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I had a dream I woke up inside the house of my mother's dreams.

She runs a finger along the maple wood cabinetry and satin brass pulls. Tót.

Outside, children laugh, a dog barks, and parents discuss some matters. Their voices languish as if through water; I never learn their names.

Where my body ends, and her dream begins, I want to know. I try wriggling out of my stillborn skin; it clings like a widow to ashes. I am nothing but repetition, but grateful beneficiary, I inherit a purpose which is to keep the dream alive at all costs.

To arrive at the house in one piece, thinking it is yours, and there is your mother, and there is your father, and there is your brother. To take your seat by the severed stump of a tamarind tree and soothe the edges with your fingertips.

To say the first sign of splintering began here is to try tracing a mist, like aiming the finger toward a dissolving center, weighing down a cloud with a fist.

Whatever happened, I can tell you the quake began at the center, a center which was no center but an open-mouthed, bottomless weep.

What I remember most was the red carpet: velvet ink spilling from the tongue of a wide staircase and Bó's soft steps to cushion my cries. Our feet pounded, racing against parachutes of plastic bags dropped from the ledge—*again, again, again!*

And a pair of swings: the rusty chains my father gloved in blue plastic so our hands wouldn't bleed. My brother and I clung wild and weightless. I remember no intention of leaving.

*

We caught wind of a better life out there somewhere, somewhere being noiseless streets and white children, well-behaved futures.

So began years of weekends of open houses: San Jose, Sunnyvale, Cupertino, back to Sunnyvale, but the nicer part. Just looking.

When we left I told Trinh don't cry. To not see a person again, a hand I let fall.

Location, location, location. We settled for the house with the blue gate that dangled open on windy days and an ill-placed dividing wall that draped our bedrooms in gloom after two. Meanwhile, my mother hoarded old copies of *Better Homes & Gardens*. Mẹ ngắm thôi.

*

They gutted the thing. Every detail, brand new: French farmhouse cabinetry, stainless steel appliances, crown molding, granite countertops, a top-notch security system, and a fence made of iron. The day my father died of cancer, my mother burst into a botched surgery of exposed plumbing and workers caught mid-hammer—

Finish the house! Finish the house!

There are facts I can't ignore: how my grandmother walked from Tuyên Quang to Hà Nội to sell potatoes, the day the French bombed the road back home, so that's why we don't know that side of the family.

Or how, after eight years in re-education, my grandfather reentered Saigon through an unmarked gate and found the city flipped on an axis of allegiance.

Or how the night I found out about my father, I wept not for his goneness, but because he never got to go back.

Or how a ghost wanders the streets of Sơn Mỹ, drifting from home to home.

Or how a lone mother raises a fist and cradles her child, and a family disappears into marble.

Or how, to deface someone, you need to look them in the eye.

A common mistake is to scan the crowd for familiar faces. Black seas and fine hair form tight-knit giggles. When a girl who looked like me—*Sylvia*—swung around her seat to bare teeth in one bright tree-lined smile, I learned how a body seizes in the glaring sun. By twelve, I knew how to run. On picture day, I faced the mirror, and nobody noticed how many times I lied. I brushed my hair, and my vision filled with bruises: I saw the whites of blondelike smiles. If *Sylvia* could, why couldn't I?

*

As a child, I begged my mother for a necklace under the fluorescence of TJ Maxx. Three strands of stars: a trance, a siren's call. *Thôi! Vớ va vớ vẩn*. Why couldn't I? When my mother pulled the strands from my pocket, she wept, clutching them like rosaries. We feigned innocence. We played nice.

The stars hung in my hunger.

*

In Batesian mimicry, a non-defended, edible species protects itself by copying the warning colors of a defended, toxic species. I take 101 South, 87, 280, and finally exit on Story Road. The clerk sing-songs me inside. I'm looking for a block of bánh chưng. He laughs, turns. *Không!* Too late. Over time, the golden teeth of my pebbled leather reveal *spectacular similarities*, dangling by forearm, dainty with leisure, *model, mimic.*

*

*I need to, I need to, I need to
I need to make you see
Oh, what you mean to me*

When Bác Tuân belts out a rendition of the Beatles classic after dinner, he is singing for me and his own daughter. *I will say the only words I know.* To name a child is to make her known. Michelle is her name is mine. We needed to see, *Michelle*, we needed to mean. When I ask Sylvia why her parents changed her name, she smiles from inside the tight white bond she has with white and blonde friends. She speaks in highlights and sheen. At night, I study photos of white-knit friends and how Sylvia smiles. *I love you, I love you, I looove you!* I look them whites in the eyes. A child looks to her mother. For recognition, a face to mirror: am I shadow or alive?

