Inside Out & Back Again

THANHHHA LAI
To the millions of refugees in the world,
may you each find a home
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1976: Year of the Dragon

Author’s Note

Acknowledgments

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Credits

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About the Publisher
PART I
Today is Tết,
the first day
of the lunar calendar.

Every Tết
we eat sugary lotus seeds
and glutinous rice cakes.
We wear all new clothes,
even underneath.

Mother warns
how we act today
foretells the whole year.

Everyone must smile
no matter how we feel.

No one can sweep,
for why sweep away hope?
No one can splash water,
for why splash away joy?

Today
we all gain one year in age,
no matter the date we were born.
Tết, our New Year’s,
doubles as everyone’s birthday.
Now I am ten, learning
to embroider circular stitches,
to calculate fractions into percentages,
to nurse my papaya tree to bear many fruits.

But last night I pouted
when Mother insisted
one of my brothers
must rise first
this morning
to bless our house
because only male feet
can bring luck.

An old, angry knot
expanded in my throat.

I decided
to wake before dawn
and tap my big toe

to the tile floor
first.

Not even Mother,
sleeping beside me, knew.

*February 11
Tết*
Every new year Mother visits the I Ching Teller of Fate. This year he predicts our lives will twist inside out.

Maybe soldiers will no longer patrol our neighborhood, maybe I can jump rope after dark, maybe the whistles that tell Mother to push us under the bed will stop screeching.

But I heard on the playground this year’s bánh chưng, eaten only during Tết, will be smeared in blood.

The war is coming closer to home.

February 12
My name is Hà.

Brother Quang remembers
I was as red and fat
as a baby hippopotamus
when he first saw me,
inspiring the name
Hà Mã,
River Horse.

Brother Vũ screams, Hà Ya,
and makes me jump
every time
he breaks wood or bricks
in imitation of Bruce Lee.

Brother Khôi calls me
Mother’s Tail
because I’m always
three steps from her.

I can’t make my brothers
go live elsewhere,
but I can
hide their sandals.

We each have but one pair,
much needed
during this dry season
when the earth stings.
Mother tells me
to ignore my brothers.

We named you Kim Hà,
after the Golden (Kim) River (Hà),
where Father and I
once strolled in the evenings.

My parents had no idea
what three older brothers
can do
to the simple name
Hà.

Mother tells me,
They tease you
because they adore you.

She’s wrong,
but I still love
being near her, even more than I love

my papaya tree.
I will offer her
its first fruit.

Every day
Papaya Tree

It grew from a seed
I flicked into
the back garden.

A seed like
a fish eye,
slippery
shiny
black.

The tree has grown
twice as tall
as I stand
on tippy toes.

Brother Khôi spotted
the first white blossom.
Four years older,
he can see higher.

Brother Vũ later found
a baby papaya
the size of a fist
clinging to the trunk.

At eighteen,
he can see that much higher.
Brother Quang is oldest, 
twenty-one and studying engineering. 
Who knows what he will notice  
before me?

I vow  
to rise first every morning  
to stare at the dew  
on the green fruit  
shaped like a lightbulb.

I will be the first  
to witness its ripening.

Mid-February
My best friend TiTi
is crying hard,
snotting the hem
of her pink fluffy blouse.

Her two brothers
also are sniffling
inside their car
packed to the roof
with suitcases.

TiTi shoves into my hand
a tin of flower seeds
we gathered last fall.
We hoped to plant them
together.

She waves from the back window
of their rabbit-shaped car.
Her tears mix with long strands of hair,
long hair I wish I had.

I would still be standing there
crying and waving to nothing

if Brother Khôi hadn’t come
to take my hand.
They’re heading to Vũng Tàu, he says, where the rich go to flee Vietnam on cruise ships.

I’m glad we’ve become poor so we can stay.

Early March
Missing in Action

Father left home
on a navy mission
on this day
nine years ago
when I was almost one.

He was captured
on Route 1
an hour south of the city
by moped.

That’s all we know.

This day
Mother prepares an altar
to chant for his return,
offering fruit,
incense,
tuberoses,
and glutinous rice.

