

An abstract, geometric painting in a cubist style. The scene is dominated by warm, golden-yellow and ochre tones. In the foreground, a small boat with a red and orange hull is filled with angular, geometric shapes. Behind it, a larger, more complex structure resembling a building or a large boat is constructed from numerous sharp, intersecting planes of yellow, orange, and brown. The overall effect is one of dynamic, fragmented light and shadow.

Birds of Paradise Lost

..... STORIES

Andrew Lam

Love Leather

MR. LE LOOKED UP one morning from mending a vest at the Love Leather and saw a very good-looking Asian kid, his oldest grandson's age, maybe, seventeen at the most, staring quizzically at him from the sidewalk. When their eyes met through the glass pane, the boy's ruddy cheeks turned a deeper shade of red and Mr. Le had to look away.

Behind him, Steven commented, "Ooh, a hotty! If he comes in—baby, hide the dildos! We'll have to shoo our twink for browsing too long." Then he offered his trademark baritone Lou Rawls guffaw, "Hahahah, hahr, hahr." "Personally, Mr. Lee," Steven added, "I wouldn't touch him with a ten-inch pole, know what I'm saying? Not 'less I want to be somebody's bitch in the slammer in a hurry."

Mr. Le turned around. "Slammer? Shoe?" he asked, adjusting his glasses. "Sorry, I don't know this slammer and this shoe you say, Steven."

"Oh, honey, don't be. I'm sorry," Steven said, slower this time, and with mild exasperation. "Shoo—SHOO, as in, 'chase out

somebody.' As in 'shoo, you crazy sex pig, shoo, get off me!' Slammer is 'jail.' You know, 'prison,' like your re-ed camp? And a 'twink' is someone too young, underage, you know? Hairless, smooth, smells like milk? And 'being somebody's bitch in jail' means . . . oh, never you mind what it means."

An inveterate note taker, Mr. Le committed "slammer" and "shoo, SHOO," to his growing vocabulary, to be written down later in his spiral notebook during lunch break. When he looked back out the window, the twink was gone. He already knew "twink." And "dildos" he learned right away that first day when he asked Roger Briggs, the store owner, about them. In a controlled tone, and as he intermittently cleared his throat, Roger Briggs told Mr. Le about their usage, including those with batteries. When Roger left, Steven thanked Mr. Le profusely. "That was simply precious," he said, laughing, clapping his hands as if in prayer. "You made RB squirm."

Roger Briggs, a big, tall man, with most of his blond hair thinned out and a beer belly, once served in the 101st Airborne Division in Nam. He remembered enough Vietnamese to say "Let's love each other in the bathroom" and "How much for the entire night?" When Roger said the latter in Vietnamese, Mr. Le inevitably laughed, though why, exactly, he couldn't say. Most likely, it was because Roger said it in a toneless accent, and it sounded almost as if someone wanted to buy the night itself.

Still, whenever he listened to Roger Briggs talk of wartime Vietnam, Mr. Le would often get the feeling that another Saigon had gone on right under his nose. Were there many Vietnamese homosexuals? And were they finding one another in the dark alleys and behind tall, protective flame trees?

Roger—who was once very handsome and fit when he roamed the Saigon boulevards at night, and who read entire biographies from furtive glances in the moonlight—said yes. "There are many versions of any one city," he said, his eyes dreamy with memories. There was another Saigon that Mr. Le didn't know, a Vietnam of hurried, desperate sex, of bite marks, bruised lips, clawed backs, and salty sweaty nights and punch-in-the-mouth morning denials, and of unrequited love between fighting men that was just as pain-

ful as shrapnel wounds. Just as there was another version of San Francisco that Mr. Le couldn't possibly have imagined when he was reading his *English For Today!* textbooks years ago, dreaming of the majestic Golden Gate Bridge and the cling-clanging cable cars climbing up fabled hills.

Mr. Le's last name is pronounced Lay, but Steven liked Lee better, and somehow it stuck. If Roger Briggs corrected Steven half a dozen times since he hired Mr. Le, who had extensive experience working with leather, it was to no avail.

Steven was "poz," he told Mr. Le right away that first day at work, and his mind was out of control half the time because of some "cocktail." It made him "a chartypatry," and "so please, Mr. Lee, don't you mind my rambling roses." A few days later Steven mentioned AIDS again, but sounded oddly upbeat: "I'm kept alive by a drug cocktail! Imagine that, Honey Lee. Too many cocktails unsafed me. But now? Now, gotta have me three a day—that's three, to keep me a-go-goin'. Well, honey, make mine a cosmo, please!" Then he laughed his Lou Rawls laugh, "Hahhahaahhaah."

