

LÊ THI DIEM THÚY

# The Americans

*for John Berger*

THE PHONE CALL CAME at eleven in the morning. It was a Tuesday, the first of November, two months after he left. The man at the other end of the line said his name was Luís. He was a rancher, lived near White Sands, New Mexico. She heard a couple of dogs barking, a woman's voice imploring, *Silencio!* And behind all that, a rush of cars, fast and steady, like a swollen river. He did not know how to tell her what he had to tell her. Don't, she thought, but his voice was warm and measured. It seemed like a pair of eyes, seeking her gaze and then holding it. He believed she knew this man. He was her husband and they had a daughter, was that not true? Yes, that is true. Is Paul there?

The frost came earlier than anyone expected and now it is snowing, the voice continued. Marisol had insisted many times that he sleep inside, in the room off the kitchen. But he had his ways, and every night he carried his bedroll outside, to a ditch along the road. He would crawl down in there and they wouldn't see him until morning, when the dogs woke him.

She listened to the animal keening and the woman's voice imploring and the rushing sound of cars, which hummed beneath everything, like the hurt slowly spreading through her body.

Forgive them, the man said. They have been barking like this all morning and they can't seem to stop.

At a quarter to five that evening, the girl could be seen walking home, her backpack hanging squarely from her shoulders. She had been kept late after school. She'd heard the teachers whispering among themselves that her mother needed some time, but no one told her time for what. Up ahead, the women's track team from the nearby college ran toward her. In the twilight they were a faint line approaching, then they filled the road, a mass of ragged breath and stamping feet swarming all around her. When they had gone, she saw Mr. Naegele standing on the front porch of the house. He raised his hand to her, tentatively marking the air with the glow of his cigarette. It was not really a wave but she crossed the street and hurried over to him.

Overhead, the rumbling of a transport plane from the nearby Air Force base could be heard, conducting night maneuvers.

Her father had left on September fifth, the first day of the school year. She remembered coming home and climbing the stairs to her family's apartment. Her mother was sitting at the kitchen table, studying an apple, a small Macoun, red, with a patch of lime green near the stem. Do you want to share this with me? she asked. The girl walked to the chair across from her, but her mother gestured for her to come closer, so the girl came and put her arm around her mother's shoulder and leaned into her. They could hear Mr. Naegele downstairs, conducting one of his many music lessons. Underneath the floorboards, a long, low, falling rope of sound seemed to plummet to a point, then slowly scale itself and rise up again, toward them.

The girl glanced into her parents' bedroom, scanned the empty bed, the two pillows. She put her hand on her mother's head and pressed down. The apple sat on the table, round, ready and untouched.

One night, before he left, the three of them sat on the couch after dinner and watched the evening news. A young reporter stood on a flooded street in New Orleans. There were trees and telephone poles bobbing in the water behind her. They watched footage of a helicopter swooping in and dropping down a kind of swing. An old man, standing on the roof of his flooded house, crawled onto it and was carried away. In the far distance, behind the reporter's shoulder, people were walking through the flood water with their arms held high over their heads, some were lifting strange, misshapen bundles, some were holding cats or dogs, and some weren't holding anything at all, their arms jutting out to either side, ready to push away whatever floated near in the water.

When the girl looked at the people trudging stiffly, as though in a procession, she couldn't tell if it was day or night and it looked to her as though the people had come from very far away and she thought that they would be walking like that forever.

He called and left messages for them when they weren't home. His messages were like postcards and the girl had been eager to receive them. He was in a little town called Avon, on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. There was a crab shack across from where he was staying, and he had gone there every night for dinner. He was outside a motel in the middle of the country, Amish farmers were passing by, in their horse and buggy, the town was full of them, moving around like this, in no hurry. He was floating down the Mississippi on a car ferry, with a Salvadorian named Douglas, pronounced Dew-glass, who was headed to Biloxi to find his brother, who had finally made it across the border, and was now working—or had been—in a casino. In one message, filled with rain, he said he was calling from the parking lot of a Vietnamese restaurant in Houston. The city was

full of refugees. The last time he called, he said that he was headed for the desert, and he would call again. But a month and now two had passed, and he hadn't yet called. The girl lay under the kitchen table, staring up through a knothole, her fingers laced beneath her head, and wondered where he had gone to.

