This book is dedicated to my parents, who are more patient with me than I deserve.
Nathan tossed and turned on the hard lower bunk of his sleeper-class room. He peered at his cell phone; it would take 30 more hours to reach Hanoi. He was struck by how things were always a long wait for him. Nothing was simple, and whatever seemed certain had a way of being turned on its head without warning.

The sound of the train was low and whooshing, like the winds of a relentless rainstorm. Whenever the train pulled into a station the lull of stillness became just as loud, howling inside him, heightening his restlessness.

Lying there, discomposed by his companions’ snores, a premonition of endless night took hold of him. Unable to stand it, he left the room.

In the passageway a young man sat on a stool with his face buried in a copy of the *Army Newspaper*. There was nowhere else to sit, though Nathan did see, at the end of the last train car he was in, that the door was open and led to a small platform.

He stepped outside and sat down. The night was cool and full of starlight. With his legs dangling over the edge he watched a mosaic of moonlit fields emerge from a tangle of trees now receding on both sides of the track.

Nathan turned around at the sound of someone approaching the platform door. He was surprised to find a young woman with a train-issued blanket draped over her head. It was an odd way to wander through a train, and coming outside alone and as late as this piqued his interest. As she stood in the doorway considering the small space
that Nathan occupied, or whatever was on her mind, he gestured for her to sit with him.

She tugged the blanket from her head and, when she slipped into a shaft of moonlight, her hair appeared as pink as a rose.

Her age was hard to guess, though she was young, between 20 and 25. The more he looked at her hair the more its shape came to resemble that of a rosebud: it enfolded her face so that the ends nearly met beneath her chin.

She wore loose-fitting pajamas and tatami sandals. She asked him for the time — Trời ơi, mệt quá . . . Bây giờ là mấy giờ rồi? Her pronunciation — z’s in place of y’s and r’s; ch’s in place of tr’s — was lilting and feminine, yet distinctly northern. There was something almost startling about the Vietnamese she automatically used, and it pleased him that she would.

He pulled out his cell phone and saw it was just after two. Hai giờ rồi. Hai giờ hả?

The northern accent was easier for him because it distinguished more between sounds. Yet there was something cold and hard about the northern way of speaking, a wintry almost martial quality. But maybe it was only Hanoi’s chill weather and thick cloud cover that bled the color from the streets, buildings, even the clothing of the people, and made him feel this. For there was something warm and inviting about this pink-haired young woman.

“Are you married?” she said, turning back to him.

Nathan held up his ringless hands.

From out of nowhere the train came upon a crossing. Two streetlights stood opposite one another and bathed yellow a strip of stony dirt. An old man in a dark green uniform pulled a lever to lift the safety cross on each side of the railroad.

“You should go back to your room,” the girl said. “If your girlfriend wakes up, she’ll worry you’re not there.”

Her clumsy attempt to learn if he was alone amused him. “Maybe her snoring keeps me awake.”

She lifted her thin eyebrows and glanced down the corridor. “It’s late. I’d better go back myself.”

“What about your phone call?” When she didn’t answer he said: “In that case, why not keep me company a little longer?”

“She shook her head, finishing her yawn. “I live in Saigon. But I’m moving to America.”

Her plan to move to America stirred his curiosity. “Why are you going to America?”

“To make a life for myself.” She turned away as if his interest made her uncomfortable.

It occurred to him that she had notably large eyes — like an infant’s, he thought. She was as disarming as anyone he’d ever met and he found her alluring.

“Why didn’t you take a plane?”

“Same as you.”

Watching her yawn into her hand, he asked if she lived there.

She shook her head, finishing her yawn. “I live in Saigon. But I’m moving to America.”

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“What about your phone call?” When she didn’t answer he said: “In that case, why not keep me company a little longer?”

“It’s late,” she said again. She bid him goodnight and disappeared through the doorway.

The blue night suddenly telescoped, reduced to a receding square: a window onto a dream fading rapidly into nowhere. He grew colder in the chill night. For a moment he felt like he was traveling away from life itself. But in the next moment the feeling passed. He saw that the train had only entered a tunnel.

A high metallic wailing began to echo off the tunnel walls; a moment later utter darkness curtained everything he’d just passed through.

