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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Bound by Blood

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Minh Duc Pham

June 2013

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BA-LESS

After the fall of Saigon
A father was dragged away
From his house by the Viet Cong,
Leaving behind a pregnant wife.

Seven years locked up
Behind bamboo prison bars
The father tried to imagine
His firstborn's face. But he could not.

At home, his son tried to fix
Wooden cabinets and mud shingles
With a yellow plastic hammer
Left behind by his father.

The son waited for his father to come home
In front of their alleyway.
When he saw an unfamiliar shadow,
The son held up his hands

High into the sky, begging to be picked up.
But his father only smiled at a boy
Strange to him and walked to his wife
And held her in his arms.

A year later, a second son was born.
The father picked up the newborn
And held his tiny fingers.
For the first time, the father knew

How it felt to hold a son in his arms.
While the first son stood in the corner
And learned, for the first time,
How to cry out for a father.

TOY CATERPILLAR

In re-education camp
A father carved
Wheels for a locomotive
From molted tree bark,

Formed a smokestack out of metal
Shell casings, and glued skins
Of young bamboo roots together
With mud to create the frame.

To see his seven year old son
For the first time, he trekked
Through a bamboo forest
With the train in his hand.

He picked up a baby
Snake and apologized
Before tossing it
Onto a land mine.

When the father returned home
A boy ran up to him and called him
“Ba.” He did not recognize
The sound of a son

Calling for his father. Aggravated,
The father threw the toy train
Against the rim of a stone well.
The train shattered.

The boy cried over its body.
He tried to press the parts together
But the wheels and smokestack had fallen
To the bottom of the well.

He picked up his father’s gift
And pretended it was a caterpillar.

THE ONLY CHILD

You told me I was your Saigon;
When it fell you had to leave.
But you would not leave this time.

On days when you were busy,
You held my hands
And we walked to the arcade.
You asked the owner's daughter
To play Sailor Moon
With me.

My brother wanted
The same
But he had no childhood
With you.

With scraps of coconut bark
You built me a shack
Painted its walls with purple
Mangosteen sap.
When my brother
Tried to climb in and play
You chased him away with a sickle.

In America he told you
He never had a father,
And that I was your only child.

I thought it was true.

VIETNAM HERO

I swung in an Army
Green hammock
Listening to you tell
The story of a Vietnamese hero
Who crawled through swamps
Where bullfrogs dodged bullets.
I felt the wind
Of helicopter blades
As you nudged my hammock
Back and forth. I cringed
When I heard of the time
The hero's camouflaged truck
Fell off a bridge
Blown apart by a misplaced bomb
And the hero fell down a ravine
Cracking his head against a rock.
You wiped the sweat from my forehead
And patted my cheeks to tell me that
He survived.
I opened my eyes
To look at the hero's face
Before falling asleep.

THE WOK

Everyone at the restaurant called my father “The Wok.”

The Latino co-workers were the ones who came up with the name. They had never seen anyone stir-fry beef and broccoli as fast as my father.

My father started working at China Palace a month after our family migrated to Riverside from Saigon, Vietnam.

He never had any cooking experience before working at the Chinese buffet, but he cooked a lot at home. My father’s specialty at home was charbroiled catfish in caramelized fish sauce.

A friend of the family knew the owners of the restaurant and helped my father get the job.

He had to learn how to make Mongolian beef, fried chicken, lemon flounder, and other foreign dishes he had never heard of before. He had certainly never gone to Mongolia, because he would have brought me along.

One of the hardest things he had to learn was how to use a wok. He had never used a wok before.

The wok is a Chinese cooking utensil. My father held a grudge against China because they had invaded Vietnam for centuries. But he had to use the wok because this was the only job he could find.

He would always burn the meat at the bottom of the wok.

My father was not used to cooking with a gas stove. In Vietnam, he would cook food by burning wood inside a clay stove. We had a gas stove at home, but the fire was

tiny. The stove at the restaurant was very powerful and would shoot out fire when it was turned on. He would always burn meat because he was not used to how hot the center of the wok would get.

I saw one of these stoves when my father took me to the restaurant when I was eight. I sat in the front of the restaurant, behind a wooden podium, pretending to greet the customers.

When noon came around, I would stand by one of the booths in the back where I could see my father working in the kitchen. I hid behind the booth and waited for him to take his lunch break so I could eat. I would wait for the brown wooden doors separating the kitchen and the dining area to open. When the doors swung open, I would see fire spray out of the silver stoves. My father would stand with a metal spatula in one hand and a wok's handle in the other. He would lift the wok up to toss the green vegetables with the spatula so it didn't burn. His white apron would be filled with splotches of brown sauce and dark streaks of broccoli stains.

I would sneak to the door when no one was around and watch my father. The heat from the kitchen felt like it was slow roasting my skin even if I was standing far away. He would lift one side of the wok up and green broccoli and orange carrot wedges would fly around. He held one of the wok's handles and stirred the vegetables with a metal spatula. The spatula clanked against the wok, like in the cartoons when Tom the cat had a sword fight with Jerry the mouse.

When a worker walked out of the kitchen, they would run into me and tattle tale to my father. I would rush back to the corner before my father would yell from the kitchen to stay away so I wouldn't get hurt.

Sometimes my father would come home with burns on his hands and arms.

The fire from the restaurant was so big that it would shoot up higher than my father stood. When he didn't move the pan over the flames fast enough they would touch my father's skin and he would wince.

After coming home he would run into the bathroom and put toothpaste on the burns. Sometimes he would burn both of his hands and he would ask me to put the toothpaste on for him. I would take care not to press my fingers onto his skin, because I didn't want to hurt him. My father would do the same and smear toothpaste on my skin when I got burnt brushing against the teapot on my family's kitchen stove. I would wiggle around because the cream felt slimy. He told me that the toothpaste would help stop the stinging and heal my skin so I wouldn't scar.

My brother was not as good at video games as I was.

He and my father never had a close relationship. When my brother was born, my father was in reeducation camp. He was released only after my brother turned nine; they never had a chance to bond.

A year after my father was released, I was born.

My father always took me to arcades. He said it was because I did well in school. I was confused because I was horrible in school. The teacher would always smack my hands with a bamboo ruler for not being able to recite poems and for flunking quizzes.

When my brother got a good grade, he would sneak out to go to the arcade. My mother would let him go, but my father would never allow it because he thought my brother snuck out to smoke marijuana.

Half a year after my father began working, my brother joined him as a kitchen helper. We didn't have enough money to pay for the rent so he had to work. He was a senior in high school.

When we first came to America we were living with another family who also recently came over from Vietnam. A friend of both families helped us find a three-bedroom house to rent. My parents and I slept in one bedroom while my brother slept on the sofa in the living room. We shared the house with the other family, who had two daughters. They all crammed together into another bedroom. The last bedroom became a sewing room containing five sewing machines and piles of unsewn cloth. When it got too hot, the daughters slept in the sewing room.

After three months, the house started to feel cramped and my mother wanted our family to move out into a separate place. She didn't want an apartment – she wanted a house with a yard where we could grow watermelon vines. Living in an apartment made her feel poor. We moved into an old house with chipped paint, a rusty fence, and two

rooms. I slept in the living room, but when it got cold, I moved my foldout mattress chair into my parent's room.

My brother first started working at China Palace only on weekend mornings, when he would peel onions, string beans, potatoes, garlic, ginger, carrots, and whatever the cooks wanted to make for that day. After peeling the vegetables, he trimmed and cut them.

He hated the carrots the most because after he peeled them he had to cut the carrots into thin oval slices, then go back and trim the edges to make the slices have wavy lines, then cut the slices in half.

Although the job was tedious, after six months he decided to work more hours, bussing tables after school on weekdays. He did this to help my mom out with the bills, and to save a little money on the side for college and a car.

This meant waking up at six in the morning for school and staying at work until ten at night, which made it hard to stay awake in class and to learn English. He barely had time for homework.

My father would always beat my brother.

My father told my mother that it was good for him because my brother was hanging around druggies.

When I was seven, I saw my father beat my brother. My brother was supposed to come home straight from school, but he went to the arcade for an hour instead. When he

got home my father was waiting in the living room. I was next door in my grandfather's house when I heard my father yelling. I ran back home and saw my brother on the floor, his cheeks purple and bumpy, and with drool coming out of his mouth and nose. My father stood over him with a chair leg in his hand, ready to strike. My mother tried to stop him, but he shoved her to the side. I stood by the doorway watching the chair leg crack as it hit my brother.

My father would help my brother with the prep in the morning until he had enough ingredients to start cooking.

He was promoted from a kitchen aide to a cook after a year, replacing one of the Chinese cooks he used to help on busy days. When the cook left, the owners asked him to take over. My father's specialties were beef and broccoli, filet mignon cubes, salt and pepper shrimp, fried rice, chow mein, and fried banana.

The restaurant had a green roof. The inside looked like a tacky Asian wedding, with windows draped with red velvet curtains light brown from dust. I used to draw smiley faces on the curtains and show my father afterwards. There was a gold phoenix and dragon on the wall. The only elements missing for a wedding were a lobster dish and a wedding cake.

In the corner, holding the food trays, were little huts lined with blue and yellow tiles at the floor, and tiny snot-shields hanging over the metal trays like a roof.

I loved standing next to the trays with filet mignon because it smelled so good, with the aroma of white onion slices stir-fried in soy sauce. The top of the meat was

sprinkled with fresh, diced green onions, and I would stare at the meat cubes imagining how soft they would feel in my mouth.

Preparation for lunch was not as hectic as dinner. For lunch, the cooks only needed to make twelve dishes to serve the regular crowd of construction workers and businessmen. For dinner, large families would come by, and the cooks made twenty-four dishes, with more desserts as well. It would get so crowded that my father would not be able to watch me, and he would ask my mother to pick me up and take me to her nail shop.

For lunch, if the servers could almost see the bottom of the metal food trays they would tell the cooks to make a new batch. For dinner, there were more customers and to avoid having multiple dishes run out at the same time, the cooks would be notified when the trays were a quarter filled.

I did not know how my father could cook the dishes so quickly. At home he took more time to cook. He trimmed the fat off the beef, cut the carrots extra thin, and cleaned the broccoli well. At the restaurant, they used a cheap cut of beef to make beef and broccoli, but at home he would either buy London Broil from Stater Brothers when it was on sale, or bring home filet mignon from the restaurant.

Watching him cook was like watching an assembly line operator at work. He cut the beef, his fingers retracting back with each blade stroke. He heated the oil and threw in the onions. After they turned brown, he tossed the beef in until the pan stopped sizzling, then dumped a basket of carrots and broccoli in. He drizzled oyster sauce to cover the

green slices and the orange wedges with a brown zig-zag, then finished with a few squirts of fish sauce. It took him fifteen minutes.

Adjacent to the restaurant was a Toys R' Us, a Best Buy, and a strip mall, all of which offered relief from the dry Riverside heat. When he had a break, he would walk me to the Toys R' Us and let me walk around. On my birthday, he would let me choose one toy. When I was young I would pick anything, but when I grew older, I learned that each toy had a different price. I began to choose the ones with the biggest number on the price tag. My father never brought my brother to Toys R' Us; he was too old for that.

