The Refugees Study Guide

The Refugees by Viet Thanh Nguyen

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

The Refugees Study Guide....1
Contents....2
Plot Summary....3
Black-Eyed Women....6
The Other Man....11
War Years....15
The Transplant....19
I'd Love You to Want Me....23
The Americans....29
Someone Else Besides You....34
Fatherland....39
Characters....43
Symbols and Symbolism....49
Settings....53
Themes and Motifs....55
Styles....60
Quotes....62

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Nguyen, Vietnam Thanh. The Refugees. Grove Press, 2017.

The Refugess is a collection of eight short stories, all centering around the experience of refugees from the Vietnam war and their descendants. The stories are narrated in both first and third person and occur during the years from the 1970s-2001.

"Black Eyed Women"

The story is narrated in the unnamed first-person by a 38-year-old ghostwriter who had not yet dealt with the trauma of her childhood. She was visited by the ghost of her older brother, who died when they were fleeing Vietnam and when the siblings were children. Her brother was killed by pirates who attacked their small, overpacked fishing boat, when he tried to protect her from being taken by them. Her brother, a corporeal ghost, swam across the world to find the narrator and her mother, and forced the narrator to remember and deal with his death and the rape she was a victim of. Once she faced her past, her brother's ghost disappeared. The narrator was able to put her past behind her enough to move forward, and by the end of the story, she committed to writing her own stories instead of the stories of others. Although the story is mostly in past-tense, there are metatextual moments that call attention to the act of storytelling itself.

"The Other Man"

Narrated in past tense by a third person narrator, "The Other Man" tells the story of Liem, an 18-year-old Vietnamese refugee in the 1970s, who was placed with a sponsor in San Francisco. Parrish Coyne, the sponsor, was a gay man who lived with his partner, Marcus Chan, a student from Hong Kong, in a mauve house in the mission district. At first, Liem was surprised and put off by the two men's relationship, because he had never seen a gay couple before. Liem found himself a menial job and kept himself busy, until Parrish went out of town for the weekend, leaving Liem and Marcus alone in the house. After a dinner together, the two men had sex and Marcus asked Liem what he wanted to be. The question and the new experience made Liem both uncomfortable and hopeful. By the end of the story, he began to imagine a different future for himself, despite receiving a letter from his family. He would be tethered to his past, but because of his new country, he had the possibility of imaging a new future.

"War Years"

The story is narrated by the grown son of Vietnamese refugees who own a grocery store in Little Saigon in California. The narrator recalled a moment in his childhood, when he was 13 years old and his mother was threatened by Mrs. Hoa, a woman raising funds for the anti-communist guerrilla forces in Vietnam. When his mother refused to give any money, Mrs. Hoa threatened to make the neighbors think that the family were communist sympathizers, and therefore destroy her business. The boy went

with his mother to follow Mrs. Hoa to the woman's home, where they learn that Mrs. Hoa had lost all of her family to the war and spent her time tailoring uniforms for the troops in Vietnman. Moved by what she had seen, his mother gave Mrs. Hoa the profits for the day.

"The Transplant"

In one of the few stories where the protagonist is not a Vietnamese refugee, "The Transplant" is narrated in the past tense, third person and tells the story of Arthur Arellano, a Mexican-American who received a liver transplant from a Vietnamese donor. When a hospital billing error gave the name of his donor, Arthur found Louis Vu, who said he was the donor's son. Arthur, who had recently reunited with his wife, agreed to hold Louis's counterfeit goods in his garage, but when he found out that Louis was not actually the donor's son, he was stuck. Louis was a Chinese man who had been born and raised in Vietnam after the communist revolution in China made refugees of his family, and then came to California, when the Vietnam war make them refugees once again. Because Arthur made the mistake of telling Louis about his brother's undocumented help, Arthur cannot get rid of Louis.

"I'd Love You to Want Me"

Narrated in third person, past tense, the story follows the story of the professor and his wife, Mrs. Khahn. The professor was suffering from the early stages of dementia, and over the course of the story, he grew more confused and lost in his own mind, as he began calling his wife by another woman's name. Little by little, the narrative revealed the backstory of the Khahns, and we learn that they were the product of an arranged marriage in Vietnam and went through the difficulty and terror of escaping the country as refugees after the war. As Mrs. Khan dealt with her frustration and jealousy, she also committed herself to staying by her husbands side.

"The Americans"

In "The Americans," James Carver and his wife Michiko visited their daughter Claire, where she was working in Vietnam as an English teacher. Carver, an African American man from Alabama, few as a bomber pilot during the Vietnam war and later as a commercial airline pilot. Carver was unhappy to be in Vietnam, and found fault with many of his daughter's decisions, especially her decision to stay in Vietnam indefinitely. Claire told her parents that she never felt as though she had a home until she arrived in Vietnam, and that she felt like she had a Vietnamese soul. Her work in the country was, in part, to make up for the things she believed her father did during the war. When Carver expressed his frustration with Claire's boyfriend and the fact that his anti-mine robotics were being funded by the Department of Defense, and could someday be used as a weapon, he and Claire had an argument that sent him storming off into the jungle. When a monsoon hit, Carver was drenched and came down with pneumonia. Despite their argument, he woke in the hospital to find Claire sleeping on the floor near his bed.

"Someone Else Besides You"

In "Someone Else Besides You," Thomas, 33-year-old man, narrates his experiences living with his father after his mother died a year before. Told in past tense, Thomas revealed his father's story and his own in piecemeal fashion, drawing out small details to build their backstories as the story progresses. Thomas worked as a service representative and night watchman, to keep himself from thinking about the fact that his wife left him. His father, a stern man who Thomas was afraid of becoming, saw that his son needed help, and forced Thomas into visiting his ex-wife, who they discovered to be pregnant with the baby Thomas was reluctant to have with her. After slashing the ex-wife's tires, Thomas's father told him that men knew what was right and wrong after decisions were made. Sam, the ex-wife, came to confront Thomas about the car, and he asked to be the father of her child, making an active decision in his own life.

"Fatherland"

Narrated in the third person, past tense, "Fatherland" tells the story of Phuong, who is the oldest child of her father's second family. Her father, Mr. Ly, named his second family after his first family after his first wife left him and took their children to America after the war. His oldest daughter, who shares a name with Phuong, has decided to go by the name of Vivien. She was planning on visiting Vietnam and wanted to stay with her father and his family. When she arrived, Vivien was as glamorous as Phuong imagined she would be, and the family took her to all of the major tourist spots. Phuong discovered, however, that Vivien was not what she seemed. After Phuong asked Vivien to sponsor her so that Phuong could come to the United States, Vivien admitted that her mother had lied and that the American family was not as well off as they pretended to be. Disillusioned, Phuong no longer envied her half-siblings and decided to figure out her own way to make a better future for herself.

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Black-Eyed Women

Summary

"Black-Eyed Women" is a short story narrated in the first person by an unnamed female narrator. While the majority of the chapter is told in the past tense, including flashbacks to the narrator's childhood, the very end of the chapter makes it clear that she has actually been telling the reader the story in present tense, and that the past-tense narrative is her remembering something that had happened to her.

The narrator in "Black Eyed Women" is a 38-year-old woman who came to America from Vietnam when she was in her early teens. She now works as a ghostwriter, helping people who have met with tragedies in their lives to pen their stories. She does not give her name, and it is not until halfway through the story that her gender becomes apaprent. The story opens with the narrator remembering a time when she conveyed her frustration with the idea of fame, especially with the fact that her name did not appear in any of the books she had written, not even in the acknowledgements. The narrator's mother reminded her that people who have their names in books often ended up dead, because that is what happened to reporters in Vietnam. The narrative then moves forward in time, to a point when she was writing a memoir for a man named Victor Devoto. Victor was the sole survivor of an airplane crash that killed 173 others, including his entire family. The narrator was working on Victor's memoir when her brother returned to her in the form of a ghost.

On the night that her brother appeared as a ghost, the narrator's mother woke her to tell her that the brother (who also remains unnamed) had returned. The narrator did not believe at first, despite seeing the wet spot the ghost left on the carpet. Instead, she rationalized that the wet spot was the result of rain, but her mother insisted that the brother swam to them.

The narrator then pauses to tell the reader that she had been living with her mother ever since her father died a few years before. They both shared "a passion for words" (3), but her mother focused on ghost stories while the daughter was a ghostwriter, telling other people's stories. As part of this flashback, the narrator remembers the time when the ghost of her aunt appeared to her mother while they were still living in Vietnam. The narrator looked back and realized that she and her brother had grown up in a "haunted country" (5) as she remembered a childhood filled with the sound of bombers overhead and the ghosts of those killed in war haunting the village.

Thinking of these ghosts, the narrator wonders about the irony of her becoming a ghostwriter, but in response to her question, the "women with their black eyes and teeth" (6) came to taunt her about her own life. The narrator then recalled their first years in America, especially the dangerous neighborhood they found themselves living in.

In the middle of her memories, a knocking disturbed the narrator. She knew exactly who was at the door, and although she was scared, she unlocked the door to allow her brother’s ghost to enter because he had once given his life up for her. The ghost was bloated and wore the same clothes he was wearing when he died; they were soaked in seawater, so the narrator offered him some of her clothing. It is at this point in the narrative that the reader realizes that the narrator is a woman, because she remembers herself as a "tomboy" and reveals that motherhood is not for her (8). When the narrator went to find her mother, the ghost disappeared.

The narrator makes it clear that the ghost was real because of the wet clothing the ghost left behind. The narrator marveled about her brother’s swim, and her mother told her that ghosts have their own rules. Her mother went out to buy new clothes for the ghost when he returned, annoyed by the narrator's own ignorance about the needs of ghosts. They watched Korean soap operas together, and her mother claimed that without the war, Vietnam would now be like Korea.

The ghost returned later that night, while the narrator was trying to work on Victor Devoto's memoir again. He told her that he had come there to them and that he had not left the world yet. He came for her despite her best efforts to forget what had happened to them.

The narrative then flashes back to the family fleeing Vietnam on a fishing boat. The narrator was 13 at the time and her brother 15. He took her below decks to cut her hair and disguise her as a boy because he knew pirates were coming. The pirates boarded the boat and took all of the girls, but as they were leaving, one commented on how pretty a boy the narrator was. The brother tried to defend her and was killed, while the narrator herself was raped in front of everyone. While the narrator tried to turn the question back to her brother’s ghost, asking whether his bruise from the butt of a gun still hurt, he focused back on her and the pain she had lived with.

The tense of the narrative changes once the narrator remembers and relives this experience, indicating that the narrator is talking to the reader at that very moment. The tense shifts again, back to the story of her brother's ghost and back to past tense, as she asked her brother why she was allowed to live, while he died. His answer, that she did die, makes her remember a conversation with Victor Devoto and how he believed that the ghosts of his lost family haunt him. The narrator was overcome with emotion and grief, and while she sobbed, her brother disappeared.

The story then moves forward in time to a few months later when the memoir is published. The narrator tells her agent she won't do any more ghostwriting because she was going to write a story of her own, a ghost story. Her mother told her that the brother's ghost would not return, but the mother still looked away when the narrator tried to talk about her own experiences on the boat. The narrator then asked her mother to tell her a story, and the mother complied by telling a story about people lost in the war and later found. The narrative shifts back to present tense as the narrator speaks directly to the reader, conveying how she gets her stories and why we continue to

search for them. Meanwhile, the clothes her brother wore sit clean and folded as a reminder on her desk.

Analysis

The subtle shifts in narrative tense of "Black-Eyed Women" create an effect where the past intrudes into the present, just as the ghosts intrude into the narrator's life. The story begins with a conditional tense: "Fame would strike someone" (1). Using the word "would," rather than saying (past tense) when fame struck or (present tense) when fame strikes, creates a moment of ongoing possibility. The verb "would" allows readers to understand the threat of fame as something that has, will, and is happening. The slippery meaning of the word "would" here relates to one of the story's larger issues, the way that history and trauma is always happening, even as it has already happened. The story as a whole replicates these multiple possibilities. The second sentence, "these survivors needed...,"(1) uses the past tense verb, which makes the reader believe that this story will, in fact, be a recollection of things already passed.

The story itself, at first, does follow these expectations. The narrator tells the reader about her father's death, her childhood in Vietnam, her experience on the refugee boat, and even her experience with her brother's ghost, whose visit occurred before the moment of the story. However, the story destabilizes this tense, drawing the story out of the past and making it present, when the narrator shifts subtly and without warning into the present tense. After she has relived the memories of the pirate raping her on the deck of the refugee boat, she tells the reader, "Since then I avoid day and sun" (16). Here, "avoid" is not in the past tense the rest of the narrative uses. Instead, "avoid" is present tense, making it clear that this is not only something that she has carried with her throughout her life but also that she is speaking presently, telling the story that is also still happening. The narrative then returns to her past-tense tale, but by the very end of the story, the present tense intrudes again. "Sometimes this is how stories come to me," she tells the reader, underlining the fact once again that the narrator is telling the story in the present, not as a relic of the past (21). Her final paragraph is littered with present tense verbs: "I go hunting," "they are pallid creatures," "stories are just things" (21). Each of these verbs serves as emphasis for the fact that this entire tale is not one about the past, but a story in which the past becomes a part of the present.

The story also uses the irony of a ghostwriter being visited by an actual ghost to examine the various ways that the living can be haunted by the past. It is not accidental that the narrator is not a ghostwriter for just anyone. Instead, she is a ghostwriter for those ordinary people who find themselves famous after surviving some sort of ordeal: "Fame would strike someone, usually the kind that heat 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" (1). The image here of fame striking is one of possible violence. To strike is to hit, to be bowled over by something unexpectedly. Her most recent client, Victor Devoto, selected her because he read her other book, about the father of a school shooter, and "identif[ied] with the father's guilt" (2). The reader learns later in the story that the narrator herself

has lived through the trauma of rape and survived something herself--the attack on her refugee boat. In her discussions with her ghost brother, her own guilt is clear. The "parrot of a question" (12) that perches continuously on her shoulder is the question of why, why did she survive when she was younger, weaker, and less aware? The guilt she carries becomes clear to the reader throughout the book little by little, and it is only through her brother's visit that she is able to move forward with her burden.

The story, then, uses the occupation she has selected for herself—the ghostwriter of other's misfortunes—to highlight the other ghosts that haunt her. The narrator's mother tells her ghost stories, the narrator herself sees her brother's literal ghost, and the figurative ghosts of her own past intrude upon her present. Her decision to become a ghostwriter for other people's misfortunes, it seems, is an attempt to funnel her own guilt and grief through the safer lens of someone else's story. She is not ready to tell her own, because the burden of guilt and memory is too heavy for her. In part, her burden is heavy because no one will share it with her. When she is being raped in front of the boat full of people, everyone is silent. "Their silence and my own would cut me again and again," she tells us as she remembers (16). Her parents do not speak of the violence done to her, and that silence binds her. As she recognizes, "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" (17). The parrot's speaking is her speaking. As a ghostwriter, she allows the parrots of others to speak and helps them unburden themselves of the guilt they carry on their shoulders. No one has allowed her that same measure of comfort, however. It is not until after her brother's ghost visits with her and recognizes that she did die that day with him that the narrator is able to move forward. The narrator's mother is still unable to tell or hear the narrator's story: "there was one story she did not want to tell, one type of company she did not want to keep" (18), but facing her brother and her own guilt about his death allows her to move from being simply a ghost writer to a writer. Ironically, the stories she will tell are ghost stories, the stories that "haunt our country" that are waiting to be sought out (21).

The emphasis on stories and storytelling in "Black-Eyed Women" highlights the importance of giving voice to the unspeakable and forgotten. In the story, the narrator makes her living from telling stories. She comes by her trade honestly, as her mother is a born storyteller herself. They both "shared a passion for words" (3) and the mother often started a conversation with the phrase "Let me tell you a story" (21). In part, this passion for stories comes through the culture the narrator is raised in. The narrator remembers the "black-eyed women" who would scare the village children with the tales of ghosts who haunted the land of her childhood, and she worried as a child that she would "never tell stories like those" (6). When her family left Vietnam for America, crammed on a boat overloaded with people, they brought very little with them besides their stories. "In a country where possessions counted for everything, we had no belongings except our stories" (7). Through the course of the story however, the narrator does learn how to tell these stories. She goes from collecting the stories of others to claiming the voice to tell them herself. "Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more," the narrator comes to understand (21). Yet the fabrication of them does not negate their value. She calls them "garments shed by ghosts" (21). This final pronouncement is important, because the garments that her brother's ghost sheds are

real. They are tangible objects that can be washed, dried, and folded, and they sit on her desk as a reminder of her own story. But they are things the ghosts themselves no longer need. By taking their stories and preserving them, in the way the narrator preserves her brother's clothes, the ghosts are able to move on and the stories themselves go from things that have the negative power to haunt to talismans for strength as we look to the future.