“I thought you couldn’t sleep on trains.”
Nathan awoke to find the pink-haired girl placing a bowl of instant noodles beside him, followed by two small bananas. She’d changed clothes and wore an old knee-length skirt and t-shirt with a faded Cộng Hồ painting of carps across the chest. Gold Chinese lettering cascaded down the side and sparkled in the clear morning light.

It took him a moment to realize she’d spoken in English. Behind her, sunshine stabbed through mists that encircled the jagged mountains.

“You brought me breakfast?” he asked.

“You missed the delivered meal. This is better, anyway. Go ahead and eat, I’ll be right back.”

Stretching to break up the stiffness he felt from sleeping all night with his back against the wall, he looked over the other side of the platform. Broken rocks lined the tracks, and between there and the near rice fields were ditches of stagnant water. It was a miracle he hadn’t tumbled off in the middle of the night.

He pulled out his cell phone to see the time, and noticed that his old friend, Anthony, had sent him a pre-dawn message. “Big week coming up. Not sure how much time I’ll have for you in Hanoi.”

The message was not what Nathan wanted to hear. While his trip north was the best chance they’d had in three years for a reunion, Nathan also wanted to ask him for a job. He’d been preparing for several weeks to approach him about this.

Over the last few months, the focus of their correspondence had been on the money he owed Anthony. In his last e-mail, however, Anthony mentioned that his wife, Huong, wanted him to forgive Nathan’s debt. “Of course, you and I both know her idea is ridiculous,” Anthony had written. “I guess that’s just the not-yet-dead embers of a first love speaking.”

The pink-haired girl returned with tea. Steam peeled off the cup and thinly veiled her face as she set it beside the bowl.

A Lipton bag bulged at the bottom of the cup. Swirls of orange rose from it like something being pumped. He was conscious of a pleasant tightness in his chest.

“Thank you.” He reached for his money but she stopped him.

“It’s my treat.” When he hesitated, she told him to eat before his food got cold.

She sat next to him as he ate.

“Your English is excellent. But I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, considering you’re going to America.”

She only smiled and raised her head to watch the passing scenery.

The breeze buffeted her hair; it fluttered about her eyes until she tucked it behind her ears. He imagined it airy and soft in his fingers, like the fringe of a silk scarf. As he thrilled over the prospect of touching it — absurd though the fantasy was, he wondered why she colored it. The Vietnamese language had so many ways to describe the beauty of black hair, he couldn’t imagine why she’d turn it pink. The more he thought about it, he wondered if perhaps it were a wig. And why a wig unless she was hiding something, like a hideous scar or disease? But it was too morbid a thought; and besides, pink hair fit her.

“I like your hair,” he said in Vietnamese. “It’s like candy.”

She laughed. “Don’t make fun of me.”

“I’m not.”

“You speak Vietnamese like a Vietnamese,” she remarked, turning his earlier compliment back to him. “You must have a good teacher.”

“I’ve never had one. They cost too much.”

She looked at him skeptically. “Then you must have a từ điển tóc dài: a long-haired dictionary. People say that’s the best way to learn.”

He shook his head again, not wanting her to get the wrong impression. “Vietnamese girlfriends are even more expensive.”

Again she laughed. “But you’re American. You never worry about money.”

“That’s a common misconception.”

“What about your girlfriend?”

He had to think back to last night’s conversation. “I said maybe I had a girlfriend.”

“Liar.” She smacked his arm.

He peeled a banana. As he ate it, she peeled the other and set it before him in its own skin.

He followed her gaze to the passing countryside. The land here was divided into paddies: a deeper green than the rice fields in the south. Far from the tracks, farmers stood knee-deep in the muck, like thin stunted trees, fixtures in an unchanging landscape.
At 5:45 in the morning the patio behind Le’s house appeared to have just been swept, and newly washed clothes dripped from a line. Nathan stepped toward the banyan tree but stopped. The lake was placid beneath the clear, paling sky. Beyond the shore, ducklings followed their mother past the formless lip of water.

A door opened behind him. Le came forward holding two cups of tea.

“I’m surprised to see you,” she said, offering him one.

“How? You invited me.”

She sipped her tea, and over the rim of her cup her eyes smiled. He saw he’d done well for himself by getting here this early.