Were Mr. Le to run the place, it'd be very different. For one thing, Steven was bad at math and shouldn't be working the register but peddling leather goods to customers. He would have an assistant make some of the leather pieces at the Love Leather rather than order everything from a factory. He would offer wallets and purses as well, and not just chaps and harnesses. If there was one thing he knew besides working with leather, it was running a business. Back in Vietnam, during the war, Mr. Le was considered prosperous. A three-story villa in District 3, four servants, a Citroën, two shops—the main one in Saigon, on Rue Catina, no less, the other near the Hoa Binh market in the lovely hill town resort of Dalat—and a small factory making leather goods at the edge of town, employing over twenty workers. Not bad for a man in his late thirties. That was, of course, before he was deemed a member of the bourgeois class by the new regime and ended up spending close to four years in a re-education camp after the war ended.

When he got out, almost everything he owned was gone. The villa, the factory, the two stores—along with his beloved gray

Citroën—were replaced by two rusty bicycles and a small, one-room studio in a mold-infested building near Cho Lon, the old Chinatown section. His wife and three children peddled wonton noodles at a little stand, and the family worked tirelessly on the street to scrape together enough money to buy a seat on a fishing boat for their only son to escape. Vietnam had invaded Cambodia, and the boy was facing the draft. Older boys from the neighborhood were already coming back maimed or in coffins. Their son escaped and, three years and a few refugee camps later, managed to get to America. It took another dozen years after that for him to sponsor Mr. Le and his wife and one of their two daughters. The older, married with a family of her own in Vietnam, was ineligible to be sponsored by her brother.

If he could, even now at fifty-seven, Mr. Le would start his business again. He was saving money, taking notes, and talking to potential investors, including Mrs. Tu, their neighbor and landlord. Mrs. Tu was rich, the owner of the popular Cicada Pavilion restaurant on Geary and 7th and a five-story apartment building. If he had a successful business, he could send his two grandsons in Vietnam to college in America. He could even fly his eldest daughter over for visits.

But to start all over again—what a dream! He wasn't taking notes for nothing. It depended on the support of his family, especially Mrs. Le, and serious business backers. Alas, he was targeting a clientele with an income as disposable as their penchant for kinky sex. His dream would make anyone he knew, with perhaps the exception of Mrs. Tu, a widow who was targeting him, more than a little queasy.

At home, his wife said in Vietnamese: "*Minh à*, how are those *lai cai*? They're fondling you?" Then she laughed her girlish laugh. Her hair was almost half gray, but Mrs. Le's laughter always had a certain twang that would send Mr. Le reeling back to the past, to a happier time before the war, before they were married, teenagers too shy to touch. He sat at the kitchen table in their San Francisco apartment with the partial view of the Bank of America building, but he was also walking down the tamarind-tree-lined boulevard

near the high school when they first met. That was in Can Tho, a sizable town in the Mekong Delta where he'd spent two years courting her. Back then there was no hand-holding, not even when you desperately wanted to. Mr. Le was extra shy. For about half a year he trailed a few meters behind her and her laughing girlfriends.

Then one day, opportunity knocked. She was alone. It had been raining, and the straw flower attached to the tip of her stylish purple umbrella fell off. She didn't see it and kept walking. Mr. Le picked it up from the mud, cleaned it with his handkerchief, and went to her. In a stammering voice, he offered to tie the flower back on. The future Mrs. Le blushed and nodded but couldn't manage a word. It didn't help very much that her first name is Hoa, which literally means "flower," and there he was holding one in his hand, hers to be exact. Under the pouring rain he stood trying to put the flower back on, shivering. They started walking side by side the next day, and, after months of courtship and enough bad love poetry to fill a small book, finally held hands.

"Why, what if they are? *Minh oi*, jealous?" Mr. Le teased as he looked at his wife, still thinking of her umbrella and that small straw flower that got them together. Then in a rather mischievous voice, he added: "So, what do you think, my little flower? Should I bring home one of those rubber things for you to play with?"

Mrs. Le shrieked and covered her mouth. She looked out the window to Mrs. Tu's apartment across the courtyard and drew the curtain. She had seen the rubber dildos from the shop, had in fact helped him with his work on the weekend when she could spare time from her garment factory job, but the idea of having a large rubber dildo in their apartment, even as a prank, was too hilarious and far too shocking to entertain. What if their son and his wife saw the thing in one of the drawers, say, by accident, when they visited from San Jose? What if their second daughter came home from college in Houston? What if their long dead ancestors who stared out from the faded black-and-white photographs on the altar could see the thing? And what if Mrs. Tu came over—uninvited as always?