My father would make me a fresh batch of fried bananas at the restaurant and bring them home for me. Sometimes he wouldn't come home until ten at night. But I knew to stay up, especially on the weekends because that was when the restaurant was the busiest, which meant they had more food prepared. When the cooks didn't use all of the ingredients, my father would cook them and bring them home.

The battered shell of the fried bananas was as soft as a freshly baked donut, but not as sugary. My father would put coconut milk in the batter to make it creamier. The center of the banana was mushy and naturally sweet. I used to mash the center in and lick the yellow glue batter off my finger when I got bored.

My father would sit with me and tell me stories of when he was in the Vietnam War. I would offer him some bananas but he would always turn it down. I didn't think anything of it because it meant more bananas for me.

He would tell stories of when he was in re-education camp and each day all they ate was a bowl of rice with a tablespoon of salt water mixed in. He said that he craved fish sauce so much when he was behind bars. That was why he put fish sauce in all of his home cooked and restaurant dishes.

I would sit on the kitchen table eating my bananas and doing my English homework. Sometimes I would tune him out because he would tell the same stories over and over again. I never said anything because I knew why he had forgotten that he had already told the story before. I would sit there and trace cursive letters until he got to the part where he almost died.

He was travelling at night inside an army truck. The squad he was leading was moving through a battlefield. It was quiet. He acted as the lookout as the truck drove over a bridge. Then he heard the sound of fireworks nearby. The bridge blew up and the truck fell down the ravine. The next thing he knew he was tumbling around inside the truck, the other soldiers screaming. Two of his men died when the truck hit the bottom. My father cracked his head during the fall. His head healed but he has had problems with his memory every since.

My brother had crooked teeth. My father was in re-education camp when my brother was losing his teeth so he didn't have a chance to teach him how to grow them out straight.

I had heard about the tooth fairy in school, but I didn't want a few nickels, I wanted a straight smile. I had two big buckteeth in the middle of my mouth and my

canines were rabid; they grew out in different directions. When I lost a tooth, I would wait for my father to come home. He taught me how to throw my teeth onto the roof, saying the straighter I threw the teeth, the straighter my smile would be. He threw the first few teeth for me. But one day I told him I wanted to do it, and he put my tooth in my hand and helped me launch it into the air. Afterwards, I told him about the tooth fairy and asked for a dollar. He gave me a five.

My brother never got promoted to become a cook. He was clumsy and slow compared to my father and he never cooked at home because my father never taught him. The best job he ever got was waiting tables. On quiet days, he was the only worker in front. On busy days, the Latino workers helped him bus tables and wash dishes. He pushed a cart with a can in the back for trash and containers in the front for dirty dishes. Beef sauce and chow mein noodles would spill onto his apron and jeans when he dumped the dishes out. But he liked the front because he got more tips.

One weekend, I was sitting at home watching Tom and Jerry. Then the front door opened and in came my brother and father. My brother looked pale, like a bat bit him and drained his blood. His left hand was bandaged with white cloth with blood seeping through. My father pushed my brother into the house and told him to rest. My mother ran out and checked my brother's forehead. She asked my father what had happened. He said that my brother had cut off a large chunk of his index and middle fingers when he was chopping chicken. The owner told him to go home. As soon as my brother lay down, my father left to go back to the restaurant.

He returned at night and told my brother to quit his job because he said that my brother was not fit for the kitchen and the owners didn't want to be liable for future accidents. My brother closed the door and lay quietly in his room. Then The Wok returned to the kitchen, bringing me a container of fried bananas to eat with him.

BIKE BASKET

When I was a month old,
You would set me down
Gently in the metal basket
In front of your bike
And ride me around Saigon
Until I would fall asleep.
I lay in the basket,
Listening to your lullaby
Of a yellow butterfly
Spreading its wings to fly.

Kìa con bướm vàng.

Kìa con bướm vàng.

Xòe đôi cánh.

Xòe đôi cánh.

You kept the wind stable.
I would fall asleep to the sound
Of the rusty wheels,
Slowly closing my eyes
To your voice.

CLOSING EYES, WARM HEARTBEATS

Locked behind closed doors,
He takes off his shirt.
His sun-touched skin
Reminds me of
A light brown shimmer
On the surface of
The Mekong
Where my father
Taught me how to swim.
My short feet
Flipped through
Chocolate milk waters.
His hands guided me along
Water currents
That filled my mouth
Through the gap
Of my missing tooth,
But I never sank.

His gentle face
Looked across the room
Into my eyes
And my smile made
Dimples appear on his cheek-
Bones, strong as if
They are carved by Son Tinh,
The spirit of my ancestors'
Mountains. We lay down
On the surface of noisy coils
My body held between
His arms. I finally felt
What it was like when
My mother held me in hers.
My premature body
Frail from only eight months
And one week of feeding off her
Blood stream.

His chest warmed my back
Like her breath kept me warm
While tubes pierced my newborn body.
I fell asleep to warm heartbeats.

DADDY'S LITTLE (BLANK)

What did it feel like when you first saw me walk?

Do you remember that wedding that you took me to when I was eight? You hoisted me up on your shoulders when I couldn't see the couple. I saw the bride in a beautiful red-silk dress with her face covered by a crimson cloth. I could not forget the smile you had on your face, you were so happy for them.

I've been having dreams ever since.

I am walking into a white room wearing a red traditional ao dai, white silk pants exposed every step I take. In my right hands are four white orchids. I walk down the aisle to many rows of faceless faces looking for a smile that I saw when I was a child, when you looked down at me and your eyes, and your smile, wide.

The person at the end of the aisle does not have a face because he is not the one I am looking for. All the other people in my dreams are faceless because your face is the only one I cannot find.

In this repeated dream that won't disappear, I've always been looking for you. I don't want to keep looking for your face. I want to look at the face that will be waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

BE DE PRIDE

On Sunday, August 5, 2012, over a hundred bikers and motorcyclists, with rainbow flags in their hands and colored paint on their faces, rode out to the streets of Hanoi for Vietnam's first Gay Pride Parade. It was a small parade. The streets were narrow, and the sidewalks were even narrower. There was barely enough space for two motorcycles to ride side-by-side.

The marchers did not obtain a permit for the parade. There was no support from the police. But there was no resistance from the police either. They allowed the parade to proceed.

Just a month before the parade, the Prime Minister of Vietnam received a proposal to include same-sex marriage in the country's doctrine. He responded positively, affirming the reality of the growing numbers of gay couples, and stating that the only issues left to address were legal ones. If the proposal is adopted, Vietnam will be the first Asian country to allow same-sex marriage.

I heard about these events on Facebook. It came as a shock because I thought it would be decades before my birth country would make such a leap forward in gay acceptance.

My father took me to a wedding in Saigon when I was five. The streets were covered with red firecracker shells and yellow chrysanthemum petals.

Walls of people lined the streets, and my father lifted me onto his shoulders so I could watch the ceremony. I plugged my ears to muffle the loud pops from the firecrackers, red fish tails of bursting tootsie roll-sized papers.

The bride wore a red *ao dai*, a silk dress with long slits on both sides running up to the thigh. For the wedding, the dress was decorated with an embroidered phoenix. Her father stood next to her with a smile, and waited for the groom's family to arrive.

In Vietnam, it is tradition that the groom walk from his house to the bride's house to ask her parents for her hand in marriage.

When the groom entered the street, more firecrackers were lit. The groom's family carried red metal tins with fruits, rice wines, and tobacco leaves to offer to the bride's ancestors.

Everyone cheered. The groom wore a black French tuxedo.

My father pressed his elbows against my legs so that I wouldn't fall, and clapped along with the crowd. He looked so happy for the new couple.

We had known the groom for years; he had helped build our house.

Within the same year, my mother and my aunts were hounding my uncle about marriage. They said people in the neighborhood were spreading rumors about him because he was a twenty-year-old man who had never had a girlfriend. My mother thought the neighbors were laughing at the family because of the way he pranced down the street, gossiping to everyone, about everyone.

One night, I heard my mother's voice coming from my grandfather's attic. She and my three aunts were yelling at my uncle after he invited a man home for dinner.

"That *bong lai cai* does not belong in our house," my mother said. "You will not bring him home again."

I did not understand what *bong lai cai* meant at the time, but I knew from the tone of my mother's voice that it was bad.

My uncle whispered something about loving the man.

"You will not," my mother said. "The Sky God will smite the whole family because of you."

I was afraid to venture up the stairs, into the attic, but I wanted to see if my uncle was okay.

When I got to the attic, he was crying in the corner. I could barely see him, hidden as he was behind the four women.

My mother called him *be de* because he loved a man.

I thought I might be *be de* as well.

By coming to America, I could live a life as a gay man.

My mother told me that she and my father gave up their lives so that my brother and I could receive an education in America.

The Viet Cong put my father into a reeducation camp for over seven years, because he fought alongside the Americans. He was imprisoned for another two and a

half years because he tried to flee the country by boat with the family. They released my mother because my brother had recently been born.

My mother dropped out of a pre-law program in college and sold cigarettes on the streets of Saigon to save money to keep my father alive in camp and to help raise her seven siblings and my older brother. I was born ten years after the Vietnam war had ended.

My mother said if I had stayed in Vietnam I would have been selling lottery tickets in the streets or molding carpentry nails in a factory.

Growing up, my parents pushed me to excel in America, so that I could have a successful career and a good life for my future family. I imagined another scenario though: I would study hard, get into a top university, and marry the richest doctor I could find there. If my mother wanted a doctor in the family, I will marry one, because I didn't want to go to medical school. But this plan had a flaw. I have only dated doctors who enjoyed working for nonprofits.

Once in college though, my plan went askew – I found myself more attracted to idealism than money, to the sort of doctors who would rather operate on animals than people, and who would rather start a nonprofit foundation than a private practice. I have accepted that my partner and I will likely be poor together, and will need to work hard together to be successful.

Around middle school, my father and I began to drift apart. One reason was that I began to be attracted to boys. I would chase them down the soccer field acting like I was blocking them from getting the ball. But I only chased the attractive ones.

My father quit his job as a cook at a Chinese restaurant when I got ran over by a construction truck in my middle school's playground. The driver didn't see me tying my shoe and ran the curve to take a short cut. My right leg was broken and my left needed skin grafts. My father took care of me for one year when I couldn't walk. After I recovered, he could not find another job and did charity work at a Buddhist temple.

He spent most of his time in the Buddhist temple, helping the monks with small carpentry tasks. He said that he did it so that my brother and I would have good karma.

But the main reason I stopped talking to my father was that I heard him say in front of me that gay people should die. He never said it directly to me. But I always took it that way.

"Those *be des* should kill themselves and go to hell," he would say, whenever there was an article about gay people in *Nguoi Viet*, a Vietnamese newspaper. "Maybe it's good that they get AIDS so that they can all die off."