Early on a Saturday morning in mid-October, she drove the girl out of town, past the farmers setting up their stalls at the outdoor market and the protesters assembling in front of the old courthouse with placards and thermoses of coffee. She and the girl crossed the bridge over the river. The car was a cocoon of warmth. The girl, still sleepy, turned to look at the light on the hills to the east. Just after the Asia & America grocery store, between an adult entertainment shop and the Polish American Café, they took a left and drove out to the old farm road. They turned right and there it was, a tobacco barn that had been listing for years and had now finally fallen, collapsing in a huge heap. In the light it looked like a sleeping dragon, or a beached gray whale, something at once immense and irrefutable, and yet also somewhat improbable. She raised her camera toward what was once the roof of the barn. It looked like a crumpled spine. The girl was wandering in the field, singing one of her little songs. Up, up, up! the girl sang, Up, up, up! Then she ran along the edge of the heap, her legs moving faster and faster, her hair blurring behind her, a ghost mass of black. The woman made a picture of her daughter, who was soon to turn nine, and of the small cemetery up the road, with its many crooked headstones, and of the long-abandoned house at the bend in the river, whose lawn was always neatly mown by the farmer who lived next door.

At home, she picked up the morning paper, glanced at the picture on the front page, of Iraqi men standing in a jagged circle, hands cupped, palms up, praying.

The girl knew that there was a war going on, in a place where there were deserts and sandstorms, and this made the war hard to fight because the soldiers couldn't see the enemy. There had been another war, in a place with caves, and the enemy ran into the caves and the soldiers lost them. On the news, the president, who was a small man with a small face, called the enemy terrorists and he said you had to send a signal to them. You had to smoke them out. Hunt them down and kill them.

The girl noticed that in the places where the war was, the women and children mostly just stood around. They stood in the doorway of their homes, or in an alley near an outdoor market, with their hands covering their faces. Cars exploded around them. Ask them if they saw anyone, the American soldier shouted into the face of his Iraqi translator and the translator turned

to the people and asked and the people said, No, disappearing through doorways and across courtyards, as if chased away by the question.

The girl went to school and told her teachers that her father was in the desert where the war was, but that she didn't know what he was doing there. It wasn't a lie; she believed that he had gone there, though her mother insisted, when Mrs. Telfer called and asked, that he had not. She wrote a book report about the Tigris and the Euphrates, two ancient rivers, along whose banks sprang the cradle of civilization. She had copied the sentence straight out of the library book and she had no idea what the phrase "cradle of civilization" meant. She pictured sunken hollows in the ground — or one big sunken hollow — and people and things would lie down or rise up out of it.

She was a photographer, of landscapes and portraits. Her job was to wait, ever so patiently. She had met him on a magazine assignment, photographing the apple orchards where he worked one summer. The other migrant workers all signed a release, but he refused. That's all right, I'll work around him, she told her assistant. But there he was, at the edge of the frame, a bit of his hat, a bit of his hand, a whole side of his body, turning away.

By the end of the month he reluctantly agreed to sit for a portrait.

His nickname was Soldier. He'd been in Vietnam. Of his enlistment at twenty-two, he said, It was a way to get away.

And did you?

Sure I did. Never came back.

She was a child when the war in Vietnam was going on and only eight years old when the war wound down. It had happened in a faraway place, on the other side of the world. What little she knew about it was through the television. As her family sat and watched the evening news — her father in his lounge chair, stocking feet up; she on the orange shag rug, coloring books spread out before her; her mother perched on the edge of the sofa, drink in hand — in came the war, burnt orange and jungle green. Her mother would marvel at the heat of that place. Unfathomable! she would say, before traipsing to the liquor cabinet to freshen her gin and tonic. 1973 was the year her parents' marriage ended. But she would remember it more as the year she learned that word, unfathomable. Not to be understood, measured or sounded.

Now, as she lay in bed, her own marriage dissolving, her husband carried away by some charged wire of loss and memory he would not share with her, she turned the word over and over in her mouth. Unfathomable.

Up above the pressed tin ceiling, which was stamped with a design of squares within squares, the bookbinder who lived on the third floor walked

from one end of her long work table to the other, surveying sheets of pomegranate paper, wide-eyed needles, linen threads, jars of bone buttons, and the sharp point of an ancient-looking awl.

Marisol watched as he took his bedroll and a blanket and walked toward the dried-up irrigation ditch that ran alongside the interstate. He stepped down into it, as into quickly shifting sand, and disappeared.

In the ditch he unrolled his thin bedding and lay down. Freight trucks rumbled past, kicking up a spit of gravel that sprayed all about him. High above stretched the Milky Way, a smoke signal writ large. He lay still and stared at it.

