

I was invisible

Christian Lorentzen

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THE COMMITTED

by Viet Thanh Nguyen.

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THE NARRATOR of Viet Thanh Nguyen's pair of novels, *The Sympathiser* (2015) and *The Committed*, is one of the more irresistible characters in recent American fiction. He smokes, he drinks, he sniffs powders. He's a playboy who sometimes can't get it up. He's a lowlife, a drug dealer, a street fighter. He's an intellectual with a graduate degree and he's a bit of a snob. He reads Voltaire, Rousseau, Fanon, Gramsci; he listens to jazz and disdains rock and roll, especially the hippy music of the Grateful Dead. He's a soldier schooled in CIA interrogation techniques. He's a murderer ('assassin' might be the more generous term) and a double agent, a communist spy among the counter-revolutionaries. He knows the movie business, which may be the most pitiless of them all. He's a liar by necessity and a thief at his pleasure. He's a serial betrayer but the most loyal of friends. He's a half-breed and a bastard. Part Vietnamese and part French, he speaks English with an American accent. He's good at getting banged up, consigned to the hospital bed, the bin, the re-education camp, a dank basement or an empty warehouse staring into the barrel of a gun. He's the offspring of paedophilia. He's lonely, often in pain. He's angry – at the world, at history, at France, at America, at his fratricidal homeland. He's an allegory, perhaps too many allegories at once. Call him the Captain, call him the Crazy Bastard, call him by the name on his passport, 'Vo Danh'. It means 'nameless'.

No name but an elaborate backstory. His mother was a poor girl of thirteen living in North Vietnam when a French priest took her in as a maid and got her pregnant. Shunned by his aunts and cousins, her son was taught by the priest at a local mission school, though he didn't know the man was his father until his eleventh birthday. In 1954, when he was nine, he and his mother had fled the communists in the North and encountered an American called Claude, nominally working in refugee relief but actually a CIA agent. At a lycée in Saigon, he formed a bond with two fellow students, Bon and Man. Bon, embittered by the death of his father at the hands of the Viet Cong, favoured the Americans. Man and the narrator were secret revolutionaries. But the narrator was also a budding CIA asset, and Claude arranged for him to study at Occidental College in Los Angeles, where he wrote a thesis titled 'Myth and Symbol in the Literature of Graham Greene'.

Nguyen's narrator is designed to have several dual identities, but it's his bond with Man and Bon that turns out to be the engine of both novels, as he tries to carry out Man's orders, handed down from the Viet Cong, while protecting Bon from danger. At the start of *The Sympathiser*, it's April 1975, and Saigon is being evacuated. The narrator is working as an attaché to the General, the head of the South's secret police, and he clears their path to the airport with bribes. Nguyen describes a violent and chaotic airlift, couched in denials and anticipating the recent departure of American forces from Kabul: 'Officially, there's no evacuation, said Claude, because we're not pulling out any time soon.' The narrator, the General and Bon take off in a hail of bombs and bullets that kill Bon's wife and child. On

orders from Man, he will continue as a mole, accompanying the General and Man out of Saigon, first to Guam, and then to Los Angeles, where he will report on the reactionaries' activities, sending letters in code and invisible ink to Man's aunt in Paris.

In California, these refugees live the quiet, scattered lives of immigrants. The General opens a liquor store. The narrator and Bon move into an apartment together; Bon goes on welfare; the narrator works in the department of Oriental studies at Occidental and has an affair with a secretary. But in the minds of Bon and the General, at least, the war isn't over. The General looks for traitors among the diaspora and draws up plans for a counter-revolutionary mission to reclaim the homeland. Bon and the narrator are tasked with assassinating 'the crapulent major', whom the narrator has fingered as an informant in order to draw attention away from himself. They commit the murder on 4 July 1976. Afterwards, they drink rye while 'watching television specials celebrating the nation's birthday. It was not just any birthday, but the bicentennial of a great, brawny nation, a little punch-drunk from recent foreign excursions but now on its feet again and ready to swing, or so proclaimed the chatterati.' Later, the General orders the narrator to kill a man called Sonny, the editor of a local Vietnamese-language newspaper who also happens to be a rival for the secretary's affections and one of the narrator's old classmates. Between these killings, he works as a consultant on a film about the Vietnam War and spends weeks on location in the Philippines, where an accident during a stunt explosion lands him in a hospital bed.

The Sympathiser is told as a confession, written by the narrator in a re-education camp where he and Bon have been detained after entering Vietnam from the border with Thailand. The confession is addressed to their jailer, the Commandant, who is revealed to be Man, his face scarred beyond recognition by napalm – a case of friendly fire, since Man was still undercover among the South Vietnamese when he was hit. The confession builds to an admission by the narrator that during his time undercover with the South Vietnamese he witnessed the torture and rape of a female communist agent and did nothing to stop it, a story that echoes a repulsive scene in the film he was working on. After holding Bon and the narrator for a year, Man arranges for their escape from the camp. They depart Saigon again, this time on a boat.

The Committed continues the story, beginning on the boat: 'We were the unwanted, the unneeded and the unseen, invisible to all but ourselves. Less than nothing, we also saw nothing as we crouched blindly in the unlit belly of our ark, 150 of us sweating in a space not meant for us mammals but for

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the fish of the sea.' There is a lot of retching when they are allowed on deck, and the meagre rations of food and water mean children soon start dying. The sequel revisits several elements of *The Sympathiser*: the elegant symmetrical structure of the plot, beginning and ending in constraint; the narrator's tendency to digress on the history of Vietnam, the legacy of colonialism, the immigrant experience; his ironic tone that gives a highly self-conscious (and comic) sheen to stories of suffering, death and displacement; a recursive mode of storytelling that constantly returns to the events of the narrator's childhood, his work as a double agent and the crimes 'of which I had never been convicted but of which I was not proud'; and a climactic reckoning among the three friends that is also an allegory for Vietnam's painful recent history. The action moves to Paris, where Bon and the narrator have made their way, via Jakarta, to deliver three bags of kopi luwak, coffee partially digested and excreted by civet cats, to the Boss, head of the Vietnamese underworld in Paris.