When I heard him say these things, I just sat quietly next to him because I could anger in the red complexion on his face.

I always thought my father loved me even if he never had never said these words. He never said that he loved me. But I knew. He left work early to pick me up from school. He left cherimoya fruits on my desk. He said that my grandfather was proud of me. I knew that was his way of saying that he was proud of me too.

I told myself that it was not my father's fault that he said those things. I blamed his words on the PTSD that he developed during the Vietnam War and from the ten years that he was in re-education camp.

But after many years, I could no longer lie to myself, and I accepted that he was the one who said these things, not the PTSD, and that he meant what he said.

The Santa Ana Tet festival is the largest Vietnamese parade in California, held annually during Lunar New Year. In 2010, members of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) community were allowed for the first time to march in the parade. I first heard about this on the radio, on a trip to Santa Ana for my twentieth birthday dinner, as my father drove.

All I remembered was my father talking over the radio.

"Who the hell let those fags walk in the parade?" he said. "They should all get AIDS and die off."

I sat quietly in the back. I didn't say anything because I didn't want him to beat me.

Three years later, the LGBT members were told they were no longer welcome to march in the parade.

Ong Noi, my paternal grandfather, gave me a gold wedding band when I was nineteen. He said, "Use it to give yourself a happy life."

The wedding band fit perfectly on my ring finger.

My fifth aunt said he figured out the size of my finger just by looking at my hand during my first trip back to Vietnam, two years prior. She also told me that he wanted me to marry a girl before he died.

I contemplated about giving him back the ring because I didn't think that I could give him what he wanted. He was ninety. I barely started college, and I have not thought about marriage. But I knew I could not bring home bride to meet him.

I told him I could not keep his ring.

He folded the wedding band back into my palm and said, "I gave you it to you because I was proud of you. It is meant to bring happiness."

My mother cried when I told her that I was gay. I told her day after my twentieth birthday dinner.

I told my mother that I was gay because there was less risk involved. I've always thought that I would come out to my father first because we were so close when I was younger. He always told me that he was proud of me. I was scared that if I told him he would no longer be proud of me, and I would no longer have him a part of my life.

My mother sat on the toilet and cried all night. She thought that I was going to die. It was inevitable that I would get HIV, she said.

One of her co-workers had told her about her own son, also gay. He always came by the nail shop to ask his mother for money. My mother said he looked sick, with rashes on his cheeks. She said he has HIV.

Only after two years did my mother brought up the subject of my gayness again.

The New York Times published an article titled “Real Faces, Real People, Real Love in Vietnam.” The article was accompanied with photographs taken by Maika Elen, a Vietnamese photographer. These photographs are images of Vietnamese LGBT couples displaying the intimate side of love behind closed doors. In one picture, two gentlemen bathe each other using plastic pails. In another, a son kisses his mother’s partner’s forehead while she rests in bed.

These pictures give me hope that Vietnam is becoming more accepting of gays. I imagine holding hands with my partner while walking down the streets of Saigon. I imagine my family acknowledging my gay uncle.

But as the article stated, these are photographs of gay love behind closed doors.

Visiting Vietnam after its first Pride Parade, I thought there would be more respect shown to LGBT individuals, but I was disappointed. Gay men were still unacknowledged by the natives.

People would shake their heads in disappointment when my uncle exuded his feminine swagger on the Saigon streets.

People would either ignore them or stare at them and shake their heads in disappointment when they exuded their feminine swagger on the Saigon streets. Many shop owners made my gay-dar go off.

Gay-dar is a nerve found in gay people below the ear canal that emits a loud siren sound when someone gay is detected within scoping range. This has not been scientifically proven to exist.

I expected rainbow flags and rainbow awnings to be everywhere. But that was not to be.

I heard from my mother that my uncle's life revolves around selling knock-off Gucci bags at an outdoor swap meet and planning tourist trips to Buddhist temples.

My mother said that he was forced by my aunts to go to the temples. They thought he could expunge his gayness with hundreds of hours of prayers.

He was always cheerful, always laughing, making me giggle anytime we were together during my last two visits to Vietnam. I thought my uncle instinctively knew that I was like him, especially during my last visit, which happened after I had already come out to my mother.

I didn't want to tell him I was gay because I was afraid of becoming alienated from my family in Vietnam, in the same way I found myself alienated from my father.

There is a difference between someone suspecting that you are gay versus someone knowing that you are gay, because you have told them. I thought that if my uncle suspected that I was gay he would become closer to me; but at the same time he couldn't tell my aunts about it. But if I directly told him I was gay, he might leak it in a conversation.

He has a mouth on him, with no filter.

One time he was introducing me around our neighborhood. We visited my childhood friend's house. I didn't recognize my friend because I had last seen him when I was five.

"Isn't he handsome?" my uncle blurted out.

I looked at the ground, my smile not visible to anyone.

I tried to spend as much time as I could with my uncle so his gay-dar would have plenty of time to detect me. I was scared of being rejected by my own family, but I still wanted to say something. I wanted to tell him to hang in there and to tell him that one day I would stand up for him. Maybe after I get married and build my own family. And maybe then he would see that it is possible to someone gay to live a happy life. I imagine gaining riches or fame or success and then coming out to all of my family. They would be speechless because I would have brought pride to them. And this pride would outweigh the lost of face that comes from having a gay person in the family.

Recently, I have discovered more LGBT members in my family.

My second female cousin likes girls. Her sister's son is gay, emulating my gay uncle. He sashays around. He speaks quietly. Not the quiet that comes from being shy, but the quiet that comes from being afraid of saying certain gay things that will cause my other uncles to beat him.

My fifth aunt has a daughter. During my last trip back, five years before, my cousin, Bi, was very attached to me. I didn't think anything about it. But on my visit last year, I understood better why. She's transgendered.

My mother and I found out on our visit to my Aunt Hong's house, located just outside Saigon. On this visit, Aunt Hong's step aunt also joined us for lunch.

"Your niece is different," Aunt Hong said to my mother. "She might be sick. She keeps taping down her breasts."

"She's not sick," the step aunt said. "She's just different."

"When did this start?" my mother asked.

"Three years ago, when her breasts came in," my aunt said.

"Is it because she's gay?" my mother asked.

"No, I don't think so. She told me she sees herself as a boy, not a girl," the step aunt said.

"How can she think she's a boy? She was born a girl," Aunt Hong said.

Aunt Hong's voice broke. She excused herself by carrying dirty dishes to the kitchen. Bi and her father helped.

On the taxi ride back I told my mom that it would be better if Bi came to America. I could take her to the LGBT center and help her make friends.

My mother told me that Bi doesn't want to marry a man.

That was the only way Bi would be able to come over to the U.S.

On my father's side, my fifth male cousin, Thai, was being forced into marriage.

My father's side of the family lives in the farmland near Can Tho, two hours south of Saigon.

People in the farmland are not as open about gayness as the people in the city. Before my mother and I traveled to the farmland to visit she told me to man up, basically to hide my jazz hands and keep my mouth from running like a gossiping grandma on Mahjong night.

Thai was thirty-three. People were starting to question why he hadn't married yet. He was tall and had a big build, unlike the other men in my family, who are skinny like coconut trees. He was a chemical engineer who studied in Saigon.

The fact that he was thirty-three and never had a girlfriend made me wonder if he was gay.

I went to college at UC Davis, 500 miles away from my family's home in Riverside, because I wanted to have the freedom to explore my sexuality. I wondered if Thai had moved to Saigon to study so he could be free from parental pressures and to live his alternate life.

One night, I was playing cards with my male cousins and a neighborhood girl joined in. My cousins began to make fun of Thai by nudging him toward the girl. The more cousins that joined in on the joke, the more uncomfortable he looked.

Thai reacted the same way I did when my brother sprang the girlfriend question on me. I looked at the ground, changed the subject, and said I was not ready. My gay-dar and my gut that told me that Thai did not want to marry a girl.

My mother and I were taking a bus back to Saigon. We watched a taping of a Vietnamese concert. I turned to her and said that one of the male singers was gay. She questioned how I knew. It's a hunch, I said, a very precise hunch.

“I think Thai is gay,” I said.

“I think so too.”

“Your aunt has arranged for Thai to get marry next year,” my mother said.

“Isn’t it sad?” I said.

“You know how your aunt is. She would get her grandchild even if she has to stand outside their room on their honeymoon.”

There are no wooden doors in the farmland. Rooms are separated by a cloth that hangs over the doorframe.

“Is that why his sister is not going to his wedding? Does she know?” I asked.

“Maybe. She didn’t look happy when I brought up the wedding,” my mother said.

A year and a half after my grandfather gave me his wedding ring I heard that he had lung cancer. He kept his pain a secret for years. None of his children or grandchildren knew. But after ten years of smoking his right lung decayed to mush. It got too painful that finally told one of my aunts to take him to the doctor. The doctor said that it was too late. The cancer had spread.

I remembered when he coughed I could hear the gurgling from mucus in his lungs. But I didn’t know it was cancer.

He climbed up a mountain to a Buddhist temple with me the last time I visited. At ninety, he was strong enough to climb up the mountain steps with his wooden cane. Before I left to go back to America, I asked him to stop smoking so he would still be a live the next time I visit. He told me he would if I did well in school.

A year later, my father had flown back to Vietnam to be by my grandfather's side. My parents kept my grandfather's condition a secret from me because they didn't want it to affect my education. When my grandfather was near death, my mother told me everything. I yelled at her for keeping his ailment a secret. I told her I wanted to go back to Vietnam, but she said that we didn't have enough money and that my grandfather would want for me to continue with my college courses instead.

When I called my grandfather's house, my fifth aunt picked up. As my aunt passed the phone to my grandfather, I could hear him say in the background that he did not want for me to know that he was in pain. He told me that he loved me and that he was proud.

"Con thuong Ong Noi. I love you, grandpa," I replied.

Three days later, my mother told me that my grandfather did not have much time left. I called to Vietnam as quickly as I could. The first time no one picked up. The second time, it was the same. The third time my father got hold of the phone.

"Son, Ong Noi has passed," he said.

I cried. "But mom.... mom just said that he was dying. I called back right away."

"I'm sorry," he said. "Ong Noi told me to tell you these words... do well in school, don't do drugs..."

He paused. "...and don't become gay."

I stopped crying. I knew that my grandfather would never have said those last words to me.

My father said that he and my grandfather was proud of me. But I didn't want to listen to my father's voice any longer. I lied and told him that my mother was calling.

After I hung up, I called my mother and told her what my father had told me. I asked her if my grandfather would say such a thing or that my father made all that shit up.

She confirmed my suspicion that he twisted my grandfather's last words in attempt to change me.

I pulled my grandfather's ring off of my finger and secured it on to my Buddha necklace to save it for my wedding day.

I whispered some prayers for my grandfather—I miss you Ong Noi, please be safe and happy.

All I could think of was my father's face when he said those words to me. The more I lingered on these thoughts, the hotter my face got.

I took out my phone and deleted my father's number.

