
Grief's Odyssey

Vinh Nguyen

The Migrant Rain Falls in Reverse: A Memoir. HarperCollins Canada \$24.99

Reviewed by Kerri Sakamoto (Independent)

In Vinh Nguyen's exquisitely faceted memoir of grief, he recalls: "I had suddenly faded into a ghost. It was like I'd been late to the world this whole time, everything already over" (49). This was years after fleeing Vietnam, after leaving the refugee camp in Thailand that had been his childhood waystation, and after Canada had become yet another.

Grief can make phantoms of us all: our lost loves grow remote and render us mysterious to our unanchored selves. For Nguyen, the mysteries are deep and turbulent. He was born in 1982 shortly after his father, a former lieutenant in the military, returned home to Ho Chi Minh City from seven grueling years in a Communist re-education camp. The family's prospects are dismal, and they decide to leave Vietnam. Mother and four children are smuggled out via truck and boat to Cambodia, then on foot through jungle to Thailand. There, living a liminal, provisional existence, they wait for their father. But he never comes. He disappears at sea, the circumstances unclear. Eventually, the family goes on to a life without him in Canada.

Nguyen grew up defined by his father's absence as the very "foundation of my being" (103). His father remains the constant space between him and his beloved mother; between him and the world. And yet, scrutinized at a family reunion when he has nearly reached the age his father attained, he's told his physical self—his thin legs, his nose, his sad eyes—could be mistaken as reincarnation. Such paradoxes and parallels, reversals and transformations recur throughout the book.

It is the loss of Nguyen's dear friend, a mentor and father figure, that reawakens his past trauma, compounding it with lacerating grief. Amid the deprivation and uncertainty brought by the pandemic, he arrives at a point of clarity and resolve to confront and make meaning from his father's death:

my task was to populate that space he was falling through with my own memories and desires, and in doing so, to make his fall from this life acquire some significance beyond another senseless refugee death, a nameless person disappearing from history. (14)

This task takes on the dimensions of odyssey. It leads him between Toronto, where he lives with his partner, to his mother in Calgary, and to Houston where aunts and uncles reside. He ponders "the story my mother told me when, as an adult, I finally had the courage to ask," as well as "the story I created from memory when I finally had the courage to remember" (70, 72). But when family elders urge him to learn the daunting history of what they, the people and the country, had to endure through war

and its lasting aftermath, he decides to “make history fit into *my story*” (118).

In Ho Chi Minh City, he reunites with a cousin whom he sees as a more beautiful iteration of himself, the self that might have remained with his family and father, intact, in Vietnam. He sees the possibility of an alternate version of history, a made-up story in which his father lives on to unremarkable old age. But he finds there is no end to that story, no end to the invented possibilities. “Out of fear, and an inability to deal with the immensity of my father’s living, I retreated back into his death” (194).

When his mother learns he is writing a memoir, she begins sending him mentions of events and dates. She tells him: “it’s important to get the facts right, even if you have to make things up” (207). Slowly, she begins her own parallel memoir but, as Nguyen tells us: “she lets me do whatever I want with the heft of her memories. I refashion them into my own and put words in her mouth, making what I feel into what she feels” (213).

That space his father fell through has become a palimpsest of memory, and memory’s memory, whose layered traces he’s pored over, adding to them, erasing and rewriting, embedding his survivor’s guilt.

At last, he travels to Thailand to find the refugee camp of Phanat Nikhom where he, his mother, and siblings had once lived and waited. Gone are the canteen, the rusted bus that would bring refugees in and out, the barbed wire fence, and corrugated tin, bent back, where locals smuggled in precious ice for cooling while bribed guards looked away. He finds no vestiges of that past on the grounds that are now grown over with new life.

His words, Nguyen concedes, owe everything to his father’s experiences, which will remain unknowable. Yet the book he’s written is, in its unique right, all-knowing and unstinting. Beautifully and brilliantly rendered, *The Migrant Rain Falls in Reverse* chronicles and questions with self-searching honesty and painstaking authenticity at every turn. Its pungent imagery grasps at what eludes fathoming, while the depth of feeling and rumination pierce the reader’s heart and mind. Ultimately, rain falls into the sea in which his father drowned; perilous jungle leads to refuge; years spent with his father can be counted on the fingers of his child’s hand. And blind alleys give way to imagined flight. There are no analogies for loss and pain. The book rings true because of its approximations and fabulations.

This memoir of loss is, in fact, a gift. There is much that touches one’s own experience of grief and psychic turmoil. Nguyen proffers an aged driver’s licence, all that survives of his father’s material possessions. “Here it is,” he says to the reader, as if with open hands. “Let me show it to you” (239).

The Migrant Rain Falls in Reverse offers intimacy to souls each on their own odyssey: touchstones of self-recognition. Nguyen’s words have lit my own ghostly trail as perpetual latecomer, uncertain of her place in the world. The torment of loss, the sense of being a parent’s lost child, the perpetual estrangement from home. Instances when you are “forced to see yourself though the eyes of a hostile world” (99). Even the bodily aches endowed by inheritance. This generous-hearted memoir tells not only the story of love gone wrong that is war, but the love story that belongs to the author and his mother, whom he has never had to search for. Not least is revealed the present-day love story of himself and his partner—who walks the curves in the path with him, assuring him that he is loved “like I could never be loved again in this brief life” (196).