Finally, the story uses the title "Black-Eyed Women" and the image of these women throughout the novel to show the importance of women's voices in story telling and preserving identity. The black-eyed women in the story are literally the women in the village of the narrator's childhood who would tell stories about the ghosts that haunted their land: "These invaders came to conquer our land, and now they would never go home, the ladies said, cackling and exposing lacquered teeth" (6). The old women find delight in the ghosts of downed Japanese pilots and beheaded American soldiers, because their missions in Vietnam, missions that wreaked havoc and violence on the country and its people, left them stranded far beyond the end of the wars. But black-eyed women populate this entire story, as the dark eyes of her mother and herself, as well as the boat full of dark-eyed girls who were taken away by the pirates and never seen again. Black-eyed women here are both the storytellers and the silenced. The title, then, speaks to the importance of both.

Discussion Question 1

Analyze the tense shifts in the story. How does the narrator's shift from past to present align with themes in the story itself?

Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of storytelling in "Black-Eyed Women"? How do stories strengthen the past? How do stories put the past to rest?

Discussion Question 3

How does the story use real and imagined ghosts? How are these characters haunted? How can they put their ghosts to rest?

Vocabulary

agent, silhouettes, ominous, illuminate, jackfruit, lacquered, exuberant, discomforting, smoldering, fabricate

BOOKRAGS

The Other Man

Summary

Told in third-person, past tense, "The Other Man" is a short story about an 18-year-old refugee from Vietnam named Liem who arrived in San Fransisco in the fall of 1975 to be sponsored by a middle-aged British man, Parrish Coyne. Liem had fled Saigon when the city fell to Vietcong communist forces.

The story opens in October, when Liem arrived in the San Francisco airport after taking a short flight from San Diego, where the refugee service helped him to find a sponsor. Overwhelmed by flying and often confused by the distorted announcements in English, Liem met his sponsor, a British expatriate named Parrish Coyne. Parrish mispronounced Liem's name as Liam, but being too flustered to respond, Liem did not correct him. Parrish introduced him to Marcus Chan, a Hong Cong exchange student in his mid-twenties. Parrish told Liem that Liem was prettier than Parrish had expected, and on the drive back to his home, Parrish confessed that he and Marcus were in a relationship. On the drive to San Francisco, Liem told an abbreviated story about how he came to be a refugee as he watched the various San Francisco landmarks pass by. Liem did not completely understand what Parrish meant by the two of them being in a relationship, but he confessed that he was open-minded and liberal. As he realized that he had nowhere to turn except for Parrish's hospitality, Liem thought of the faces of men he had known in the tea bar where he had worked in Saigon. Liem thought he had forgotten about those experiences, but upon remembering, he wondered if they had somehow become part of him, like a line in his palm.

Once Liem understood better what Parrish and Marcus's relationship actually was, Liem began to wonder if he had not been misplaced by the refugee services. However, Parrish's generosity made him feel ashamed of thinking this, and he spent each morning staring in the mirror and telling himself that the only thing he had to fear was himself. These morning rituals made him remember that he had said the same thing when we was leaving his parents' home the summer before, when he was on his way to Saigon.

The story then turns to a flashback of the events that took him from his parents’ house in Long Xuyen to Saigon. Lien had known the American soldiers near his home since he was only eight, and they were the ones to teach him English, which enabled him to find work in Saigon. Between the soldiers and the girls who sold themselves in the teahouse where he worked, Liem was able to learn English. By April of 1975, it became clear that Saigon would fall to the communists, and Liem fled with others and became a refugee. Liem, however, did not tell his parents any of this in the two letters he sent: one from Camp Pendleton and one when he arrived at Parrish's house in San Francisco. He kept it from them to keep his family safe from communist censors reading the messages. The only time he was not thinking about his family was in the moments just after waking, when he was still half in the dreams where he spoke perfect English.

Liem settled into his life with Parrish and Marcus, who often argued in front of him. However he spent most of his time at his job at a liquor store in a district called the Tenderloin district. He worked menial labor, and he felt as though the trash he handled each day was sinking into his skin and becoming part of him. All the while he tried to learn English from a book called “Everyday Dialogs” in English, which did not at all help him with the actual interactions he had on a day-to-day basis. At Parrish's home, Liem kept to himself mostly and tried not to think about Marcus's body.

The story then moves forward to mid-November, when Parrish went away for a weekend business trip, leaving Liem and Marcus together in San Francisco. After dropping Parrish off at the airport, Marcus and Liem went to have breakfast in Chinatown. Marcus corrected the formality of Liem's English, telling him to use contractions, while the two men shared dim sum, including chicken feet that Parrish would not have touched. Marcus told Liem about his own past. Marcus' family had sent him to America to attend college, but they disowned him after an ex-lover sent Marcus' father pictures that showed their intimate relationship (37). Liem was not sure exactly what candid meant, but he felt a kinship with Marcus as a fellow traveler. Liem them told Marcus about his past, filling in the story that he had originally edited for Parrish. Liem's family sent him to Saigon because they trusted him to not be corrupted by the city. When Liem told everything to Marcus, Marcus told him to forget about the past, because there was nothing to change. Marcus asked Liem what he wanted to be. The question struck Liem as startling, because no one had ever asked him and he had not considered it. Liem decided that he simply wanted to be a good person.

The question Marcus asked had implications for Liem, however. The next day at his job, Liem did not feel satisfied any longer. He had dinner with Marcus after work, and when they returned to Parrish's mauve Victorian house, a blue airmail envelope was waiting for Liem. Liem did not want to open it because he knew that his life would change once he read it, and he was content with his evening with Marcus. Marcus implied that he understood Liem's feelings for him, saying that their families thought it was a "Western disease," and Liem responded by telling Marcus he wanted to be "candid" with him (41).

The story then moves forward to after the two men have sex, with Liem sensing that it had not gone very well. He told Marcus that he loved him, but Marcus rebuffed Liem. Marcus told Liem that in his future other men would tell him that they love him. Later, Liem remembered the blue envelope. Liem would not let Marcus read it, but he told Marcus what he planned to write back. After he told Marcus about the letter he intended to write, Liem asked Marcus if he (Liem) was good, and Marcus said yes. After Marcus fell asleep, Liem finally opened the envelope to read his father's letter. It was longer than he had expected, but it described the country Liem's family was now in—one run by communist forces—by praising the revolution. He read the letter again and then looked out the window to the street below. At first he saw only his reflection, a reflection of a man he no longer recognized, but then he saw two men walking together on the street below. He realized that before he met Parrish and Marcus, he would not have realized the two men were lovers. The men see him and wave before they moved on, and Liem remained at the window, wondering if someone else might be watching him.

Analysis

The short story "The Other Man" uses Liem's sexuality and experiences with Marcus to show the way that identities and relationships can be shaped by the culture in which they exist. In the story, Liem's lack of experience with gay men and homosexual identity in his home country means that he cannot quite understand what Parrish and Marcus's relationship is at first. When Parrish confesses, "We're a couple...in the romantic sense" (27), Liem either does not understand or chooses not to understand. "Liem decided that 'in the romantic sense' must be an idiomatic expression, the kind Mrs. Lindemulder had said Americans use often" and "in idiomatic English, a male couple in the romantic sense must simply mean very close friends" (27-28). He almost immediately realizes his mistake, however, when a look from Marcus in the rearview mirror sends "a nervous tremor through his gut" (28). His realization immediately makes him think of his memories in Saigon, living among men and boys who worked for the tea bar and who would masturbate at night in their shared dormitory. In Saigon, their sexual needs keep them separate from one another because they are illicit and unspeakable: "nobody spoke of what occurred the previous evening, as if it were an atrocity in the jungle better left buried" (29). For Liem, sexuality is something taboo. His parents send him to the city only because they believe they have raised him well enough to not be corrupted. The men share a room and masturbate separately, and their own self-exploration of their sexuality keeps them separate from one another. The trip to America, and specifically to Parrish's home, changes Liem in many ways, but perhaps none is so clear as his sexual transformation. At the beginning of his time with Parrish and Marcus, Liem forces himself to "not think of Marcus's lean, pale body" (34). In part this is in deference and respect to his host, but in larger part it is because Lien is still coming to understand about possibilities of sexual identity that were not available to him in Vietnam. When Parrish leaves the two men alone and they become lovers, it fundamentally changes Liem’s view of himself and his surroundings. Marcus tells Liem that their family's think they (gay men) have "a Western disease," but the story makes clear that the relationship between these men is not a disease but a point of connection. Even after reading his father's letter, Liem is not changed in the way he had feared he would be. When he goes to the window and sees the two men in the street, he recognizes something he could not have recognized before--a point of connection and community for him that would not have been available in Vietnam, and especially not with his family. This ending of the story, with Liem standing at the window, his hand still raised and hoping to be seen by others (most likely by another gay man who lived in the Mission district), is a hopeful one. Though he has lost a homeland in Vietnam, he has found a new one for himself in the identity he has the freedom to claim in this city.

"The Other Man" uses a focus on language, especially on the different types of English and the possibilities of communication, to destabilize the notion of English as a single, easily categorized language. In the face of critics who would tell refugees and other non-English speakers to either learn English or get out of America, the protagonist of the story is Liem, who has learned English but who is still faces challenges of understanding. The difficulty is in part because there are communities of languages demonstrated in this story. As a child, he learned "the rudiments of English" (30) from

GIs, most of whom would not have been college educated themselves. He learned a different English from the tea bar on Tu Do Street in Saigon. "He sandpapered the two discourses of junkyard and whorehouse into a more usable kind of English" (30). This English enables him to understand the danger of Saigon falling to communist forces, but it does not make it easy for him to integrate into American culture. He has trouble understanding the "PA system's distorted English" (24) in the San Francisco airport, and does not understand at first what "in the romantic sense" (27) means when Parrish tells Liem that Parrish and Marcus are a couple. Later, Liem studies a pocket version of Everyday Dialogues in English, which features dialogs about visiting New York City (a continent away) and how to go to a football game, scenarios that are completely unhelpful to Liem's actual day-to-day life in the gritty Tenderloin district of San Francisco. The intricacies of language are also interrogated in this story, as Marcus corrects what is completely proper English, telling Liem that "you have to learn how to use contractions if you want to speak like a native" (36). The story in this way shows the levels of confusion non-English speakers face when confronted with the task of immigrating and learning the language. It is not enough to know the formal, standardized version of the language, but there are details about usage that only native speakers know, which threaten to mark Liem as different, even as he attempts to become fluent. The emphasis on language, then, and the stories focus on the ways that new speakers of language can misunderstand and be misunderstood underscores the danger and difficulty of assimilating into another culture.

Discussion Question 1

How does the story use sexuality to examine community and connection?

Discussion Question 2

Describe each of the men's relationships with each other and with the communities they live in currently and in which they lived previously. How does their identity as gay men parallel the identity of Liem as a refugee in this story?

Discussion Question 3

How does Liem's knowledge of and confusion about English contribute to his experience as a refugee and outsider?

Vocabulary

disembark, placard, impelled, mauve, rudiments, resettlement, audible, martyred, candid, sought,

War Years

Summary

"War Years" is a short story about the unnamed 13-year-old son of Vietnamese immigrants who run a grocery story in San Jose, California. It is set in the summer of 1983 and is narrated in firs-person, by the boy, who is remembering the events of the summer years later.

In "War Years," the story opens with the narrator claiming that nothing his mother did surprised him before Mrs. Hoa came into their lives. The story begins in the summer of 1983, when the narrator was taking summer school classes in English. The classes were a break, a vacation of sorts, from the Vietnamese spoke in his home and in his parents' grocery story, New Saigon. The narrator tells the reader about the food stocked at the store, the types of specialties that would remind the Vietnamese community in San Jose of home, but the narrator himself did not understand why his parents could not stock more American fare, like TV dinners and bologna. One day while the narrator was labeling the prices the customers would end up haggling over, a woman named Mrs. Hoa walked into the shop and asked for a donation for the fight against communists in Vietnam. The boy recalled the history of the communists taking over Vietnam in 1975, but could not recall any memories of his own from living in that country. When the narrator's mother refused to donate, Mrs. Hoa threatened to spread the world around the anti-communist community that she was a sympathizer, therefore ruining her business.

Once Mrs. Hoa left, the narrator's mother was angry, and told him that the war was over and the money Mrs. Hoa was demanding was a waste. The narrator's father thought a little "hush money" might be worth it, but the narrator's mother refused (53). Later that night, he heard his parents talking, but he did not stay to listen. He had heard enough of his mother's stories about the tragedies of her childhood after WWII and the war that chased them to America. The story discusses the history of Vietnam's various revolutions, from its freedom from France in the 1950s to the communists' eventual victory in the mid 1970s.

Days passed, but it was clear that his mother was still unsettled. She began talking during their evening bookkeeping, something that she never did. As she counted the money, she talked about both the dangers of communists in China, and rumors of attacks on businesses and newspapers on U.S. soil that might have been related to what was happening in Vietnam. The narrator expressed surprise when his mother mentioned that making peace with the communists might be a good idea, because he thought the communists were evil. The narrator wondered about how different his life might be if they had stayed, and whether children who grew up in communist controlled Vietnam knew about the pop culture he knew about, including Star wars. As his parents count their daily income, the narrator tells about where the money goes: to the bank, hidden in the house, and to family in Vietnam.

The acknowledgement that there was money hidden in the house leads the narrator to think about what happened the October before the story takes place. He opened the door to someone claiming to be a delivery person because the man spoke English, and the man tried to rob them at gun point. The man was never caught, and his parents did not talk about the incident.

The Sunday following Mrs. Hoa's first visit, the family saw her again at church. Mrs. Hoa warned the narrator's mother that she would be visiting them again, so the narrator's mother followed Mrs. Hoa home, to find out where the woman lived. She took the narrator with her. The narrative of the story shifts for the space of two sentences, where the narrator reveals that he is telling the story from far in the future. He wonders in present tense whether his memories are accurate, or if he is simply approximating what their lives felt with. The narrative then returns to the past tense. As they drove, the narrator looked at a picture of his parents when they were younger that was kept in the car. He realized that he could not imagine his mother as a young girl, because there were no pictures--no evidence--for him to see.

The Wednesday after they see each other in church, Mrs. Hoa returned to the grocery store and again demanded money. The narrator's mother again refused, and Mrs. Hoa made a scene, declaring to all of the customers shopping that the shop owners were as good as communists. Later that evening, the narrator's mother decided to go confront Mrs. Hoa, and she took the narrator with her. When they arrived at Mrs. Hoa's house, they were shown more hospitality than expected. They learn that Mrs. Hoa had lost her husband and three sons in the wars, though Mrs. Hoa refused to believe that two of them are dead. Mrs. Hoa spent her time altering uniforms for the resistance soldiers who would fight the communists. When the narrator's mother saw this, she gave Mrs. Hoa the entire earnings for the day, $200. On the way home, she stopped at a 7Eleven and gave the narrator $5 to buy whatever he wanted. When he went into the store, he found that although he could have anything, he could not choose.

Analysis

Although many may believe that refugees leave their past and the problems of their country behind them, "War Years" examines the ways that the dangers they left behind can follow them to their new country. In "War Years," Mrs. Hoa is raising money for an offensive that has, ostensibly, ended. The war is over, especially for those in America, and the communists have won control of the country. Without backing from western countries, the dream that another revolution against the communists can happen is all but a pipe dream. The narrator and his family had fled from the dangers of the first, failed attempt to keep the communists out of Vietnam, but when Mrs. Hoa walks into their store, she brings the dangers back into their life. First, Mrs. Hoa's threats to brand the family as communist or as communist sympathizers is dangerous to their livelihood. The Vietnamese community that they depend on as customers would not shop at a store they believed supported the very people who chased them from their country. But more specifically, the threat of being seen as a communist puts a larger target on their back. "As we did the day's reckoning, my mother reported on the rumors of former

South Vietnamese soldiers organizing not only a guerrilla army in Thailand but also a secret front here in the United States" (55). The rumors of this army are, according to rumors his mother has heard, linked to a firebombing of a newspaper and the murder of another newspaper editor.The rumor, however false it might be, that the narrator's family sympathizes with communists could put them in danger beyond the economic. In this way, the story demonstrates the ways that the dangers refugees flee are not always left behind.

