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THE BAD STORY

by Robert Olen Butler

"The novel is a pack of lies hounding the truth."
—Carlos Fuentes

I know that you've read "Open Arms" for tonight [see appendix], which is a story I'm proud of. But if I'm going to critique many of your stories by telling you to put them away and never look at them again, I think it's only fair that I begin by exposing to you a story that I had to put away and never look at again—except for the purpose of illustrating a good writer's bad beginnings—a story whose origins were, eventually, eighteen years later, recomposted into "Open Arms."

So tonight I'm going to treat you to that awful story, and I'm going to begin by reading a bit from the notebook that I carried around Vietnam in my hip pocket. I carried it with great self-importance. My ambition back then was to be famous. I carried that book in my hip pocket thinking that I could see it under glass some day: *This was the curve of his butt. These are the smudges made by his fingers. Yes, this was his toothbrush.*

These are the false things, where ambition goes wrong.

Your ambition as an artist is to give voice to the deep, inchoate vision of the world that resides dynamically in your unconscious. That's what you must keep focused on; that's the only ambition worth anything to you as an artist. The desire to give voice and the desire to be published sometimes feel like the same thing, but they're not. The dream that comes from your white-hot center and the dream of fame—they are not the same.

In any case, I always carried a notebook around and I made hundreds of notes. After I figured out what art is all about, I never looked back at them again—except to look for this passage; and I didn't do that until I started to teach. Here's the passage from the notebook:

> *Núi Đất* [the place where I was], *chiêu hôi* [a Vietnamese phrase which means essentially "open arms"] at the stag films. Former political officer of large crack Viet Cong unit now watching the Aussies' Sunday night stag films, all four hours of them. Communist intense prudishness: punish people for having a pinup; what does he think of this? I talk to him later. He is very intelligent. A VC adjutant went to hills because he hated the wasteful, inefficient, corrupt government, and also because one day his wife and child were standing in a doorway and an ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam; that is, South Vietnamese] soldier gunned them down. Went to the hills. Finally decided that the war would never end this way, returned and

became bushman scout for the Aussies, took them to base camp after base camp. Names, stats on dozens of VCI [Viet Cong infrastructure, the shadow government people]. Driving through village, saw woman, just lower half of face, identified her as VCI. He met her only once six weeks ago. It took him four days to find the ARVN soldier before he went to the hills. The *chiêu hôi* was a platoon leader of Sapper Recon Platoon. Went to COSVN, which is the North Vietnamese Army headquarters that nobody ever found. Went to Cambodia, a month's march. There he learned sapper techniques. One day I was watching Vietnamese television. He came in and smiled and he sat down with me. He asked if I spoke Vietnamese. He asked if I was an American. We talked and watched television together. I told him what I thought of the Vietnamese people, their warmth and kindness to me in spite of the bitterness they should have after all these years of the war. He said they'd had hundreds of years of war already—the Chinese, the French, and so forth—and it is part of life. He said they all want peace very badly, both those who speak against the war and those who make the war, but when the Americans and Australians pull out the Communists will take over. He says the Communists don't allow people to be anything but poor, don't allow people to print newspapers or speak against the government. The people who are against the war don't understand this; he says when you have a choice between a bad Communist government and a bad democratic government, you must choose the

bad democratic government because you can change it eventually.

That's what was in this little notebook I carried around. About six months after that event, I wrote the first short story I ever wrote as an adult. I had finally decided that I wasn't going to write plays; my future was in fiction. Luckily I didn't know how far-off that future was. The story is called "The Chiêu Hôi," and—I take a deep breath—here it is:

"Hey, Yank! You sure you want to stay around? We've got some bloody hot stag films coming up." The warrant officer they called Wally laughed and began moving wicker chairs at the back of the club.

I hesitated a moment at the half seriousness of his jibe and thought of the tiny, sweet-smelling, whining girls lingering in the dark of our company street at Long Binh.

"Think I'll chance it," I said.

The snap of canvas in the twilight and I looked out the big tent at the blowing trees. I'd trade the Aussies some of our real sex for a few of their trees.

"You don't get anything like these at your camp."

"No."

I heard the crunching of the gravel floor as he struggled with the chairs. One more look at the trees going purple outside.

"Want some help?"

"You just relax yourself. I can handle these."

I got up. "I insist."

I went back to him and helped put the chairs in line facing the raised platform at the far end of the club.

"You going to be the projectionist?"

"Yes indeed. It won't be anything fancy, mind you. But the machine's good and we use a nice fresh bedsheet for the screen. Appropriate."

As we laughed, Thanh came in. I had seen him around the camp. One of the very few Vietnamese on the post. He smiled the eager, head-bobbing smile used for foreigners who don't speak Vietnamese and he sat down in a chair near the platform.

"That's Thanh."

"I've seen him around," I said.

"He's a *chieu hoi*. He was the leader of a VC sapper platoon." The Australian paused for effect. I looked at the slim young man quietly smoking a cigarette. There is always a silent moment of shared respect when two allied fighting men talk about sappers. They are the combat engineers who penetrate perimeters and are the toughest, gutsiest VC of all. "If all their blokes were like Thanh, the VC would have kicked our asses into the sea years ago. He's a bushman scout for us now. That little bastard has led us to base camp after base camp. He sat down and wrote out biographies on dozens of VC infrastructure people all over Phuc Tuy province. Incredible mind, that bloke."

Thanh continued smoking, seemingly unaware of our talk. He looked very small, sitting motionless in the large wicker chair.

"Why did he join the VC?"

"In '67 his wife and child were standing in the door of his house. A government soldier gunned them down. Killed them. It took Thanh four days to find the soldier. Then he went to the hills."

I left the Australian and walked forward to where Thanh was sitting. He looked up as I approached and he smiled and nodded again.