She led him into her studio and pointed him toward a small desk and chair like a child might use in school. The broken canvases, empty paint jars, and dried brushes on the floor were a veritable obstacle course, but he solved it and settled into the paint-splotched seat.

Immediately he sketched in his notebook the layout of the room, then wrote a caption below it.

*Her studio is surprisingly spacious. Lacquer paintings are propped against the walls, coated with dust. Canvases everywhere are filled with images: people working in rice fields, tending ducks in a stream, burning incense in temples. In the background of many paintings West Lake spreads like a somber mood.*
Vinh Phuc is 80 miles northwest of Hanoi. For Le, traveling there is a pilgrimage. Without the unique rocks and trees found in Vinh Phuc, Vietnam’s lacquer tradition would be entirely different from what it has become, and inferior to the lacquer traditions of China, Japan, and Korea.

Vinh Phuc possesses a unique type of cây sơn tree, the source of lacquer used in Le’s paintings. The tree is tapped midway through the sun’s rise, a window of no more than an hour. Once dry, the sap is processed into a black lacquer called sơn then and a reddish-brown lacquer known as sơn cánh gián (named for the wings of a cockroach).

When she told him that Vinh Phuc is renowned for having Vietnam’s best secret-keepers, he looked up and asked what she meant.

“Do you have a lot of secrets?”

“Probably no more than anyone else,” he said. Given their past together, the question set him slightly on edge. “Why?”

“Because lacquer artists are protective of what they do. In Vietnam, secrets are important. Maybe you think that’s strange, but if we didn’t keep secrets our lacquer traditions wouldn’t exist. Even now, while I can show you the techniques I use and explain the process generally, secrets are still important. Lacquer artists have to accept this, otherwise they’ll fail.” She looked at him hard. “It’s true in life, too.”

“One of the most interesting things about lacquer,” she says, “is that the production of certain materials is shrouded in mystery.”

In the mountains around Vinh Phuc there exist two kinds of special stone: thần sa and chu sa. In the homes of artisans these stones are ground into powder and poured into a small container. This container is placed in a larger container and heated. When the contents of the outer one begin to boil, the container inside reaches a temperature that separates the powder into four distinct layers of red pigment: sơn trai, sơn tươi, sơn thắm, and sơn nhì. According to
the demands of the image, any of these pigments can be mixed and used to paint the vóc.

She unscrewed a jar. After showing him the red powder inside, she opened several other jars so he could see the rich colors they contained. “I could paint a hundred years, but still I’d never know the secret to making the right pigment.”

It takes an entire week to make enough pigment to fill a small teacup. Only one family in Vietnam knows the secret to making these pigments, which are considered more valuable than gold, and they have risked their lives to protect it. When French colonialists tried to force them to divulge their methods, the family refused. They remain steadfast even today and will not sell their pigments overseas. The pigments are made exclusively for Vietnamese lacquer paintings made in the traditional style.

Only one village in Vietnam produces the gossamer-thin gold and silver leaf so essential to Vietnamese lacquer painting. The village, too, is tight-lipped about their methods.

“Secrets are important in Vietnam,” she says. “One slip of the tongue can mean betrayal, and then the whole universe may crash down. History offers many examples. Countries, families, relationships, art — they’re all vulnerable.”

From where she stood he could see a dark splotch of paint on her cheek, like a birthmark she’d managed to hide from him until now. He imagined that if he could peel it from her face he’d find a window to her soul that revealed everything about her — and perhaps learn the truth about her feelings for him.

She dusts a thin paper with chalk and uses it to trace an image of everyday life to the vóc. Next she mixes together the sơn nhì and paints it over the tracing: a figure of Ong Tao, the Chinese Kitchen God. Gold and silver flakes are then sprinkled over the top like snow. As she spreads them with her brush, they become embedded in the tracing lines (now filled with the wet sơn nhì), helping preserve the image and make it brighter.

It is the layering of lacquer, a process rooted in an age-old tradition that younger artists have mostly abandoned, which brings the vóc to life.

Weather permitting, she will dry the vóc overnight on a rack. Ironically, only in humid conditions will lacquer from the Vietnamese cây sơn tree dry.