CHASING A BOY

I had dreams of chasing a boy along the Mekong.
I followed him
through a doorway hidden behind my grandmother's altar.
I was afraid of wandering too far away from my family,
but the boy's smile called me to come.

His black bangs covered his eyes.

I chased him to a house,
Took off my straw sandals,
And stepped inside.
Wooden crane statues and yellow lanterns lit with iridescent flies.
I looked back at the path toward my grandparents' house.
The door swung close.

LEARNING TO LOVE A MAN

After Eduardo Corral

I remembered my father
Bathing my body
With a rag made from
His shirt sleeves.
He placed his hands
Under my knees and back,
Cradled my thirteen year old body
Towards the shower.
He set me down onto a chair
Built from wood
Softened by his hammer.
The rag was too rough.
He threw it over the drain
Used the bottom of his middle and ring
Fingers to clean dirt
From the underside of my chin.
My broken leg rested on his knees.
When I felt pain
He traced his fingers over the veins
To hush them down.
I sat in front of him
Naked as water
Beat against my face.
I opened my mouth and swallowed
Pain pills so he would smile again.
Every time he saw me wince
He looked away and wiped his eyes.
He whispered,
“If I could switch places with you,
I would.”

SAME LOVE

After Macklemore's song

I

When I was five
Playing soccer in Saigon
I realized I liked him
Instead of her.
On the playground
I tried to find a boy
Who could build me a house
Like the one my father built.
Most kids could not
Pick up wood
With their scrawny arms.
They scooped mud
And dime-sized
Starfruit leaves.
Behind my house
I found a beautiful
Boy who brought me caramel
Spun on a coconut leaf stem.
I thought I found someone
Like my father.
I ate all the honey colored sugar.
He smiled.

II

I questioned
If I would rather die
Than live as a straight man.
My father said he would
Protect his son from bullies.
But how could he protect me
From himself?
I knew he wanted to leave
Since I was eight.
PTSD riddled his skull
With bullet holes.
When the wind blew
He heard the sound of metal

Whistling.
He left the house each morning
So I wouldn't hear him cry.
I walked to my backyard
Built a piggy bank from
Earthworm vomit.
Took out nickels
And incense ash
To patch up the holes.

I didn't have enough.

PLEAS UNDER LOTUS FEET

I

Beginning bow.
Forehead touching
The carpet under
Gold statue
Of Buddha
Who steps
Onto pink lotuses
After birth.
Ong Noi,
My grandfather's
First plea,

Don't do drugs.

II

Middle bow.
My lips mouthing,
Nam mô a di đà Phật,
Sacred words.
Reflecting off
Rippled water
Mossed pond
Pebble jagged
Under gold
Toes.
Second plea,

Do well in school.

III

Don't become gay,

My father said,
Relaying
Ong Noi's
Last plea.

My father

Twisted
Ong Noi's
Last words
In hope I become his
Perfect son.
I press
My hands,
Vertically,
In front of my chest.
I ask Buddha for forgiveness.

Ending bow.

WEDDING DAY

Since I was five, my dream was to get married.
I wanted to see my father's face
With tears dripping around his laugh
Lines. But he wanted for me to marry a girl.
I knew that I could never see that smile on my
Wedding day. All I wanted was for him to be there
To pass my hands onto my husband's.
I tried, for twenty years, to make him see
That I am happy.
But he did not listen.

CRICKET FIGHT

In the streets of Saigon,
Two black crickets fight.
Watching them are two boys,
One standing, another kneeling.
The kneeling one
Watches black cricket legs
Kicking at a partner's torso.
The other boy
Gazes at his friend's brown neck
And imagine that they are
Wrestling in mud.
He sees heels touching, and
Torsos grinding.
But the boy stays quiet
Because if his friend knows
He is having gay dreams
His friend's hands will pound
His face, instead of
Embracing his body.
They continue to watch the fight.
One cricket
Dies in the street.

CREMATED SMOKE

I remember the day
You told me that I should die.
It was around my birthday
During the year I became a man,
No longer a teenager.
I sat in the back seat
Of our white Camry
Beside Mom. I tried to
Ignore your smoke
As I watched you dip
The tip of your Marlboro
Against the car's lighter.
And then you said,
Those Fags marching
In the Tet New Years Parade
Should get AIDS
So they die off slowly.
My skin felt the burn of the lighter
And I smelt cremated smoke
Coming from your mouth.
Those things are not our people,
You said as you toss the finished
Cigarette butt out the window.
I wanted to cry
But I wanted to make you happy.
So I thought of how
To not exist.

JASMINE PORRIDGE

The wooden attic stairs
Cracked with my steps.

When I walked up
I felt the splinters.

“That bong lai cai does
Not belong in our house,”

She said to my uncle.
“You will not be like him.”

My stomach quieted down
All that was left

Pangs replaced
By memories of

Ground beef
And rice porridge

With the scent of blanched-
Diced green onions

That she made when
I was weak

And could not chew
Full jasmine grains.

Up more steps.
Four women surrounded

My uncle in candlelight.
I could only hear my mother’s voice,

“Ong Troi will smite the whole family
Because of you.”

I saw Uncle behind the sewing machine
When I reached the top

Something was missing,
And could not return.

“You can’t love him.
That is not love,” she said,

Jabbing into my uncle,
Her fingers like gun motions firing.

My aunts stood behind her,
Their shadows

Coming down the staircase
Towards me.

PRAYER OF A WOODEN GONG

At a Buddhist Temple
My uncle prays.

nam mô Phật,

Hands towards the sky
Eyes towards the ground.
He prays with
Each sound
Of a wooden gong.
Fingers counting
Single prayer beads.

một. hai. ba. bốn.

He knows that
Even If he prays
His prayers might
Not be answered.
But he still prays.

nam mô Quán-Thế Âm Bồ-Tát.

With each sound of the
Wooden gong.
So Buddha can hear
And give his gay nephew
Something he has not been able
To receive,
His sister's love.

A MOTHER'S WAIL

Dad, you told me I should end my life
Because gays are cursed beings.
I believed you.
So I took Christmas ribbons
And tied a knot around my neck
To give you the present you always wanted –
An unflawed son –
But the ribbons broke.
I went to the kitchen
And took out a knife.
In the metallic reflection
All I saw was your face telling me
Don't be wimp.
But I heard the sound of a ticking clock
And I imagined Mom
All in white.
Her body slumped over as she climbed
Three temple steps, past clouds of incense smoke,
To my casket.
She wailed
As if she had nothing left.
I woke up and saw her smile
As she walked into the kitchen.
I hid the knife in between
The cupboard and the refrigerator
So only I knew
What I was about to do.

WATERCRESS BY THE RIVERSIDE

There's a secret entrance to the Santa Ana River that only Vietnamese immigrants know.

I first hear about the river shortly after moving to the U.S. from Saigon. We had lived in Riverside, California for only two months. The family who sponsored us had lived there for twenty years. They were family friends of my grandfather. They told us about a river where watercress grew.

Our family waited until Tuesday, my mother's only day off from the nail shop. My father packed knives, wrapped in newspaper, and placed them into an empty paint container. My mother put an old beige towel that she used to clean the countertops into a grocery bag from the ninety-nine cents store.

I walked out the door, empty handed, behind my older brother. His backpack bounced up with each step he took. He had emptied out his high school books and folders to make room for the watercress.

My brother told stories of joining my father to pick watercress on the farm behind my grandfather's house in Vietnam. To get to the plants, they had to walk past the family cemetery, follow the rows of banana trees, and cross by the catfish ponds to get to a shallow river where watercress bushes grew from the size of a watermelon up to even the length of an ox. My father took my brother before I was born. They stopped going after I was born. I had never gone watercress picking.

We drove past a K-mart.

My father took me there every payday. I would grab onto his hand and pull him to the video games section, where I would trace my fingers over all the game covers until I found something interesting. He would stand behind me waiting to see how much that particular trip would cost him. When I found the game I liked, I turned around, and each time, I would see a smile on his face. We would drive home and he would play the game with me for a few hours.

During our video game tournaments, my brother would stay in his room. He was not invited to play, because my father thought he was a bad son. In Vietnam, my father did not like the friends my brother hung out with. They were druggies. My father always told him to stay home and study. But he never listened.

They never got along. My father had been trapped in reeducation camp for the first ten years of my brother's life. He did not see my brother grow up. He returned in time to raise me.

I missed Saigon. In Saigon, houses were joined to each other like Legos. In Riverside, houses were spread out, and there were no hanging canopies made out of ragged clothes sewn together to play under.

I missed the motorcycles in Saigon, and the feeling of wind beating against my face when my father drove me around the city. In Riverside, cars were scary and large, and would appear out of nowhere when we walked along the street. When we drove through the city, the inside of the car was stuffy and hot.

As we drove past K-mart, the land changed. It seemed we were no longer in the city. There were fewer red lights. The buildings shrank in size, as if eaten away by rain, and eventually vanished altogether, replaced by green fields sprawled on both sides of the road.

It was quiet in the car. I kept looking between the seats at my parents. My father kept his eyes on the road while my mother stared out of the window.

I could still remember their argument from the night before. It was about money. It was always about money. Our family never had enough. My father couldn't speak English and didn't know anyone in Riverside, which made it hard for him to find jobs in carpentry, his specialty. Instead, our sponsor family helped him find a job in a Chinese restaurant as a cook.

I always knew when my father came home from the aroma. When he opened the door I could smell fried banana batter lingering on his clothes. The batter had the sweetness of the banana's pulp and carried with it the essence of crushed blackened peels. But the leftover smell was the only thing that he brought home. My mother never received a dime from him to help with food or rent.

She was the sole supporter of the family. But that didn't stop my father from accusing her of sending money back to her relatives in Vietnam. One evening after seeing my mother cry, I ran out of their bedroom into the sewing room where my mother worked. I hid under a pile of jean jackets, and cried. My father ran after me.

"Everything is fine, I'll make sure of it," he said, consoling me.

That night, he asked me move away with him and leave behind my mother and brother. He promised it would be better that way. I was hesitant. I didn't want to leave and not see them again. And I was scared he would not have enough money to take care of me and also buy me toys.

The question lingered in my mind.

I caught my father's eyes in the rearview mirror. I smiled.

"Get ready to sniff your way to the river," my father said.

I looked over at my brother and grew excited. I wanted to find the secret entrance without his help.

I breathed out slowly, preparing to use my keen sense of smell, the best in the family.

I heard the car windows roll up.

"Ba, why are you winding the windows up?" I said. "I'm trying to smell the way to the river."

"Oh, you'll smell it, Son." he chuckled. "Don't worry."

To the side of the road a patch of dirt rose into view, flat like an unseeded rice patty, missing only the plow lines made by oxen dragging their way through the field.

As we drove further down the street, my brother plugged his nose. I wondered why, until the smell hit me. Raw poop. I sniffed the air. I gagged. It smelled like the manure of oxen. In Saigon, playing on my grandfather's farm, I

would dip my feet into the muddied waters of a rice paddy to rub off smells. But there was no muddy water in Riverside.