"How are you?" he asked slowly in articulated English.

"*Tôi mạnh giỏi. Còn ông thì sao,*" I said. It was the standard Vietnamese reply.

Thanh laughed loud and long and thrust his hand to me. "You speak Vietnamese very well," he said in his own language.

I sat beside him as I shook his hand. "Don't put me on a paper airplane," I said, using the Vietnamese saying that amiably rejects flattery. Thanh laughed loud again.

"Very good. Very good. You are an American, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm just working with the Australians for a couple of weeks. We exchange people sometimes."

"How long have you been in Vietnam?"

"About three months," I replied.

"And you speak so well? That is amazing."

"I studied for a year in America before I came to Vietnam."

"I see. But you still speak very excellent Vietnamese. It is not the same just to study it. You are very good."

"Thank you. I am happy to have the opportunity to talk to the Vietnamese people." I began to feel that inevitable awkwardness that always comes at the start of conversations, as I sound for many minutes like a daily dialog from our language textbook.

Thanh took a long puff on his cigarette, savoring it, and blowing the smoke through his nose. After a moment of contemplating the cigarette in his hand, he looked at me and smiled easily again. "What do you think of Vietnam?"

"I like Vietnam very much," I said. I glanced past Thanh and out at the darkening sky. "The evenings are very cool."

"Yes, they are. Very fresh." I looked back at Thanh. He smiled and nodded, waiting for me to say more. I looked at his hands. I had heard so many whistles of respect for sappers from even the most grizzled "gook-killer" sergeants that I had an almost childish awe of these small brown hands. The left lay in repose on the arm of the chair. The right continually rolled the cigarette, meticulously keeping the lit end free of flaking ash.

"The fresh nights are fine to be with someone," Thanh said.

I looked up at him. The humor of the statement startled me as I saw in my mind the night roaming VC platoons. I could not tell if Thanh intended the joke.

"But is that your only feeling for Vietnam in three months?" he continued.

"No. Of course not."

"I am interested in your feelings."

It seemed a good chance to crawl out of my textbook. "Before I came to Vietnam I had expected half the people to be so miserable from the war that they would hate any foreigner and the other half of the people to be Communist sympathizers and therefore want to kill me."

Thanh laughed.

"But since I have been here I have talked to many Vietnamese people. And it is amazing. Without exception, every man and woman has been as friendly and open as anyone I have ever met."

"Of course."

"In spite of all the years of misery, the Vietnamese people have an innate sense of cheerfulness that is truly extraordinary."

"Vietnamese know how to enjoy life." Now Thanh looked out of the tent. His cigarette was gone and both his hands rested lightly on the arms of the chair. He turned back to me and smiled a more solemn smile. "The Vietnamese have had hundreds of years of war. Many countries have come here to war—China, Cambodia, Japan, France."

"The U.S.," I said.

"Many countries. So the Vietnamese people know what war is. But it makes no difference. If a

people know how to enjoy life and they are used to war, it makes no difference. Their life goes on. The war is part of it. But they enjoy living. They are still happy in their days."

Among the high branches a few stars were beginning to appear. Thanh was watching the night now too.

"Why did you join?"

Thanh turned to me. The easy smile was gone. But his solemnity was simply thoughtful, still friendly. After a moment he said, "The government was robbing the people. It was corrupt and wasteful and repressive. At the time, the Communists seemed to offer an alternative." He paused, watching my face closely. I nodded my head and waited for him to say more.

Then I said, "Was that all?"

"No. Of course not." We looked at each other silently for a moment more. Then he said, "They murdered my wife and child." Another pause. "We had only two years together."

Other people were coming in. They were laughing at the back of the club, calling out orders for beer, pulling chairs around.

"And why did you leave the VC?"

"'The purity of the revolution must be preserved. The corruptions of the body are part of the decadence of our enemies.' One of the men in another platoon was caught making love to one of the nurses and was shot." Thanh thought a moment and then added, "Of course, that was logical to them."

People were sitting just behind us now. Talking loudly and sitting on my other side now too. Thanh paused and I leaned closer.

"The Communists love no one. They love nothing," he said.

The OC made a little speech about keeping the noise down but how it was difficult to applaud with one hand anyway and everyone laughed and the lights went out and the films began. There were nine twenty-minute Danish films. Three hours of close-ups. Working bodies. And hands. Avid hands.

Thanh sat unmoving through all nine films. He watched and the three-hour string of male jokes at the screen must have been nothing but a blur of foreign words. He watched earnestly, his hands quiet.

When the lights came up, Thanh and I remained as the others drifted out of the tent or back to the bar. Thanh was looking at his hands.

"Enjoyable, wasn't it?" I said.

"It was so short."

At first I didn't understand. Three hours, after all. I smiled.

"Only two years." He looked at me. Then the easy smile came again. He shook my hand and we spoke the conventional Vietnames good-byes before he left.

Lots of stuff wrong with this; in fact, everything's wrong with it in exactly the way I've been describing. "Hey, Yank . . ." Opening with a piece of dialogue very rarely works,

because there's no context. And, important, in this whole piece there's not a single line of dialogue with *subtext*. Nothing's going on beneath the surface. Dialogue gives you the illusion of moment-to-moment sensual experience—after all, these are the words this character is speaking aloud in the moment—but in bad dialogue all you're getting is the information, exposition, or emotional declaration; and that's where your summary, your generalization, your abstraction, your analysis, run and hide in plain sight. Beware of that as you work to get that unselected, unironic, there-for-information stuff out of your writing: it's going to try to find a new home in the mouths of your characters. This story is full of sheer chunks of analysis and abstraction, often straight from my undigested notes, included just for the convenience of the story.

