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ANDREW LAM

Give Me the Gun

The American dream in exile

I am now seven years older than my father was when he came to California at the end of the Vietnam War. I have been an American writer and journalist for over two decades. I am here to tell you that the war, though it ended so long ago, doesn't end—and for children from war-torn countries, the Old World, its memories and turmoil, sometimes calls out for our blood.

For years I've had this dream: Sometimes I'm a bird, other times I'm fully human. Always it's a dive into the ocean. Bird, me as a child, as an adult—no matter, in the dream, it's straight to the bottom I go. With bloody fingers, with a scratched beak, I try to excavate, to retrieve something hard to see.

There it is: a gun. In the dream, it turns into a vague object, or a sorry-looking rock, or it changes its shape continuously and loses texture—or else the gun dissolves into sand, into mud, and sifts through my clutching fingers.

Some dreams are impossible to decipher; but this one is a direct route to my own psyche. Upon news that the South Vietnamese government had surrendered to the communist invasion, my father boarded a naval ship with a few hundred other Vietnamese officials and their families on the Saigon River and headed out to sea. Nearing Subic Bay in the Philippines where they asked US authorities for asylum, he folded away his army uniform, changed into a pair of jeans and a shirt, and, now a stateless man, tossed his gun into the water.

I was not there. I was already in Guam, having left inside a humming C-130 cargo plane full of panicked refugees out of Tan Son Nhat Airport two days before Saigon fell, but I've come to regard that moment when he jettisoned his gun into the sea as a turning point in my own story. Rusting at the sandy bottom, it serves as a kind of marker. It spelled the end of my Vietnamese childhood and the beginning of my life in exile in America.

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I am telling you this because although I fail to retrieve that gun in my dreams, I am all too aware that some other refugee children in America have managed to grab hold of it in reality, and on a few occasions have even found their way toward tragedy. The rags-to-riches American immigrant narrative often fails to acknowledge its darker stepsister, a chronicle in which some children, failing to fulfill their American dream, revert to fight lost battles from their parents' homeland.

I am telling you this because I am still trying to understand what happened when two bombs went off and killed three people at the Boston Marathon and seriously wounded dozens of others.

The culprits were not organized terrorists, not foreigners, but two Chechen brothers who, on their way to the American Dream, crashed into a bloodbath of their own making. Tamerlan Tsarnaev, 26, and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, 19, lived for years in Boston. Both were once refugees and, along with their parents and two sisters, found asylum in America; both were known to friends and neighbors as "regular guys," which makes their bloody sagas all the more baffling and disturbing.

In watching their stories unfold, I couldn't help but wonder how much of a scar does being a child of a war-torn country leave? And why do some old scars turn back into open, festering wounds?

Here is what we know: Tamerlan was an aspiring boxer who dropped out of school and was described by others as "cool" and "arrogant." He represented New England in the 2009 Golden Gloves national championship but could not compete the following year when rule changes barred non-US citizens. That, coupled with a back injury, killed his Olympic dream, his vision of a better world. It was around this time when his life veered hard toward radical Islam and fundamentalism.

Dzhokhar, the younger brother—who, ironically, became a US citizen on 11 September 2012—was reportedly likeable and outgoing. A wrestler who attended Boston Dartmouth,

Dzhokhar was struggling. He received seven failing grades over three semesters, including Fs in chemistry and Introduction to American Politics. He had \$20,000 in unpaid bills to the university at the time of his arrest.

Their family, too, had unraveled. Anzor, their father, was a mechanic; Zubeidat, their mother who had turned religious and reportedly had a great deal of influence on Tamerlan, worked as a cosmetologist. Both suffered setbacks in America, went on welfare after a few years of working, and then divorced. Anzor moved back to Dagestan, east of Chechnya, to be followed by Zubeidat a few years later. They had left Tamerlan in charge of his younger brother. Two middle sisters had moved to New York and kept their distance.

Here is what I know: it is inevitable that children born into war inherit trauma, even if they didn't experience that war first hand. The inheritance is deep rooted, and it seeps in below the surface: the way the adults talk of the past, the way fragments of their history replay on TV, the way sadness hangs in the refugee home like heavy air, like smoke; a lost home, a shattered people, the humiliation, the overwhelming nostalgia; it seeps into dreams. And when they are vulnerable, when their lives in America unravel and their access to America's grandeur is blocked and denied, the old memories and unshaped desires have a way of reaching out to take hold.