The smell got worse. I didn't know whether to roll down the window to let in a fresh breeze, or to roll up the window to block even worse odors. Either way, I lost. I was no longer excited to sniff out the secret entrance.

My family laughed at my groans. I had forgotten that they'd been to the river once before when I was at school. I had wanted to come, but my third grade teacher would not have understood that picking watercress was a good reason to miss vocabulary training.

After passing the sewage plant, we reached a bridge.

As we drove over the bridge, I saw bright flashes of sun glint off the clear water running underneath, which I imagined connecting back to the muddy Mekong River that ran in front of my grandfather's house. It made me miss my grandfather. I hadn't seen him since the day I left Vietnam, two months earlier.

Our car turned onto a dirt path, pushing rusted orange dust into clouds that rose up from all sides. We all disembarked. My mother and brother walked to the trunk and removed our equipment.

"Pull the car in further so no one sees us," my mother commanded.

As my father re-parked the car behind a leafy tree, I walked over to a metal railing and waited for him. To my side was a sign with an X crossed over a stick-figure man, and English words underneath. I stared at the sign, not understanding the words.

My brother hopped over the thick metal railing. I followed but got stuck halfway over, my feet hanging over as I half-sat on the cold railing. My father came behind me and lifted me up. I giggled as his thick fingers tickled my sides.

“Are your feet on the ground?” he said.

“Ya, Ba,” I nodded.

I followed my brother down a steep hill, muddying my blue Payless Birkenstocks. I didn’t care; I wanted to be the first to reach the water.

At the bottom of the hill were rows of trees, tall and slim like bamboo, arching over me, ready to gulp me up.

I was disappointed there were no coconut trees along the Santa Ana, only weeds. Along the Mekong there were many coconut trees. I remembered my father picking coconuts, clenching a machete between his teeth, clamping the palms of his feet against the tree, and pulling himself up with his arms, going up so high I could no longer see his face. After chopping the coconuts, he would drop them to the ground, and chop the tops off one so I could drink its juice. He brought the others to my mother for her to cook into beef stew with eggs and bamboo shoots.

At the bottom of the ledge were jagged rocks, gaped open like a jaw. My brother began climbing down.

I stood at the top and watched the water flow downstream. The ripples on the shallow water caught the light from the sun, sparkling like floating stars. In Saigon, my grandmother and I would eat shaved ice together, then follow the twinkle of the Mekong home. My grandmother had a hunched back. I would place

my snow cone in front of me and tried to cover her hunched shadow. Syrup would drip down my hands, and I would stick out my tongue to lick up the cold tendrils. When we got home, I would see my grandfather waiting on the terracotta steps. He would laugh when he saw my blue lips and tongue.

The Santa Ana water was clear. I could see small pebbles on the riverbed being rolled along by the currents. It was not like the Mekong, brown and thick like Nesquik milk. Both rivers could be gentle. But during a rainstorm the wind would stir up the Mekong's water, causing it to overflow the banks. Land would break off, and trees and houses would collapse into the river. I once saw pieces of a mature banana tree, the size of a small child, being kicked around by the turbulent waves. After a storm ended, the brown water would settle. Not even a ripple could be seen.

I felt giddy looking upstream. I had wanted to go watercress picking for a long time. I missed playing in a river. But I was more excited for what would come after — a delicious meal with tender beef, onions, and watercress. Our family would eat together, except for my brother. My brother never ate with us because he hated the awkward silences between our parents. I wished he was there though. He broke up the silences, and could be counted on to say something stupid like how I needed to eat more or how he could use my skinny body to scare the trick-or-treaters on Halloween.

My father told me to wait. He climbed down the ledge with ease. He leapt from each rock without fear. When he got to the bottom he walked upstream towards an area where there were no rocks.

“Come over here, Son,” he said.

I ran to him. He raised both of his hands into the air. I sat down on the ledge, covering the bottom of my blue shorts with orange dust. He placed his hands under my arms and lifted me down. I shrieked when my feet touched the icy water. He laughed. The tingling feeling died down as the sun began to warm up my skin.

My brother waited on a small patch of dirt in the middle of the river, having found his way there on his own.

The water reached my thighs. Looking around, I saw that it barely reached to the middle of my father’s calves. I walked up towards a bush, snapped off a long twig, and ripped off all the leaves.

“Ba, look, I made a walking stick.”

“Good job,” he said.

I looked down at the water and saw in reflection him guide my mother down into the river. Her hair was loose. Black curls bounced everywhere. His skin was dark against hers. She had a smile on her face. It reminded me of how happy they were in Vietnam.

Before we left Vietnam, our family took a trip to a faraway temple. To get there, we walked up dirt roads that weaved around a mountain. Wooden beams and tree roots protruded from the mountain walls, supporting and intertwining houses

that seemed to hang in midair. Some of the houses looked like they were part of the trees. Hung on the roofs were wind chimes made from dried coconut shells. When a gust of wind blew, I heard the empty shells clank against each other.

At the top of the mountain, supported by giant red pillars, stood a temple holding dozens of statues of Buddhist gods. My favorite was a statue of the lady Buddha, made of white rocks, with small speckles of gray pebbles just beneath her glossy sheen. Her smile was gentle and helped calm my fear of heights. One of her hands held a slim vase, and the other held a stem with leaves. Before we left, my parents lit incense sticks. I watched them kneel before a gold statue of Buddha the size of a house. They pressed their hands in front of their chest, knelt to the floor, and bowed. They repeated this three times. I imitated them and pressed my head down on the red carpet. I closed my eyes and asked Buddha to keep us safe on our trip to America. I should have wished for our family to be as happy in the new country as we were in Vietnam.

When my mother's feet touched the water, my father let go of her and walked ahead.

The water was so shallow that small bumps in the riverbed became small islands. On these islands, watercress grew. We walked upstream for a few minutes before we found the bushes.

I saw my brother and father survey the watercress, small green bushes with tiny dime-sized leaves. My brother passed my father a knife. My father took it without acknowledgement.

“These are too mature,” my father said to my mother. “They’ll be bitter.”

But she still picked them.

“I like bitter ones,” my mother replied.

I picked up a watercress stem. The bottom looked like a straw, so I squeezed the tip until liquid appeared. It looked sweet. I stuck out my tongue and lightly tapped it against the tip. It tasted like lightly sweetened water. I nibbled on the edges of the leaves. They tasted like bitter melon. I spat out the leaves, and scrubbed my tongue with the bottom of my fingers to get rid of the taste.

I questioned why these plants would be so expensive. I overheard my mother say that she could sell these to her co-workers at the nail shop for almost as much as shrimp would cost at the Vietnamese market. I wanted to sell my own batch so I could save up for a Nintendo game.

We continued to walk further up the river. The watercress grew close to each other so we didn’t have to walk far to find the next patch.

I followed behind my father. Suddenly, his body plunged into the water. I jumped and screamed out for my mother. She was a few islands ahead. I scanned the river for my father’s body. There was a dark shadow under the water in front of me. I inched my feet forward and felt the edge of a deep hole, as if the bottom of the river had split open. I wanted to go forward, but I was afraid.

His head emerged out of the water. His hands smashed against the water, trying to keep the rest of him afloat.

“Son, wait there,” my mother yelled. “Don’t step forward. It’s deep.”

I looked up and saw my mother on the other side of the chasm.

My father regained his footing and swam to a shallower part of the river.

“Wait there,” he said, “I’ll come to get you.”

“I can get over. I know how to swim,” I said.

“No, you’re a weak swimmer. Let Ba carry you over,” my mother said.

My father walked back to me and knelt down.

“Jump on,” he said.

My mother and brother knelt over a bed of watercress — it looked like grass scattered so densely I could no longer see the water. They cut away the stems with their fruit knives. My mother wore a conical rice hat made out of sundried palm leaves. Tucked under her chin was a strip of green silk to keep her hat from flying off.

Because I wasn’t allowed to use the knives, I stood on the side and watched. Then I walked over to my father to help him pick young watercress stems.

“Do these look good, Ba?” I asked.

He smiled and gave me an empty bag. I tied the bag around my wrist and placed some young stems in the bag so I could sell it to my mother’s co-workers.

My mother looked like she was in the last stretch of a watercress marathon. She trimmed all the bushes, not leaving a single stem behind. As the sun set, the land

around the river grew dark. Our family followed the river back to the bridge, hopping between the small islands that the watercress grew on.

On the drive back, I thought of the filet mignon dish that my father made the last time they picked watercress.

My father called it “Bo luc lac.” I thought it was a funny name, since “luc lac” reminded me of the sound of a cowbell. When we had watercress, he would ask me what I wanted to eat. “Cowbell beef,” I would answer. I would shake my hips back and forth like a cowbell. He would laugh.

I remember the watercress tasted tangy and bitter if eaten alone.

He sautéed the filet mignon with some diced onions. The filet mignon was from the Chinese restaurant he worked at. It came sealed in a plastic bag and frozen. He often said that he wanted to buy better quality beef for me to eat, but he never had enough money to buy the good kind from the butcher.

After he cooked the beef he would lay out a bed of watercress on a giant plate and place thinly sliced tomatoes on top, the tomatoes perched like flowers atop a green bird’s nest. He brought the skillet over to the kitchen table and scooped out the beef onto the center of the nest.

I loved the smell of the dish when the beef was added – soy sauce and hints of garlic and tomato which filled my nose when the plate became hot. All the components worked together. The onions added a sweet taste to the soft beef. The watercress added a crunchy texture and a minty and citrusy taste to the tomatoes.

At the table, the four of us sat around the dish of Bo luc lac and enjoyed our dinner. My brother made my mother laugh by making fun of me. I hated it, but after a few seconds of listening to my mother's cackle I laughed along.

When we got home my mother shook me awake. My parents made their way into the house.

When I got inside, I heard yelling from the kitchen. I saw the bags of watercress on the kitchen floor rather than in the sink. I knew my father was not going to make Bo luc lac for dinner.

I prayed. *Ong Phat, please let me find a way back to Vietnam. My grandfather will know what to do.*

FRUITS FROM MY GRANDMOTHER

Before she died Ba Ngoai said,
Mudskippers are made from bones and skin of the dead.
When you eat jackfruit
I remember my grandmother's burial.
I climbed in the grave and stomped on the dirt
To soften her new bed.
I dug into the ground with my bare hands.
Pieces of her embedded under my finger
Nails. Before I came to America
I washed her off with
Head & Shoulders and salt water.
I've eaten lots of sweet jackfruit
In America but all I did
Was shit it out.

you eat a child.

MY GRANDMOTHER'S BACK

Ba Noi cast a mold
of her hunched
back, glued onto
my spine
with sap
from cashew pits.
When I miss her,
I trace
my index finger
up my back,
a slight curve – her smile.
A doctor suggested surgery
to fix the scoliosis.
(a 50% chance of death)
My father
flipped a steel-plated coin.
Before it landed,
he made up his mind –
to keep
her within
me.