The story is also inorganic. Even though there appears to be a motif, the images are totally unrelated. *Looking out of the tent*, and *the trees*, and *going purple against the sky*—what's all that about? It does not connect in its sensual pattern to anything going on in the story. Remember that I had written twelve just as awful plays, so these passages are like little stage directions (which was my failure as a playwright too): *He's looking, I'm looking out, then he looks out, and I look out, and now we're both looking out.* No resonance whatsoever.

The trap of literal memory is very clear here. It was eighteen years later that I wrote "Open Arms," which as you can see grew out of the composting of the same event. Let's call "The Chiêu Hôi" the bad story and "Open Arms" the good story. In the bad story, things happen exactly as they did in

real life, whereas the good story involves a dramatic inversion of the literal event. In the bad story Thanh's motivation is that he was in a place where he was comfortable and where he belonged, a South Vietnamese democratic society. The thing he did against his own deeper nature was go off to join the VC in response to the killing of his wife and child by a South Vietnamese soldier. And now, in the bad story, he's basically back where he belongs. You notice that in "Open Arms" all this is inverted. He was a Viet Cong true believer and the Viet Cong killed his wife and child, and this Australian porn show where we find him is not where he belongs but a place where he *also* doesn't belong. I had to free myself from the way it literally happened in order to make "Open Arms" work.

In the bad story the narrator is a passive observer. It's me. I'm sure every one of you has at least one story—and you may write another—where you are the sensitive writer responding to this unusual character you've met in life. You encounter somebody interesting and you go, *Oh boy, that's a story*. You sit down and write it, putting yourself in the middle as a passive observer watching this other person. Right? What's missing in every story where you've got a passive observer in the middle? The yearning. If the narrator in my bad story desires anything at all, it's to show what a swell sensitive American guy he is. Which of course is not a yearning at all. The narrator is doing fine, meeting this interesting guy he can communicate with in his own language, and the guy's doing fine, back where he belongs. Oh yeah, his wife and child are dead, but, you know, that's a problem, not a yearning. The dynamics of desire are utterly missing.

I don't care how smart you are. Your mind is stupid artistically, and here's another striking example of that. I have to emphasize that this event in the story I'm about to point out *did not happen* in real life. In "The Chiêu Hôi," this sensitive American who speaks Vietnamese says, "Why did you join?" Thanh turns to him. His "easy smile was gone. . . ." And Thanh even tries to avoid answering. " 'The government was robbing the people. It was corrupt and wasteful and repressive . . .' " And so forth. Then Thanh pauses, obviously hoping that's all he has to say on the subject. And the narrator drills in. " 'Was that all?' " he asks. He *makes* Thanh talk about the tragedy.

This is utterly cruel. But it's no longer about people, it's about crudely applying fiction technique. The writer wants to get this information about Thanh into the story in his own voice, and to show how the guy is struggling, trying not to face the terrible thing that's happened. Gee, how do you show that? Well, you have your narrator ask him, and when he waffles, you press him. Now I promise you I never would have done this in real life. But when I wrote the story I was totally oblivious to the moral implications and didn't notice until I came to teach creative writing and pulled the old bad story out that this sensitive American guy does something truly heinous. That's what comes from writing from your head. As writers we must have compassion for all the characters we create. If we're going to play God, we have to be a loving God, and you can't love with your brain.

By contrast, the Vietnamese narrator in "Open Arms," whose yearning resonates organically into the story as it's reconceived, does a similar heinous thing; but he himself is

conscious of it—and so am I as writer. Both the Vietnamese narrator in "Open Arms" and the American narrator in "Chiêu Hôi" know ahead of time that the man's family was murdered and that is why he left his home. In both cases, even though they know it, they make him say it. But the Vietnamese narrator, says: "To my shame." He says it both times. *To my shame.* He knows he's doing a terrible thing here and acknowledges it. We see that tension in him.

Of course, you might write a story with an insensitive character like the narrator of "The Chiêu Hôi." Obviously there are cruel characters and cruel acts in fiction. But in that story the cruelty is totally incidental—or maybe the intent of the author was to show a sensitive guy responding to a sad character who misses his wife. And that's all he takes away from an afternoon of porn films. How pathetic. The narrator's insensitivity is not an issue; there's no repercussion, there's no realization, and no seeming ill effect on Thanh. We don't see the cruelty of it in any manifest way. It's just on-the-surface cruelty, and it stays on the surface.

Let me elaborate on a point I made earlier in passing about the beginning of "Open Arms": "I have no hatred in me. I am almost certain of that." How do you establish dramatic irony in a story? Well, to begin with, anyone who has to say he's got no hatred in him is already protesting too much. And then, one way to suggest irony is with a qualifier, in this case just that one word *almost*. "I have no hatred in me. I am almost certain of that." He has self-doubt that lets us doubt him. "I fought for my country long enough to lose my wife to another man, a cripple. This was because even

though I was alive, I was dead to her, being far away. Perhaps it bothers me a little"—*perhaps*—"that his deformity was something he was born with and not earned in the war. But even that doesn't matter. In the end, my country itself was lost. . . ." *My country*.

This whole story, as you soon learn, has to do with trying to find a place in the world. "In the end my country was lost and I am no longer there. . . ." It's not that it's no longer his country, it *is* his country, but he's no longer there. He takes some pleasure in the fact that his wife and her new lover are suffering. And then he brings up this stranger, this guy:

> . . . who suffered the most complicated feeling I could imagine. It is he who makes me feel sometimes that I am sitting with my legs crossed in an attitude of peace and with an acceptance of all that I've been taught about the suffering that comes from desire.