The late UC Berkeley sociologist Franz Schurmann once noted two paths for children of immigrants toward their Americanization process: either through education or the military. But there's no longer a draft, and the other institution, the American education system, is failing our kids.

One of the Tsarnaevs' uncles, a successful man in America, when asked for an explanation of their actions, described them as "losers" who harbored a hatred of those who were able to settle into life in America. "These are the only reasons I can imagine. Anything else, anything else to do with religion, with Islam, it's a fraud, it's a fake," he said.

The uncle may not be far from the truth. Islam may very well become the old clutch when the brothers' vision of

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Persistence of Memory #12 by Dinh Q. Lê. IMAGE COURTESY OF PPOW GALLERY.

a beatific America falters. Unable to move forward, they move back, trying to become warriors for a lost cause, or trying to assuage their parents' humiliation and grief. Or else, they try to find a theater on which they can still play out as the main actors.

Though I have moved far away from my humble beginning, have found a direction for myself, and have in many ways betrayed my allegiance to the old country, I never underestimate the speed with which a refugee boy can go off track—how the vision of America as the land of milk and honey can quickly shift to that of a bona fide barren landscape with a failing grade. Ambition, too, can shift to rage and hatred, and the “mixing memory and desire,” to quote T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, can like the spring rain stir all “dull roots.”

Indeed, while the Tsarnaevs’ trajectory—from asylum, to attempts at assimilation and finally to terrorism—seem incomprehensible and baffling to many, there have been

precedents in my own community. In their story, I hear echoes of another set of brothers from my own country.

On 4 April 1991, three Vietnamese brothers and a friend—all teenagers—took over an electronics store in Sacramento, California. The group held forty-one people hostage, garnering national attention as journalists flocked outside the store. Inside, the boys prowled about with their guns, the hostages tied up.

What did the Nguyen brothers want? Four million dollars, 1,000-year-old ginseng roots (thought to make one invincible in battle), a helicopter, and bulletproof jackets. Their plan: To fly to Thailand and take on the Vietcong. (It was not clear if they knew the Vietcong were in Vietnam and not in Thailand, nor whether were they aware that helicopters couldn’t possibly fly across the Pacific Ocean.)

Negotiators on the scene were baffled, and when talks broke down the four began to wound hostages to show that



Untitled (vintage) by Dinh Q. Lê. IMAGE COURTESY OF PPOW GALLERY.

they were serious. The SWAT team stormed the grounds in response, killing three of the four hostage takers and critically wounding the oldest of the three brothers. Three hostages were killed before the siege ended.

Like the Tsarnaevs, the Nguyen brothers were described by those who knew them as decent, even obedient children. They attended their Catholic church regularly, where their father was a deacon. They were told to follow the Vietnamese traditions by their parents. But their father, once a sergeant in the South Vietnamese army, later admitted that he couldn't help them with school and homework because he himself was woefully uneducated.

But there was little hint at the barbarism they would later commit. Their parents, too, in the aftermath of the bloodshed were left to wonder: Why? Before the attack, their trajectory toward a successful American future quickly ended: all four had been expelled from school for a dangerous prank that involved lighting some materials on fire after school.

Though little was known about their private lives, people who knew them said they were big fans of Hong Kong movies—gangster and martial arts films full of blood and vengeance chief among them. The 1,000-year-old ginseng root came directly from old Kung Fu movies where, legend has it, consuming the mythic root would increase one's martial arts prowess exponentially. One movie quite influential at that time was John Woo's 1990 *Bullet in the Head*, where three blood

brothers, caught and tortured in Vietnam for doing drugs, ended up attacking the communist stronghold in a helicopter.

Today, the eldest brother, Loi Nguyen, is serving three consecutive life sentences for the crime.

Dzhokhar was indicted with thirty counts for using a weapon of mass destruction, killing four people, and wounding many others. He is facing the death penalty. As he lay wounded in the boat before his capture a few days after the bombing, Dzhokhar penned what he must have thought was his last testimony: "The US Government is killing our innocent civilians," he wrote. "I can't stand to see such evil go unpunished. We Muslims are one body, you hurt one you hurt us all."

And most telling, "Fuck America."

What do refugee children in the New World have in common? When we set foot on the American shore, history is already against us; we have become dispossessed, footnotes in history. Our mythology quickly turns into private dreams: there's no war to fight, no heroic quest, no territory to defend, no clear enemies.