When she calmed down, Mrs. Le deadpanned: "*Minh a*, it's called dildo. If you bring one back, I'll beat you with it." Mrs. Le found it liberating to slip in a few dirty words in English in the middle of her Vietnamese sentences. She could never swear in Vietnamese. Dirty words would not fall from her tongue. But since her husband started work at Love Leather, she'd learned many dirty words from his notebook, and the two, like giggly teenagers, had been using them with each other with gusto when alone.

One day, at the bottom of a page on the subject of sadomasochism, she found her husband's meditation on the Vietnamese word *minh*, which both she and Mr. Le were fond of using.

"Don't know why, but Steven's 'sodomasochism' reminds me of the word '*minh*.' It's a difficult word to explain. '*Minh oi*' literally means, 'oh body.' What it intends: 'my dear husband,' or 'my dear wife,' depending on who the speaker is. How to explain the usage of this word to Steven? The self, when loved, is shared, no longer singular, the self a bridge to another. '*Minh*' can be 'you,' '*minh*' can be 'me,' '*minh*' can be 'us,' all depending on the context—your body is mine is yours is ours, as long as we exist in an intimate circle. Also consider: '*Nha minh*': 'Our house,' or 'our family.' You and I, through love, and its consequences, are connected in a way that bonds beyond sex, beyond shared flesh—a communion of souls."

When she read this passage, Mrs. Le was moved to tears and resolved not to read Mr. Le's notebook again. America—what a shock to the system! This whole subculture, its obsession with sex and youth and physical attributes and—more curiously—the penis, was all very perverse to her. Until her arrival in America, she lived in a world where the genitals never hovered in the imagination beyond a curse word or a dirty joke. It seemed to her American culture forced one's eyes upon them, and now she, who couldn't resist flipping Mr. Le's new pages to find out what he'd been up to at the shop, had been slowly poisoned by it.

STEVEN FOUND OUT one day that the Asian kid's name was Douglas, Douglas Kim, and he was of legal age, barely. "He browsed and

he browsed—and he browsed," Steven reported breathlessly. "In the end he bought some Liquid Silk. He's a talker, that one. He was afraid to talk before 'cuz you were around. Asked me if you were gay. I said, 'Pshaw, honey, Mr. Lee is as gay as Liberace is butch. But if you need him to fix your penis harness or chastity belt, well, he's your man.'"

"Liberty?" asked Mr. Le, reaching for his notebook. "Bush?"

"No. Liberace. And definitely not Bush. Butch. BUTCH. You know, macho, strong, like . . . I don't know . . . Barbara Stanwyck."

Mr. Le remembered Barbara Stanwyck. His favorite movie of hers was *Bitter Tea of General Yen*. In it she played a missionary captured by a powerful Chinese man and, despite her resentment and the horror of his cruelty, fell in love with him. He even remembered the TV show *The Big Valley* on the American television channel in Saigon during the war. Although dark-skinned, Steven had her air, and the same dramatic flair. "Steven," Mr. Le offered, "I think you're butch. You're too good teacher."

Steven waved his hand, pretending to be bashful. "Oh pshaw, Mr. Lee, I might be very, very beautiful, especially my Angie Dickinson legs, but I'm no teacher. And I'm certainly not butch. Just a burned-out queen sitting on the dock of the bay." Then he started humming and gyrating.

Mr. Le, befuddled, watched Steven perform behind the cash register and wondered if too much freedom could lead you astray. This had been unimaginable to him as he hustled and bled and scripped for enough money to buy passage on that rickety boat for his son to escape, dreaming of another America. But back then the dream was vague and defined by what Vietnam was not. America was safe. America was hope. America was where you don't step on land mines or disappear in the dark of night. It certainly did not take the form of the wanton, unmitigated desires of Love Leather.

One afternoon a week later, Mr. Le turned around and saw Douglas Kim at the other end of the store, where the porn rags and dildos and leather toys were on display. Mr. Le could see the kid's hands in his jean pockets making fists as he leaned forward to study the dildos and magazine covers. The boy's clothing was

so loose his blue boxer shorts were showing. And the way his pant legs draped over his tennis shoes seemed like an accident waiting to happen.