Let me indulge in a bit of artificial and secondary analysis. The Vietnamese narrator asserts that he understands the story he's going to tell. As a result of it, he has accepted his fate. None of that's true. I hope you understand the irony at the end, that little litany of *I'm OK: I've got a VCR, I've got a good job, there's no hatred in me, everything's fine*. Not so. He is utterly lost, for the same reason as that other man, Thap, who came to a moment in which he realized that he had no country whatsoever. That's what our narrator is really responding to, because in spite of his avowals at the end of the story, deep down he feels he belongs nowhere. *I live on Mary Poppins Drive*

in Gretna, Louisiana. . . . And of course, his yearning is for a place in the world.

Understand that when I came to write "Open Arms," I did not refer to this older story at all. In 1988 I was finishing my sixth novel, *The Deuce*, which is in the voice of a sixteen-year-old half-Vietnamese, half-American former Saigon street kid who ends up on Forty-second Street in the bad old days before Mickey Mouse overran the place. Alan Cheuse called me to say he was producing a series for National Public Radio called *The Sound of Writing*, and he was soliciting original short stories that would be read by actors on the radio. He said, *Would you give us one? You bet.* I hung up the phone and . . . *what have I done?* I was writing good novels, and I'd convinced myself that it's a rare writer who is adept in both forms. I went back to those stories to see if there was something I could salvage, but they were worse than I remembered. So I put them away again.

However, there was a bit of Vietnamese folkway on one of the three-by-five cards I'd made for *The Deuce*, which I'd expected to put into the novel but hadn't. The card that fell out of the stack had to do with a Vietnamese boy who loved to catch, train, and fight crickets. Suddenly a voice came out of my unconscious, the voice of a Vietnamese father in Lake Charles, Louisiana, on a Sunday afternoon. Everything's boring and dull and his son is bored and he tries to interest the kid in cricket fighting. So I sat down and wrote it in one six-and-a-half-hour stretch. It turned out well.

I went to bed that night and the next morning when I woke up I had two dozen other voices in my unconscious, saying *me, me, me*. All the stories in *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* presented themselves to me at once. When "Open Arms" came to me, it was not in reference to that old story; it wasn't even a reference to the notebook. I didn't look at the notebook either. The voices came strictly from my unconscious at that point.

Before you go, let me give you an assignment for next week: you'll need to be able to tell some personal anecdote, something you've told before aloud. I don't want you to give this any thought; you don't need to write it out; it doesn't need to be profound; it can be totally trivial: taking a shower, sitting at a traffic light. You don't have to be funny, it doesn't have to be moving or well told. Just tell an anecdote as you would over coffee. Of course it's going to be full of summary and generalization and analysis. It should be. An anecdote is not a work of art; it's something else. So do the something else. It'll give me a little fragment of your life to walk you back through in a special exercise.

APPENDIX

"OPEN ARMS" BY ROBERT OLEN BUTLER

I have no hatred in me. I'm almost certain of that. I fought for my country long enough to lose my wife to another man, a cripple. This was because even though I was alive, I was dead to her, being far away. Perhaps it bothers me a little that his deformity was something he was born with and not earned in the war. But even that doesn't matter. In the end, my country itself was lost and I am no longer there and the two of them are surely suffering, from what I read in the papers about life in a unified Vietnam. They mean nothing to me, really. It seems strange even to mention them like this, and it is stranger still to speak of them before I speak of the man who suffered the most complicated feeling I could imagine. It is he who makes me feel sometimes that I am sitting with my legs crossed in an attitude of peace and with an acceptance of all that I've been taught about the suffering that comes from desire.

There are others I could hate. But I feel sorry for my enemies and the enemies of my country. I live on South Mary Poppins Drive in Gretna, Louisiana, and since I speak perfect English, I am influential with the others who live here, the Westbank Vietnamese. We are all of us from South Vietnam. If you go across the bridge and into New Orleans and you take

the interstate north and then turn on a highway named after a chef, you will come to the place called Versailles. There you will find the Vietnamese who are originally from the North. They are Catholics in Versailles. I am a Buddhist. But what I know now about things, I learned from a communist one dark evening in the province of Phu'ó'c Tuy in the Republic of South Vietnam.

I was working as an interpreter for the Australians in their base camp near Núi Đất. The Australians were different from the Americans when they made a camp. The Americans cleared the land, cut it and plowed it and leveled it and strung their barbed wire and put up their tin hootches. The Australians put up tents. They lived under canvas with wooden floors and they didn't cut down the trees. They raised their tents under the trees and you could hear the birds above you when you woke in the morning, and I could think of home that way. My village was far away, up-country, near Pleiku, but my wife was still my wife at that time. I could lie in a tent under the trees and think of her and that would last until I was in the mess hall and I was faced with eggs and curried sausages and beans for breakfast.

The Australians made a good camp, but I could not understand their food, especially at the start of the day. The morning I met Đặng Văn Thập, I first saw him across the mess hall staring at a tray full of this food. He had the commanding officer at one elbow and the executive officer at his other, so I knew he was important, and I looked at Thập closely. His skin was dark, basic peasant blood like me, and he wore a sport shirt of green and blue plaid. He could be anybody on a motor

scooter in Saigon or hustling for xích-lộ fares in Vũng Tàu. But I knew there was something special about him right away.

His hair was wildly fanned on his head, the product of VC field-barbering, but there was something else about him that gave him away. He sat between these two Australian officers who were nearly a head taller, and he was hunched forward a little bit. But he seemed enormous, somehow. The people in our village believe in ghosts. Many people in Vietnam have this belief. And sometimes a ghost will appear in human form and then vanish. When that happens and you think back on the encounter, you realize that all along you felt like you were near something enormous, like if you came upon a mountain in the dark and could not see it but knew it was there. I had something of that feeling as I looked at Thập for the first time. Not that I believed he was a ghost. But I knew he was much bigger than the body he was in as he stared at the curried sausages.