"War Years" uses the shift in narrative from past tense to a brief present-tense narrative to examine the reliability of memory. While the majority of the narrative is narrated in the past tense, "War Years" breaks out of the past-tense narrative to bring awareness to the fact that this is a story being told in the present: "Looking back so many decades later, I wonder if she was exaggerating or if I am now, my memory attempting to approximate what our lives felt like. But I am certain that when I rolled down the window..." (63). This brief shift is the only place in the narrative where the tense of the story changes, and it might easily be overlooked. However, these two sentences call attention to two important aspects of the story. First, the story is being told as a story. The narrator here breaks out of the narrative and, in doing so, calls attention to the story as an invented creation, and one that might be unreliable at that. This meta-textual moment points to the importance of the telling itself, the act of memory and construction. Second, this moment fits with larger themes of memory and the reliability of memory in the text. The narrator himself was born and lived briefly in Vietnam as a small child, but he has no memory of it. When he looks at a picture of his mother and father before he was born, he is able to imagine his parents in their youth, but he has no way to imagine his mother as a young child, despite the stories she tells him. Moreover, he further wonders if she can truly even remember herself: "My mother as a little girl no longer existed anywhere, perhaps not even in her own mind" (64). His understanding of the past and his family's history is dependent on memory, but the story draws attention to the way that memory itself can be faulty and incorrect.

Finally, "War Years," like many of the other stories in the collection explores the importance of language for forming identity. In the story, the narrator sees his seven-hour days at summer school like "a vacation than home" (50). The Vietnamese spoken at the family's store and home is loud, and he appreciates and values English over it at times in the narrative. He can speak Vietnamese, but when Mrs. Hoa hands him a paper with Vietnamese writing, he cannot make it out. This valuing of English gets him and his family into trouble, however, when he opens the door to a robber because they said the words in English. "If he had spoken in Vietnamese or Spanish, I never would have opened the door," (58). He also is forced to be the translator for his parents, acting to decipher their words for the police who come to investigate the robbery, and also hiding his embarrassment by not translating words for them. Throughout the story, it is clear that the narrator is stuck between two worlds, and English becomes both the bridge between them and the break between him and his parents.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss how the use of English and Vietnamese works in the story to help the characters claim or shape their identities. How does knowing (or not knowing) English affect their ability to move within American society and within the Vietnamese community?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it important that the story breaks out of its past-tense narrative to have the narrator question his own ability to remember?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the narrator and his family's relationship to communism and to the Vietnamese community in America. What does the power of Mrs. Hoa's threat tell you about the community that they have forged in their new country?

Vocabulary

tripe, kryptonite, haggle, monochrome, counterattack, recession, infiltration, anemones, chortle, decoy, amateur, sermonized, mimeograph, ochre,

The Transplant

Summary

"The Transplant" is told in the third person, past tense and follows the story of Arthur Arellano.

Arthur Arellano was a third generation Mexican American who lived in Orange County, California. When the story opens, he was looking at the stacks of boxes that contain counterfeit luxury goods that were being stored in his garage for Louis Vu. Arthur felt indebted to Louis because he received Louis's father's liver as a transplant months before, and he offered Louis the use of his garage to store the goods.

The story then moves forward in time to one of Louis and Arthur's weekly lunches as a Vietnamese restaurant in Little Saigon, Orange County. Arthur expressed his discomfort with the counterfeit good business, but Louis attempted to lessen Arthur's guilt by explaining how the counterfeit goods enable those without as much money to have the same luxuries as the rich, while also providing jobs to countless low-paid "ghost workers" in China (75). During lunch, Arthur got a text from his wife to pick up the dry cleaning.

The story then flashes back to the events that led the two men to meet. Eighteen months before, Arthur learned that he had Autoimmune Hepatitis and would need a transplant. After hearing his diagnosis, Arthur was convinced of his imminent death, because in general he considered himself to be an unlucky person. In reality, his bad luck stemmed from his drinking and gambling. His gambling losses (including the loss of his home) caused his wife, Norma, to leave him months before the diagnosis. When Norma heard about Arthur's diagnosis, however, she returned to him, and Arthur saw his illness as god's way of keeping them together. He was surprised when he was offered the transplant, and after, he had no desire to seek out the identity of his donor. However, an error on the hospital billing caused his donor's name to be revealed unintentionally, and Arthur took this as a sign that he should look for the family of the man whose liver saved him. The donor's name was Men Vu, and neither Arthur nor his wife know what nationality that name might be. Arthur turned to the phone book and began calling all the Vu's listed, until he found Louis, who claimed to be the son.

The story then returns to later in the evening of the same day Louis had lunch with Arthur, when Norma returned home and Arthur realized he forgot to pick up the dry cleaning. Norma, angry, did not cook him dinner, and that night she told him not to touch her. The next day, after a miserable night on the couch, Arthur called his brother, who he worked for, to ask if he could stay with him, but when his brother's Guatemalan housekeeper, Elvira Catalina Franco, answered, he lost his nerve. Instead, he made a feeble joke and then pretended to continue to talk on the phone, so his wife would not know that his brother, Martin, hung up on him.

Later that morning, Arthur went to work. Arthur's brother, Martin, ran the business out of his home, where he employed a range of undocumented housekeepers and landscapers. The business was supposed to go to both siblings, but the father changed his will when he realized how bad Arthur's gambling problems were. Martin suggested that things were not going well between Arthur and Norma, because his own wife's manicurist had heard things. Arthur began to wonder if Martin would have given him an organ if he needed one, or if he would give one to Martin. The question nagged him until later, when he had dinner with Louis in Louis's unfurnished apartment. Again, the men eat Vietnamese food together, and Arthur told Louis that he should thing of getting married. Louis told him that he had enough of women, but would not say more, because he never thought about the past. During this exchange, Arthur learned that Louis was actually grew up in Vietnam but his family was actually Chinese. Louis, however, had never been to China, and so he did not know what nationality to consider himself.

The next morning, Arthur struggled to make the computer work at the office and had car trouble. He also received a call from someone claiming to be the son of Men Vu, but the man on the phone is not Louis's brother. Arthur realized that Louis was not the son of the man who donated his liver, but someone who had lied to him. Arthur went to confront Louis, but Louis seemed unshaken by being discovered. When Arthur told Louis to move the illegal merchandise from their garage, Louis refused. There was nothing Arthur could do, however, because he had told Louis about the undocumented help his brother employed. Louis used the threat of destroying the family business to keep Arthur doing his bidding.

Analysis

In "The Transplant," Nguyen uses the identity of Louis as a Chinese national who grew up in Vietnam and who currently lives in California to show how unclear nationality can be as an identity trait. When Arthur first learns that the name of his donor is a Men Vu, he and his wife are unsure of which nationality the name Vu is. Norma wonders "Could it be Korean? Like the Parks," who are "migrants from Incheon via Buenos Aires who spoke Spanish better than the Arellanos did" (80). She also wonders if the name might be Japanese. Arthur has even less idea. The narrator tells us, "he had fallen back on his default choice when confronted with a perplexing problem of identification regarding an Asian. 'There are a lot of Chinese around here...I'd bet this guy is Chinese,'" he tells Norma (80). This interchange highlights the fiction of nationality as an identity. The name, clearly Asian, does not give either Norma or Arthur any idea of nationality, but the Asians that they no confuse the very category of national identity. The Parks (which is not an obviously Korean name) speak Spanish better than the characters who are of Latin descent. Arthur eventually comes to believe that Men Vu is from Vietnam, and when he meets Louis (who turns out not to actually be the man's son), Arthur assumes Louis is also Vietnamese. In fact, Louis grew up in Vietnam, which accounts for his knowledge of Vietnamese cuisine, but he is, himself, of Chinese descent. Arthur is pleased with himself, thinking that he knew Louis's ethnicity all along, when he learns that Louis is actually Chinese, but Louis does not leave things so simple. As Louis tells Arthur, "I was born in Vietnam, and I've never been to China...I can barely speak

Chinese. So what does that make me? Chinese or Vietnamese? Both? Neither?" (94). Here the reader is confronted with the fiction of national identity. For Louis, whose family ostensibly came to Vietnam after the communist revolution in China, and then fled once again when communists took over Vietnam, ethnicity and nationality are not fixed categories. By family culture, he considers himself Chinese. By birth, he would be Vietnamese. Because of his history, his identity is both either-or and both-and. To the outsider, the American-born Arthur, Louis is simply Chinese, a category that he sees as interchangeable with all Asians. The distinctions for Arthur are basically nonexistent.

Arthur himself, however, further develops this idea of national or ethnic identity as a fiction. Arthur would self-identity as a Mexican-American, yet he barely speaks Spanish and his Mexican ancestry is "only vaguely remembered by word of mouth from ancient grandparents with faces like Easter Island" (86). The reference, here, to the faces on Easter Island indicate that in terms of his ancestry, his Mexican heritage most likely is related more closely to the indigenous populations that lived in the country before the Spanish arrived than to the conquerors. In this small mention, the text reminds us that the very idea of Mexico is, in many ways, a fiction born of conquest and created by the victors. The individual indigenous peoples with the distinct languages and religions were all subsumed under a new country named Mexico in 1810.

The idea of authentic identity, as explored in both the characters of Louis and Arthur is emphasized by the appearance of the counterfeit luxury goods that Louis sells and that Arthur is storing in his garage. Arthur is concerned about the items, and was "troubled by a lingering sense of guilt and a fear of the law" (74). Louis, a counterfeit himself by the end of the story, continually must convince Arthur that "his business did more harm than good" (74). In a convoluted explanation, Louis explains that "beautiful people can't let on that they need ugly people. But without the ugly, the beautiful people wouldn't look half so good...the more fakes there are, the more that people who can't buy the real things want them. And the more people buy fakes, the more the real things are worth" (74). While Louis's explanation might sound like complete nonsense, but his explanations and the goods he is selling actually becomes a metaphor for the refugees and immigrants in the country. In a story populated by American-born children of immigrants, legal immigrants, and undocumented workers, the status of "American," or an authentic citizenship is up for debate. Arthur is every bit as American as anyone else born in the country, at least on paper. Louis's naturalization has also made him an American, and yet neither of these men consider themselves American first. More importantly, they are always seen as Asian and Latino/Mexican first (probably also by the reader). This notion of authenticity is important again at the end of the story, when Louis threatens Arthur by saying that he will turn Arthur's brother in for hiring undocumented workers. The "counterfeit" workers are not any more legal than the fake D&G sunglasses in Arthur's garage. However, like the sunglasses, they are still real, tangible subjects. Like the sunglasses, the undocumented help that Arthur's brother employs allows him to appear more affluent than he might actually be; they impart a certain value. The story uses these very subtle distinctions between authenticity and value to critique the idea of authentic ethnicity or national identity.

Finally, the story uses the mentions of multiple immigrant and displaced populations to demonstrate the breadth of diaspora conditions in the world. The reader gleans early on that Arthur is Latino, or that he is at least the child of Latino immigrants. When Arthur argues with Louis about the morality of selling counterfeit goods, Louis sites the "ghost workers" in Wengag, China, who make the counterfeit sunglasses. Without the counterfeit goods market, these unknown and unnamed workers would be in even worse economic condition than they are with their low-paying jobs. Martin, Arthur's brother, employs a maid from Guatemala who may or may not be documented. The landscaper who works for Martin has confessed that he is "indocumentado," a fact that "Arthur knew was true for more than one of Martin's gardeners" (90). The Parks, who are Korean, spent time in Buenos Aires before coming to California. Louis himself was born in Vietnam of Chinese parents. The multiplicity of countries with various refugee crises over the course of the last 20-30 years allows the story to open the idea of immigration and diaspora much wider than previous stories in the book.

Discussion Question 1

How do the counterfeit goods work as a metaphor in the text? What might Arthur's discomfort with having the goods in his house tell you about his understanding of the relationship between authenticity and value? What might Louis' acceptance of the goods tell you about his particular understanding of the relationship between authenticity and value?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the various ethnic identities in the text. How does the number and complexities of these identities help to demonstrate the story's theme?

Discussion Question 3

How does the story examine the idea of Asian identity through Louis' character?

Vocabulary

unforeseen, fetching, perplexing, immunosuppressive, conjecture, pungent, auspicious, naïveté, psuedo

I'd Love You to Want Me

Summary

"I'd Love You to Want Me" is a short story told in third person, past tense. The story takes place in Southern California, about an hour south of Los Angeles, and begins at a wedding banquet that Mrs. Khahn and her husband, called simply the Professor, attended. The beginning of the story, however, is a bit confusing, because it proceeds as though the reader already understands that the couple are, in fact, husband and wife, and that the professor is suffering from the onset of dementia. Instead of introducing the characters completely, the reader is given the moment when "Mrs. Khahn" was called the wrong the wrong name by "the professor" for the first time, and then the reader must piece together the facts of the two people's relationship.

The bride and groom came to the professor and Mrs. Khahn's table, and the professor used the names he had written on his hand to remind him where he was. The bridge's mention that the couple would be honeymooning in Paris causes the professor to ask what the French had once called Vung Tau, and then to remember his own honeymoon with Mrs. Khahn. After the professor finished recalling the memories he had of their time together on the cape when they were first married, he launched into a lecture about oceanography. Mrs. Khahn listened, soothed by his voice, until the professor asked her if she remembered the song playing, "I'd Love You to Want Me." He remembered listening to it before their children were born, but Mrs. Khahn knew that the song did not come out until after her first pregnancy. She did not correct him, however, knowing that he was losing his memory, and he asked her to dance like they used to and called her by the name "Yen," which was not her name. Mrs. Khahn asked when they had ever danced, and she refused to dance with him. She had prepared herself for many things, but she was not ready for the professor to begin making up things that had never happened.

After the wedding, he insisted on driving home. He handled the car fine, but took the wrong turn on their street, heading instead toward the community college where he had recently retired from teaching Vietnamese. Mrs. Khahn was still seething from being called the wrong name, and she recognized it as jealousy. The professor realized he was driving in the wrong direction and asked her why she had not told him, but she did not have an answer.

The next morning, Mrs. Khahn told the professor about the night before and the things he had done and said. He was surprised and had no memory of asking her to dance, but he recorded what she told him in the small notebook he carried to record his memory lapses. As the professor was writing, the couple's oldest son, Vinh arrived with a framed counterfeit Picasso painting that he bought the month prior during his vacation to Saigon. Vihn had heard that Picasso's art could stimulate people like his father. Vihn told his mother that he and his five siblings believed that she should retire from her position at the library. He offered to have the children send money for the mortgage and

to hire help around the house, including a gardener, since Mexican gardeners are inexpensive. But Mrs. Khahn refused, because she loved both her position at the library and the garden she had designed and cultivated herself.

The conversation caused Mrs. Khahn to remember Vihn as a child and his troubled teenage years, when he believed himself to be in love with an American girl who dressed in Goth style. Although the professor tried to keep them apart, Vihn ran off and eloped with the girl in Las Vegas once he was 18. He told his mother that she would not understand love, because she and the professor had been an arranged marriage, but Mrs. Khahn did not take advice from someone whose marriage had lasted less than three years when her own to the professor had lasted 40 years. After Vihn left, Mrs. Khahn moved the painting to the professor's library, turning it toward the wall so she would not have to look at the abstractly depicted woman.

The story then moves forward in time. The professor's condition began to deteriorate, and as he lost interest in the things he had once done, such as attending mass, Mrs. Khahn found herself more and more distanced from her friends and community. She still went to the library, but she had not told any of her colleagues about her husband's condition. The story condenses the passing of time, until the point when the professor required help simply getting around their house and the point when she came home to someone who was a stranger. The professor began doing odd things that he had never done before, including getting her flowers and books of fiction, but he never remembered doing it. He also began calling her Yen more frequently, which only served to increase Mrs. Khahn's frustration and jealousy. Still, she continued to care for her husband, including cooking him multi-course dinners of Vietnamese food that reminded them of their childhood.

As they ate one day, they read a postcard from their oldest daughter, who was living in Munich at the time. The postcard reminded Mrs. Khahn of all the traveling she would not be doing now that her husband was impossible to travel with, but it reminded the professor of their life in Saigon after he returned from studying in France for graduate school. He seemed to be able to remember small details of their life, and often he recalled details that Mrs. Khahn had no memory of, which made her wonder if she had forgotten or if he was making them up. Still, he called her by the wrong name, so later that night, she mimicked his handwriting and made a note in his notebook about calling her Yen.

The following morning, he called her Yen multiple times. Over the next few days, she recorded all of the times he called her the wrong name, but it seemed to have no effect on him. After catching the professor trying to wash out his pants after he had an accident, Mrs. Khahn told herself that the woman, Yen, must be a fantasy that his mind made up. She tried to convince herself that real love is the life they led together, including his willingness to teach Vietnamese at the community college to support their family, instead of going off and finding a career in Oceanography. These memories cause her to remember their earliest days as refugees from Vietnam. The story then flashes back to recall the harrowing boat trip that the family took away from Vietnam, and how he had been steady and comforting to her and the children.

The more that the professor remember about things that never happened, the more Mrs. Khahn worried that her own memory was failing her. Still, she kept the truth of his condition from everyone except Vihn, who she knew would tell the other children for her. Vihn, however, continued to pressure her to quit the library, something Mrs. Khahn adamantly refused to do. As the professor spun his misremembered tales, Mrs. Khahn remembered the boat ride over the South China Sea, when she did not know if they would get to safety.