Meanwhile, from behind the cash register, Steven pointed conspiratorially at the kid's back and mouthed silently to Mr. Le, "Hide the dildos!" then giggled into his hand.

Douglas Kim turned. Their eyes met briefly. The boy looked away immediately. In a fraction of a second Mr. Le saw all at once resentment, shame, lust, and confusion in the boy's eyes, and perhaps something else, too: defiance.

The kid avoided looking in Mr. Le's direction after that, but Mr. Le intermittently glanced at his back. He imagined he could hear the boy's nervous breathing over Steven's palpitating music. He thought of his oldest grandson in Saigon and wondered if the boy was doing as well as he had boasted on the phone to him last week. He would, if he could, give Douglas Kim a scolding. No kid should come in a place like this. He contemplated talking to him, then Roger Briggs walked in and, instead of saying hello to his employees, immediately zeroed in on Douglas Kim. Mr. Le flipped through his notebook, trying to remember the words. As Roger's hand descended on the boy's small back, Mr. Le remembered the words. He stared at the boy's neck and whispered, "Shoo. Twink. Shoo."

IN HER LIVING ROOM one bright Sunday afternoon with the windows wide open, Mrs. Tu, whose satin peach pajamas matched her swaying curtains, popped the deal as she poured chrysanthemum tea for her neighbors and tenants. "Brother, sister, now listen. Mr. Ba in Salinas, who runs a little factory making leather bags and jackets, just told me he's very interested in helping out if we buy Love Leather. What do you think: I put in eighty and you come up with twenty? We'll split fifty-fifty, counting your skills and labors as the other thirty percent. With your skills, brother, and Mr. Ba's, we will sell those knickknacks for half what those leather stores

are charging their customers—it's a winner. Of course, I can easily put in the hundred, that's not a problem. But I want you to have a stake in it, you understand, so that you're co-owners, not my workers. We're like family, after all."

Mrs. Le paused from drinking her tea and looked at Mrs. Tu for a full second. Xing-Xing, Mrs. Tu's white cat, had leapt onto his owner's lap and was now purring under attentive, stroking fingers. "Sister, you're serious? What you offer us sounds very generous, but you know where he works, who the customers are, don't you? It was a rhetorical question. It was Mrs. Tu, after all, who had bragged to Roger Briggs, a regular at her restaurant, about Mr. Le's skills with leather.

Mrs. Tu was ready. "*Lai cai* clientele? Their money is as good as anybody else's. There are *lai cai* and *lai duc* couples in this building, some of the best tenants I ever had. *Lai duc*, *lai cai*. Makes no difference in business, as long as the business is *lai loi*." Then she laughed at her own joke. *Lai duc* in Vietnamese is slang for "lesbian." *Lai loi*, on the other hand, means "making a profit"—Mrs. Tu's witty way of rhyming gays and lesbians with money.

Mr. Le started to laugh, too, but stopped short when Mrs. Le gave him a look that could have frozen the chrysanthemum in his cup. Mrs. Le gestured to the big mahogany cabinet, which was graced by photos of Mrs. Tu's grandparents, her parents, and her two husbands, the last one an aged American who had left her the building. A large bowl full of burnt incense sticks sat in front. "Sister, I know you are modern, but you are at heart traditional. If you invest in that place, wouldn't it mean you and I both having to help my husband on a regular basis to keep the business going?"

"I look forward to it." Mrs. Tu took pride in the fact that she came to America not as a refugee but as the wife of a midlevel Vietnamese diplomat during the war. "As for modernity, I'm Vietnamese, but I'm very modern. Must the two have to be contradictory? As you know, I studied French in Vietnam at Marie Curie and then Vietnamese literature at Saigon University. *Alors moi, je m'en fous totalement ce qu'ils font les homosexuels.*"

Mr. Le understood French but his wife's was at best rusty. He was about to explain to her what Mrs. Tu just said, but thought the better of it. He acted calm, but he could feel his heart beating wildly in his chest. If he was half-consciously currying Mrs. Tu's favor, he still hadn't expected this windfall of a proposal, this soon. Yet there it was, looming near the horizon, Love Leather, soon to be his. He could see it—money for the grandchildren, the entire family in one place. He could taste this dream in the bittersweet aftertaste of the tea.