Then there was a stir to my left, someone sitting down, but I didn't look right away because Thập held me. "You'll have your chance with him, mate," a voice said in a loud whisper, very near my ear. I turned and it was Captain Townsend, the intelligence officer. His mustache, waxed and twirled to two sharp points, twitched as it usually did when he and I were in the midst of an interrogation and he was getting especially interested in what he heard. But it was Thập now causing the twitch. Townsend's eyes had slid away from me and back across the mess hall, and I followed his gaze. Another Vietnamese was arriving with a tray, an ARVN major, and the C.O. slid over and let the new man sit next to Thập. The major said a

few words to Thập and Thập made some sort of answer and the major spoke to the C.O.

"He's our new bushman scout," Townsend said. "The major there is heading back to division after breakfast and then we can talk to him."

I'd heard that a new scout was coming in, but he would be working mostly with the units out interdicting the infiltration routes and so I hadn't given him much thought. Townsend was fumbling around for something and I glanced over. He was pulling a slip of paper out of his pocket. He read a name off the paper, but he butchered the tones and I had no idea what he was saying. I took the paper from him and read Thập's name. Townsend said, "They tell me he's a real smart little bastard. Political cadre. Before that he was a sapper. Brains and a killer, too. Hope this conversion of his is for real."

I looked up and it was the ARVN major who was doing all the talking. He was in fatigues that were so starched and crisp they could sit there all by themselves, and his hair was slicked into careful shape and rose over his forehead in a pompadour the shape of the front fender on the elegant old Citroën sedans you saw around Saigon. Thập had sat back in his chair now and he was watching the major talk, and if I was the major I'd feel very nervous, because the man beside him had the mountain shadow and the steady look of the ghost of somebody his grandfather had cheated or cuckolded or murdered fifty years ago and he was back to take him.

It wasn't until the next day that Captain Townsend dropped Thập's file into the center of my desk. The desk was spread with a dozen photographs, different angles on two dead woodcutters

that an Australian patrol had shot yesterday. The woodcutters had been in a restricted area, and when they ran, they were killed. The photos were taken after the two had been laid out in their cart, their arms sprawled, their legs angled like they were leaping up and clicking their heels. The fall of Thập's file scattered the photos, fluttered them away. Townsend said, "Look this over right away, mate. We'll have him here in an hour."

The government program that allowed a longtime, hardcore Viet Cong like Thập to switch sides so easily had a stiff name in Vietnamese but it came to be known as "Open Arms." An hour later, when Thập came through the door with Townsend, he filled the room and looked at me once, knowing everything about me that he wished, and the idea of our opening our arms to him, exposing our chests, our hearts, truly frightened me. In my village you ran from a ghost because if he wants you, he can reach into that chest of yours and pull out not only your heart but your soul as well.

I knew the facts about Thập from the file, but I wondered what he would say about some of these things I'd just read. The things about his life, about the terrible act that turned him away from the cause he'd been fighting for. But Townsend grilled him, through me, for an hour first. He asked him all the things an intelligence captain would be expected to ask, even though the file already had the answers to these questions as well. The division interrogation had already learned all that Thập knew about the locations and strengths of the VC units in our area, the names of shadow government cadre in the villages, things like that. But Thập patiently repeated his answers, smoking one Chesterfield cigarette after another,

careful about keeping his ash from falling on the floor, never really looking at either of us, not in the eye, only occasionally at our hands, a quick glance, like he expected us to suddenly be holding a weapon, and he seemed very small now, no less smart and skilled in killing, but a man, at last, in my eyes.

So when Captain Townsend was through, he gave me a nod and, as we'd arranged, he stepped out for me to chat with Thập informally. Townsend figured that Thập might feel more comfortable talking with his countryman one on one. I had my doubts about that. Still, I was interested in this man, though not for the reasons Townsend was. At that moment I didn't care about the tactical intelligence my boss wanted, and so even before he was out of the room I intended to ignore it. But I felt no guilt. He had all he needed already.

As soon as the Australian was gone, Thập lifted his face high for the first time and blew a puff of smoke toward the ceiling. This stopped me cold, like he'd just sprung an ambush from the undergrowth where he'd been crouching very low. He did not look at me. He watched the smoke rise and he waited, his face placid. Finally I felt my voice would come out steady and I said, "We are from the same region. I am from Pleiku Province." The file said that Thập was from Kontum, the next province north, bordering both Cambodia and Laos. He said nothing, though he lowered his face a little. He looked straight ahead and took another drag on his cigarette, a long one, the ash lengthening visibly, doubling in size, as he drew the smoke in.

I knew from the file the sadness he was bearing, but I wanted to make him show it to me, speak of it. I knew I should talk with him indirectly, at least for a time. But I could only

think of the crude approach, and to my shame, I took it. I said, "Do you have family there?"

His face turned to me now, and I could not draw a breath. I thought for a moment that my first impression of him had been correct. He was a ghost and this was the moment he would carry me away with him. My breath was gone, never to return. But he did not dissolve into the air. His eyes fixed me and then they went down to the file on the desk, as if to say that I asked what I already knew. He had been sent to Phu'ó'c Tuy Province to indoctrinate the villagers. He was a master, our other sources said, of explaining the communist vision of the world to the woodcutters and fishermen and rice farmers. And meanwhile, in Kontum, the tactics had changed, as they always do, and three months ago the VC made a lesson out of a little village that had a chief with a taste for American consumer goods and information to trade for them. This time the lesson was severe and the ones who did not run were all killed. Thập's wife and two children expected to be safe because someone was supposed to know whose family they were. They stayed and they were murdered by the VC and Thập made a choice.

His eyes were still on the file and my breath had come back to me and I said, "Yes, I know."