VIOLET LILIES

My grandmother died
After staring at the color violet.
Before her death,
My grandfather planted
Water lilies in front of their house.
She grew sad
The more she looked into
The deep purple flowers
The more she thought about a life wasted
With her husband—
A drunk and a wife
Beater. My mother tried her best
To lift my grandmother out,
But she failed.
When my grandmother passed
My mother stared at the purple lilies
Trying to reason
Why her mother left her,
Wondering who would help her
Now that she felt the same way.

ORCHIDACEAE

Your prized orchid,
Her skin dull, dark, and dry,
Yet with hope
She lays on a flat surface
Feeling warmth as you carry her
To a dark chasm,
Her new home.
She lies motionless
As a child grows out
From a limb.
Feeling moisture seep into her roots
She begins to emerge.
Her petals open up for their glory.
Her beauty lasting only minutes.
Delicate pink petals swarm with white dots,
And thin stems stretch out from her sides.
She spreads her ovate leaves to feed herself
Before she fades under the sun's rays.
Her dry brown skin encases
Until she is too weak and dies,
Falling in pieces onto the soil.
Her body nursing her child.

CITY CHICKEN

She tried
To make rice porridge
And chicken salad
With light
And dark
Meat
But forgot vinegar and
Iceberg lettuce.
My father married
A city woman
Who could calculate
How much a chicken cost
But not how many feathers it had.
My father told me
She counted
Papers with
Green ink
To put into
Envelopes to Vietnam
The exact amount
For farm chickens
To feed her siblings'
Fat bellies
While her sons
Scooped rice water
And chicken wing
Tips
For lunch.
Sisters of my father
Carried metal pots
And a Chicken
Bright yellow beak
Blood stains
Boiling over clay stoves.
Sisters sat on the ground
And plucked
White feathers
One by one.
My mother stared
From a stool
Learning to be a wife
The chicken was already
Cleaned.

STING

I wonder why he doesn't touch
My mother like he
Touches me.
My father raises his hands at my mother
And strikes down at her face.
Her cheeks do not crack like wood,
But change from brown to purple.
She blows him a kiss
With her spit, asking forgiveness
For doing nothing wrong.
I try to catch it with my wooden net.
The liquid spills.
His hands rest gently on my shoulders
Saying something like I still
Love her.

THE BEAUTY OF BLACKENED EYES

Your hands are not as soft as they used to be.
The calluses tell me the number of times
You have rubbed someone's feet
For the catfish on our table.

Each morning you look into the mirror
And see how your red lips have darkened
From drinking dirt water so your sons
Can eat coconut meat.

You thought if your lips had not faded
Your husband, my father, would not have left us.
This is not true; his eyes did not age with wisdom
Foolishness made his iris blind.

You hated the dark bags under your eyes
Thinking they made you look ugly.
I must admit
I lost sight of beauty.

The swollen bags remind me of
The number of times you took my father's fists
Against your face, so that your sons
Could have a father in their lives.

“NAIL TYME”

I grew up with the smell of acetone and nail powder.

My mother took me to the nail shop for most of my childhood. On the first day, I was afraid so I brought Blackie, my stuffed panther, along.

I wanted to go with my dad to China Palace instead. He took me there once when he went to work as one of their cooks. The walls were painted velvet red, and embossed with golden scales of a dragon and fiery plume of a phoenix. The room was filled with the scent of newly stir fried Chow Mein, orange glazed chicken, and soy sauced beef. I wanted to go with him to be his sous chef, but he said it was too dangerous for me to be near the giant silver stoves that sprayed fire.

My mom held my hand as we walked toward the entrance. Her other hand held onto a Stater Brothers bag filled with Tupperware that she had bought at the ninety-nine cent store.

The words “Nail Tyme” were molded into colorful block letters pressed against the wall over the shop. Each letter had its own distinct color like the desserts at the buffet restaurant where my father worked. The T was yellow like flan, and the A was the same shade as freshly sliced tangerines.

As we walked toward the door the smell of nail liquid reached my nose. I inhaled a big breath of what smelled like mothballs and alcohol rub. The smell lingered in the back of my nose.

“What’s that nasty smell?” I asked.

“It’s just the smell of powder and nail liquid,” she laughed.

“It stinks, *Me*,” I said, as I pinched my nose and furrowed my brow.

“You’ll get used to it. You can go outside if it smells too much.”

I couldn’t take the smell, but I was too scared to remain outside, since the location was unfamiliar to me. I drew a large gulp of air in through my mouth, and kept it in my puffed up cheeks. Then I followed my mom into the nail shop.

There were women setting up in the nail shop when my mother and I walked in. I heard the sounds of small cabinet doors closing as they prepped their stations. A petite woman, barely taller than the four-foot tall workstations, took out brushes from her bag. She sprayed purple liquid onto the brush head, and started scraping white powder clumps off of the brushes’ head. Another worker brushed off excess nail powder from a ceramic container. The nail powder flew everywhere. I sensed some of the white particles creeping into my nostrils. When I couldn’t hold my breath any longer I took a whiff and found the source of the mothball odor.

My mom told me to go sit in the front of the nail shop so I would be away from the clouds of dust and smells of acetone. As I sat down I saw a clear shelf on the wall filled with nail polish bottles. There were lights placed behind the shelf to illuminate the bottles, which looked like lite-brite tabs against the white walls.

I recognized some of the bottles as similar to the ones my mom would take home with her, so she could practice painting nails. I always saw my mom practice painting creepy fake fingers with different nail polishes at home. When I sat down and put the creepy fingers together it looked like a dismembered hand. I would run away into the

bedroom because I knew that my dad would protect me if those pink zombie fingers followed me.

I used to love walking through the nail shop with a bottle of nail polish in each hand, shaking them up and down like instruments. I even wanted to paint my nails baby blue to match the sky, so that if I lifted my hands up into the outdoor air, my nails would fade into blue nothingness. But I never dared. My mom's eyes would probably scrunch together like the time she saw me snap my right hand toward her, the way that my gay uncle would. She would slap my hand and wave her right index finger, up and down, in front of my face. "Boys don't do that," she would yell.

There were so many colors on the shelf: blues, greens, reds and some that I did not recognize. I had barely started learning English for two month, after moving over from Vietnam. My third grade teacher recently gave me flashcards with the colors written in English. I tried to remember words for certain ones. I picked up a *hong* colored bottle. "Pin-kuh," I sounded out. I looked on top of the bottle's cap to check if I was correct. "Peachen Party" was written on the label. I thought for sure that I was correct. I tried another bottle. "Red like ap-pole," I said. But "Ruby Licorice" was written on the label. I was annoyed for getting all the colors wrong.

I walked over to my mom's station. It was in the front row of the shop. All the tables look alike. They were white and rectangular. There were tall white shelves on each side of the station with staircase holders for the nail polish bottles. It looked like a less sturdy version of the tables my carpenter dad would build.

A small flower vase, made out of toothpicks, was showcased on the corner of my mom's station. My dad carefully stacked each toothpick to form a three-dimensional square that spiraled upward. At the top were two white tissue roses. My dad taught me how to fold the tissue paper into rose petals. His rose had flared petals perfectly wrapped around a copper stem. My smaller rose was filled with creases. I could still see where he folded the tissue over my mistakes. But he still placed my small rose below his fully bloomed one on top of the vase.

My dad made the vase for my mom the day she found out she got the job at Nail Tyme.

My mom had been searching through the newspaper for nail shops that were looking for new manicurists. None of the shops gave her a chance.

"*Me* is too old. They won't hire a *ba da*, old lady, like me," she laughed, but her eyes did not have the same joy.

And if they overlooked her age, they might not overlook that she did not speak English.

I remember walking by a nail shop on our way to Stater Brothers. Most of the manicurists looked young, like my twenty-six years old aunt. Some of them even had the same light yellow hair that their customers had.

Nail Tyme was the last nail shop to give my mom an interview. The owner took a liking to my mom when they met. She thought my mom was friendly, smart, and that she was quick at adapting to the pace of the shop.

“She knew I was educated by the way I talked,” my mom said.

The owner hired her after the first meeting.

Ngoc, another manicurist, walked over to my mom’s station. She was the loud one of all the ladies. She always joked around every time she came to work. On the days that she was not working, the nail shop was so quiet that I could hear the vibrations of the foot massagers.

“Dung, who is this?” Ngoc said.

She looked down at me and smiled.

“Say hi to Auntie Ngoc, son,” my mom commanded.

I placed my hands together, in front of my waist, and bowed my head down at her, like my mom instructed.

Ngoc knelt down and pinched my cheeks. “He looks exactly like his dad.”

I looked up and smiled.

They both laughed. My mom seemed much happier when she was talking to Ngoc. I guess this was the reason why she always wanted to go to work early. It was because my dad was not here, there was no yelling, and these ladies made her laugh constantly. It was like the nail shop was her cramped, white-walled, foul-smelling sanctuary.

A customer walked in and asked for a pedicure.

My mom turned to me and asked me to bring her food bag to the back of the nail shop.

After I dropped off the bag next to the refrigerator I walked back out to my mom's station. She was working on a customer with long lashes with clumps of what looked like charcoal dust on them.

"What's your name?" Long Lashes asked my mom.

My mom didn't answer. I thought she didn't understand the lady.

Long Lashes asked again. My mom still didn't answer. I knew then that she was nervous to speak because of her thick Vietnamese accent.

"Dung," I said.

"Oh, hello there. Who are you?" she asked.

"Son," I pointed to my mom.

"What did you said her name was?" she smiled.

"You-ung," I pronounced.

"How do you spell that?" she asked.

"D-U-N," my mom stopped me. She shook her head.

"*Me*'s name is not pretty in English. Be a good boy and wait for me in the back room," my mom said in Vietnamese.

"Bye," I smiled at Long Lashes and walked to the backroom.

I spent most of the day in the break room toward the back. The room helped block off the smell of fish sauce and microwave ramen from the customers. But the room served a better purpose for me -- to block off the odors from the shop.

To pass the time I colored in my picture books. One had a prince and a princess riding a horse. I colored the princess' hair black, like mine. I colored her eyes brown, also

like mine. Then I stopped because I didn't like the dress the princess was wearing. Or her breasts.

I heard laughing coming down the hallway. I thought the laughter came from my mom, so I acted like I was reading my English book. Ngoc walked into the room and searched through the cabinets for some paper towels. I shoved my English book aside and continued to color. When she turned around and saw me she stopped. One of her eyebrows was raised. I quickly flipped over the picture, where I'd drawn an X over the princess, and carefully colored in the prince. She messed up my hair and left.

A half-hour later Hanh came back to put her food in the refrigerator. She rarely talks but there was always a smile on her face. After she saw me, she searched through her bag and held out a palm full of candies and pushed them toward me. She smiled and took a caramel cube and left. I sorted out the mints, preferring instead to eat the fruity hard candy. The mints just sat on the table until the end of the day.

It was two in the afternoon. My mom had not come back to make lunch for me. I walked out and saw my mom picking up trash bags from all the stations.

My stomach rumbled. I decided to help.

I walked to Hanh's station and asked, "Auntie Hanh, can I take your trash bag for you?"