"I'm not as modern as you, sister," Mrs. Le said presently in a cold, slightly sarcastic tone. "But I'm open-minded just the same. I'm not worried about *lai dau*, *lai cai* either. My husband and I love and trust each other. Why else would I agree to have him work with them when you told us about the job? If anyone can seduce my husband, let me tell you, that person must possess magic charms because our love—"

Mrs. Tu didn't let her finish. She clapped her hands once and Xing-Xing jerked his head up, eyes wide and alert. "Of course you are. Of course you're open-minded, sister. Why else would I propose it?" Mrs. Tu smiled as if everything had been agreed upon, the business settled. But the smile stayed a bit too long on her face, which now blushed brightly.

Mrs. Tu's face reminded Mr. Le of people who felt the exact opposite—hurt and embarrassed. He felt sorry for her and quickly looked down to study his empty teacup. When he did so, however, he incurred the wrath of his landlord. "Brother," Mrs. Tu said, looking at him, "I hear they have some kind of festival next month. We should all go and see what it's like, the lifestyle of our clients. I believe it's quite sexually liberating." She was still smiling. "And afterward, I would love to treat you both to a fancy dinner at the Pavilion."

"It's called Folsom Street Fair," he said weakly. Though he hadn't seen the festival himself, he'd seen the photo album Steven kept from the previous years. Images swam in his head of near naked women in leather bras and leather thongs and overweight men in leather chaps and harnesses, their butt cheeks showing. And then

there were the photos of Steven, who had gone the year before as a Marilyn Monroe in a blond wig. "Not a good idea," he added.

"Oh? Why not?" Mrs. Tu feigned disappointment. She looked over to Mrs. Le as if they were chummy and Mr. Le was spoiling their fun. "If we are going to sell these knickknacks to them, we need to face these people sooner or later. They may be sex addicts, but they are sex addicts with disposable income. I've seen them. Harmless fun, that's all." Then she dropped the clincher. "Trust me, you two, if there's one thing I know well, it's making money. Roger Briggs is inept. That store, well managed with cheap supplies and with good advertising, could bring the rest of your family over in three years, guaranteed."

Mrs. Le, who knew nothing of the fair, but was familiar with business dealings, put her teacup and saucer down so they wouldn't rattle. Then, her dark, steely eyes slowly met Mrs. Tu's. "Eighty five-*fifteen*," she calmly announced.

"Goodness, sister, how marvelous! You never talked business to me before, but I can see, honestly, that you're good at it. But let's talk about details later, how we share," Mrs. Tu said and looked for a reaction from Mrs. Le. "In business, it's relationships that you've got to build. So first we should check out the clientele, *nest-ce pas?*"

"*N'est-ce pas?*" harrumphed Mrs. Le, her face flushed with emotions. For some time now she had been staring at the well-mended tear in Mrs. Tu's fleshy leather couch, where the cat had caused much damage the month before, now barely visible. "It's a date," she said. Her voice was cold but her body trembled slightly. "It's not as if I haven't seen dildos and butt plugs and cock rings and dykes on bikes! My husband taught me everything." When she said "dykes on bikes," Mrs. Le's voice rang out despite her effort to hold herself in. Mr. Le supposed it was his wife's version of French, for it caused Mrs. Tu to involuntarily clutch at Xing-Xing's neck and pull his face backward to reveal an expression he'd never seen before on a cat: that of utter astonishment.

My wife, he decided, shaking his head slightly, feeling strangely amorous, is very, very butch.

A WEEK BEFORE the festival, however, Mr. Le fretted. He couldn't concentrate at work. The feud between the two women occupied him. He fretted about what his wife would see. Worse, he didn't know how to fend off Mrs. Tu, whose love seat, she told him, had a new tear that needed mending, and she was in need of his assistance.

When Steven asked Mr. Le if he had been in the army, he could barely hear him. "Bet you were a stud," Steven said. "Yeah, you in uniform. Hmm hmmmm, I can see it now. All the girls in those pretty slit-up oriental dresses and some of the boys in theirs, all hot and bothered when you parade by."

"My brother and me were soldiers, yes. I was soldier for three years. I get shot in leg, they let me out." Mr. Le paused from putting a new zipper onto a pair of leather pants and pointed at his right thigh. Then he added, choking, "My brother, not so lucky."

There was a long, awkward silence between them.

"You know, Mr. Lee, I've been thinking. I'm a refugee, too," Steven said. Mr. Le looked at him, fixing his glasses.

"I'm serious now," Steven said. "I fled from my God-fearing old man's crazy Mississippi shit. It was not the beating; every kid I knew got whopped. Hell, I even fancied myself a preacher when I was young, if you can believe it. No, I ain't afraid of his belt, you know what I'm saying? Just that way he looked at me when he found me out and wished his faggot son was dead. So I ran. Then here, I made real good friends but lost half to AIDS, and they were more family to me than my family ever was. So I figured it's kind of like a war, too, you know, what I went through. I'm serious now."