He turned away again and he stared at the cigarette, watched the curl of smoke without drawing it into him. I said, "But isn't that just the war? I thought you were a believer."

"I still am," he said and then he looked at me and smiled faintly, but the smile was only for himself, like he knew what I was thinking. And he did. "This is nothing new," he said. "I confessed to the same thing at your division headquarters. I

believe in the government caring for all the people, the poor before the rich. I believe in the state of personal purity that makes this possible. But I finally came to believe that the government these men from the north want to set up can't be controlled by the very people it's supposed to serve."

"And what do you think of these people you've joined to fight with now?" I said.

He took a last drag on his cigarette and then leaned forward to stub it out in an ashtray at the corner of my desk. He sat back and folded his hands in his lap and his face grew still, his mouth drew down in placid seriousness. "I understand them," he said. "The Amercans, too. I learned about their history. What they believe is good."

I admit that my first impulse at this was to challenge him. He didn't know anything about the history of Western democracy until after he'd left the communists. They killed his wife and his children and he wanted to get them. But I knew that what he said was also true. He was a believer. I could see his Buddhist upbringing in him. The communists could appeal to that. They couldn't touch the Catholics, but the Buddhists who didn't believe in all the mysticism were well prepared for communism. The communists were full of right views, right intentions, right speech, and all that. And Buddha's second Truth, about the thirst of the passions being the big trap, the communists were real strict about that, real prudes. If a VC got caught by his superiors with a pinup, just a girl in a bathing suit even, he'd be in very deep trouble.

That thing Thập said about personal purity. After it sank in a little bit, it pissed me off. But this is a weakness of my own,

I guess, though at times I can't quite see it as a weakness. I'm not that good a Buddhist. I live in America and things just don't look the way my mother and my grandmother explained them to me. But Thập suddenly seemed a little too smug. And I wasn't frightened by him anymore. He was a communist prude and I even had trouble figuring out how he'd brought himself to make a couple of kids. Then, to my shame, I said, "You miss being with your wife, do you?" What I almost said was, "Do you miss sleeping with your wife?" but I wasn't quite that heartless, even with this smug true believer who until very recently had been a bitter enemy of my country.

Changing my question as I did, even as I spoke it, I thought I would never get the answer to what I really wanted to know. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I felt a flush spread from under my chin and up my face. It was only a minor attack of shame until I saw what was happening before me. I suppose it was the suddenness of this question, its unexpectedness, that caught him off guard. It's an old interrogation trick. But Thập's hands rose gently from his lap and I knew they were remembering her. It all happened in a few seconds and the hands simply lifted up briefly, but I knew without any doubt that his palms, his fingertips, were stunned by the memory of touching her. Then the hands returned to his lap and he said in a low voice, "Of course I miss her."

I asked him no more questions, and after he was gone, my own hands, lying on the desktop, grew restless, rose and then hid in my lap and burned with their own soft memories. I still had a wife and she had not been my wife for long before I'd had to leave her. I knew that Thập was no ghost but a man

and he loved his wife and desired her as I loved and desired mine and that was within the bounds of his purity. He was a man, but I wished from then on only to stay far away from him. The infantry guys had their own interpreter and I wouldn't have to deal with Thập and I was very glad for that.

Less than a week later, however, I saw him again. It was on a Sunday. Early that morning there'd been some contact out in the Long Khánh Mountains just to the east of us. First there was the popping of small arms for a few minutes and then a long roar, the mini-guns on the Cobras as they swooped in, and then there was silence.

In the afternoon the enlisted men played cricket and I sat beneath a tree with my eyes on them but not really following this strange game, just feeling the press of the tree's shade and listening to the thunk of the ball on the bat and the smatterings of applause, and I let the breeze bring me a vision of my wife wearing her aó dài, the long silk panels fluttering, as if lifted by this very breeze, as if she was nearby, waiting for me. And a few times as I sat there, I thought of Thập. Maybe it was my wife who brought him to me, the link of our yearning hands. But it wasn't until the evening that I actually saw him.

It was in the officers' club. Sometimes they had a film to show and this was one of the nights. Captain Townsend got me there early to help him move the wicker chairs around to face the big bed sheet they'd put up at one end for a screen. Townsend wouldn't tell me what the film was. When I asked him, he just winked and said, "You'll like it, mate," and I figured it was another of the Norman Wisdom films. This little

man, Wisdom, was forever being knocked down and tormented by a world of people bigger than him. Townsend knew I didn't like these films, and so I decided that was what the wink was all about.

Thập came in with a couple of the infantry officers and I was sorry to see that their interpreter wasn't with them. I couldn't understand why they had him here. I guess they were trying to make him feel welcome, a part of their world. I still think that. They just didn't understand what sort of man he was. They clapped him on the back and pointed to the screen and the projector, and they tried their own few words of Vietnamese with him and some of that baby talk, the pidgin English that sounded so ridiculous to me, even with English being my second language. I didn't think Thập would like Norman Wisdom either. Thập and I were both little men.

But when he came in, the thing I was most concerned about was that since I was the only other Vietnamese in the club, Thập would seek me out for help. But he didn't. He glanced at me once and that was it. The two infantry officers took him up to the front row and sat him between them, and when Thập was settled, my attention shifted enough that I finally realized that something was going on here out of the ordinary. The Aussies were unusually boisterous, poking at one another and laughing, and one of them yelled to Townsend, "You intelligence boys have to smuggle this stuff in?"

Townsend laughed and said, "It was too bloody hot even for us, mate."

I didn't know what he was talking about and I was evidently staring at Captain Townsend with my confusion clear

on my face. He looked at me and then put his arm around my shoulders. "You'll see," he said. "It's for all us boys who are missing our little ladies." He nodded me toward the chairs and I went and sat a couple of rows behind Thập and a little to his left. I could see only the back of his head, the spray of his hair, his deep brown neck, the collar of his plaid shirt. He raised his face to the screen and the lights went out and the films began.

