

# The Hidden Scars All Refugees Carry

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Many people have characterized my novel, "The Sympathizer," as an immigrant story, and me as an immigrant. No. My novel is a war story and I am not an immigrant. I am a refugee who, like many others, has never ceased being a refugee in some corner of my mind.

Immigrants are more reassuring than refugees because there is an endpoint to their story; however they arrive, whether they are documented or not, their desires for a new life can be absorbed into the American dream or into the European narrative of civilization.

By contrast, refugees are the zombies of the world, the undead who rise from dying states to march or swim toward our borders in endless waves. An estimated 60 million such stateless people exist, 1 in every 122 people alive

today. If they formed their own country, it would be the world's 24th largest — bigger than South Africa, Spain, Iraq or Canada.

My memories of becoming a refugee are fragments of a dream, hallucinatory and unreliable. Soldiers bouncing me on their knees, a tank rumbling through the streets, a crowded barge of desperate people fleeing Vietnam.

I have no guarantee these images are true. They date from the early 1970s, when I lived in the country synonymous with war. I wonder if the fact that I cannot stand the taste of milk today has to do with being a 4-year-old boy on that barge, sipping from milk a stranger shared with my family.

Perhaps this is how history becomes imprinted in the body, how fear becomes a reflex, how memory becomes a matter of taste and feeling.

My real memories began soon after we arrived at the refugee camp in Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa., in the summer of 1975. Only those refugees with sponsors could leave the camp. But no sponsor would take our family of four, so my parents went to one home, my 10-year-old brother went to another and I went to a third. My separation from my parents lasted only a few months, but it felt much longer. This forced separation, what my childhood self experienced as abandonment, remains an invisible brand stamped between my shoulder blades.

A few years later we moved across the country. My parents, merchants in their homeland, had no desire to do the menial work expected of them in Harrisburg, Pa., where we had settled.

Instead, they opened a grocery store in a depressed area of downtown San Jose, working 12- to 14-hour days, seven days a week, except for Christmas Day, Easter and New Year's Day. They became successful, at the cost of being shot in an armed robbery.

Today, when many Americans think of Vietnamese-Americans as a success story, we forget that the majority of Americans in 1975 did not want to accept Vietnamese refugees. (A sign hung in the window of a store near my parents' grocery: "Another American forced out of business by the Vietnamese.") For a country that prides itself on the American dream, refugees are simply un-American, despite the fact that some of the original English settlers of this country, the Puritans, were religious refugees.

Today, Syrian refugees face a similar reaction. To some Europeans, these refugees seem un-European for reasons of culture, religion and language. And in Europe and the United States, the attacks in Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino, Calif., and Orlando, Fla., have people fearing that Syrian refugees could be Islamic radicals, forgetting that those refugees are some of the first victims of the Islamic State.

Because those judgments have been rendered on many who have been cast out or who have fled, it is important for those of us who were refugees to remind the world of what our experiences mean.

I was — I am — the lucky kind of refugee who was carried along by his parents and who had no memory of the crossing. For people like my parents and the Syrians today, their voyages across land and sea are far more perilous than the ones undertaken by astronauts or Christopher Columbus. To those watching news reports, the refugees may be threatening or pitiful, but in reality, they are nothing less than heroic.

They will remain scarred by their history. It is understandable that some do not want to speak of their scars and might want to pretend that they are not refugees. It is more glamorous to be an exile, more comprehensible to be an immigrant, more desirable to be an expatriate. The need to belong can change refugees themselves both consciously and unconsciously, as has

happened to me and others.

A Vietnamese colleague of mine once jokingly referred to his journey from "refugee to bourgeoisie." When I told him I, too, was a refugee, he stopped joking and said, "You don't look like one."

He was right. We can be invisible even to one another. But it is precisely because I do not look like a refugee that I have to proclaim being one, even when those of us who were refugees would rather forget that there was a time when the world thought us to be less than human.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's novel "The Sympathizer" won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. His short story collection "The Refugees" comes out in February.

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