

rectify morals by fiat. The proper disapproval would have recourse to categories of judgment that make Americans nervous: aesthetic and moral standards and the intersection of the two. The democracy of taste has not been hospitable to judgments of this order. We aren't content to condemn trash on the grounds that it is stupid, wasteful, morally bankrupt; that it coarsens taste; that it shrivels the capacity to feel and know the whole of human experience.

Let a thousand criticisms bloom. Let reformers flood the networks and cable companies and, yes, advertisers, with protests against the gross overabundance of the stupid, the tawdry, and the ugly. Let them demand of local TV stations that the news cameras find something else to photograph besides corpses. . . .

Not least, let the reformers not only turn off the set, but criticize the form of life that has led so many to turn, and keep, it on.

LOVE, MONEY, PRISON, SIN, REVENGE

Andrew Lam

Andrew Lam, an associate editor at Pacific News Service, came to the United States with his family at the time of the fall of Saigon, when the Vietnam War ended in 1975. He has been a Rockefeller Fellow at UCLA, and his work has appeared in the New York Times and the Nation. In this reading, published in the Los Angeles Times Magazine in March 1994, Lam explores a 1991 shooting incident in Sacramento, California, during which three of four young Vietnamese gunmen (two of them brothers) were killed. He presents the story, in part, to discover what caused the violence. Implicitly, he asks, Why did the journey of these boys end so differently from my own?

As you read, note the differences Lam mentions between the wave of Vietnamese immigrants who arrived in 1975 and those who arrived later, referred to as boat people, who underwent terrible hardship to leave Vietnam in small handcrafted boats. Note, too, the ideas named in his title—love, money, prison, sin, revenge. According to Lam, how did the Vietnamese and American cultures, high-tech consumerism, Hong Kong videos, and the legacy of the Vietnam War contribute to the Sacramento shooting?

On the afternoon of April 4, 1991, 15 years, 11 months and 27 days after the end of the Vietnam War, four Vietnamese youths armed with semiautomatic pistols stormed into a Good Guys electronic store on Stockton Boulevard.

Sacramento and held 41 people hostage. Speaking heavily accented and broken English, they issued what the *Sacramento Bee* described as "a series of bizarre demands." They wanted a helicopter to fly to Thailand so they could fight the Viet Cong,^o \$4 million, four bulletproof vests and 40 pieces of 1,000-year-old ginseng roots.

While a crowd, some enthusiasts equipped with their own camcorders, gathered across the street, TV reporters informed viewers that three of the gunmen were brothers—Loi Khac Nguyen, 21; Pham Khac Nguyen, 19, and Long Khac Nguyen, 17—and that the last, Cuong Tran, 16, was Long Nguyen's best friend. The Nguyen brothers had come from a poor Vietnamese Catholic family headed by an ex-sergeant of the South Vietnamese army.^o All four were altar boys. Three of the youths had dropped out of school or had been expelled. None had been able to find a steady job.

The gunmen could be seen on live television behind the store's glass doors, strolling back and forth with their firearms, bound hostages at their feet. Sacramento County Sheriff Glen Craig, who had implanted listening devices in the store, reported that the gunmen were jubilant at seeing themselves and hearing their names on TV—"Oh, ah, we're going to be movie stars!" The sheriff had also told reporters that the gunmen belonged to a loosely knit gang called Oriental Boys—an error, as it turned out, since police couldn't prove membership in any gang.

As the siege wore on, negotiations between the gunmen and the taut-faced, gray-haired sheriff reached a stalemate. The gunmen, for their part, had grown increasingly edgy and refused to negotiate after authorities met only part of one demand—providing them with a single bulletproof jacket. Sheriff Craig, on the other hand, later told reporters that the four would not "focus on any single demand. They were attempting to gain notoriety, attention and, perhaps, some transportation out of the country."

Eight-and-a-half hours later, after the gunmen wounded two of the hostages, a SWAT team raided the store on live television. Three of the young men were killed immediately, but not before one of them sprayed the hostages with bullets, killing two employees—John Lee Fritz and Kris Sohne—and a customer—Fernando Gutierrez—and wounding eight more. Loi Nguyen, the one who wore the bulletproof jacket, was seriously wounded. He is charged with 49 felony counts and three counts of murder is set for July 11. He is pleading not guilty.

I watched this tragedy unfold on my TV set that night, I remember being overwhelmed by an irrational fear. It was the fear that the Vietnam War had

^o Viet Cong: A guerrilla member of the North Vietnamese Communist forces who fought against the South Vietnamese and their U.S. allies. ^o South Vietnamese army: The side allied with the United States during the Vietnam War.