Steven's voice was sad and low, but Mr. Le only nodded and said nothing. AIDS is not the same as war, he was thinking, not even close. People with AIDS at least knew carnal pleasure, which in the end was what killed many of them. People who died under bombs died right away or soon thereafter from their wounds. They don't dance behind cash registers to trance music talking up a storm. They die without saying goodbye to loved ones, in horror and screaming and in anguish. Bombs and bullets give you no time. "My brother was very young. He was just a twink," Mr. Le offered.

Steven stifled a laugh, and Mr. Le looked at him sternly. He could tell when his coworker was thinking something naughty. It was there in the eyes. "Well, that's a shame!" Steven said. "But maybe some of his army buddies gave him a good time before the end."

Mr. Le slammed the pair of scissors he was holding onto the workable. "Not everything in life is sex, Steven," he said evenly.

"No," Steven's voice rose to meet his. "But everyone's ruled by some kind of desire."

Mr. Le frowned. But Steven backed down quickly, his voice barely a whisper, "Hey, Mr. Lee, listen, I didn't mean anything by it. Mr. Lee, you can write down in your little notebook there that Steven is a royal jackass. That's JACK-ASS. Honey, write down that his sorry-ass libido runs amok."

Mr. Le didn't say anything. He took off his glasses and turned to look out the window. For some reason, he half expected to see Douglas Kim looking in. But all he saw was a sun-drenched street. That was when he felt Steven's hands on his shoulders, the warmth passing through his shirt. Up close, Steven had a distinctive smell, not unpleasant exactly, but powerful and salty. It vaguely reminded Mr. Le of freshly turned earth. "Libido. LIBIDO is sex drive, pure lust and desire; it's what makes someone a fool of his old self," Steven murmured quietly above Mr. Le. "I never had any control, Mr. Lee. I've always been a fool. Fool for love. And look where it gets me."

With his mind's eye, Mr. Le checked himself. No arousal, no sexual feelings, no fear, no quickening rhythm of the heart. Rather, the opposite: lethargy settled in. Steven's kneading was comforting; he felt tired all of a sudden. He opened and closed his fists, his fingers aching from the leatherwork. He wanted to laugh. He thought of how he struggled so hard all his life—of the horrors he'd seen, the war, the re-education camp where real whipping tore many a dissident's flesh and left horrid scars, and now he found himself in a childish, ridiculously genitalia-obsessed world, where whips rarely leave a mark but the pain and suffering are hyperbolized, become theatrics—yet, how odd that this was going to fulfill his hopes and dreams to reunite his family.

"Relax," cooed Steven. Mr. Le yawned and closed his eyes. "Relax." And Mr. Le saw that he'd somehow turned into a bird flying across a mysterious ocean, and there was no land in sight.

Ode To Flower

*The poetry of the flower
Tis the hardest to write
Her admirer sits at the dawn hour
Beguiled by her beauty, fueled by her light*

MONTHS LATER, NO MATTER where he is, Mr. Le remembers with absolute clarity the way he stood at the fair, in a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up at the elbows, his arms outstretched as if he were a traffic cop at an intersection. His glasses have disappeared in the scuffle. Behind him stands Roger Briggs in an open black leather vest, stomach protruding, his cat-o-nine-tails raised high in the air. In front of him stands Mrs. Le, pushing toward Briggs, her face enraged, her folded parasol also raised, ready to counter Roger's attack. To his left, a naked Douglas Kim lies bent over a sawhorse, wrists bound to ankles, his buttocks striped with red marks. He is turning sideways and looking up at Mr. Le.

Farther out, Mrs. Tu stands with the staring crowd, her mouth agape, her eyes wide with fear. Most striking to Mr. Le, however, is Steven. He is wearing a sort of adult diaper, holding a bow and arrow, a pair of strapped-on wings protruding from behind his bony shoulders. Steven is jumping up and down, and, in Mr. Le's memory, the tiny wings are flapping, as if they can somehow bear Steven, body and soul, toward the heavens.

Indeed, this riotous tableau seems to Mr. Le to have been tapped from some underground river of libidinous dreams, such that a part of him imagines, or rather wishes, that it were a modern pantomime of sorts—until reason and shame step in and clear the fog of denial and remind him that the image is, alas, too real.