The story then moves forward in time by months until after the Santa Ana winds in October. At this point, the professor's condition has further deteriorated, to the point where could no longer read. Mrs. Khahn would read to him, until he interrupted and told her stories of their past. One memory he recalled was when the couple had visited Saigon three years before the story begins and went to see their old home. This memory is narrated third person, and it seems as though it is the narrator recalling it, but thy the end of the memory, the narrative shifts back to the professor, who calls his wife Yen yet again. Upset, she finally told him that her real name is Sa when he could not recall it, and this is the first time the reader knows the character by anything other than Mrs. Khahn. She also needed to tell him his own name. That night, she went to write in his journal, but instead found a note saying that the professor believed she was losing her mind, because she did not know who she was any longer. For the first time, a moment that felt like deja vu, Mrs. Khahn wished he were dead.

Finally, however, Mrs. Khahn was forced to quit her job to take care of the Professor. When she left the library, she was gifted with a set of travel books, a sign that she still never told her colleagues about her husband's illness. When she returned home after her last day of work, however, the professor was gone. She searched the neighborhood and when she returned home, she found him in his library, looking at her books. He did not recognize her, and when he asked who she was, she told him that she was Yen. In that moment, she felt her life as she had hoped for it to be ending, but she committed herself to continuing to care for her husband, even if he did not know who she was.

Analysis

The story "I'd Love You to Want Me" uses the loss of the professor's memory to interrogate the power of memory itself in shaping identity. For the characters in the story, especially for the professor and Mrs. Khahn, the gradual loss of his memory from dementia or Alzheimer's, is a doubly traumatic experience, because the professor built his entire life around his mind. As a student, he pursued advanced studies in oceanography. Even as a husband and father who was forced to work as a community college teacher rather than a scholar, his interest and identity were built around his intellect. At the very end of the story, Mrs. Khahn watches her husband who no longer remembers who she is look over the books in his library. "He touched the cover of each book with great care, tenderly, and she knew, not for the first time, that it wasn't she who was the love of his life" (123). The careful statement that this is not a new revelation for Mrs. Khahn is important. She has lived their entire lives with the understanding that his quest for intellectual development, his books, and his studies are what anchored him.

His loss of memory is also a loss of identity. He cannot at one point even remember his own name, but he can recall moments from his past and information about oceans. His loss of the ability to read strips him further of his identity as an intellectual and a scholar, until finally he exists in a world alone, separated from his wife and children by the disease of his mind. What's important to note, however, is that the professor's loss of memory does not only impact him. By the end of the story, Mrs. Khahn, who has been angry and jealous of her husband's insistence on calling her Yen, finally claims the name as her own in order to keep him comfortable. His misremembered or completely made up stories and details about their life together and his own life away from her makes Mrs. Khan question her own identity: "the more she listened to him, the more she feared her own memory was faltering" (115). If our memories are what establishes us as individuals and forges our identity, the story asks what happens when those memories are faulty or stripped away. The life Mrs. Khan had was one built around the husband her father selected for her. Once she lost the man he was, did her life exist any longer? The story seems to suggest that it did not. When she claims the name Yen for herself to make her husband comfortable and keep him calm, she is setting aside the previous history and narrative of her life, and in doing so, sets aside her self.

The professor's descent into dementia also mirrors in many ways the acculturation of immigrants coming to a new country and losing the memory and reality of the life they once had. The Khahns are literal immigrants, refugees from Vietnam who fled the country with their six children after the war ended and the communists took control. Through flashbacks, the story reveals their harrowing and dangerous journey across the South China Sea in a fishing boat, a trip during which Mrs. Khahn was unsure if she could keep her children safe. Having lived for so many years in the United States, they have become comfortable with their new lives. Their children, who were all born in Vietnam and who all made the same dangerous journey have little, if any, memory of it. When their oldest son Vihn visits, Mrs. Khan wonders if "he remembered their escape from Vung Tau on a rickety fishing trawler, overloaded with his five siblings and sixty strangers" (107). The text implies that either Vihn does not remember or he does allow the memory to give him any understanding or empathy about his parents. Instead, he throws their arranged marriage back at them when they try to stop him from eloping and goes by an American name, Kevin. If Kevin, the oldest, does not remember, it is less likely that his younger siblings would remember. Indeed, the Khahn children do not share the taste for Vietnamese cuisine that their parents have, an indication that their pallet was Americanized early on: "Their children had never acquired the taste for it [the bitter melon soup], but it reminded the professor and Mrs. Khahn of their own childhood" (110). Just as Mrs. Khan cannot share in the newly remembered (or misremembered) reminiscences of her husband, the Khahn children do not have a shared memory of Vietnam or that particular culture, even though they were there and born into it. For the Khahn children, the very real and visceral memories that Mrs. Khahn had of being tossed around on the boat at sea are no more real than the professor's memories of the woman named Yen. His demential, at least in a figurative sense, becomes a new country and new experience that the two can no longer share. Though the professor understands at certain points that his memory is failing him, but the end, he seems unaware that he is a new person with a new reality. The fear of losing who he once was fades, just as it has faded for the Khahn children.

The story also uses the idea of names and naming to critique ideas of authenticity. The most obvious issue of naming in the book is the name that the professor mistakenly calls Mrs. Khahn by, Yen. This name might be either an invention or a memory that he never previously shared with her, but his understanding of his wife as Yen is no less real to him than Vihn's friends knowing and calling him by the name Kevin. In the end, Mrs. Khan's acceptance of the name, to comfort her husband, does not undermine her authentic sense of self. If anything, it reinforces it. Her willingness to call herself by that name to keep her husband calm and comfortable is perhaps the deepest and most authentic mark of her love for him. "She wondered what, if anything, she knew about love. Not much, perhaps, but enough to know that what she would do for him now she would do again tomorrow, and the next day and the day after that" (124). Mrs. Khan knows full well she is not Yen, but she is willing to put her own needs aside once again to care for her husband, which is something she has done throughout their marriage. The use of names and naming is reinforced by the various way people and places are named. Vihn, their oldest son, goes by the name Kevin, but not around his parents. Mrs. Khahn's use of the American name does not signal intimacy or acceptance, but instead signals that she is angry with him because "his mother used his American name only when she was upset with him" (106). In addition, throughout the story, the characters draw attention to place names and the way that thy change depending on the regime in power. The French called Vung Tau by the name of Cap Saint Jacques (100), Saigon is now called Ho Chi Minh city, a name that neither of the Khahns nor the cab driver can make themselves say, and their original street was called Phan Gian Than and is now called Dien Bien Phu (117). The changes in names do not change the places themselves; the city is still a city, the street where they lived still holds the house they once owned. And yet, these changes in names do signal a change of sorts. The city that once was Saigon is not a place where they can remain, and the people who have taken their house have not cared for it well. In many ways, the new names for the Vietnamese locations do reveal something about the places, just as Mrs. Khahn's acceptance of the name Yen reveals something about her character. Under communist rule, these places have not prospered and are not what they once were.

Discussion Question 1

How do place names and the names of people function to develop your understanding the story's themes?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Mrs. Khahn Finally accept the name Yen rather than fight it? What does this signal in her development as a character?

Discussion Question 3

What argument does the story seem to be making about the importance of memory and shared memory? How does the professor's dementia work with other types of remembering and forgetting in the story?

Vocabulary

mustiness, oxfords, inexplicability, trellis, disjuncture, hypnotic, deja vu,

The Americans

Summary

"The Americans" is a short story told in the third person, past tense about James Carver, a Vietnam veteran who married a Japanese woman and goes to visit his daughter who is living and working in Vietnam. At the beginning of the story, the reader does not know the protagonist's race, so the reader does not necessarily realize he is a black man and his until nearly halfway through the story.

The story starts with the statement that James Carver would have never gone to visit Vietnam if not for his daughter and his wife, Michiko. Although the story does not state the setting at first, the events of the story occur in September, a fact that will be revealed later. Michiko wanted to see the country, because she had been told that Vietnam reminded them of Japan before WWII, a country she had no memory of. Carver himself, who was from Alabama, did not believe that anything good could come of seeing the country, but he was talked into going by his wife.

In September, Carver found himself touring Vietnam with his daughter, Claire, and his wife. They were with Claire's boyfriend, Khoi Legaspi, an Asian (his ethnicity is never made any more specific) who was adopted by Americans, and they toured imperial tombs in Vietnam. We learn that Carver had broken his hip by falling down his stairs three years before the story takes place, but that he still walked with a limp. Khoi reminded Carver of the Bowdoin college students who loitered around town, an indication that he and Michiko lived in Maine. Khoi worked as an engineer, building robotics under a grand from the Department of Defense, to clear fields of land mines. Carver was critical of the Department of Defense funding, and wondered if taking the jobs from the people who usually cleared the mines would hurt them. He had no desire to see Khoi's robots.

Claire, however, became upset when Carver made this suggestion that Khoi's work might be tainted by the DOD's involvement. He quickly retreated, not wanting to start another argument with his daughter. As they took a picture with the Temple statuary, Carver realized that he could not remember the name of the emperor buried there, which was another indication of how growing older made one stupider. He believed that his mind hand not been so muddled since his two children were babies.

At the thought of his children, Carver thought of his son, William, who was 28 (three years older than Claire) and was currently a pilot for the Air Force. William was unhappy and bored with his current job, and Carver told him to be glad it was safe, but Carver himself knew that the danger of flying was part of what made it worthwhile. His thoughts of his son made him think of his own days flying B-52s over the South China Sea to bomb parts of Vietnam during the war. This is the first indication that Carver was a veteran himself and had a relationship with the country of Vietnam. His reluctance to visit at the beginning of the story becomes more clear.

The next morning, Claire hired a van to bring her parents to Quang Tri, the town where her boyfriend's mining operation was stationed. She showed them her own apartment, and Carver was upset to see how poor and small the place was. Claire claimed that it was better than most had, but Carver pushed, claiming that she was not a native. Carver wanted to respond, but stopped himself with a technique he learned from couple's therapy. Even so, he could not help himself from responding when Claire claimed that she was used to being looked at by the locals. Her mother insists that as a Japanese woman on a Michigan Air Force base, she had her own experiences of being the other, and Carver added that it was the same being a black man in Japan. This is the first indication of Carver's race, and with that information, the reader becomes aware that Claire herself was multi-racial, being a combination of her black father and Japanese mother.

Claire, however, did not appreciate their comparisons to her situation. She claimed that she has never felt as though she had a home to go to. Her pronouncement made Carver think of Claire's adolescent years, when her racial identity caused her problems at school, which made him think of his own difficulties with racism as a black man first at ROTC at Penn State and then later in the actual service. He realized that his goals were what kept him moving forward, but now that he was retired, he had no idea what his goal should be. The family took a tour of Claire's school after seeing her apartment, and Carver was again taken aback by her living and working conditions. Claire, however, told her parents that she planned on staying indefinitely and that she had "a Vietnamese soul" (134). This caused a major argument between her and her father, and her mother Michiko took her side. Both women gave Carver the silent treatment until the next day.

The next afternoon the four--Carver and his wife, Claire and her boyfriend, drive the hour from their hotel to the place where the mines are being cleared. They passed temples and churches as the went. Eventually they arrived and met two younger Vietnamese men, but Carver cannot remember their names and thought of them simply as Tom and Jerry. Both men were missing limbs, and the prosthetics that replaced them did not match the tone of their skin. The four watch the robot, which is pulled by a mongoose, clear a mine. While Claire's boyfriend was excited at the efficiency of the robotics, Carver was upset by it and by the boy's naiveté. Again, he commented on the Department of Defense's involvement and suggested that they might want the technology to plant mines some day.

This statement upset Claire, who claimed that she wanted to stay in Vietnam to undo some of the damage that he did as a pilot when he served in the war. Her charges angered him, and he stormed away from the group, thinking of what it was really like to fly the bomber. Not even 15 minutes after he had walked away, a monsoon struck. Soaked to the bone, he thought about how Claire was his opposite, and he was angered that she could have sympathy for people who would just as soon kill her but not for her own father. The car carrying the other three pulled up next to him, but in his attempt to get to it, Carver fell into the mud.

By that evening, Carver fell ill with a high fever and he did not wake for almost three days. When he did wake, Claire was there at the hospital, sleeping on the floor next to

his bed. As she helped him to the bathroom, he remembered sleeping on the floor of his own room, so that she could be in his bed with her mother. He had always imagined himself dying in battle or at a high speed, but his weakness made him rethink that. He had a new suspicion that he would die in a place he was not supposed to be, possibly on the wrong side of the world. This, along with the realization of how much things have reversed themselves and the realization that his daughter really does care about him, left him in tears.

Analysis

"The Americans" uses the misunderstandings between generations to illustrate the ways that personal history can remain hidden in the face of public history. In the story, Carver and his daughter, Claire, have clearly been at odds for a longer time than the argument on their brief trip to Vietnam. When Claire had invited her parents, her email is addressed to both, but "really meant for her mother" (125). Moreover, when they do begin to argue, Claire references past fights: "Why do I ever think things will be different with you?" she asks him when he confirms that he did, indeed, think her decisions to go out of state for school, major in women's studies, and teaching in Vietnam were bad ideas. The arguments that they have are, on one hand, the normal sorts of disagreements expected between parent and child. When she was six, for instance, he stood firm on buying her a doll, resulting in her tantrum in the middle of a store. But their disagreements go deeper as well, and they are based in large part on a misunderstanding of one another's history. For Claire, her understanding of her father's service stems from her belief that his bombing runs did harm that it is her job to make amends for. While they are in the middle of the jungle, she turns on him, and says, "You bombed this place. Have you ever thought of how many people you killed? The thousands? The tens of thousands?" (142). She explicitly states that part of her mission in Vietnam is to "do some good and make up for some of the things you've done" (141).

While it is true that her charges are accurate--Carver did, indeed, bomb the jungles of Vietnam and may have killed many people in doing so--they also lack historical and personal context. First, Claire's belief that he indiscriminately bombed the countryside is incorrect on a factual level. "He never explained to Claire the difficulty of precision bombing, aiming from forty thousand feet at targets the size of football fields, like dropping golf balls into a coffee cup from the roof of a house" (142-3). While Carver most likely did kill people on these runs, his explanation gives the indication that his targets were small, specified, and most likely were not indiscriminate countryside. Moreover, Claire's belief that his service was somehow an evil that she must atone for does not take into account the history of the Vietnam conflict. Within the context of this book as a whole, the reader is aware that the majority of characters who are Vietnamese refugees thus far were fleeing the communists, the very same forces her father was fighting against. While the war did create tragedy on a massive scale, Claire's blaming her father for the state of the country and the deaths from that war do not take into account that the communists that were being fought eventually drove many of the previous characters in this book into becoming refugees; that is, they were not blameless. The blame she places on her father also does not take into account his

personal history. From the information we receive in the narrative, it is clear that his hometown in the state of Alabama was the type of place people leave: "a rural Alabama hamlet siphoned clean of hope long before his birth" (125). His decision to enroll in the ROTC was an attempt to get an education as much as it was an attempt to escape the place of his birth, a South unfriendly to African Americans. That he ended up in Vietnam, serving his country, is a result of his own desperate need to move and migrate north, to get out of the land that would have otherwise extinguished his hopes for a better future. Claire does not understand any of this, in part because her parents have purposely kept it from her. As Carver tells her, we "coddled you so you wouldn't have to worry about the things we worried about" (142).

Because the story is situated in Vietnam, the reader is able to see the effects of colonialism and war on the country. "The Americans" is the first story in the collection that takes place in Vietnam itself. The first glimpse the reader gets of the country is of imperial tombs, abandoned structures from a time before the French colonized the land. That they are tombs are important, as tombs are where the dead are buried. That we see the burial place as emblematic of the country as a whole indicates a lack of promise, and a death of the past. Throughout the story, the reader is introduced the extreme poverty of the country, such as the apartment Claire lives in that has neither air conditioning nor a real shower and the run-down school she teaches in where plaster peels from the walls. As they drive out to see the robot, they pass through the countryside, which becomes a metaphor for the country as a whole. "Lining the road outside Quang Tri were one- and two-story homes of faded wood and corrugated tin, a few freshly painted and plastered mini-mansions towering over their primitive neighbors, all of them long and narrow. Occasionally a century or a temple came into view, encrusted with dragonesque architectural filigree, as well as a couple of churches, their ascetic walls plain and whitewashed" (136). In these two short sentences, the reader gets a glimpse of post-war Vietnam, the poverty in the shadow of mansions, and the class of eastern and western religions indicating a long history of colonialism and conquest. The minefield itself is also an important part of the landscape. Since Carver's children are 28 and 25, this story is taking place in at least the 1980s, but more likely the 1990s, nearly 30 years after the Vietnam conflict took place. That there are still minefields laden with undetonated mines and that the figures of "Tom" and "Jerry," as Carver things of them, were injured by playing with cluster bombs as children indicates the far-reaching effects of the war (138).

