"You could totally exploit the whole Vietnamese thing", a friend tells Nam, "You could totally exploit the whole Vietnamese thing", a friend tells Nam, "You could totally exploit the whole Vietnamese thing", a friend tells Nam, "You could totally exploit the whole Vietnamese thing", a friend tells Nam, "You could totally exploit the whole Vietnamese thing", a friend tells Nam. "And important too". Nam, at a loss, decides to write his father's story. What follows could easily become a formation of new father-son reconciliation; the reader may feel in familiar territory here, but Nam Le adroitly sidesteps any expectations. Nam's father recounts his story of surviving the My Lai massacre as a 14-year-old boy, buried underneath his father's dead body. He then continued into the South Vietnamese Army and fights with the American Army. When asked how he could fight on the side of the Americans, he replied: "I had nothing but hate in me, but I had enough for everyone". He then undergoes a re-education camp, where he is tortured and indoctrinated. In 1979 he organized the family's escape to Australia by boat. As the story unfolds, it becomes more than a meditation on a father and son trying to find a common ground, and Nam is sadly left with the realisation that though they may be closer in understanding, the gulf created by experience is something that cannot be overcome.

"Here is what I believe," Nam says, "We forgive any one of us, our parents, so long as it is not made in our name. To my father there was no other name — only mine, and he had named me after the homeland he had given up.

"His sacrifice was complete and compelled him to everything that happened. To all that, I was inadequate." The second story is Cartenega, a painful exploration of loyalty and friendship, and the heartbreaking sacrifice that our circumstances call on us to make. Cartenega immediately subverts any expectations the reader may have of the author's intent, and sets us up for the rest of the collection. We are swept away from the workshops in Iowa, to the slums of South America and to the world of our narrator, Juan Pablo, a 14-year-old hitman from Medellin. Juan, like the others in this collection, is at a painful crossroads in his life. To date he has been a loyal and efficient killer, but when he is ordered to kill one of his closest friends, he finds himself unable to do so, and is summoned before the boss, known as "El Padre" to answer for his transgression.

Juan's tension and dread of the upcoming meeting set the backdrop to the story. Juan is well aware of his destiny; he knows that his inevitable demise resonates throughout, giving the story a heavy sense of oppression. The language Le uses, at once lyrical and idiomatic, is utterly convincing, and the reader is unable to doubt his voice, or that of the narrator. Le vividly paints the grim and poverty, and Medellin, and how they force children into untenable choices. But Le does not merely ask the reader to witness the horror. In hisreturn from re-education camp, he is tortured and indoctrinated. In 1979 he organized the family's escape to Australia by boat. As the story unfolds, it becomes more than a meditation on a father and son trying to find a common ground, and Nam is sadly left with the realisation that though they may be closer in understanding, the gulf created by experience is something that cannot be overcome.

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