“When in no other country will Vietnamese lacquer respond the same to the air and weather,” she said, not without pride. “In no other country will it perfectly dry. No one knows why, and so this is a secret, too.”

She removed a vóc hanging beside the one she just finished and brought it to her worktable. “This one’s ready for a second layer of lacquer.”

She applies the second layer, sprinkles it with gold and silver leaf, and, prior to drying, fits the vóc with cheesecloth to protect it and prevent it from expanding. The vóc can be polished only when dry.

When she was done, she hung it to dry, and returned with another painting she’d been drying the last few days. Vaguely, he could make out a woman’s face in the vóc. She repeated the process a third time, carrying out the final polish with a stone that was soft yet rough.

“Like the intestine of a chicken,” she said, rubbing it against his arm. “Painting means applying one thing onto another, but polishing is an act of removal. Let me show you.”

She pushed the black stone back and forth across the painting. After a few minutes the polishing had taken away some of the sprinkled gold and silver leaf, but it had also pushed the leaf irrevocably into the vóc, making it brighter and deepening its hues.
Nathan didn’t know how to explain the feeling, but indeed there was something of her in all her paintings. Did it lie in the harmony of color, perspective and imagery? Or was it more prosaic, evidenced by how life flowed from the center, by how the commonplace was inspired by her vision and skill?

“Tell me,” he said. “How is a painting given life?”

“It’s a secret even to me. I know there’s life in a painting only when I’ve finished it.”

Sometimes before she paints she sees the image in her mind; other times not. But one is always there within her.

“I’ve known much loss and sadness. But painting is a constant, and no matter what happens in my life I’ll always be able to create. I believe that strongly and it puts me at ease.”

They took a tea break hovering over her work. Nathan blew the steam from his cup and drew a dark circle around what she’d just said.

Although his understanding of Vietnamese lacquer painting would never be complete, she made a special effort to help him learn. After he wrote everything down she had him repeat it to her, making sure nothing was missing, nothing wrong, nothing overlooked.

Perhaps she thought that as a writer he could introduce to the world something beautiful from her country. She knew that if foreign interest was strong enough it could help preserve a dying tradition that she, on her own, could never keep alive.

He came every morning after that, even after he’d submitted the article to several newspapers, and even two weeks later when the Los Angeles Times had accepted it. It wasn’t much later that she asked him to come over after work, too.

The lake was calm and black beneath the low-lying fog. Though it wasn’t raining, the Land Rover’s windshield accumulated so much moisture from the air that the driver had to use his wipers. It was midmorning, but it felt like dawn.

“Will you roll up that window?” Mrs. Thompson said. “It’s cold back here, and all that wind is blowing my hair.”

In the five minutes they’d been driving around West Lake Nathan hadn’t noticed that his window was open. Now that she mentioned it, he was surprised he hadn’t; the wind streaming through the small gap between the window and frame was loud. When he put his fingers to the space, they came away cool and damp.

“Of course. Sorry.” He reached for the handle but the window wouldn’t roll up. The driver fiddled with the console but it couldn’t close the window either. “That’s as far as it goes, I’m afraid.”

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“Will you roll up that window?” Mrs. Thompson said. “It’s cold back here, and all that wind is blowing my hair.”
“It’s that,” Mr. Thompson said, “but also all the head injuries from the war.”

“Why was there a war?”

Mr. Thompson pursed his lips and, after a few seconds, shook his head. “It’s complicated. You’ll learn about the war in school one day.”

“Many people died,” Mrs. Thompson added sorrowfully. But the conversation had already ended.

Nathan wondered if he should mention that the house was purported to be haunted. None of the agency’s salespeople would have anything to do with it, which was why he had to show it. They’d been spooked by stories from the previous tenants, a married couple from Taiwan. Because Nathan had only heard a few of the stories himself, he could form but a limited picture of what had chased them away.

The landlord’s mother had died in the house two years ago, and now her ghost was said to wander about. The staff suggested that Nathan fabricate an excuse to keep the Thompsons from going inside an altar-room that contained photos of the old woman and her late husband. When he asked why, they explained that the expressions of the deceased often changed. If the photos showed them smiling, then their son had appeased them with prayers, burned incense, and offerings. If they were scowling, however, it meant he’d neglected his duties and whoever was living there would suffer.