Finally, the story highlights the racism in the United States through the characters of Carver and his daughter Claire. For Carver, being a black man on the majority-white campus of Penn State either during or not long after the civil rights moment was not easy. His memories of those times feature the stark question in people eyes, "what are you doing here" (132). Throughout his career, the eyes of the people he met seemed to ask that same racist question "in flight school at Randolph Air Force Base, in an airman's uniform; in his B-52 and later his Boeing airliner, he was never where he was supposed to be" (132). His race means that his success makes him stand out in his own country. For his daughter, growing up in what many would consider more progressive times, her ethnicity poses equal problems. His memories of her "sobbing at a slight from a peer or stranger, some variation of the line “What are you?" mirror Carver's own

experiences (132). Her tears made him feel guilty for "delivering her into a world determined to put everybody in the proper place" (132). However, this story by its very inclusion of race and ethnicity confuses the answer to that question. As a born American, Claire should belong in her own country, but as a daughter of a black man and Japanese woman, she does not feel she belongs anywhere and has come to believe she has a "Vietnamese soul" (134). Her identifying with the country she has chosen to call home, a country still riddled with land mines and the threat of malaria from mosquitos, a country where she must use bottled water and does not even have a shower, is what she chooses over the discomfort and pain of racism she faces in the United States.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the country of Vietnam in this story. How do each of the characters see it? How does their view of the country help to reveal them more fully?

Discussion Question 2

Explain how the relationship between Claire and her father Carver develops over the course of the story. How do they misunderstand one another? How are they more alike than different?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the inclusion of the mine fields in the book. How does the literal danger posed by the mines remind the reader of the war? What effect does it have to show that they still exist?

Vocabulary

prelude, postscript, melancholic, multitude, lamentation, picturesque, pastoral, naïveté, deluge, monsoon, filigree, ascetic, dragonesque

Someone Else Besides You

Summary

The story "Someone Else Besides You" is narrated by Thomas in the first-person, past tense. The story is set in Los Angeles, most likely in the 1990s, but before the advent of caller ID. The story begins with Thomas driving his father to the apartment of the father's girlfriend, Mimi. Mimi lived in an upscale apartment complex, a far cry from the rental houses Thomas himself grew up in. The narrative continues on, revealing backstory about the father and the narrator little by little, so that the reader must piece together information. Thomas's name, for example, is not even revealed until more than halfway through the story.

When they arrived at Mimi's apartment, Thomas asked to use the bathroom when he dropped his father off, just so he could see how his father's girlfriend lived. He compared her home and Mimi herself to his own mother, who died from a brain aneurysm the year before at 53. His father, a fit and muscular man, had once been a paratrooper in the Vietnam War, and retained his physique and charisma into his older years, but the narrator's mother had not. Thomas, the narrator, looked in Mimi's medicine cabinet, expecting to find Viagra, as Thomas's ex-wife, Sam, had found in his father's medicine bag some years before. This is the first hint of the affairs the father had throughout Thomas's childhood. Thomas did not stay for coffee, and his father seemed happy for him to go. Thomas reflected as he left that his father was a "spare" man (154). After he got into his car, Thomas thought of the suitcase his father had brought to Thomas's apartment six weeks before, which is the first indication we get that his father is now living with him.

The story then skips forward in time, as Thomas worked as a service representative at his first job, a hearing aid manufacturer. As he worked, he recalled his childhood and his relationship with his father and the reader learns that Mimi is the last of a string of mistresses his father kept. Mimi, however, was the first one Thomas ever met. During a lunch break, the narrator called his ex-wife, Sam, just to hear her voice on the recording. Sam was a teacher, and her relationship with her students reminded Thomas of his father. The story then reveals more of the characters' backstories, and we learn that Thomas's father was a guidance counselor known to the students only as Mr. P. He was a well-respected faculty member, and the narrator wondered if the students ever knew the man that Thomas himself knew.

As the narrator tells the reader that he never told his colleagues at his first job about his second job, the story itself moves to the second job, compressing the timeline. By the time Thomas is done describing how he had to change into his uniform in his car, he was changed and ready to begin his second shift as a night watchman at a luxury apartment complex. The job provided Thomas with something to do with the sleepless nights and loneliness he experienced after Sam left him. The story flashes back to the memory of why Sam left. The couple was celebrating her 34th birthday when she told

him she wanted a child. He did not feel ready, because he feared he would turn into his father. Her comment caused him to think about his childhood, especially about how his father forced his five children to train like a small army, doing daily calisthenics until they puked from exhaustion, in his father's attempt to turn them into real men.

When Thomas's shift ended at dawn, he drove to his Eastside apartment, which was in a sketchier neighborhood where police helicopters and sirens were usual occurrences. Thomas did not sleep long before going back to pick up his father at Mimi's house. Thomas was driving his father around because his father's car had been stolen. As his father showered, Thomas talked to Mimi, who said that his father spoke highly of Thomas. She insisted that Thomas needed a girl, and that the best wives were Vietnamese women who wanted to immigrate, because they would take care of their men. As they leave Mimi's, his father asked when Thomas had last talked to Sam, and Thomas admitted that it was around the time of his mother's death. The father then berated Thomas for not doing more to get Sam back, saying that he was acting like a woman and pinching Thomas's stomach fat to show him that he felt like a woman.

His father declared that "it's time we did something about you," which made Thomas think of the other time his father said those same words (162). Thomas was in fourth grade and a kid at school had called him a "slant-eyed frog" (163). Thomas's father took him to the boy's house and talked to the boy's father. When it was clear the father would not make the boy apologize, Thomas's father kneed him in the groin and punched him in the neck, leaving the man crumpled on the sidewalk. At that time, his father was still a janitor working on his degree.

The story returns back to the present. After they left Mimi's apartment, the two men picked up a rental car for his father. His father took Thomas to a barber, who cut his hair too short, and then took him to see Sam, without calling first. Sam was very visibly pregnant when she opened the door. Thomas was surprised that trinkets and souvenirs from their life together are on display in her house. They learned that she recently visited Vietnam, but from Thomas's father's remarks, Sam herself was not Vietnamese. His father vowed to never go back, but he looked hungrily at her photos of the country. Most of the places she showed him, he had never seen, because the war had kept his generation from knowing their own country. Thomas looked at the pictures, but the country meant very little to him. The reader then learns that Thomas himself was born in a refugee camp in Guam.

Thomas could not stop himself from asking whether a man in one of the photos was the baby's father, which upset Sam. After they argued about it, Sam showed them the door and asked Thomas not to return. As they drove away, Thomas's father asked him to stop by Sam's car. His father knifed all four tires and broke the windshield, claiming that Sam would blame it "on the blacks" (172). Thomas was horrified, but his father pointed out that Thomas could have stopped him at any time, simply by honking the horn to alert the neighbors. He father told him that only a real man knows right from wrong, and right was about what you felt after you made a choice. Thomas confronted his father about the affairs he had over the years, and his father confessed he respected his wife

but did not love her. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, and he had loved someone else.

When they returned to Thomas's apartment, he helped his father into bed, massaging the muscle the older man had strained in destroying the car. When Thomas went to put his father's shirt away, he saw the Styrofoam head with his mother's last wig on it in the closet.

Late the next day, the police found his father's car. When Thomas returned from work, Mimi was at his apartment with his father. Seeing them together made Thomas feel that maybe Sam had made the right choice to leave him. While his father went outside to clean up his newly found car, Thomas talked to Mimi and asked her if she knew that his father would eventually cheat on her. Disgusted, Mimi asked him if there were not times he wanted to be someone beside himself.

After Thomas worked two additional shifts, he returned to his apartment near dawn. He was barely asleep when a pounding erupted at the door that turned out to be Sam. His father had been wrong; Sam blamed him for the slashed tires and broken windshield. She told him that she did not realize he had it in him to do anything like that. He offered her the envelop of cash that he had been planning to slip under her door. Thomas touched her belly, realizing that there was a life inside of it. He told her that he could be the father, and she asked if he understood what he was saying. After he admitted that he had no idea, he noticed age spots that had not been on her chin before. As Thomas waited for Sam to respond, Thomas heard the creak of the floorboard, a signal that his father was also listening and waiting.

Analysis

The way the story reveals backstory and pertinent character information little by little, often long after such information would have been helpful to the reader, mirrors the way identity is formed and understood. The story begins in media res, with Thomas already in the apartment of his father's girlfriend. From the opening line, "My father's girlfriend lived in a condo complex..." it is unclear whether this girlfriend, Mimi, is a woman his father is having an affair with, or whether the narrator's mother is no longer married to his father. The confusion that it establishes from the very beginning is important, because it forces the reader to be conscious of each detail they decode about these characters and it means that our understanding of the characters are constantly shifting. The way the plot is structured, the reader learns next that the narrator's mother is dead and then that Mimi, the girlfriend, most likely was his father's girlfriend when the narrator's mother was still alive.The way that the information is doled out, piecemeal and often out of order, means that the reader may have trouble understanding the motivation of each character, but this confusion also creates a situation that keeps the reader from stereotyping any single character. Important information is often given late in the text or withheld completely. For example, we do not learn that the narrator's first name is Thomas until nearly halfway through the story, when he remembers his ex-wife, Sam using it. We never learn his last name, nor does the reader ever learn the name of

his father, Mr. P. Likewise, information about the characters' ethnicities are often withheld at first. When we learn, for instance, that Mr. P was a paratrooper, it is not clear that he was not an American serviceman. Until Thomas tells us that he was called a "slant-eyed fag" it is not clear that Thomas, with his anglicized name, was of Asian descent, and even then, he could have been the product of a marriage between US serviceman and a Vietnamese woman. It is not until very late in the text, when they look at the pictures of Sam's trip to Vietnam, does the reader know for sure that Mr. P. was a paratrooper for the Vietnamese forces, and that Thomas himself was born in a refugee camp in Guam. We do not know that Sam is not Vietnamese until Mr. P calls her a "foreigner" who knows nothing, and tells her that the Vietnamese "take your money and say nice things to you" (167).

The story's refusal to give identifying information at the beginning and its strategy to layer the information throughout the story creates a narrative about fathers and sons that is both free from the markers of ethnic identity and dependent on them. In some ways, the relationship that Thomas has with his father has nothing to do with their cultural identity as Vietnamese refugees who have become American citizens. Their arguments and lack of understanding of one another is universal, a timeless story of generational disagreement that is not specific to any one country or nation. On the other hand, their relationship is very much dependent on the misunderstandings that their generational and cultural differences create. Born and raised in Vietnam, Thomas's father has a different set of ideas about the world and how manhood works within it. While his son sees Mr. P's actions as disrespectful, spare, and even immoral, Mr. P. is living based on a different code of ethics. "Everything I've ever done I believed in...The only way a man knows right from wrong is when he makes a choice" (173). Coming of age in a country torn by civil war, forced to marry a woman he did not love, and then forced to flee his country with his young wife and family when the war was lost, Mr. P. has a set of experiences that have made him who he is. Those experiences are directly related to his experiences as a Vietnamese man. His son, however, is one step removed from those experiences. Having never set foot in Vietnam himself, Thomas only has access to the parts of that culture which his parents have managed to import for their family. Thomas, for example, cannot understand the frustration of his father's experiences of an arranged marriage, because he himself lives in a country where an arranged marriage is unthinkable. By revealing these experiences and pieces of each character's backstory throughout the narrative and often out of the order that would make things most clear and easily accessible, the story asks readers to consider how relationships are formed and the forces--both internal and external--that impact them.

Discussion Question 1

How does the plot structure with its use of flashbacks help to support and create the themes in the story?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Mr. P and Thomas's relationship. Both father and son seem at odds with one another, and yet through the narrative, they come to understand one another more clearly. What might the story be saying about familial relationships? About generational relationships?

Discussion Question 3

How does Thomas's status as a refugee impact his character?

Vocabulary

stucco, barracks, immaculate, squadron, derricks,

Fatherland

Summary

"Fatherland" is the final short story in The Refugees. It is narrated in third person, past tense, and it returns to the country of Vietnam itself. In the story, the protagonist, Phuong, was a 23 year old biology graduate who worked as a hostess at a tourist-class restaurant. She was the oldest of three siblings, who are the second set of children her father, Mr. Ly, had. Both sets of children were named the same names. The story is set in 2001, a year after President Clinton's visit to the country.

When the story opens, the reader does not necessarily realize that the setting is Vietnam. Phuong had grown up receiving annual letters and photographs of her father's other family. Her older sister was also named Phuong, and everything about the other girl made the protagonist feel lesser by comparison. The older Phuong went by the name Vivien, and the letters from the first Mrs. Ly narrated the success that Mr. Ly's other family had accomplished. At first, the reader might think that the second family was in America, the first family being left behind in Vietnam somehow. The story then reveals that the first family was actually in America, while it was the second family who were in Vietnam. This is realized when Vivien wrote a letter to tell her father that she would be visiting and expected to stay with him and his second family. When she arrived, the reader understands that her arrival is in Saigon, and that she had come to Vietnam to visit. This confusion cleared up, the narrative than progresses with Vivien's visit.

When Vivien arrived, she was exactly as polished and impressive as Phuong had always imagined her older sister to be. While Mr. Ly and the second Mrs. Ly (Phuong's mother) were insulted by Vivien taking on an American name, Phuong understood immediately why her sister renamed herself. Phuong believed she selected the name from Mr. Ly's favorite movie, Gone with the Wind. After a week in Saigon, Vivien still remained every bit the tourist and was often confused by locals as both Korean and Japanese. Vivien took the family to dinner at the restaurant where Phuong worked, an expensive place where the tourists took pictures of the waitstaff and ate peasant food served as haute cuisine. Phuong overheard other tourists commenting on the delicateness of the waitresses and felt uncomfortable.

Throughout her visit, Mr. Ly and his second family follow the schedule that Vivien set for herself, visiting a number of tourist destinations around the country. When Mr. Ly praised his older daughter's schedule, the story flashed back to tell the story of how Mr. Ly came to have two families. At the closer of the war, Mr. Ly had been banished to a New Economic zone as a capitalist and his mistress had come to demand more money. Mr. Ly's first wife left the country, taking their children with them. When Mr. Ly returned back to Saigon after five years of exile to discover his family gone, he divorced his first wife, married his mistress, and had more children, whom he named after his first set of children.

As the family toured with Vivien, Phuong felt jealousy of how pleased her father seemed with his first daughter, He took them to a restaurant that was like Saigon "in the old days," and Mrs. Ly commented that he never took her there in the old days (187). Phuong had trouble seeing her aged, fattened father as the slim, stylish man he must once have been.

On her free day, Vivien went on one of the tours Mr. Ly gave for his living. They took Phuong with them, and again Phuong felt the jealousy of not ever have been asked to go before then. They visit many of the old sites from the war, including tunnels the Vietcong used to attack Americans, and Phuong noticed that the American tourists seemed unaware of the performance her father was giving and unbothered by the implications of his narrative. She hoped that Vivien would not go back to America believing that her father's performance was how he felt. During the tour, Vivien complained about her discomfort with the heat and mosquitos, and Phuong grew irritated at her sister's vulnerability.

Two nights before Vivien was set to depart, the sisters are in the bedroom that Phuong shared with her parents. Vivien had already given all of the American goods she had brought to the family except one gift she brought specifically for Phuong, a set of Victoria's Secret lace undergarments. Phuong was scandalized by them, but tried them on nevertheless, and the feel of the lace against her skin made her yearn even more for something else in her life.

The next day, Vivien took the family to an amusement park. Feeling a new closeness to her sister, Phuong confessed to Vivien what she had been hoping for all along--that Vivien would sponsor her to come to America, so that Phuong could use her degree to become a doctor, like Vivien, and do more than marry and have babies. Vivien was surprised, and made a confession of her own--that everything the first Mrs. Ly wrote about their success in America was a lie. Vivien had recently been fired from her job as a receptionist because she had slept with her married boss. When Vivien returned to America, she planned to get her life together and not think of her half-family in Vietnam again. For the rest of the day, Phuong was too disillusioned to really enjoy herself, now seeing her sister for the fake she was.

A month later, Vivien sent another letter to her father in Vietnam, this one containing the pictures they took at the amusement park together. The rest of the family wanted to preserve the pictures, but Phuong tore the letter in half. For the first time, Phuong felt pity for her father and realized that she now knew how to change her life. It was only a matter of getting momentum to begin. The next morning, alone in the house, she looked at the pictures again, remembering how odd it had been to be inside the ice palace at the amusement park, where most of the pictures had been taken. She put on the lacy, scandalous underwear and then she burned the pictures, until they were nothing more than ash floating up into the crystal clear sky over Saigon.