There were nine of them, each lasting about twenty minutes. The first began without any credits. A man was walking along a country path. He was a large, blond-haired man, Swedish I later learned, though at the time it simply struck me that this wasn't the sort of man who would be in a Norman Wisdom movie. He was dressed in tight blue jeans and a flannel shirt that was unbuttoned, exposing his bare chest. I had never seen an Englishman dressed like that. Or an Australian either. And Wisdom's movies were all in black and white. This one was in grainy color and the camera was quaking just a little bit and then I realized that all I was hearing were the sounds of the projector clicking away and the men beginning to laugh. There was no soundtrack on this film. Someone shouted something that I didn't catch, then someone else. I thought at first that there'd been a mistake. This was the wrong film and the men were telling Townsend to stop the show, put on little Norman. But then the camera turned to a young woman standing by a fence with cows in the background and she was wearing shorts that were cut high up into her crotch and she shook her long hair and the Australians whooped. The camera returned to the man and he was clearly agitated and the club

filled with cries that I could understand now: Go for her, mate; put it to her, mate; get on with it.

I glanced at Thập and his face was lifted to the screen, but of course he did not know what was about to happen. I looked up, too, and the man and woman were talking with each other and then they kissed. Not for long. The woman pulled back and knelt down before the man and she unsnapped and unzipped his blue jeans and she pulled them down and he still had his underpants on. I discovered, a little to my surprise, that I could not breathe very well and I felt weak in my arms. I had never seen a film like this, though I'd heard things about them. But there was a moment, when the man remained clad in his underpants, that I thought there was still some boundary here, that this was not a true example of the films I'd heard about.

But the woman squeezed at him there, playfully, smiling, like this was wonderful fun for her, and then she stripped off his underpants. His body was ready for her and that was very clear there, right on the screen, and she seemed truly happy about this and she brought her face near to this part of him and I drew in a sudden breath as she did a thing that I had never even asked my wife to do, though seeing it now made me weak with desire for her.

And then I looked at Thập. It was simply a reflex. I still had not put together what was happening in this club and what Thập was and what had happened to him in his life and what he believed. I looked to him and his face was still lifted; he was watching, and I glanced up and the woman's eyes lifted, too; she looked at the man even as she did this for him, and I

returned to Thập and now his face was coming down, very slowly. His head bowed low and it remained bowed and I watched him for as long as I could.

I must admit, to my shame, that it was not very long. I was distracted. I said before, speaking of Thập's "personal purity," that an indifference to this notion is a weakness of mine. I have never remarried, and I must admit that it pleases me to look at the pictures in some of the magazines easily available in America. The women are so naked I feel I know them very well and the looks on their faces are usually so pleasant that they seem somehow willing for me to know them this way—me personally. It's a childish fantasy, I realize, hardly the right intentions, and I suppose someday this little desire will lead to unhappiness. But I am susceptible to that. And on that dark night, in that Australian tent in the province of Phu'ó'c Tuy, I was filled with desire, and I watched all nine films, desiring my wife—mostly her, I think—but at times, too, briefly desiring one of these long-haired women who took such pleasure in the passing farmer, the sailor on the town, the delivery man, even the elderly and rather small doctor.

Three more times I looked at Thập. The first time, his head was still bowed. The second time, he was, to my surprise, looking at the screen. He was watching as the camera settled on the face of a dark-haired woman who was being made love to in the only way I had ever known to do it, and for a time all we could see was her face, turned a little to the side, jarred again and again, her eyes closed. But on her face was a smile, quiet, full of love, but a little sad, like she knew her man would soon have to leave her. I know I was reading this into her from

my own life. She was a Swedish prostitute making a pornographic movie, and the smile was nothing of this sort. It was fake. And I know that it's the same with all the smiles in the magazines. The smiles of these naked women are the smiles of money, of fame, of a hope to break into movies or buy some cocaine or whatever. But on that night in the Australian tent, Thập and I looked at this woman's face and I know what I felt and something told me that Thập was feeling that, too. He watched for a long time, his face lifted, his hands, I know, yearning.

He was still watching as I turned my own face back to the screen. There were two more films after that, and I viewed them carefully. But my mind was now on Thập. I knew that a few rows in front of me he was suffering. This man had been my sworn enemy till a week ago. The others in this room had been my friends. But Thập was my countryman in some deeper way. And it had nothing to do with his being Vietnamese, either. I knew what was happening inside him. He was desiring his wife, just as I was desiring mine. Except on that night I thought I would one day be with my wife again, and his was newly dead.

But if that was all of it, I don't think he would have made this impression on me that does not leave. These films he saw sucked at his desire, brought the feel of his wife to him, made his hands rise before him. He was a man, after all. I watched the films till there were no more and I felt bad for Thập, his wanting a woman, wanting his wife, his being drawn by that very yearning to a vision of her body as ashes now and bits of bone. The third time I looked at him, his head was bowed again

and it probably remained bowed. It was bowed still when the lights went on and Captain Townsend was called to the front of the room and was hailed for his show with wild applause and cheers.

And as we all shuffled out of the tent I saw Thập's face briefly, between his two Australian mates, the two infantry officers who had made him feel like he was really part of the gang. Thập's face told me how it would all end. His eyes were wildly restless, like he'd been on a sapper mission and a flare had just gone off and he suddenly found himself here in the midst of his enemy.