On Wandering Souls' Day, Buddhists pay tribute to those *for whom no incense burns*, no family to remember them, *desolate, seeking, every night and all*. Bác Lan's apple cheeks brim with two streams that spill into the corners of a smile. *Có thể con không nhận ra*. She presses the pits of stone fruit into my palms, riverbeds breaking: It is possible my father's body is not how I remember him.

Ten years pass. I visit Grand uncle, who brought my father to America. *Ông ơi, Ông biết ai đây không?* The same hefty, sagging head. Embroidered curtains, velveteen blankets stacked on the bed, a portly figure depressing its surface. Heavy as I remember. And the long pause he takes. *Không!*

Your eyes are failing, isn't that right, Ông?

Isn't that right?

Hold the integrity of the space you leave behind, my dance teacher warns.

Otherwise, your limbs

flail

the body

spirals

Who is the real you and who is the fake you, asks long-limbed, blue-eyed friend. Distressed blonde blade of grass tilting. She notes my eyes, my eyes she has never seen my eyes like that, she means evil. Bad girl bad girl.

Two-faced crook wants honest connection wants no special accommodations I am rather confused, a stressed mimetic. She wants avatar to match real life she means either predictable or exaggerated my whole ethnic self she says she wants but please, no evil eyes. Stressing her sensibilities *Don't you know who I am?*

*

Now, how to leave at the door the aftermath of a bomb. Consider the terms of entry: pomp and circumstance, sunbaked heads bobbing with salvific possibility, wide open arms of gracious host. Either folded into the bosom of America or *desolate, seeking, every night and all*.

*

cranking the steel groan grinds me either/or. either lose
a loved one or lose a loved one. either lose your family or lose

your family. either lose your self or lose your self why
these not be one/the same?

to tame the heehee hyena hysterics of an other, i fumble
nervous nervous for the right face

which one is it now?

this peculiar bothness: a hug here, a cheer there, a cavity
welling. laughing and weeping, i do i do i do.

In 2008, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam come to an agreement on the ACCEPTANCE of the RETURN of VIETNAMESE CITIZENS. A *precarity*. A *processing*. It costs \$150 to return. A *wish* to establish *friendly relations*, ejecting then ejecting again please make up your mind? Now: a unilateral interpretation: wishy-washy / comrades / criminal aliens / wanting / not wanting / flip-flop / hopscotch / ashes / ashes

We all fall down!

*

When I return, the xe ôm driver who said *call me Chú* and *let me take that*, bag full of belongings, gone. *Khờ*—my mother suspected that I would lose my belongings, here and there. I'm left in the middle of the souvenir market with a handful of facsimiles.

*

Disownment: dis ownment: what I feared most: no longer being possessed. *Cứ việc* shoo shoo and the back faces you, bosom over colander, water running cold.

Accommodations: a room, group of rooms, or building. For example: The cost includes accommodations. Also a convenient arrangement, settlement or compromise. For example: I am happy to accommodate you as long as you are willing to accept the terms.

I try twice to express my complaints. First, in abstractions: I play dead, pray to fall asleep, really to disappear. Okay concrete I try, *white culture*, white hosts and white house, *not you, no offense* gently here and there. Accommodations considered.

To bear, to hold. To go all evil eye, sassy raw rubs on the accommodations. Starts to wear on a body alone. I wake to the blank stare of cream-colored walls. My throat closes, my eyes water, I shove off both shoulders heaving.

Gracious host, alarmed by my whole self hurtling out of nowhere, pivots her whole self into the bedroom and shuts the door. Impossible.

I see clearly my body and the whites of her eyes, the inconvenience of both in the same room, an arrangement, a compromise, what we pay for.

Sương không?

In 1975, a two-hundred-year-old tamarind tree was axed in the gut. Its trunk was dragged across the parking lot of the U.S. Embassy so that the Jolly Green Giant could prepare for landing. Hundreds of Southern Vietnamese clamored to enter the embassy gates. *We had no future there*, my aunt says, mouth all panic and flight. Surroundings change, but the body remains. This is how a polished place can hide the aftermath of a bomb.

Nightfall descends on a path I can't cross. Behind me, an excruciating blankness, no hook to hang my coat. I linger in the doorway of my childhood bedroom. Just looking.

I leave any place where I don't feel at home, the young girl tells me. I'm afraid she will keep leaving places, creating places where she doesn't belong. I tell her *all I can remember are the stars*. That the ocean where we lose everything is the same ocean that holds us afloat. I see her again, the distant shore, and the sufficiency of the stars.