The four-storey villa was fully furnished, and, if the previous tenants were to be believed, the furniture sometimes shifted around by itself late at night. There were stories of glasses jumping off the table during a meal, and knickknacks flying off shelves when someone passed by. On separate occasions light bulbs throughout the house had shattered simultaneously. Once, the front door of their house creaked open; when they went to shut it they found a frog and bat on their front step, both flopping about in their death-throes. Two months before, their alarm clock went off early and when they checked it they saw time spinning backwards. As it turned out, that day was the death anniversary of the landlord’s mother. She’d died very early one morning in July.

The old woman’s ghost was said to be angry because her son, who rented out the home for over two thousand dollars a month, had never removed the altar from a room on the top floor, and had never introduced his dead parents to the strangers in their house.

Before the Taiwanese couple broke their lease, they came in to speak with Anthony about the situation, which they claimed had become unbearable. They said they’d consulted with a lawyer and would bring him in if the real estate agency and landlord wanted to litigate the matter. None of their bluster had been necessary. Anthony had emerged from his office looking like he just awoke from a 20-year sleep.

“That’s the biggest crock I’ve ever heard,” he said, even before the couple finished their account.

The husband’s face reddened and he puffed out his chest. “You try sleeping there some time.”

“I’d love to,” Anthony said. “But I’m committed elsewhere.”

The man tried to explain again what they’d lived through, but Anthony told him to shut up.

“Have you removed all your shit?”

There was a collective tittering among the staff.

“Excuse me?” the man said.

“I said, are your things still in the house or have you already moved out?”

“We left last week,” the woman said. “We couldn’t stay another night, believe us.”

Anthony turned to the gathered staff. “Binh, Quang, take these two . . .” He hesitated, as if seeking a word to put them down, but then seemed to reconsider. “Take them to the house and make sure they haven’t destroyed or stolen anything. If nothing’s wrong, collect their keys and change the locks.” He turned back to the couple. “Your lease is in all ways binding, but I don’t care. As a businessman I believe in doing the right thing. We’ll keep your deposit, of course, but we’ll reimburse you for the advance rent you paid.” He told the accountant to tally up what the couple was due. Waiting for the figure, he slumped into the receptionist’s chair and swiveled back and forth. Everyone watched him, not daring to speak. When the accountant announced what was owed, Anthony said: “Go ahead, get it ready in cash.” When she had, he handed the money to the couple. “I’m a fair man, see?” He
slapped the man on his shoulder humorlessly. “Now get the fuck out of my office,” he said, shoving the man toward the door.

Nathan was surprised at how rarely Anthony’s staff left the company for another. Loyalty wasn’t the reason, he decided. Anthony paid them well enough, but sometimes Nathan overheard them grumbling. Still, for much of the staff, who were old enough to remember going hungry as children, the most important thing was “to have rice in the bowl.” Stability was important to them — they needed to know their future would be better than their past.

The only thing that kept Nathan there was the debt he owed Anthony. His sense of loyalty was strong, but he’d leave if the right opportunity came along. Such an opportunity was hard to imagine — it would have to bring him back, however circuitously, to writing.

The Land Rover pulled up to the villa. Nathan felt a faint chill seeing a light on through the open attic windows. While the shutters creaked in the wind, the rest of the house was lifeless. He watched Mr. Thompson lead his family away to inspect the grounds.

“Coming inside?” Nathan asked the driver.

Leaning against his vehicle the man pulled out a cigarette. “I’m not particularly superstitious. Still, I’ll stay out here.”

“You’re not superstitious. But you’re a little afraid of ghosts?”

The man coughed as though embarrassed. “Why take a risk?”

“And if it rains?”

They looked at the sky: the low clouds had sunk lower, and a milky mist swirled atop the villa’s sloped roof.

“Then I’ll wait in the car.”

Nathan walked to the front door, opened it, and followed the Thompsons inside. Having decided not to accompany them through the house, he settled into a chair and removed from his briefcase the stack of mail he’d taken on his way out of the office. The first item he looked at was also the biggest: a thick manila envelope with Reuters News Agency printed across a large address sticker in a corner. “Priority Mail” was stamped on the front and back.