That night he went to a tent and killed one of the two infantry officers, the one, no doubt, who had insisted on his coming to the club. Then Thập killed himself, a bullet in his brain. It was lucky for Townsend that Thập didn't understand the cheers at the end or the captain might have been chosen instead of the infantry officer. Thập's desire for his wife had made him very unhappy. But it alone did not drive him to his final act. That was a result of a history lesson. Thập was a true believer, and that night he felt that he had suddenly understood the democracies he was trying to believe in. He felt that the communists whom he had rightly broken with, who had killed his wife and shown him their own fatal flaw, nevertheless had been right about all the rest of us. The fact that the impurity of the West had touched Thập directly, had made him feel something strongly for his dead wife, had only made things worse. He'd had no choice.

And as for myself, I live my life in the United States of America. I work in a bank. I have my own apartment with my

own furniture and I have saved more money than I expect ever to need, if I can keep my job. And there's no worry about that. It's a big bank and they like me there. I can talk to the Vietnamese customers, and they think I'm a good worker beyond that. I read the newspapers. I subscribe to several magazines, and in one of them beautiful women smile at me each month. I no longer think of my wife. I go to the movies. I own a VCR and at last I saw the movie "Mary Poppins." The street I live on is one of four named after Mary Poppins in our neighborhood. This is true. You can look it up on any street map.

The Vietnamese on the Westbank do not like the Vietnamese in Versailles. The ones on the Westbank point out that for the ones in Versailles, freedom only means the freedom to make money. They are cold people, driving people, Northerners. The Southerners say that for them, freedom means the freedom to think, to enjoy life. The Vietnamese in Versailles do not like the Southerners. We are lazy people, to them. Unfocused. Greedy but not capable of working hard together for what we want. They say that they are the ones who understand America and how to succeed here. There are many on the Westbank and in Versailles who are full of hatred.

I say that desire can lead to unhappiness, and so can a strong belief. I can sit for long hours from the late afternoon and into the darkness of night and I do not feel compelled to watch anything or hear anything or do anything. I can think about Thập and I can fold my hands together and at those times there is no hatred at all within me.

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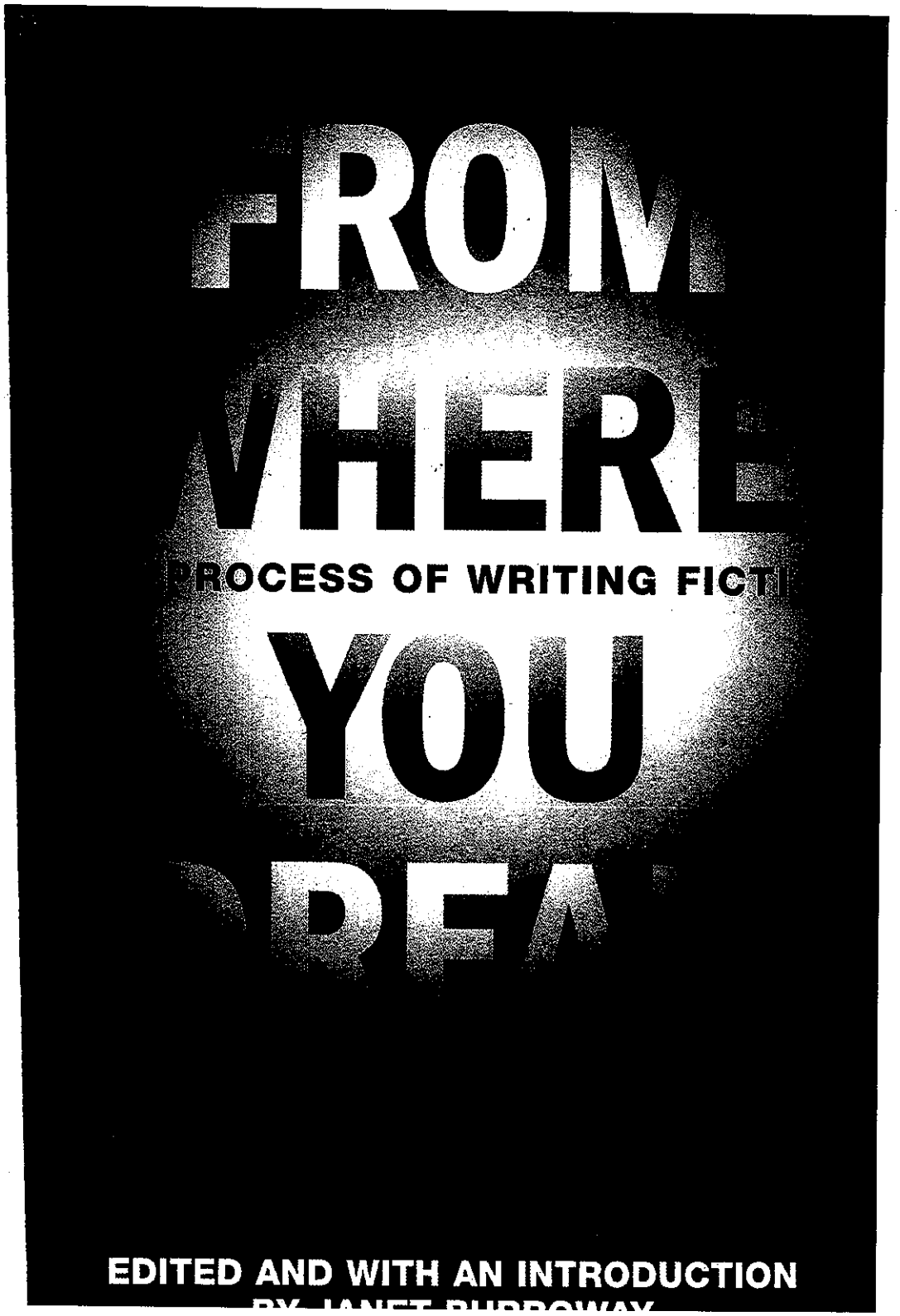
—Robert Olen Butler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