Analysis

The use of the double family allows Nguyen to play with the theme of success and failure in "Fatherland." Mr. Ly's two families are doubles, with two Mrs. Lys and two sets of children who have the same name. At first, at least, it seems as though the two eldest daughters, both named Phuong, are also scientists. The first Phuong, who calls herself Vivien, has become a doctor, while her younger sister has majored in biology but currently works as a hostess at a tourist-class restaurant in Saigon. At first, it seems as though the first Mrs. Ly has succeeded in transforming her children's lives and her own life by fleeing Vietnam as a refugee. Her pictures and letters seem to be evidence of her success, and even her first husband holds a reverence for the children who were taken from him: "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" (182). He honors his first set of children by naming the second set after them, and he uses those names as bait to get his first set of children to return to him: "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" (189-90). Because of this, Phuong grows up believing that her own life means less, her own success in getting a college degree is failure in comparison to her sister's life. In short, Phuong grows up wishing to be in the world that Vivien lives in--America. This is all exactly as the reader might have expected. The American family has found success that those left behind in the developing, communist country that is Vietnam cannot find. The story, however, subverts these expectations with the irony of having Vivien admit to her mother's lies. The American family is not actually more successful than their Vietnamese-based doubles. The first Mrs. Ly does not own a beauty shop, but is employed in a nail shop. Vivien is not a doctor, but an unemployed receptionist who was fired when her married boss wanted to end the affair she was having with him. It is unclear whether Vivien even has a college degree, as Phuong does. This reversal is important, because by subverting the reader's expectations, it also calls attention to the promise of Phuong--and all who live in Vietnam--as well as the reader's own preconceptions. Though it is not clear what path Phuong will take toward her future, what is clear is that she no longer believes that her country of birth will keep her from moving forward toward the future she wants. Vivien's confession is a moment of disillusionment for Phuong, but in that moment, Phuong is able to see past her own preconceived notions of what she can and cannot do with her life.

The story "Fatherland" is one of only two stories in the collection that return to the setting of Vietnam, and the setting of Vietnam allows the reader to understand the effects of war and tourism on the country and its people. The mention of Bill Clinton's visit in the story reminds readers that until 2000, Vietnam was not always seen as a safe country for Westerners to visit. In part, Vivien's appearance has everything to do with that visit, which convinced Vivien's mother "that Vivien could return safely, especially when equipped with a US passport and dollar bills" (186). However, simply because Westerners have not traveled in the country does not mean it has been free from tourists. Vivien is not so much recognized as an American tourist, but at times "she was easily mistaken for a Korean businessman's frazzled wife or a weary Japanese

tourist" (183). Despite its identity as an anti-capitalist and communist nation, Vietnam depends on its tourism. Both Phuong and her father now work for the tourist industry. In an upscale restaurant, Phuong is required to be photographed by any guest who requests it. Her father leads tours of the old war zones, including the tunnels the Vietcong once used to ambush American soldiers. The Americans on the tour, however, do not see the difference between a performance and fact any more than the restaurant patrons do. "For the tourists, act was fact...they could not tell the difference between a Communist and a man the Communists had exiled to a New Economic Zone" (193). Just as Vivien imagines her second set of half-siblings to be provincial, so too do the tourists see the Vietnamese in the service industries that support tourism as "all the same" (193). While this allows families like the Ly family to make a living, it also comes at a cost.

Discussion Question 1

Explain how the story uses irony to subvert the reader's expectations about Vietnam and the Vietnamese people.

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Phuong with Vivien. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? How does their individual national identities affect the characters they are?

Discussion Question 3

How does the setting of the story inform theme? Discuss how using the setting of Vietnam and the plot of a refugee returning to that specific setting allows Nguyen to analyze the effects of war and violence on a population and its refugees.

Vocabulary

plenipotentiary, zither, abscond, banish, weevil, paunch, endearment, brassiere, hypocrisy, ignite

Characters

The Unnamed Narrator in "Black-Eyed Women"

The narrator of "Black-Eyed Women" remains unnamed throughout the story, and at first, even her gender is not clear. She works as a ghostwriter, writing the life stories of people who became famous in tragic ways. She is haunted by her memories of her past, especially her brother's death. Her brother was killed by pirates when he tried to save her from being taken from their refugee boat. Her present character is defined by watching her brother die and by being raped at the hands of pirates while the entire boat, her parents included, watched. She avoids sunlight and does not like intimacy because of this event. She lives with her mother (also unnamed) and they both have a passion for words, but the narrator prefers the silence of writing to oral storytelling. She is visited by the literal ghost of her dead brother, who listens to her story when no one else will and helps absolve her of the guilt she feels because she survived when he did not. Because of her brother's visit, she is able to move forward with her life, and she decides that it is time for her to write her own stories.

Liem in "The Other Man"

Liem is an 18-year-old Vietnamese boy who is the protagonist of "The Other Man." He grew up in Long Xuyen, where he knew American servicemen from at least eight years of age. When he is 17, in 1974, Liem's family sends him by bus to Saigon to help make money to support the family. They send him because they trusted that he was steady and had been raised well enough to not be corrupted by the city. In Saigon, he works at a tea house and lives in a rooming house with other single men and boys. He learns enough English to know that when Saigon falls to the communist forces, he needs to flee. He ends up first at Fort Pendleton and then in San Diego, where a placement agency sends him to a sponsor in San Francisco to live. In San Fransisco, he lives with two gay men and works at a liquor store in the Tenderloin district. He is content with his life until the younger of the two men asks him what he wants to be. He is also attracted to the younger of the two men, Marcus, and begins a sexual relationship with him.

Parrish Coyne in "The Other Man"

Parrish Coyne is a middle-aged British expatriate who lives in San Francisco with his younger boyfriend, Marcus Chan. He has green eyes, a graying ponytail, and a large belly. He used to work in investments but at the time that "The Other Man" is set, Parrish works as an environmental activist. He implies that his family money comes from activities that he is currently ashamed of, and he uses that money to help make up for those activities. He sponsors an 18-year-old Vietnamese refugee named Liem to come live with him in his mauve Victorian house in San Francisco.

Marcus Chan in "The Other Man"

Marcus Chan is a twenty-something Honk Kong native who came to America as a university student. He lives in San Fransisco in the mid 1970s and is openly gay, but his family disowned him for his sexuality when an ex-lover outed him to them via a letter and photographs. When we first meet Marcus, it is clear that he is not necessarily a kind person; he subtly makes fun of Liem, the refugee that his current boyfriend is sponsoring. He fights often with his older lover, Parrish, whose house he lives in. When Parrish leaves for the weekend, Marcus calls him a martyr and says he's insufferable. Marcus then quickly takes up an affair with the young refugee living with them. He does not believe that love is anything but a reaction.

The Unnamed Narrator of "War Years"

The narrator of "War Years" is grown man looking back to his experience as a 13-year-old boy. Born in Vietnam, he has no memory of that country or of the war that drove his family away from it. His older sister is off at college, and he lives in a neighborhood in San Jose where houses have bars on the windows and his mother locks their car doors as soon as getting in. He is old enough to understand the history of struggle in Vietnam, but his narrative shows that he is unaware of the complexities in the community. In many ways, he is a typical of any American teenager, interested in comic books and Star Wars. He can speak Vietnamese but cannot read in the language. He prefers English. In "War Years," he watches his mother do something unexpected, but it is not clear if he understands the reasons for her decision to give the money to Mrs. Hoa, at least until he is older.

The Narrator's Mother in "War Years"

The narrator's mother in "War Years" is never named. She is a woman in her mid-40s who owns a grocery store in San Jose, California. She lived through near starvation after World War II, the revolution against the French in the 1950s, and the Vietnam conflict of the 1960s and 1970s, which drove her and her family out of the country. She is a strong-willed women, determined to protect herself, her store, and her family, but when confronted with the truth of Mrs. Hoa's situation, she demonstrates enormous empathy. When she realizes that Mrs. Hoa has lost nearly everyone she loves, and that the woman's devotion to the cause of fighting the communists is her way of coping with these losses, she gives Mrs. Hoa her entire day's profits.

Arthur Arellano in "The Transplant"

Arthur Arellano is a down-on-his-luck gambler who suffered from a form of autoimmune hepatitis, which required him to have a liver transplant. He has a long history of gambling and, one can surmise, drinking. His gambling cost him his house, his wife, and his share in his family's business. He receives a liver transplant and after learning the

name of the donor, goes to find the family. Rather than carefully checking out the person he finds, he believes a con man named Louis Vu, who corners Arthur into hiding counterfeit goods in his garage. Arthur sees himself as unlucky instead of realizing his luck stems from poor choices. He is jealous of his brother, who inherited the entire family business, and is angry that his life has not progressed more than it has. As bitter as he is, however, Arthur is also loyal. He allows himself to be blackmailed by Louis Vu in order to keep his brother and their family's business safe.

Louis Vu in "The Transplant"

Louis Vu is a Vietnamese-born man of Chinese descent who convinces Arthur Arellano that his is the son of Arthur's liver donor. Louis is a con man who trades in counterfeit luxury goods to fund his real estate purchases. He has never been to China and does not know whether to consider himself Chinese or Vietnamese or both. He is an opportunist, who is not above holding the threat of reporting undocumented immigrants employed by Arthur's brother to get what he wants.

The Professor in "I'd Love You to Want Me"

The Professor in "I'd Love You to Want Me" is actually named Anh Khahn, though the reader does not learn that until very late in the story. He married his wife through an arranged marriage, and they have been together for 40 years. He is an expert in oceanography who was forced to take a job teaching Vietnamese at a local community college just south of Los Angeles after his family fled from Vietnam. He has fair skin and silvery hair, and over the course of the story he suffers from dementia. As "I'd Love You to Want Me" progresses, the professor loses his memory, becomes confused about details of his past, loses his ability to live on his own, and also his ability to read. He is a serious man, who was never prone to romantic gifts or actions, but his dementia cases him to do unexpectedly romantic things. In the past, he was a calm presence for his family, keeping them safe and at ease during their long and dangerous journey away from Vietnam. He shows his love through his steadiness and willingness to care for them

Mrs. Khan in "I'd Love You to Want Me"

Mrs. Khan is a middle-aged wife of a community college professor who works at a library. Her first name is Sa, though her husband never uses it and the narrator does not think of her in this way. She was matched to her husband, Anh Khahn through a marriage arranged by her father, and she has been married to him for 40 years. She is the mother of six children who do not visit her regularly, though they still try to take care of her in their own way. She grows jealous when her husband, who has dementia, calls her by another woman's name, but by the end of his disease, she willingly takes on that name to keep him feeling safe and secure. She has clear memories of fleeing from

Vietnam with her six children after the communists took over the country, and those memories keep her from ever wanting to travel by boat.

James Carver in "The Americans"

James carver is a 69-year-old African American male, who was a veteran of the Vietnam war and then a commercial airline pilot for PanAm. He grew up in rural Alabama, a town where there has not been hope for generations before him, and did his ROTC training at Penn State University. He is retired from flying. He met his wife Michiko in Japan, where he was stationed, and they have two children, William (28 years old) and Claire (25 years old). He has fond memories of flying B-52s on bombing runs during the war. He is very proud of his son for following in his footsteps in the Air Force, but is grateful that William runs safer refueling missions.He has an often contentious relationship with Claire, his daughter, who he believes to be his opposite in every way. His relationship with his wife is often strained, and there is mention that the couple went to therapy at one point. In the story, his wife takes his daughter's side in a disagreement, leaving him feeling isolated.

Claire Carver in "The Americans"

Claire Carver is the 25-year-old daughter of James and Michiko Carver. She is biracial, having a black father and Japanese mother, and has often felt out of place and as though she did not have a true home until she found Vietnam. She came to Vietnam after going out of state for college and majoring in women's studies against her father's wishes. She teaches English in a small village where most of the townspeople live without basic amenities, like showers and air conditioning, but she has no plans to leave. She sees herself as having a Vietnamese soul, and feels as though she has found her home. Part of her reasoning for doing the work she does is based on a belief about what her father did during the war. She believes she is doing good to make up for the people he killed on his bombing run, but she seems to have little or no idea what his life was like or what his experience of the war was. Despite her conflict with her father, she clearly loves him, as evidence by the way she sleeps on the floor next to his hospital bed when he falls ill in Vietnam.

Thomas in "Someone Else Besides You"

Thomas, whose last name is never given, is the 33-year-old narrator of "Someone Else Besides You." He is defined by his passivity, and spends more time in the story allowing things to happen to him than being an active agent in his own destiny. Thomas is the son of Mr. P., his 63-year-old father, who was once a paratrooper in the Vietnam war. His mother, who remains unnamed, died a year before the story takes place from an aneurysm. Thomas works two jobs: customer service at a hearing aid store and as night watchman for an upscale high rise apartment building. He picked up the second job after his wife, Sam, left him for not wanting to have a baby. He is still in love with Sam

and often calls her answering machine just to hear her voice, but did not do anything to stop her from leaving or to try and win her back. Thomas was born in a refugee camp in Guam, where his parents fled to after the war. He has four siblings who never make an appearance in the story, and he seems cut off from everyone except his father, who he has a tenuous relationship with. His greatest fear--and the fear that kept him from agreeing to have children--is becoming like his father, a womanizer who forced his children to train daily, like a small army. Despite having a tenuous relationship with his father, however, Thomas invites his father to come live with him after his mother dies, because he knows what it feels like to be lonely.

Mr. P. in "Someone Else Besides You"

Thomas's father, Mr. P. is never given any other name in "Someone Else Besides You." Mr. P. was a paratrooper and squadron commander for the Vietnamese army in the Vietnam war, fighting against the communists. When the country fell to the communists, Mr. P. and his wife and children fled first to Guam and then eventually settled in Los Angeles, California. He is a barrel-chested man who is spare with his words and with things, but who has enormous charisma nonetheless. He had mistresses throughout most of his marriage to Thomas's mother. While he respected his wife, or so he claims, he never loved her. He was forced to marry Thomas's mother in a marriage arranged by his own father, even though he loved someone else at the time. He worked first as a janitor and then, by taking night classes, became a well-loved school counselor. Although he is spare with his words and affection for Thomas, it is clear that he cares deeply for his son and has Thomas's best interests at heart. When Thomas is called names by a boy in fourth grade, Mr. P. attacks the boy's father when the father refuses to make the boy apologize to Thomas. When he realizes that Thomas has no vision for how to get his ex-wife back, he takes the drastic steps of slashing her tires and breaking the windshield of her car. It eventually becomes clear that what at first seems like a violent and vindictive gesture, in actuality was an astute move, because Sam does, indeed, return to Thomas.

Phuong Ly in "Fatherland"

Phuong Ly is a 23-year-old woman who lives in Saigon with her family. She majored in biology in college, but now works in a tourist-class restaurant as a hostess, where she is forced to pose for photographs and pretend that she is happy to work there. Her family is her father's second family. His first family left him to become refugees in America after the Vietnam war, and he named his second family after them. Phuong has a dream of going to America and becoming a doctor. She wants to marry someone she does not yet know, instead of one of the boys in her village. She hopes that her older sister, Vivien, will sponsor her. Once she learns that Vivien is neither a doctor nor is willing to help her come to America, Phuong's eyes are opened. She no longer is willing to wait for someone else to save her, and the story indicates that she will find her own way forward.

Mr. Ly

Before the war, Mr. Ly is a capitalist with a summer house by the sea and a mistress on the side. When the war ends and he is sentenced to be sent into exile, his first wife leaves the country with the children. After he returns, he marries his mistress and has a second set of children, whom he names after his first set of children. After the war, he works as a tour guide. He laminates the pictures his first wife sends him from America, and when his oldest daughter, Vivien, arrives in Saigon for a visit, he shows her more care and deference than he's ever shown to Phuong or her siblings.

Symbols and Symbolism

The Brother's Ghost in "Black-Eyed Women"

The ghost of the unnamed brother in "Black-Eyed Women" symbolizes the way trauma can haunt a person. In the story, the brother is a literal ghost, who appears to the unnamed narrator as a fully-flesh being, still wearing the clothes he died in. His material presence is important because rather than being an ephemeral wisp of spirit or even a figment of the narrator's imagination, the wet spots he leaves on the carpet and the briny clothes leaves the reader no choice but to see him as a solid and real thing in the story. The very weight of his presence is important to the story, because it makes visible the weight of the past and the guilt the narrator has been carrying with her since she watched him die. The brother's ghost makes clear that he never left or crossed over, but has always been coming toward them. He was not something that ever disappeared and, while they might have left his body behind in the ocean after his death, he remained with them. His appearance in the narrator's life is a literal haunting, but he serves to represent the many people that did not make it across the sea. His death was one of many, just on the boat the narrator traveled on, but it was also one of many refugee deaths that happen on any number of over-packed boats.