MR. LE IS forced to search again and again for a way to tell the story of what happened. How, after all, to explain himself, a quiet, dignified Vietnamese man, a participant, albeit unwillingly, in a public S&M ritual?

If one has never seen, say, a rose or a chrysanthemum, can he imagine it in full bloom by looking only at the bud? No, no more than he could have imagined what would come at the fair. His mind repeats the scene until it turns, over time, into a sort of metaphysical flower in motion, each of its petals a different color, and they, in their complete ways, balance one another.

Nothing of that day belongs to the ordinary, and everything seemed to lose its original meaning thereafter. Take Mrs. Le's parasol, for example. On its silk fabric her husband had penned his "Ode to Flower," a gift to her on her fifty-fifth birthday. Mrs. Le, who had wept upon reading it, had brought the parasol to the fair for an entirely different purpose than protecting herself from the sun; it was to hold it over Mrs. Tu's head. Still, even in her wildest dream, how could she possibly foresee that it would end up repeatedly striking Roger's sunburned bald spot?

Take, for example, Folsom Street, transformed into a collective display of very private passions—a bazaar of flesh. Plenty of it, in fact, in various shapes and sizes, wrapped tightly or spilling out, all in a kind of casual sexual overture. Stalls lined the middle of the street like a makeshift hamlet whose denizens shared a penchant for leather.

Onlookers of all sorts came, too; there were even families with strollers, Japanese tourists with cameras. Eight blocks had been sectioned off, and the air, veiled in barbecue smoke, was festive and oddly communal.

TWO PETALS UNCOIL and turn.

MR. LE sees again Mrs. Tu. She appears more "modern" than he's ever seen her, in matching black leather jacket and pants; on the street fair, a new personality emerges: vamp. She touches people's breasts when invited and slaps men's buttocks even when not.

laughing gaily afterwards. More than once he catches her eyeing Mrs. Le, looking for a reaction.

In Mr. Le's memory, there is a sad and nervous quality to his own voice when he says "*Minh oi*, let's leave" to his wife, who shakes her head. Since entering the fair, Mrs. Le's face had turned pink and her fingers now grip the parasol's handle the way she would the metal bar in a crowded bus, knuckles turning white. Mrs. Tu's laughing banter with a blond dominatrix in a pair of red leather boots and a red leather thong that barely covers her groin has somewhat given Mrs. Le the grim resolve to brave on.

Nearly naked and sunburned Americans in leather harnesses and thongs moon them with their large behinds from every possible direction, and the few who recognize Mr. Le from the street shake his hand or even hug him. Mr. Le trails slightly behind the women as they walk on, feeling miserable, trying to be invisible.

Then he hears his wife say in a surprisingly cheerful voice: "Sister Tu, mind holding my parasol for a minute?"

"Sure," answers Mrs. Tu as she takes the parasol. "What's a neighbor for?"

"Thank you. My husband made it, pretty but heavy. Must be his sappy poetry that weighs it down."

Mrs. Tu glances up. Mr. Le's "*Ode to Flower*" casts a faint shadow. She mumbles the words, and the parasol wobbles. Mr. Le looks down and pretends to study his dry, opened palms, but not before glimpsing an unusual look on his wife's face as she retrieves the parasol: triumph tinged with a modicum of guilt. He feels immense love for his wife then, not for the harsh act, but for what she is willing to do in order to protect what she has. In memory, his love is partially obfuscated by Mrs. Tu's face, however, for his landlord's face seems to have infinitely aged. Her grin has reappeared and she now wears it vacantly. It must be his imagination, but has the widow's hair somehow turned gray under the harsh sunlight?

"Sister," Mrs. Tu finally musters, "you're a very lucky woman."

THEM—"HAI HAH hah hahhh," that Lou Rawls laugh—another petal unfolds.

There's Steven, unrecognizable at first to Mr. Le because he appears in a diaper and holds a bow and arrow. Steven laughs as he prances toward them. "I do declare, Scarlett, I just adore your parasol," he says to Mrs. Le, then to Mr. Le he adds, "I saw Douglas Kim stripping for some serious whipping at the Love Leather demonstration. You might want to check it out. Mr. Lee, Roger's doing a number on our twink."

"Our twink?"

Mr. Le does not see it at the moment, but in the recalling, he sees Steven in another light. Playful Steven of little self-control and three-a-day drug cocktails wants Mr. Le to save Douglas Kim. When Mr. Le shakes his head no, thinking it is too much for his wife to see, and turns, Steven places a hand on his shoulder and says in a slow, serious voice, "No, Mr. Lee, you didn't hear me. Our twink is this way."