Hanh smiled and handed me a white trash bag filled with used cotton balls reeking of acetone. I waved my hands in front of my nose. Hanh laughed and told me to put out one of my hands. I stuck out my right hand and she set two quarters in my palm. I was happy to receive my first tip.

I walked to Ngoc's table and asked her for her bag.

"Such a good boy," she said.

After she handed me her trash bag I stuck out my hand toward her. She slapped it and laughed. When she turned around I stuck out my tongue and walked back to my mom.

"Ngoc is a horrible tipper," I said.

She looked at Ngoc and smirked.

After my mom threw away the trash bags she made two bowls of vermicelli noodles with chewy sautéed beef.

As I ate the lukewarm vermicelli noodles I thought of the steaming egg fried rice and broccoli beef my dad brought home from the Chinese restaurant. His beef was more tender than hers.

"Dung a customer is here for you," a voice sounded from the front of the shop. My mom hurried through her bowl of noodles and ate a mint.

"Leave your bowl near the fridge and *Me* will wash it later," she said before she rushed to the front.

As I sat in the break room, finishing my noodles, I heard the sound of laughter coming from the front of the shop. I walked out and sat in the abandoned workstation in the back. As I sat down, I realized my mom's customer was following my every movement. I looked around, saw a pile of white towels, and started to stack them one on top of the other. I made a small barricade out of white towels with a small slit in the

middle so I could spy on the customer. I placed Blackie in between the towels so he wouldn't blow my cover.

I felt like I was in one of my dad's stories from when he was in the Vietnam War. I started to imagine that I was spying on the evil leader's wife who had captured my mom. The customer looked like she was royalty sitting on a low-budget throne made out of white plastic and a fake black leather cushion. My mom was caught and made into her slave. My mom was forced to massage her legs that looked as tough as lizard scales all day long. They were both quiet. Lizard Scales did not say anything to my mom as she leafed through a magazine only stopping from time to time to check on my mom's progress.

My mom did not have any expression on her face. Her eyes were fully open but they did not move. She just stared blankly toward her hands. She didn't smile like she always used to do when I was the only one around. Her arms acted like they were being controlled by a computer. The left one moved up, the right one moved down. She performed the same movements over and over.

She had been massaging Lizard Scales much longer than I would when I gave her a massage at home. When she would come home from work she sometimes would ask me to massage her. I clapped my hands together and start chopping down her back. I would get tired after two minutes. The upper part of my arm began to grow weak. There was a slight sting in my biceps. And my concentration had shifted to the Ben and Jerry cartoon on the television.

After a minute my arms became sore and she knew. My chopping motions slowed down and became weaker.

“That’s good enough,” she would say. “Thanks, son.”

She gave me one dollar for two minutes of work.

My mom had been massaging for ten minutes, and was still continuing. She took out a pink bottle and squirted some lotion on her hands and rubbed Lizard Scales’ legs until they had a glossy sheen. She then took out a foot shaver and started to shave the dead skin from her ashy heel.

After she was done, she carried the metal bowl filled with gray soapy water and skin shavings toward the restroom. The water had milky bubbles coming up in the middle that looked like spoiled tofu dessert. I felt sick looking at her bare fingers touching the water as she carried the bowl into the restroom to clean.

The other ladies were sitting across from me eating oranges and laughing. They always gossiped in Vietnamese when there were few customers. Their voices could be heard over the loud burbling noise of my mom’s pedicure massager. Once I smelt the scent of orange peels I knew the gossip was about to begin.

“Your shirt is tacky today,” Ngoc said in Vietnamese.

“Is this tacky?” Hanh asked, while looking at Gai.

“Um...It’s not... maybe a little...” Gai said.

“No it’s a lot tacky. Just say it,” Ngoc jumped in before Gai finished her sentence.

“Right, Dung?” Ngoc asked while looking at my mom.

“Ngoc, you loud...I’m working. Don’t drag...into this,” my mom replied.

The light blue mask that made her look like she was a surgeon getting ready to perform a foot operation muffled her already soft voice. But I could hear her laughing from where I was sitting. I hadn't heard her laugh for a while. At home, I mainly hear her and my dad talking loudly.

The night before, their voices were loud and abrasive.

"Why are you so stupid?" my dad yelled.

"I'm stupid? You're the one that's not making any money."

My mom's fingers jabbed in the air at my dad.

"*May, may...*"

"*May, may* what? You're going to call me that?"

Their voices screeched together. I covered Blackie's ears. Their voices were still deafening. I covered my own ears.

"Stop it," I pleaded. "*Ba, Me*, please stop...yelling."

The screaming ceased.

I ran back into my parents' bedroom and crawled onto my futon, with Blackie's fur wet with salty watermarks. I hid under my blankets next to their bed and acted like I was sleeping.

My mom did not enjoy working on Lizard Scales legs, but I was for sure she was happier than the night before. Her eyes were dry.

Lizard Scales looked over at the loud manicurists. I wanted to laugh because Lizard Scales just kept staring and staring. She probably wanted them to shut their yappers. Before long the boss walked over to the group.

I enjoyed it when I saw my mom's boss, Kim, because of the unique clothes she wore. She had on a body-length, glossy black suit with a gold chain belt. My mom was the tallest of the ladies. But with Kim's thick sequenced wedges she was the reigning giant of the shop. The customers probably knew she was the boss by the way she dressed.

"Quiet down. You're bothering the customers," Kim said in Vietnamese.

"What customers? There's only one. And she's busy reading the magazine anyways," Ngoc replied.

"Well hush up. She is not deaf. She can still hear your annoying voice."

Ngoc whispered something to the group. Kim walked away with a smile on her face and all the women continued on their laughing tirade.

After my mom painted Lizard Scale's nail glittery red, she handed my mom fifteen dollars and walked out with cotton balls stuffed in between her toes.

There were few customers that day. My mom only had two customers so far and it was already four in the afternoon. And she was two customers away from her turn again. My mom tried to explain the turn system to me once, but I still did not understand why it existed.

"Each person gets one customer a cycle until everyone gets a turn. And then it's *Me's* turn," she said.

"Why do you have to share?" I asked.

“So everyone is happy,” she laughed.

I scratched my head.

“Can’t you run to the customer and whoever gets there first can get the money?” I said.

She laughed again.

“Then *Me* won’t get any money that day.”

In the afternoon, I grew bored. I walked to the front of the shop and thought it would be funny to move the bottles around. I rearranged a few nail polish bottles, giggling to myself while I did the dirty deed. The polish bottles formed the colors of the rainbow: “Met On The Internet” red, “Don’t Be Koi With Me” orange, and “Dazzling Aqua” blue.

I continued to browse through the bottles. The red bottle of “Candles on my cake” made me think of the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae. My stomach began to call out for me to go get a chocolate sundae from McDonalds, the closest thing to what I was imagining. But I looked over at my mom and saw a tall woman with light yellow hair sit down at my mom’s station. I knew that it would be a while before my mom would be done. The image of a three-scoop sundae disappeared from my mind.

After the customer left I saw Kim walk over to my mom’s station. I walked back to my station, the abandoned station, and hid behind the pile of white towels and listened to their conversation.

“How’s everything at home?” Kim said.

“What do you mean?”

“You never brought him to the shop before?” Kim looked toward my direction.

“I thought I asked you if I could bring him?” my mom said.

“You did. I just want to know if everything is fine at home.”

“It is.”

Lies.

“Did your husband find a job?” Kim asked.

“He did. But he’s not helping out.”

Lies. Ba bought me the Robocat 6000 that transform into fifteen different robot warriors.

“Why don’t you tell him to help pay some of the bills?”

“I have. He always says he doesn’t have money,” my mom said.

Lies. She had only been complaining to me. “Your dad never helps out. Go ask him for rent money, he listens to you.”

“I don’t know where all his money is disappearing to,” my mom continued.

“Well if you need anything, like an early pay, let me know,” Kim said.

“Thanks,” my mom replied.

While I sat in the abandoned station I heard my mom’s name being called out. I walked around the corner and saw Ngoc standing at the nail polish wall.

“Your son messed up the wall,” Ngoc said.

My mom stopped the nail buffer machine and pulled down her mask. “I’ll fix it later.”

I became scared. I knew I was in trouble and was going to be yelled at when we get home.

Ngoc began to laugh. "I'm just kidding. I found my color."

She grabbed the bottle and walked back to her station. I hid back in the break room.

After I finished my math homework I looked up at the clock. It was eight-fifteen. I was getting sleepy. I watched the clock closely and practiced counting in English each time the long hand of the clock moved. Ten minutes later my mom walked back and started packing up her Tupperware.

"Time to go home," she said. "Let me take care of a few things and we can go."

I was so happy I sprang up from my seat and followed her out.

"Do you need help, *Me?*" I asked.

"It's okay," she replied. "I'll be quick."

She was calculating how much she had made that day on a pad of paper. There were too many numbers for me to follow. But when I got to the bottom I saw the word total. She wrote in forty dollars.

"Is that how much you made, *Me?*" I asked.

She nodded.

"Is that good?"

She didn't answer.

She pulled out a bundle of crumpled bills and placed it on the table. I took the bills and smoothed it out and started counting. "*Mot, hai, ba, bon, nam.*"

“*Me*, there’s five dollars,” I said.

“You can have it,” my mom said. “For coming with *Me* today.”

“Thank you, *Me*,” I bowed.

I opened Blackie’s pouch and stuffed the crumbled bills next to the two quarters.

After she was done cleaning and sweeping around her station she walked to the back and grabbed her bag of empty Tupperware.

I folded my hands in front of me and said, “Bye aunties, I’m going home now.”

Everyone waved to me as we walked out.

As we stepped out of the nail shop’s door I saw that Blackie’s ears lit up by the colors from the lit neon Nail Tyme sign. I smiled as I moved his ears up and down. I wanted to show my mom the colors but I saw that she was looking down at the ground, not smiling. I asked her if she wanted to hold onto Blackie. She shook her head and reached out for my hand and we walked to the car.

HUGGING SANTA

Once a year
Santa would climb down
The chimney,
Drop a present,
Eat my cookies,
Leave the crumbs
And disappear.
My father would leave a fruit,
Take a hug,
And with the scent of tobacco
And rinds of cherimoya remaining
Slip out the back door.
When I grew older,
No matter how much I wished
For Santa to appear
He would not.

BREAKFAST IN AMERICA

The Bottom of my shoe
Tracked dirt from
The Mekong to the U.S.
In LAX a guard said
I was dirty.
He pointed me to a McDonalds
To clean out my tongue with
Mustard and happy meals.
I asked my mother for a quarter
To buy cashews soiled with sugar.
All she had were pennies.
A man walked up to me and asked
If I had a passport.
I gave him a paper with
My birth country – Vietnam.
“Why are you here?” he asked.
“To find my father,”
I smiled.