The Black-Eyed Women in "Black-Eyed Women"

The old women who told ghost stories to the children in "Black-Eyed Women" symbolize the power of story telling in the story. In the story, they tell the children in the village ghost stories about past would-be conquerors who are now trapped forever in their lands. They transform the devastation of those wars into a victory of sorts, by remembering the Japanese and Americans who once tore their country to shreds not as valiant warriors, but as aimless ghosts, trapped in their untimely deaths. These old women with the dark eyes and dark lacquered teeth are simultaneously something that the unnamed narrator wants to be and something that she fears. She imagines them taunting her twenty years later and an ocean away, judging her for the stories she has been unable to live with and tell. It is only through accepting her past and dealing with the survivor's guilt she has been carrying that the narrator is able to become one of these women herself, telling the stories of the ghosts that continue to haunt.

The Blue Airmail Envelop in "The Other Man"

The blue airmail envelop in "The Other Man" symbolizes the life and identity that Lien has left behind him in Vietnam. When the envelop with his father's handwriting appears one day in San Fransisco, Liem does not react the way the reader might expect. For someone who never stops worrying about his family, except for in the moments between sleep and waking, Liem's refusal to open the letter and look at its contents might seem strange. However, the letter arrives right after Liem has spent nearly two

days alone with Marcus, a moment when Liem feels almost at home in his new life and with the possibilities that the life in America holds for him. The blue letter literally reminds him of his past, but its arrival also symbolizes the family and responsibilities that will remain tethered to him. His decision to set the envelop aside is a way for him to symbolically set aside the family responsibilities and identity he had in Vietnam. His eventual decision to open the letter indicates that he will meet those responsibilities in the future, but the fact that he waits until after he experiences a dramatic change by having sex with Marcus demonstrates that his new identity will not be put aside for the responsibilities of the past.

The Chicken Feet in "The Other Man"

The Chicken Feet that Liem and Marcus share at the Chinatown restaurant in "The Other Man"symbolizes the connections between their status as Asian immigrants, despite the differences in their background. "'Parrish won't touch those,'Marcus said approvingly as he watched Liem suck the dimpled skin off a chicken's foot, leaving only the twiggy bone" (36). Whatever differences might exist between Marcus and Liem, they share this cultural connection. It does not matter that Marcus was sent to America to study, and Liem has come as a refugee, because in this moment they share something that Parrish does not share with them, a culinary culture. Parrish, whatever his motivations for helping refugees and for dating Marcus, marks himself as an outsider by his unwillingness to eat the chicken feet.

Pop Culture in "War Years"

Mentions of pop culture, especially the Captain America Comics and Star Wars movies, in "War Years" symbolize the acculturation of young Vietnamese immigrants. In the story, the narrator is fixated on purchasing the new Captain America comic, and will go at great lengths to earn the money to buy it, including picking the gray hairs from his mother's head. He also wonders what his life would be like if he had lived in Vietnam, and whether kids living under communist control have seen the new Star Wars. The narrator's fixation on pop culture marks him as a typical 13-year old, but it also shows how quickly cultural assimilation can occur. The narrator himself was born in Vietnam, but he has no memory of that country and can not even read Vietnamese writing. He can, however, easily navigate the world as an American teenager.

The Counterfeit Luxury Goods in "The Transplant"

The counterfeit luxury goods in "The Transplant" are symbolic of the fiction of authentic national identity. In the story, citizenship and national identity are not fixed, natural categories, but are instead unstable labels that people claim or reject based on necessity and desire. Louis, the person who sells the counterfeit goods, is from a Chinese family but has never even been to China, nor does he know much Chinese. Instead, he was born in Vietnam and considers that country (especially through its

cuisine) home. Arthur sees himself as Mexican or Latino, but he does not speak Spanish as well as the Korean immigrants he and his wife know, nor does he remember anything about Mexico other than barely remembered stories grandparents might have told him. Though other Americans might see him as Latino, he seems himself as American. The idea of authentic identity is consistently interrogated and undermined throughout the story, in the same way that the quality and value of the counterfeit goods are.

The Donated Liver in "The Transplant"

The liver that Arthur receives in "The Transplant" is symbolic of foreign or immigrant labor within a country. Arthur is aware of the otherness of his donated organ. He calls it "the alien within him" (24). The liver is from a Vietnamese man, and Arthur is a Latino. His alien liver is both alien because it is from another person and because it is from another ethnicity. Like immigrants in the story (and in the country as a whole), the liver keeps Arthur alive.

The Counterfeit Picasso in "I'd Love You to Want Me"

The fake Picasso painting that Vihn Khahn brings back from his vacation to Saigon symbolizes his mother's experience dealing with her new life as his father's caretaker. The painting is one of Picasso's abstract, cubist pieces, with a woman who has both eyes on one side of her face. It makes his mother deeply uncomfortable to have this two-eyed stare looking at her, so she turns the painting to face the wall. The visual fracturing of the figure in the painting symbolizes the fractured identity that Mrs. Khahn feels as she cares for her husband during his descent into dementia. She is both the woman who shared a life and memories with the professor, and she is at the same time the woman who is a witness to the new version of him. These two people are at odds with one another, but both are the only real witnesses to her husband's condition and experience, just as the woman in the painting is the only real witness to Mrs. Khahn's own frustrations and devastations during her husband's illness. Just as the painting is a counterfeit, Mrs. Khan herself will become a counterfeit wife by taking the name Yen to keep her husband safe and happy in his final years.

The Imperial Tombs in "The Americans"

The imperial tombs in "The Americans" symbolize a lost history of Vietnam. The tombs are literally from the imperial era, before the French colonized the country and the communists threw out the French. The fact that they are tombs, instead of palaces or temples, indicates that there is something dead and unreachable about the past. The statuary at the tombs are headless, as foreign tourists and armies have taken the heads as souvenirs.

The Minefield in "The Americans"

The minefield in "The Americans" symbolizes the lasting effects of the Vietnam war in the country. The mines are left over from both the communist forces who would lay mines throughout the jungles for American troops to find and they still continue to do damage to the people who have to live in these areas. Thirty or more year laters, they are a physical reminder of what the war has done and continues to do to the country.

The Mother's Wig in "Someone Else Besides You"

The last wig that Thomas's mother wore, a gift from him, symbolizes the differences between appearance and reality in the story. The wig literally changes his mother's appearance. Made of real human hair, it is a high-quality piece, and one she wore when she died. At the end of his mother's life, the wig was the most vibrant part of her, and it still did not match the richness or abundance of his father's girlfriend's real hair. The wig's appearance at the end of the story, indicates that it is more than a simple object. Although Thomas's father does not have a picture of his dead wife on his dresser, as tradition and custom dictate, he does have her wig on its foam stand in his closet. Considering how little he brought with him, the fact that he does keep her wig is significant. To the outside world, his parents' marriage might have seemed stable, to Thomas himself, it seemed like a sham with all the affairs his father had, but the wig points to something different. Thomas's father might not follow the tradition of displaying the photograph of a woman he never loved, but he does keep something more real, more a part of her.

The Photographs of Vietnam in "Someone Else Besides You"

The photographs of Sam's vacation to Vietnam in "Someone Else Besides You" symbolize all that Mr. P. has lost through the war and by becoming a refugee. Because of the war, he has never visited the places that Sam, a foreigner and outsider, has seen. Because of his status as a refugee, he never will visit those places. Even if he could go back, he would be branded as a traitor, since he fought against the communists. The photographs represent a country that no longer exists for him, the country that made him but is kept from him just the same.

Settings

Refugee Boats

In "Black Eyed Woman" and "I'd Love You to Want Me," characters remember the actual experience of being on small boats over-stuffed with people as they crossed the South China Sea to try to escape from Vietnam. In both stories, the experience of being on the boat is a harrowing one, defined by a lack of privacy and the fear of the empty water around them. The narrator of "Black Eyed Woman" tells the reader, "I had not forgotten our nameless blue boat and it had not forgotten me, the red eyes pained on either side of its prow having never ceased to stare me down" (14). In "I'd Love You to Want Me," Mrs. Khahn remembers her own experience on a refugee boat: "by the fifth evening, the only sounds besides the waves slapping at the hull were children whimpering and adults praying to God, Byddha, and the ancestors" (114).

Vietnam

In "Fatherland" and "The Americans," the stories return to the setting of Vietnam. In both stories, the country is one defined by both poverty and resilience. The effects of the war are obvious in both stories. In "The Americans," Claire's boyfriend works on a robotics project to clear mine fields that have been there for nearly 30 years. In "The Fatherland," Phuong's father gives tours of the old Vietcong tunnels and battlefield traps to white tourists who do not seem upset by the details. Despite the poverty and effects of war, however, both of these stories emphasize the beauty of the country and the perseverance and strength of the people who live there.

California

The stories in the collection that take place in America are all set in California. From San Fransisco to Orange County's Little Saigon, the various Vietnamese and other immigrants have found new communities and new lives in the state. Most live in Vietnamese enclaves, where Vietnamese groceries and restaurants create a sense of unity for the community within the larger cityscape.

The Vietnamese Grocery in "The War Years"

The family in "The War Years" owns a Vietnamese grocery store in San Jose, California. The store is filled with the types of goods and food items that the local Vietnamese population grew up with, including the bags of rice that they could not find in the regular supermarkets. The store is both familiar to the narrator and off-putting, because only Vietnamese is spoken in the store.

Nam Kha in "Fatherland"

Nam Kha is the tourist-class restaurant on Dong Khoi Street where Phuong works in "Fatherland." The restaurant caters to a mostly white clientele and serves fancier versions of Vietnamese peasant food at prices that the locals cannot afford. The tourists who dine in the restaurant objectify the Vietnamese women who work there and who are not permitted to refuse a photograph when one is requested.

Themes and Motifs

Ghosts

The motif of ghosts in The Refugees allows Nguyen to argue for the importance of the past and the way it can haunt characters, even as they've moved on to the future. It is not an accident that the collection of stories begins with the unnamed narrator of "Black Eyed Women" working as a ghostwriter who sees the literal, embodied ghost of her dead brother. In the story, the dead brother shows up at her home, dripping wet from the sea and wearing the clothing she saw him in last, more than a decade before. In this story, the ghost becomes more than a spectral haunting. Her brother comes as an embodied form, a boy whose clothes she can wash and who leaves wet spots on the carpet. His solid, physical state underscores the importance of ghosts in this story and other stories. The narrator, herself, has grown up with ghost stories, which were her mother's "favorite kind" (3). This comes as no surprise to the narrator, who sees the Vietnam of her youth as a "haunted country" (5) filled with black eyed women who would whisper stories of the ghosts of soldiers that haunted the woods to her as a child. But for the narrator, ghost stories are not frivolous or useless. They are instead the most important stories, and she worried as a child that "it seemed to me that I would never tell stories like those" (6). The narrator's status as a ghostwriter means that she is forever telling the stories of other people, but not necessarily her own stories. Once she is able to face the ghost of her brother, and subsequently her own past, she becomes able to tell the stories she wanted to tell as a child, the ghost stories she grew up on. It is important to note, however, that these ghost stories, while they might be the stories of others, are also her own stories. In facing her past, she finds a voice.

By starting the collection that is The Refugees with the story of a ghostwriter who later writes about real ghosts (i.e., history and lives), Nguyen declares his project for the entire collection. He too, through the stories collected in this volume, becomes a ghost writer, authoring the stories that have haunted him and bringing to light the traumas and histories that these characters have been reluctant to face. Just as the narrator in "Black Eyed Women" faces her own past and trauma, Nguyen allows the characters collected in these stories to confront the pasts and histories that haunt them. In doing so, and in telling their stories, the collection as a whole provides the same "weight of evidence" that the soggy clothes the brother's ghost bore. As the narrator tells us, "Stories are just things we fabricate, nothing more. We search for them in a world besides our won, then leave them here to be found, garments shed by ghosts" (21). In this statement, Nguyen proposes the project of the book: to make corporeal and real the stories of people who might often be thought of as ghosts--the invisible, the voiceless, the refugees.

Home

The theme of finding or having a home in these stories helps Nguyen to interrogate the issue of belonging, and the stories argue that home, whether that means national home

or specific house, becomes a place where identity is shaped and formed. In the first story of the collection, "Black-Eyed Women," the narrator thinks back to a time when she and her mother first arrived in the United States and lived in a rough, crime-ridden neighborhood. She tells the reader, "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 were possessions counted for everything, we had no belonging except our stories" (7). Thus, early on, The Refugees establishes the importance of finding a home or feeling like one belongs in the home they have. This quote is important though, because it begins to tease out an essential difference between mother and daughter. While the mother does not believe they belong, the daughter (our narrator) says that she had an American adolescence. Her sense of belonging, and therefore also of home, is somewhat different than her mother's.

This generational divide we see in "Black-Eyed Women" is echoed through other stories in the collection, as the children of immigrants and refugees redefine home and belonging for themselves. In "War Years," the narrator is more comfortable and relaxed speaking English than Vietnamese, and the stories his mother often tells him of home--stories much like the ones mentioned above--are not his stories of his home. For him, home is the place where he works to scrape together enough to buy the next issue of Captain America or where Star Wars posters hang on his walls. His identity as a refugee is secondary to his identity as an American teenager, and his notion of home is not the same, shared notion of the Vietnam his family came from that his mother has. Through this exploration of the various forms and definitions of home, Nguyen marks the immigrant experience as one of redefining one's identity in response to the unavoidable shifts that one experiences in one's surroundings and life circumstances. Thus, the idea of a home is a reflection of one's own identity and state of mind with regards to various traumatic events such as the ones experienced the by the characters in The Refugees.

Memory

The stories in The Refugees use memory to show the way that identity is formed through remembered experience and cultural identity is formed through shared memories. Characters feel a sense of connection to their cultural identity and to the older generation depending on how much they remember of the country and culture from which they came. For characters like Thomas in "Somebody Else Besides You" and the unnamed narrator of "War Years," their lack of memories of Vietnam or their travels as refugees set them apart from their parents and the older generation, where the narrator of "Black Eyed Women," who remembers both her childhood during the war and the trip on the refugee boat, looks back to her cultural identity as Vietnamese to draw power and comfort when she turns to storytelling.

The act of remembering or forgetting in these stories allows characters to either grow closer to a cultural identity aligned with the lands they left or distance themselves from it. In "The Other Man," Liem "tried to forget what he'd discovered, how little other lives mattered to him when his own was at stake" (31). When the letter from his parents, who remained behind in Vietnam, arrives in San Francisco, it forces him to remember the

cost of leaving them behind, and reminds him of his responsibilities and duties. In "War Years," the protagonist has no memory of the war or the country he came from, but Mrs. Hao's visit to his parent's store makes it clear that "others have not forgotten" (51). Mrs. Hao's memories and the clarity of those experiences keeps her linked to the country she left far more strongly even than the narrator's parents.

However, in these stories, the act of forgetting or misremembering also shows the danger inherent in the intersection of memory and identity. Many of these characters struggle with remembering, or they struggle with knowing whether their memories are accurate. The protagonist and narrator in "War Years" stops his story to wonder if what he is remembering is accurate or if he is exaggerating, his "memory attempting to approximate what our lives felt like" (63). In "The Americans," Carver laments the memories that seem less stable and more slippery in his old age: "Even his own years were elusive, time ruthlessly thinning out the once dense herd of his memories" (145).

Finally, and perhaps most starkly, the professor in "I'd Love You to Want Me" demonstrates just how essential memory is to identity and how important shared memories are to history and relationships. In the story, the once erudite and thoughtful professor literally is losing his memories. He begins to call his wife by a different, unknown name, and he begins to narrate memories that his wife, Mrs. Khahn has no recollection of. "The more she listened to him, the more she feared her own memory was faltering" (115). Without shared memories, it soon becomes for Mrs. Khahn as though she is living with a stranger, sharing a life she has no memory of making, and in an act of love, that appearance becomes reality by the end. To comfort her confused husband and keep him calm, she allows him to call her the name that is not hers, accepting her role in a story she no longer shares with him. In many ways, Mrs. Khan's experience mirrors that of so many of the children of immigrants in these stories, living a parallel life with parents who remember things they do not.

Food

In the stories collected in The Refugees, food often becomes a mark of both generational differences, as well as a way for characters to find connections with one another despite those same differences. In "I'd Love You to Want Me," for instance, Mrs. Khan cooks a multi-course meal for her husband as an act of love, the food connecting them in a very real and meaningful way to their past life in Vietnam before the war. But the story makes clear that while the food reminds the Khahns of their childhood, their own children do not even like it: "The children had never acquired the taste for it, but it reminded the professor and Mrs. Khahn of their own childhood" (110). In "War Years," the narrator's family owns a market in New Saigon in San Jose California, where Vietnamese immigrants can find the food that reminds them of home: "the staples an spices of hime, jasmine rice and star anise, fish sauce and fire-engine red chiles. People haggled endlessly...over everything, beginning with the rock sugar, which I pretended was yellow Kryptonite, and ending with the varieties of meat in the freezer, from pork chops and catfish with a glint of light in their eyes to shoestrings of chewy tripe and packets of chicken hearts, small and tender as button mushrooms" (50).