The bags actually contain drugs, a white powder the Boss refers to as 'the remedy', which seems sometimes to be heroin and at other times cocaine. One of the bags has been mistakenly switched with actual civet coffee, a gift to Man's aunt, who welcomes the narrator into her home and introduces him to the Parisian intellectuals who will be the remedy's first buyers. *The Committed* is an even wilder book than *The Sympathiser*, taking its cues from exploitation flicks. Brawls, shootouts and double-crossings replace the double agent theme. The narrator gets into numerous scrapes in the course of a turf war with a gang of Algerians. He convalesces in the care of prostitutes in the Boss's employ, using the remedy as a painkiller and then weaning himself off it. In a bravura set piece, a group of wealthy Parisian men are lured into a burlesque revue, plied with the remedy and the ministrations of prostitutes, all for the purposes of

a blackmail scheme arranged by the Boss, which has distinct echoes of the scandal and rumours surrounding Jeffrey Epstein.

In *The Sympathiser*, Nguyen drew liberally from American literature, transforming it for his own darkly funny and deadly serious purposes. The narrator has parallels with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Philip Roth's Alex Portnoy (both inheritors of Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*). The accident on the set of the war movie alludes to *Invisible Man*, and the arrogant, racist Auteur takes the place of the white man who lands Ellison's narrator in hospital. (I never expected to see that character reborn as a caricature of Francis Ford Coppola.) Recalling his first experience of masturbation, Nguyen's narrator describes using a squid from his mother's kitchen, an entertaining twist on Portnoy and the liver. *The Committed* expands on these allusions. Games of Russian roulette are a play on the finale of *The Deer Hunter*. We encounter gangsters reading Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and the narrator wonders whether he and his North African rivals can't find solidarity as othered members of the criminal underclass in the West. The narrator has a feminist awakening overhearing the moans, sighs and pillow talk of Man's aunt and her female lover, a lawyer representing Pol Pot in his trial for war crimes. He takes up cunnilingus himself on his visits to the brothel, spelling out the Vietnamese alphabet with his tongue – diacritic accents and all. (There is a similar scene about the erotic power of language in Ben Lerner's recent novel *The Topeka School*; I suppose three would make it a real trend.)

There are caricatures of Parisian intellectuals: a Maoist psychoanalyst with a PhD, modelled on Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's son-in-law; and a socialist politician who goes by the initials BFD. They condescend to the narrator, whom they see as a 'noble savage', rehearse Western leftist clichés and buy his drugs. On a trip to the brothel, BFD gives off 'an air of casual brilliance and cosmopolitanism, with his pink trousers, white shirt unbuttoned to the sternum, lime-green sweater draped over his shoulders with its arms loosely tied over his chest, monogrammed handkerchief, gold Rolex, slightly worn espadrilles, and sockless white ankles', and of course he is a cartoon version of Bernard-Henri Lévy. Characters from *The Sympathiser* return, among them Lana, the General's daughter turned pop singer,

who, having spent a night with the narrator years earlier, now has a surprise for him; Claude, who is as unwilling as the General to let go of the past; and the ghosts of the crapulent major and Sonny, the newspaper editor. They haunt the narrator, reminders of the sins for which he was never punished. Nguyen's anti-communist theorist Richard Hedd (his name isn't the subtlest of Nguyen's jokes), has a new book, *The Evil Empire's Oriental Origins*. The narrator reads from the last page: 'History has shown that sometimes the brutish win. The Soviets are attempting to demonstrate

that sad, ugly truth once more in Afghanistan. We must be committed to ensuring that Afghanistan is their Vietnam.' He reflects:

'Their Vietnam'? What did that mean? Was that like saying, We'll always have Paris? Except that when people said 'Paris' they meant flaky croissants, and the Eiffel Tower, and a cruise on the Seine like the one Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn took in *Charade*, and a nice glass of Sancerre, and gazing on Notre-Dame while an accordion-playing mime in a beret and striped shirt entertained them, and so on and so on and so on. And, God help me

– here I use 'God' figuratively – I believed in this Paris, too! A Paris that existed as much as God existed. But when a man like Richard Hedd said 'Vietnam', what he and most of his readers thought about were napalm, and burning girls, and bullets to the head, and crowds of faceless people under conical hats wearing basic black outfits that could have been the height of haute couture in Paris given the right circumstances. 'Vietnam', in shorthand, was war, tragedy, and death, and so on and so on, and how, I begged to know, would it ever cease being that way?

Didactic passages like this one are common enough in Nguyen's novels, but I can't

think of another writer who is didactic with such comic flair. Among the gangsters in *The Committed*, the narrator becomes known not just as a bastard (i.e. an unmarriageable half-breed) but as cunning, ingenious, streetwise, tough, prone to getting into jams: the Crazy Bastard indeed. The book is at once a hardboiled romp and a sleek vessel for Nguyen's ideas about Vietnam, France, America and the aftermath of colonialism. These are angry books and, like Ellison and Roth, Nguyen knows that sometimes the best way to get anger across is with a good, long, dirty joke. □

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