Nathan’s heart skipped a beat. He wasn’t expecting a letter from Reuters. If anything, he would have expected something from the Los Angeles Times, with which he’d recently had a working relationship.

The envelope’s thickness increased his wonder. He couldn’t imagine how they got his address, unless Kate Stein, a Reuters correspondent he vaguely knew, had given it to them. He’d bumped into her some time ago at the only English-language bookstore in Hanoi and given her his new business card.

He tore the envelope open and shook out a letter and large folder. The letter was printed on Reuters’ letterhead.

Dear Mr. Monroe,

I’ve read your travel pieces in the SF Chronicle and SJ Mercury News, as well as your latest article in the LA Times on Vietnamese lacquer painting. I’ve also received good word about you personally from Kate Stein, Reuters’ Vietnam reporter until last month. It’s hard to find good people who know Vietnam and have the ability to report a story. Not insignificantly, we’re having difficulty securing work visas for our journalists, which is the main reason I’m contacting you: you’re a good writer, and you’re already there.

I’d like to offer you the chance to report for Reuters, at least until we can sort out our visa problems with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Perhaps you’re not interested, or maybe you’re committed to other work. However, at this juncture we want you to consider working for Reuters on a freelance basis. I’ll give you details if and when you indicate interest in such an arrangement.

I took the liberty of enclosing a topic we want you to report on: Tu Du Hospital in Saigon and their efforts to help children allegedly born with Agent Orange-related diseases. Having lived in Vietnam as long as you have, I’m sure you’re aware that Vietnamese citizens are suing the U.S. military for damaging the environment and poisoning human populations with toxic chemicals used during the war. They allege a high incidence of congenital birth defects, leukemia, and other untreatable conditions
reported that almost 20 million gallons had been sprayed to destroy the vegetation that hid Viet Cong transportation routes. Vietnamese groups and individuals were taking up the cause hoping to pressure the U.S. to admit its culpability and compensate those who continued to suffer from the toxin’s ravages.

Agent Orange was increasingly in the news. Almost every day the media carried a story on it. Local fundraising like he’d never seen before was bringing attention to those said to be suffering from exposure to the chemical defoliant. Just the other day he came across an article reporting that those who’d fought for the resistance and had children born with defects caused by Agent Orange would receive more monetary support (up to $19 per month) for their medical needs. There was no avoiding the topic, so much publicity was it getting. Several foreign organizations had started fund-drives to help families struggling to bring up children with deformities they claimed were a result of exposure to Agent Orange. A recent photo exhibition on Agent Orange victims had also gotten a lot of press.

Several months before, Nathan’s secretary, Xuan, had asked him what the American news reported about Agent Orange. She’d been dismayed to hear that the American public was likely receiving no information. He reminded her that the U.S. was fighting a war in Iraq, mid-term elections were around the corner, and domestic terror alerts were constantly rising and falling. Somehow there was no room in the media spotlight for the case against America. Still she couldn’t understand. When by government decree, he said, Iraqi casualty figures weren’t allowed to be tallied and published, how could one expect anything more than the most peripheral attention to be given to alleged war atrocities committed 30 and 40 years ago in Vietnam? He offered the explanation to her gently, but no degree of gentleness could soften the impact. She had never heard of the government’s decree and knew little about the war in Iraq other than what friends had told her. For several days afterward she was cold to him, as if she thought he’d lied to her, or as if he was somehow complicit in the suffering of Agent Orange victims.

Though it frustrated him, he knew he was the closest thing to a culpable figure she could find. That determination was all his; she’d never deliver such a strong statement to him directly.
Many people helped me over the seven years (if you count the long breaks) it took me to write *Lotusland*. My gratitude goes out to:

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David Joiner was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio, and attended Earlham College, a liberal arts school founded by Quakers where he majored in Japanese Studies. He later earned an MFA degree from the University of Arizona, where he won awards in fiction and playwriting. He has been living in Vietnam off and on since 1994; his most recent move back was in the summer of 2013. He speaks varying levels of Vietnamese, Japanese, and Spanish. Over the last year and a half he has been writing full-time in Vietnam but plans to return to Japan soon to resume his work as a university writing instructor. He is currently at work on a second novel, which takes place in Vietnam and Cambodia in the early 1990s.