Our twink. Perhaps the store could have been saved if Mr. Le had not responded. But Steven's hand would not leave Mr. Le's shoulder, and the trill in his voice moves Mr. Le's feet.

"You will want to see this," Steven says, his cupid arrow pointing toward a gathering crowd.

THREE PETALS UNFOLD and swell.

In the middle of a large crowd stands Roger Briggs, his face red from drinking, a cat-o'-nine-tails in his hand.

Roger Briggs's motto, "There's always a different version of the same city, different version of the same story," applies most aptly to himself that day. Roger, who once cried in front of Mr. Le at the memories of a fallen comrade, is a leather daddy who has found a tasty morsel in a newly inducted masochist willing to be humiliated in public in Douglas Kim—a demonstration of equipment all available at Love Leather. The easygoing man is gone, replaced by a drunkard.

Douglas Kim's alabaster skin glows under the sun. He is face down on a bondage rack. "Who's your daddy?" Roger demands in a loud, slurred voice above him. "Tell me. Tell your daddy you love him."

"Please," cries Douglas Kim. Despite his discomfort, he opens an erection. "Give it to me. I've been bad, sir. I deserve it."

The whip whirrs in the air. Douglas Kim screeches. As the whip makes its impact, two things occur to Mr. Le: that Roger Briggs is not faking, and that this is the end of his dream of owning the store. Blood trickles from the welts on the boy's buttocks.

He is slow to react, but his wife is not. She steps in and, with precision, brings her folded parasol down on Roger's head.

Twack!

"What!" Roger Briggs exclaims. He dazedly turns to look at Mrs. Le and promptly receives yet another hard blow—twack—on the side of his head, which forces him to drop the whip and one of his daddy character now, to squeal, "Ow!"

"Mind oi," yells Mr. Le, but it is much too late. Mrs. Le can no longer hear him.

The crowd roars with laughter.

"You horrible! You cocksucker!" yells Mrs. Le, her voice more ferocious than Roger's had been. "You hit a boy."

Something in Mrs. Le's voice gives weight to her accusation. Roger looks stricken, as if she is about to take away his top. He looks down at Douglas Kim's naked back. Then he gathers up his courage and cries through his stupor, "I hit a sex slave. Not a boy. My sex slave! He's mine! And he loves me."

Mrs. Le ignores him and fumbles at Douglas Kim's shoulder. "Oh, God!" says Douglas Kim when he sees her face. He starts to cry. This is not the humiliation he'd bargained for. Beads of sweat and blood run down his back and buttocks, a strand of saliva drips from his lower lip. "Oh, God! I can't believe . . ." he mutters and closes his eyes.

Roger meanwhile fumbles for his whip on the ground.

Mr. Le steps into center ring, arms outstretched.

THE FLOWER BLOOMS.

A pat de six.

Behind him Roger raises his cat-o'-nine-tails. Mr. Le can smell the faint alcohol wafting from his employer's breath.

Mrs. Le looks up, turns, and picks up her parasol once more. Then she rushes toward Roger as Mr. Le strengthens his arms to block her.

Farther out, Mrs. Tu turns partially away, her hand goes up to shield her eyes.

Next to Mrs. Tu, Steven jumps up and down, aiming his fake arrow at the center stage, wings flapping.

Douglas Kim looks up at Mr. Le and groans in pain. Mr. Le looks down.

They hold each other's gaze. "You," says the boy, lips quivering, "you're my daddy."

IN THAT FRACTION of a second before whip and parasol descend, the image that will become the New World is that of a mysterious and vast garden. In it flowers bloom from a myriad of dreams and far-flung desires, its soil made fertile by love and its endless foibles. The descending sun washes the world in a fiery orange light; the air wavers. Farther out, the crowd stares, their blurred faces aglow with expectations.

Mr. Le didn't see it before, but he sees it now: how far he has traveled. His dream has taken him farther from his homeland in a way that the jumbo jet plane never could. How everything has changed, as if the skin, once broken, will in some way remain forever open to the larger world, just as the borders, once crossed, remain forever porous to the traveler.

In the kitchen his wife is moving about, the dishes clang and clatter, and the air smells of fish sauce and ground pepper. A cool breeze through the living room sways the curtains, and behind them the high rises of San Francisco appear and disappear. "Mind oi," yells Mrs. Le lovingly, "time for supper."