Despite the narrator's asking his parents why the couldn't just sell T.V. dinners, the descriptions of the food here show such a fondness for the items that one can surmise that he is not disgusted by the non-western food. Instead, the food has become a link between him, an all but Americanized teenager, and his parents.

Food is also a mechanism by which the immigrants of the stories are able to bridge the gap between their own cultures and the new cultures, which at first appear strange to them. For example, in "The Other Man," Marcus and Liem share a meal together without Parrish. They connect over the delicacies in the Asian restaurant, and Marcus is pleased to see Liem suck the skin off chicken feet, a delicacy that the British-born Parish will not touch. In "The Transplant," the Mexican-American Arthur is taught to appreciate and love Vietnamese fare by Louis Vu, who he discovers later is not Vietnamese but Chinese. But Vu, having grown up in Vietnam instead of China, shares the food of his childhood and his home, and despite being a con man, he forms a sense of real connection with Arthur through the meals they share.

Effects of War and Violence

Although none of the stories in The Refugees takes place during the Vietnam War, each one of the stories shows the often long-lasting effects of the wars that divided Vietnam and the residue of violence from those wars. In "Black Eyed Women," the narrator has been living with the effects of being raped as a child while on the refugee ship. Her memories of her childhood is one of war, including playing the bunker her parents built to protect their family from the bombings. In "The Other Man," Liem is forced to flee Saigon when it falls to the communists. He is unable to go back for his family, and to save his own life, he must flee the country. In "War Years," the conflict in Vietnam may be over to those in America, but in the Vietnamese community, rumors of anti-communist organizations terrorizing possible communist sympathizers in the U.S. bring the possibility of violence to the refugee's new country. The threat Mrs. Hao posses to the family store demonstrates the lasting effects of the war that sent the immigrants fleeing the country and the way that war has, in many ways, followed them.

The way in which the stories portray these effects of war takes on a particularly complex tone when demonstrating how war intersects with the ways in which the characters recall their own past and their own culture. In "The Transplant," Louis Vu has been made a refugee twice over because of wars, while in "I'd Love You to Want Me," the threat of being seen as a capitalist sympathizer drives the Khahn's from their country. "The Americans" takes the reader back into Vietnam and shows the very real, lasting effects of the war when Carver visits the edge of a minefield that still contains explosives more than 30 years after the conflict has ended. In "Fatherland," the war's effects on Vietnam is revealed once again, as Phuong and her family make their living from the tourism based on interest in the war. The same conflict that left her country torn and allowed the communists to punish people for being capitalists has become a source of entertainment for Westerners, who cannot tell the difference between an actual communist and her father, who the communists exiled. The way that war and images of the effects of war repeatedly reoccur in these stories reminds the readers that even

once bombs stop falling, the violence that was waged has lasting effects on the people and places where the conflict happened.

Styles

Point of View

Because The Refugees is a collection of short stories, the point of view shifts from story to story.

"Black Eyed Women": The story appears to be narrated in first-person, past tense by the unnamed protagonist. However, in the middle of the story, the narrator stops and speaks directly to the reader in present tense. This meta-textual moment creates a narrative that is being narrated in the present, but the main events of the story happen in the past.

"The Other Man": This story is narrated in third-person, past tense. The narrator is limited-omniscient, and the reader can only see the internal thoughts and reasonings of the protagonist, Liem.

"War Years": This story is narrated by the unnamed protagonist. The narrator tells the story in the past tense, so while the events of the story happened during the narrator's teenage years, the narrator himself is an adult looking back and trying to remember. At one point in the story, the narrator draws attention to his memory, wondering if he is describing what actually occurred or if he is inventing details to get at the heart of how it felt at the time.

"The Transplant": The story is narrated in the third person, past tense. The narrator is limited-omniscient, allowing the reader to see into the thoughts of the protagonist, Arthur, but not any other character's motivations.

"I'd Love You to Want Me": The story is narrated in the third person, past tense. The narrator is focused through the perspective of Mrs. Khahn, to give the reader the experience of dealing with a husband with dementia. It is limited-omniscient.

"The Americans": The story is narrated in the third person, past tense. The narrator focuses through the perspective of Carver, limiting the reader to the protagonist's perspective and inner thoughts.

"Somebody Else Besides You": The story is narrated in the first-person by the protagonist, Thomas. His narrative is in the past tense, but often compresses time and uses flashbacks.

"Fatherland": The story is narrated in the third-person, past tense. The limited-omniscient narrator is focused through the protagonist's perspective, that of Phuong.

Language and Meaning

In general, the stories in The Refugees uses language that is at once lyrical and accessible to most readers. The language in the stories told in the first person ("Black Eyed Women," "War Years," and "Somebody Else Besides You") replicate the language and voice of their narrators, a ghost writer, teenager, and man in his mid-30s, respectively. These stories tend to have the most simple vocabulary and straightforward language. Because all three of these first-person narrators are children of refugees, or children who were too young to remember much of their home country, the stories tend not to include untranslated terms. In these stories, however, the narrators often think about their own relationship to their mother-tongues and cultures. In the third-person stories, the language tends to be more lyrical, and often includes untranslated and unexplained words in Vietnamese or other languages. Because the narratives are focalized through older refugees or people who might not be fluent in English (such as Phuong in "Fatherland), the narrative replicates the experience of being an outsider for the reader. The use of untranslated words and names for objects forces readers to either miss portions of the story or engage more actively in translating the words to find meaning. Together, these stories and their use of language give readers a broad spectrum of the diverse ways that refugees and immigrants use and relate to their various languages.

Structure

The Refugees is divided into eight separate stories, each individual and not reliant on the others in terms of character and plot. The stories are not presented chronologically, and there does not appear to be any easily discernible pattern or logic for the order they are presented in. However, taken together, the stories interact with one another on a thematic level. Some, like "Black Eyed Women" and "I'd Love You to Want Me" show experiences of people who risked the dangers of packed fishing boats to escape. Because we see the refugee boat from both a child's perspective and an adult's perspective, the collection as a whole is able to build and converse with the varied experiences of refugees. The collection begins with the unnamed narrator of "Black Eyed Woman," who came to the United States as a young enough child that she has assimilated fairly well, but it reverses the immigrant experience by ending back in Vietnam with the protagonist of "Fatherland," Phuong.

Quotes

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.
-- The unnamed narrator of "Black-Eyed Women" ("Black-Eyed Women")

Importance: In this quote, the narrator conveys how easily the past intrudes into her present. Specifically, the memory of her brother and her brother's tragic death constantly threatens to interrupt her present. This quote also shows that the narrator has tried, and failed, to forget him. Her strategy for dealing with this tragedy has been to try silencing it, as her mother has silenced the narrator's own tragic past, but that strategy does not work.

Ghosts don't live by our rules. Each ghost is different. Good ghosts, bad ghosts, happy ghosts, sad ghosts. Ghost 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.
-- The narrator's unnamed mother ("Black-Eyed Women")

Importance: In this quote, the mother is responding to the narrator's attempt to attribute some sort of logic to the behavior of ghosts. While the narrator expects ghosts will follow the same rules, the same cause-effect laws that govern reality and life, the mother reminds her that ghosts operate on a different plane and with a different set of rules. This is important because while ghosts serve as a metaphor and symbol for the past and the things that have the power to haunt, each of these pieces of the past is unique, and each behaves differently. There is no single one-to-one relationship with the behavior of ghosts.

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.
-- The unnamed narrator about her mother ("Black-Eyed Women")

Importance: This quote is important because it shows that even those adept with dealing with the past and with the things that haunt them have limits. The mother, who was able to be steady and bear witness to the actual rape of her daughter, is unable to relive that story or to tell it.

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.
-- The unnamed narrator of "Black-Eyed Women" ("Black-Eyed Women")

Importance: This quote is important because it brings together multiple strands of the story. In this quote we see that storytelling is fabrication, something made up. However, even if the stories are made up, it does not make them any less real. The mention of the garments of ghosts is a reminder that the brother's garments were, in fact, real, material objects.

Liem spoke with nonchalance, even though the prospect of rehearsing his story one more time flooded him with dread.
-- Liem ("The Other Man")

Importance: In a novel that tells the stories of refugees, this quote indicates the often traumatic nature of recounting a story. For Liem, telling his story is tiring and overwhelming, so he edits it for his audience, giving them a streamlined version. This quote also indicates the need that we have for these stories. Liem is asked again and again how he escaped and what has happened to him. His audiences are well meaning, perhaps, but they re-inflict the trauma of his experiences every time they ask him to recount them.

With persistence, he sandpapered the two discourses of junkyard and whorehouse into a more usable kind of English, good enough to let him understand the rumor passed from one foreign journalist to another in the spring of '75....thousands would be slaughtered if the city fell to the communists."
-- Liem ("The Other Man")

Importance: This quote underscores the difficulty of understanding the variances of a language and the power claimed by those smart and dexterous enough to piece them together. For Liem, his ability to knit together these different types of English spoken around Saigon by people who do not necessarily understand that he is listening gives him the knowledge to flee when he sees the city about to fall.

Once he opened the letter, his life would change, and perhaps he wanted it to stay the same.
-- Liem ("The Other Man")

Importance: This quote is important because it signals a shift in Liem's thinking and identity. Until this moment, he has been running from something and worrying about what that might mean for himself and his family. After dinner with Marcus, he is now moving toward something--a future for himself. The letter is a reminder that his future, however he might imagine it, will always be tethered to his past and his family in Vietnam. Once he opens the letter, he will once again be their son, and for a moment he wants to be someone else. Someone free from that responsibility.

I had no memories of the war, but Mrs. Hoa said others had not forgotten.
-- The unnamed narrator of "War Years" ("War Years")

Importance: Although the narrator is himself a refugee and immigrant, he has no memory of living in Vietnam or of the war that drove his family out of the country. Without these memories, he is separated from the older immigrants who do remember.

My parents kept some of their profits in the bank, donated a portion to the church, and wired another percentage to the relatives in Vietnam, who periodically mailed us thin letters thick with trouble, summed up for me by my mother to the tune of no food and no money, no school and no hope.

-- The unnamed narrator of "War Years" ("War Years")

Importance: In this quote shows the connections that the immigrants still have with their family in Vietnam. The thin letters keep information and family connections strong, and the money they send back to that family shows a commitment beyond their safety in America.

While the clerks chatted in a language I could not understand, I hesitated, yearning to take everything home but unable to choose.
-- The unnamed narrator of "War Years" ("War Years")

Importance: This, the final line of the story, shows the narrator stuck between worlds. He finally has the money and ability to purchase whatever he wants at the 7-Eleven, but surrounded by other languages (in this case Indian) and overwhelmed by choice, he is frozen and unable to do anything.

But I was born in Vietnam, and I've never been to China." Louis sat down beside Arthur on the couch. "I barely speak Chinese. So what does that make me? Chinese or Vietnamese? Both? Neither?
-- Louis Vu ("The Transplant")

Importance: Louis's national identity is undetermined in this story. He is, by his family of birth, Chinese. By place of birth, he is Vietnamese. By immigration status, he is an American citizen. His own inability to know which identity to claim helps to reinforce the argument that national identity, even ethnic identity, is a fiction.

She wondered if he [Vihn] remembered their escape from Vung Tau on a rickety fishing trawler, overloaded with his five siblings and sixty strangers, three years after the wars end.
-- Mrs. Khahn ("I'd Love You to Want Me")

Importance: This quote draws attention to the difference between experience and memory. Just because Vihn and his siblings experienced the same events as his mother, he does not necessarily remember them as clearly. Without that shared memory, mother and son lose an important point of connection and understanding.

This was true love, she thought, not giving roses but going to work every day and never once complaining about teaching Vietnamese to so-called heritage learners, immigrant and refugee students who already knew the language but merely wanted an easy grade.
-- Mrs. Khahn ("I'd Love You to Want Me")

Importance: In this quote, Mrs. Khahn redefines love for the reader. This quote also mentions explicitly the larger community of immigrants and refugees, but in doing so, it humanizes them. They are not a monolithic set, and they are not necessarily the stereotype that many Americans have about Asians as being high-performing, driven academics.

For some reason, the professor never spoke of this time at sea, although he referred to so many other things they had done in the past together, including events of which she had no recollection. The more she listened to him, the more she feared her own memory was faltering.
-- Mrs. Khan ("I'd Love You to Want Me")

Importance: In this quote, the idea of memory as determining reality is made clear. For the professor, the things he remembers are his reality, but for his wife, her lack of memory creates a divide between them.

But you could always go home,' Claire said. 'There was always a place for you somewhere. But there's never been a place for me.
-- Claire ("The Americans")

Importance: This quote demonstrates Claire's lack of understanding about what her parents have each gone through. She does not understand that neither of them have managed to return to the places that should be their homes. The Japan that her mother knew was a Westernized version of her country, established after the conquering forces of WWII took over. The Alabama of her father's childhood is not one that would have welcomed him then, nor is it one he would return to now.

Almost everything looked more beautiful from a distance, the earth becoming ever more perfect as one ascended and came closer to seeing the world from God's eyes, man's hovels and palaces disappearing, the peaks and valleys of geography fading to become a stroke of a paintbrush on a divine sphere. But seen up close, from this height, the countryside was so poor that the poverty was neither picturesque nor pastoral.
-- Carver ("The Americans")

Importance: This quote discusses the difference between seeing the world from the viewpoint of an airplane versus on the ground. In the plane, he did not experience the poverty and dirt of Vietnam. But the point of view of a pilot gave him a different perspective, one that erased evidence of man and presented what the world might be.

My father hadn't even put up my mother's picture, as custom said he should have, next to the photographs of his dead parents on his dresser.
-- Thomas ("Someone Else Besides You")

Importance: This quote shows Thomas's anger toward his father for how his father treated his mother. The act of not commemorating her life is, inThomas's eyes, just another mark of the lack of respect his father had for his mother. At this point in the story, Thomas does not know that his father has kept his mother's wig, a more intimate and personal memento. The refusal to put up the picture of his dead wife goes with the father's understanding of right and wrong being more than tradition, but also what a man feels inside himself.

Sam had landed in Saigon and traveled north to Hue and Hanoi, with detours to Ha Long Bay and the mountains of Sapa. Most of these were places he'd only read about,

since the war had kept his generation from seeing their own country.
-- Thomas ("Someone Else Besides You")

Importance: In this passage, Sam shares pictures of her trip to Vietnam to Thomas's father. The pictures depict the country he was born in and fought for, but they are also pictures of a country that Mr. P. never new. Because of the war that raged during his generation, Mr. P. never had the chance to travel in his own country. The paratrooping he did during the war would have given him a far different view of the land he did happen to see--a view from the sky and one marred by the violent effects of war.

I wanted to ask her what a woman is without a husband, what a child is without a father, what a boy is without a man, but the questions wouldn't come out.
-- Thomas ("Someone Else Besides You")

Importance: When Thomas discovers that his ex-wife, Sam, is pregnant and not married, he has the urge to ask her these questions. As much as Thomas has tried to be the opposite of his father, and has even shied away from having children of his own because he feared becoming his father, this quote reveals just how much influence his father has actually had on him.

You wouldn't know right from wrong.' There was no trace of anger in his voice. 'The only way a man knows right from wrong is when he makes a choice.
-- Mr. P (Thomas's Father) ("Someone Else Besides You")

Importance: In this quote, Mr. P. gets to the very heart of Thomas's problem--his passivity. Throughout the story (and his life), Thomas has been willing to float along, reacting to rather than acting on the world around him. His father, for all of his faults, understands this explicitly. Only by making choices, Mr. P. claims, can a man know what is right and wrong. Because he allows others to make those choices for him, Thomas does not know. However, at the end of the story, Thomas does finally make a choice, and the story implies that this action has changed everything for him.

Phuong was the eldest of these younger children, and for all of her twenty-three years she had believed that her father's other children were much more blessed.
-- Phuong ("Fatherland")

Importance: This quote establishes a main character arc for Phuong, who believes that her life is less important or interesting because she was one of the Ly children born in Vietnam. The story will eventually question this assumption with the ironic revelation that Vivien and the other children are not as well off as they presented themselves as being.

But Phuong suspected 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...We're all the same to them, Phuong understood with a mix of anger and shame--small, charming, and forgettable.
-- Phuong ("Fatherland")

Importance: Because so much of this story revolves around tourism and the tourist economy in Vietnam, this quote is important for drawing attention to the superficial understanding of the realities of the country.