He remembered the back garden in Massachusetts, pictured the paper-thin poppies. As in a sped-up time-lapse image, he saw the seed and the stem, the flower with its petals, the quivering stamen, the black pollen, the rattling dry pods. He tried to stay focused on this, but his mind veered off to bombs in street signs and bombs in the bodies of dead dogs and bombs that fell from the sky and landed in the middle of a caravan of people on their way to a wedding. A thousand pilgrims trampled each other to death because they thought there was a bomb on the bridge that they were crossing and they lost their slippers as they ran. After the bodies were carried away, the street sweepers came and slowly pushed the lost slippers from one end of the bridge to the other, forming a big heap that was then set on fire. He pictured the poppies. He saw seeds bursting in their underground beds, the green stems rising, the red petals of the poppies fluttering open, filmy as eyelids. He reeled back to himself the memory of his wife and his daughter standing in the garden in late summer, cutting him a birthday bouquet of poppies. He was watching them from the porch, and they shouted for him to throw his lighter down. The girl cupped the flame and told her mother to hurry. They singed the stems of the poppies and placed the flowers in a jam jar, which they set at the center of the old barn door he had cut and sanded and stained and made into a kitchen table. The flowers seemed to float and flicker on the dark wood, like a small island of flames.

He felt the full weight of his body press into the cold ground, and keep pressing until the ground itself seemed to give beneath him, swinging open like a trapdoor. As he fell to sleep, his fingers twitched and he turned his face this way and that.

In his sleep, he lay suspended over that other ditch, the one that he had once stood on the edge of, in that hell-hot country, the lieutenant in his ear, yelling for him to finish the job. They were small and squirming and seemed a million miles away. Women, children, old people, babies too. There were maybe seventy-five or a hundred of them down there. He had helped to line them up along the lip of the ravine. Had fired at them. Had watched them

fall. Staring down into the ditch he saw that the people had disappeared and in their place lay an enormous knot of hair and limbs and blood and black cloth, coiling in the early morning heat. Small, insistent murmurings and pitiful animal moans, long lacerating whimpers, at a pitch that seemed unearthly, emanated from the center of the knot. No, no, no! the lieutenant shouted, and grabbed his gun from him and shouting, Shut the fuck up! fired into the ditch until all the sounds stopped. He walked to one of the huts, sat down in the doorway and listened to the silence all around him without understanding fully why it now was silent.

In the days and years after, he told himself that whoever those people had been, whoever he had been, whatever had happened there, was dead and buried. His tour ended. Someone with his name and face went home to Indiana, to the good, taciturn parents, and the baby brother who wanted to hear what it had been like, to the acres of farmland that needed plowing, and the winter wind that cut through him, as if he could be divided any further from himself. To all this he returned, and from all this he soon drifted away, to pick pecans, to herd sheep, to paint houses, to tend lawns, to lay down fence, to pick onions and apples and asparagus.

One day he had turned away and driven west, straight into himself. He had no explanation for it. At night he lay in this ditch and the body of his own wife and the face of his daughter were a mystery, receding, while these others, like drowned souls surfacing, bore down on him. At first they had appeared only in nightmares, hovering, tearing at the edge of his sleep. But now they were his sleep entirely, filling it with the bird sound of their names and the blood from their wounds and the damp feel of their faces, each pressed so close to his.

Mr. Naegele stood on the porch of the gray shingle house, one hand in his pocket, the other holding a cigarette. The door to the house was closed behind him. Upstairs, the girl's mother sat on the floor of the living room, her back against the couch. She stared into the open mouth of the fireplace, at the soot that had collected along its back wall. The bookbinder sat beside her, slowly stirring a cup of tea. The spoon made a feeble scraping sound. Please stop, the girl's mother said. In the quiet that followed, they could hear Mr. Naegele calling the girl's name, Alma.

Mr. Naegele took two steps down into the front yard and asked the girl, as she crossed the street, if she wouldn't like to go for a walk. She had to ask her mother first, she said. That was all right, he had asked her mother for her, and it was all right. She slid her backpack from her shoulders and he took it from her and placed it on the porch. They walked down the hill, toward the town. It was dark now. Mr. Naegele, the girl said, Do you think

my dad will come back? His arms and legs filled with weariness. He thought of his own dead wife. The cars were a steady stream along State Street. He could hear more than see them. He reached for the girl's hand and took a step off the curb. The drivers stopped and Mr. Naegele and the girl crossed.

Mr. Naegele?

I don't know, my dear. I don't know. People have a way of returning.

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