PTSD

I know your brain is made of coils of bullets
Because you told me all you hear
Is gunfire.
But other fathers are able to win the war
Inside their heads. They have forgotten
The scent of burnt flesh, the taste of metal
From exploding shell fragments, the sounds
Of a woman's scream
For her dead husband,
And the feeling of holding their
Uniformed brother's
Cold body in their hands.
How come you can't
Fight the war that continues inside your head
Since 1975.

SAI. GON.

My father left our house.
His gun-barrel nightmares
Made him go.
Feet planted firmly,
Mind wandering.

My brother saw him
Walking the streets
Of Little Saigon,
With his back
Crooked from carrying
Machine guns,
Strings of bullets,
And the bodies of his fallen
Brothers.

My father's feet
Yearned to wander over salt water
To where his birth giver's ashes
Made their home.

Each footstep led him back
To a mound of dirt
With charred remnants
Of a Shack he made
With his bare hands
That his wife lit ablaze
With hers
When he did not return.

He looked for footprints
He had made with dried,
Cracked heels
From brown rivers,
Green rice patties,
And grey oxen
Plowing his father's land.

At L.A.X.

\$17.19

Fifteen dollars and ninety-five cents plus tax,
To be exact,

Is how much I spent on the orchid
That I gave you for Father's Day,

The orchid that took me less than ten minutes
To pick from the Home Depot shelves.

I don't want to be angry.
But everything in
My life is measured out in numbers,
In value.

Arguments are about dollars spent today
And promises of dollars tomorrow.

At the counter, I used a twenty
From the two hundred dollars
You gave me every four months.

You took dozens of folded bills
From an empty coffee can
Saved for rent and food.

This family was not good enough for you
So you went and raised another.

Ba, how much was the
Love you held back
worth?

One orchid.

You saved: Everything you did not live up to;
 Subtract a bag of rice you bought
 One of those weeks.

APPLE

Month's end came
Rent check
Counted
Coins instead of
Bills.
Don't dig for gold,
Reach for a
Silver apple.
One a day
Will send the doctor
Away.
No residency.
I took one bite
Of the juicy
Fruit
And plucked its
Single leaf.
The core is worth billions.
Will mine
Take away shame
Of borrowing bills,
Or selling my freeway feet?
Peel my Fuji
Peak of
Season skin
With air
Or books.
Take a bite.
I'm seedless.

ORCHID GARDEN

I heard your footsteps in the morning. You backed your car out slowly.

You thought no one saw you leave. I did.

When we drove to Home Depot, I saw a light brown '88 Camry that looked exactly like yours. I asked mom if that was your car? She answered, No.

I wanted to follow you. But I didn't want to see what you were hiding.

You took me to the orchid garden once. The Home Depot orchid was not good enough for you. In the garden, there were hundreds of orchids in empty soda bottles with ripped labels. Not like your garden. Each had its own hand carved tree root pot.

The orchids in the garden lined up waiting to be bought. They did not look like mine. Their petals were bigger. Their roots were exposed. The flowers were pink like mine.

You walked past three orchids with pale fuchsia flowers and picked a yellow one to take home.

MOONCAKE LANTERNS

I try to find my father in
The narrow streets of the city
Of massacre,
Ho Chi Minh.
A red lantern hangs from the grip
Of this forgotten son.
Holding onto a mooncake,
I walk down the dirt pavement.
The red yolk dissolves
Between my curled fingers.
By a corner, I see my father
Standing next to a whore
He calls his goddaughter.
I have no sisters, I yell.
The mooncake breaks
Between my clenched fingers.
He does not hear me
For he is lost.
I throw my mooncake at
The back of his head.
The pieces crumble to the ground.

CHAOS BIRD

A house is left in shambles
And chaos when
An owl with peppered salt
Feathers visits a home
With no fence.

My mother calls the woman
An owl monk.
She visited our house
Once, and ever since, you have
Not forgotten her,
An exile from the
Temples of the Nine Mountains.

You used wood from our house
To build her a fence because
You think she is a worshipper
Of Buddha. Her hair is shaven,
But the tips of feathers' shafts
Can be seen by everyone
But you.

She has been kicked out
Of many Temples
Because she cruelly schemes men –
Fathers.
But she is scared that
She is running out of her own

Short
Black
Strands

To make a new nest on top
Of the next home
Left to crumble.

You sat and watched as
The owl flies to a
Fenceless house.

Ours.

BIRTH NAME

I.

At birth,
I was named Minh
In hopes I would
Be smart.
But I did not live up to my name.
Because all my life I thought you cared
About your family.
I was stupid to believe you thought of me
When you left a cherimoya in my room;
Black seeds spilling out of white flesh.
Now I know you only left the fruit
Because you felt guilty
For raising another family.

II.

Duc.

You told me it meant
The inheritor of the family's good karma.
But I inherited
From you
A crumpling family
Left behind.
Buddha is punishing me
For all the ill
Deeds you have done.
And my punishment
To live
A father-
Less life.

III.

Pham.

I once was proud of this name.
It belonged to a man
I thought was strong.
But you soiled it with your selfish
Day dreams
Of life with another woman.
Now I want to change my name
On my wedding day.
I am sad that grandpa will not be there,
But I am happy that I will not see your face.
When I use grandpa's ring
I know he is proud.

UNFIXED DENTS

I walked into the garage and saw your power saw
Blocking my way. A nail hid under my tire. I picked it up
Threw it in a corner. It fell down a pile of your old tool.
I'm glad I did not punctured my tires because I would
Have to hear the sound of air leaking out slowly
Until it was too late on the freeway.

When I backed up, the first thing I saw was
Your car sticking out of the curve. The trunk
Smashed in from your recent accident. I tried
To take your hammer to fix the dent,
For you. But you never taught me how to grip
A hammer tight enough. It kept falling out of my hand,
I heard the sound of metal hitting the concrete.

When I got home I grabbed your keys from an altar.
I walked out to move your car. But when I looked around,
There were no spaces left.

FATHER AT WALMART

I tried to find my father
In the parking lot at Walmart.
I looked for a beige Camry
With a license plate whose
Registration sticker
Was marred by slash marks
From a carpenter's nail.
I heard the sound of a cart that was heavy
Mixed with steps that were light.
I thought it was him.
There was a man with his back hunched,
Pushing his belongings over to the dumpster,
Looking to replace what he had
With new trash.
The shadow of the man tricked my eyes.
His skin sun-torn;
Wearing clothes from Ross.
I called out "Ba." But he did not look up.
I knew my father was gone.

HEIRLOOM

I know you want to take back grandpa's wedding ring
But how can you take a dead man's ring from your own son's finger?
Grandpa gave me the ring because he's proud of me.
He hangs my awards on the cabinet door
To show people from our neighborhood
Who he's proud of.
You looked for your name on those awards.
You could not find it
You tried to take my ring to put it on your fingers.
But they were too thick— from greed—
Because one wife was not enough for you
So you left to find another.
When I was left to mend our family
I asked myself
How could someone like grandpa
Created someone like you.

RESPECTFUL

I don't know why these words come out when I think of you.
I don't know why these words come out when I think of you.
I never speak these words: shit, du ma, bastard, and other foul ones.
I keep thinking of people misreading my poems as ugly, stupid words
a son writes to his father because the father broke the son's heart.
You taught me to be strong, but all I am is weak.
Because you are weak. These words cannot tell you how hurt I am.
I don't know what I would say to you if I saw you again.
The last time you were in our home you called me Son but I could not call you Ba.
I walked away. The man who stood in front of me
was no longer the father I loved.
These words come out because in our language I don't know how to say
I no longer respect
You.

ICE CREAM SANDWICHES

Maybe when I have kids
I will forgive you.
When I look into my children's eyes
I will think of the time
You took me
For ice cream sandwiches.
You let me take a bite of
Purple taro scoops
With condensed milk.
Maybe when they are born
You will look into their
Little longan-seed eyes
And see that they are your son's.
The son who sat on the front steps
And watched you drive
Away after finishing
The ice cream sandwich.

BA, LEAVE ME THE ALONE.

I hear fathers cheering their sons
On The Voice and ask,
“Why that was never you?”
All you cared about was some city, lost;
And you walked toward it.
But all it became was some woman
You left your family for.
All it became was a life
Where you are suffering.
I will make sure of it.
I will get a talent
To go on T.V.
And speak Viet
So *ong se* see me,
So *ong se* hear me,
And I hope you cry
When you look at a
Bastard child.
I write about you
Not because I care about you.
I write for that moment
When you see me on the bookshelves
And your tears will fall
When you realize
You do not have this son
Any longer.

YOU ARE BETTER OFF DEAD.

Mom said, I should forget you
And act as if you had died
During the War. But I can't.
Because I know you are out there
Sleeping in an empty lot trying to
Figure out what you have done wrong
To deserve such a life.

At night, I always hear noises
In the backyard and I run down stairs
To look for your shadow scavenging
For scraps near Lucky's dog bowl.
But all I find is the scent of wood chips
From childhood.

I just can't forget you because if I act as
If you had lost your life in Vietnam
Then that would make you a hero
Who died protecting your family.
But you are not. You are just a man
Who left his family after forty years
To chase a woman.

ONLY BY BLOOD

Father, thank you for leaving. I have tried to find a way to tell you that I am gay for ten years. But I was always scared that I would lose you. Now that you have left, I am no longer afraid. I no longer need to name my future son after you, because he will no longer have a grandfather. I do not know how it will feel like to die with no one by your side, but you will know this feeling when you are on your deathbed. You chose this life when you left your wife and sons. And my life has been better ever since.

But I will ask you one question, because you are still my father. Do you miss having a home?

BUDDHA'S ADVICE

Each year I take a
A jar of popsicle sticks
With numbers painted on the tip
To pray for advice from Buddha
At the start of the year
Of the black snake.
With each shake of the aluminum can
A stick is spirited out
Onto the pavement of the temple.
Twenty-nine;
On a piece of onionskin
Paper, the translated words of Buddha's
Blessing. To attain good Karma
I need to forgive.
I have no choice.
It will be hard
Because each day that passes
I hate my father more.
But to move on with my life
I need to listen to these words.

CIGARETTE AND SON

You don't have to tell me
You love me.
I already know
When you say Con,
Son, with your voice raspy
From smoking for decades.

Then you stopped.
I asked you to.
You fought off temptations,

Pick me up
Stick me in your mouth
Take a puff
Blow it out.

At your son
Calling out,

Lift me up, Daddy.
Put me on your feet
Teach me how to dance
For my wedding.

Ba oi, Ba

You don't recognize the word father,
Anymore.
Your fingers,
Index and thumb,
Squeeze the cigarette bud
Kill it on a soft surface.

I still know you love me.

THREE WORDS

I have three words for you,
I am gay.
I know it will be hard
For you to hear, but I am
Telling you because I want
My father to be a part of my life.
It is my way to say
I love you.
I have forgotten how to
Tell you this in our language.
So please take these words
And tape them to the inside
Of your toolbox
So each time you look
For your hammer
You will remember
Your son loves you.

RUSTED WOUNDS

Though all the words
Bled from saw marks
-Rusted-
Inflicted by you.
All I want to tell you is
I miss you (I need my father again).