The refugee child's first self-assessment in America is often helplessness. It is characterized by the new knowledge that his parents are inarticulate and lost. It is often framed by humiliation and waiting: in line for donated clothes, for food stamps, for free clinic exams, for green cards. Unlike immigrants who, though their own will and effort, sold their homes, said goodbyes to their neighbors and relatives,

and applied for visas to migrate; refugees flee, often from violence, and their final destinations are usually unknown.

But the refugee child learns quickly that there's no returning, that in exile his nation is lost, that he is an enemy of history, and that he must venture into the New World alone, as he, learning the new language faster than the adults, is the better navigator.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" Mr. K, my English teacher in seventh grade asked. I hadn't thought of the question before. Such an American question. "A movie star," I replied, laughing.

America's identity is tied in with what we do. If we do well and gain fame and fortune, we are respected, we gain a foothold, and we can forget the past. It is understood that this rags-to-riches narrative will assuage past grievances, erase our ignominy and shame. America tells the newcomer to think for himself and look out for number one. America spurs rebellion of the individual against the communal grief, encourages amnesia. America seduces, and you betray old loyalties, your old man's extraterritorial passion, your mother's nostalgia. It whispers a new desire: Follow your own dream.

For many of us, it works. Think about it this way: What would have happened if Tamerlan had made it to the Olympic team? Or if Dzhokhar hadn't had such heavy debt and seven failing grades but had been thriving in school on a wrestling scholarship? Would their gaze have been that of vehemence?

Because I experienced rebirth, because English is a bendable language on my tongue, because I long ago drove away from the mythical kingdom where 1,000-year-old ginseng roots grew and blood must be paid by blood, I read Dzhokhar's scribbling as he lay wounded in that boat before his capture as a naive and bitter rejection from someone who got to the gate to the land of golden promises only to have it slammed shut on him at the last minute.

Often, the successful border crosser will find ways to articulate and redefine himself; his revenge over his wretched past is his successful transition in America, his newfound status—a boxer, a scholarship boy. But when access to America's grandeur is blocked or denied, especially for children from war-torn lands, old memories have a way of resurfacing, of reaching out. Inherited trauma, ever-present in refugee homes, becomes seductive, something on which to latch one's identity. In fantasy, in search for a new myth, some even fantasize themselves fighting their father's lost war or defending a land long lost. Old loyalty demands an old-world, strict ethos: blood debt must be paid by blood.

Alas, the history of the defeated is private and circular. It owns all at some core level like a metal ball and chain around a prisoner's bleeding ankle. In it, the only moral direction to be had is the one that demands complete loyalty to the past—not to own it, mind you, but to let oneself be ruled by it, and to do so, one would have to accept forever the status of a stranger in a strange land.

Dzhokhar's romantic notion of unity—that Muslims are one body—is far removed from the reality of the bloody conflicts between various Islamic branches. His attempt to defend a people—the mythical "We" with which he claimed affiliation while he lay bleeding on that boat—is as naive and tragic as the Nguyen brothers' idea of flying helicopters in peacetime to kill Vietcong.

For those lacking imagination, violence by default often becomes the game. For those who feel powerless to transform themselves, the gun can be seductive. It provides power. It speaks in a language everybody understands. It speaks across color lines. It opens doors for the invisible into the public space. It declares that one exists. Unfortunately, it is the language of annihilation and not creation. It's not a dialogue at all, but a monologue of the desperately immature.

Like it or not, the Tsarnaevs' trail of blood captured America's imagination, and their gun fight in the dark of night harks back to the narrative of Billy the Kid, of Bonnie and Clyde, of those who found instant fame through bloodbath.

Perhaps it is why a dreamy, curly haired Dzhokhar Tsarnaev stared out from the cover of *Rolling Stone*. His gaze, however, is one of nostalgia and bewilderment. His is the face of someone not clear on the concept that there's an exorbitant price to pay for old loyalty in the New World, a face that lacks self knowledge.

My wish for Dzhokhar as he sits in his cell for many years to come is that he reads; that his jail cell be flooded with books, and his mind filled with others' sadness and torments, so that in time hate will be replaced with empathy, regrets, and sorrows. For if he had resented and rejected America, he is now bound to it in profound ways, and what lies before him yet is an undiscovered country, one in which his journey toward self-knowledge and atonement await.

"To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it," noted the lyrical writer James Baldwin. To own the past, one ought not to be ruled by it but should appropriate it and render it into aesthetic expressions as a way to move forward. **B**