She displays his portrait
taken during Tết
the year he disappeared.

How peaceful he looks,
smiling,
peacock tails
at the corners
of his eyes.
Each of us bows
and wishes
and hopes
and prays.

Everything on the altar
remains for the day
except the portrait.
Mother locks it away
as soon as her chant ends.

She cannot bear
to look into Father’s
forever-young
eyes.

March 10
On weekdays
Mother’s a secretary
in a navy office,
trusted to count out
salaries in cash
at the end of each month.

At night
she stays up late
designing and cutting
baby clothes
to give to seamstresses.

A few years ago
she made enough money
to consider
buying a car.

On weekends
she takes me to market stalls,
dropping off the clothes
and trying to collect
on last week’s goods.

Hardly anyone buys anymore,
she says.
People can barely afford food.

Still,
she continues to try.
Brother Khôi
is mad at Mother
for taking his hen’s
eggs.

The hen gives
one egg
every day and a half.

We take turns
eating them.

Brother Khôi
refuses to eat his,
putting each under a lamp
in hopes of
a chick.

I should side with
my most tolerable brother,
but I love a soft yolk
to dip bread.

Mother says
if the price of eggs

were not the price of rice,
and the price of rice
were not the price of gasoline,
and the price of gasoline
were not the price of gold,
then of course
Brother Khôi
could continue hatching eggs.

She’s sorry.
Every Friday
in Miss Xinh’s class
we talk about
current news.

But when we keep talking about
how close the Communists
have gotten to Saigon,
how much prices have gone up
since American soldiers left,
how many distant bombs
were heard the previous night,
Miss Xinh finally says no more.

From now on
Fridays
will be for
happy news.

No one has anything
to say.

March 21
This year
I have afternoon classes,
plus Saturdays.
We attend in shifts
so everyone can fit
into school.

Mornings free,
Mother trusts me
to shop at the open market.

Last September
she would give me
fifty đồng
to buy one hundred grams of pork,
a bushel of water spinach,
five cubes of tofu.

But I told no one
I was buying
ninety-nine grams of pork,
seven-eighths of a bushel of spinach,
four and three-quarter cubes of tofu.
Merchants frowned at
Mother’s strange instructions.

The money saved
bought
a pouch of toasted coconut,
one sugary fried dough,
two crunchy mung bean cookies.
Now it takes two hundred đồng to buy the same things.

I still buy less pork, allowing myself just the fried dough.

No one knows and I feel smart.

_Late March_
Two More Papayas

I see them first.

Two green thumbs
that will grow into
orange-yellow delights
smelling of summer.

Middle sweet
between a mango and a pear.

Soft as a yam
gliding down
after three easy,
thrilling chews.

April 5
I don’t know
any more about Father
than the small things
Mother lets slip.

He loved stewed eels,
*paté chaud* pastries,
and of course his children,
so much that he
grew teary
watching us sleep.

He hated the afternoon sun,
the color brown,
and cold rice.

Brother Quang remembers
Father often said
*tuyê t sút*,
the Vietnamese way
to pronounce the French phrase
*tout de suite* 
meaning *right away*.

Mother would laugh

when Father followed her
around the kitchen
repeating,
*I’m starved for stewed eel,*
Sometimes I whisper *tuyệt sút* to myself
to pretend
I know him.

I would never say *tuyệt sút*
in front of Mother.
None of us would want
to make her sadder
than she already is.

*Every day*
Brother Quang races home from class, throws down his bicycle, exhausted, no longer able to afford gasoline for his moped.

Unbelievable, he screams, and turns on the TV.

A pilot for South Vietnam bombed the presidential palace downtown that afternoon. Afterward the pilot flew north and received a medal.

The news says the pilot has been a spy for the Communists for years.

The Communists captured Father, so why would any pilot choose their side?
Brother Quang says,
*One cannot justify war
unless each side
flaunts its own
blind conviction.*

Since starting college,
he shows off even more
with tangled words.

I start to say so,
but Mother pats my hand,
her signal for me to calm down.

*April 8*
I, the youngest,
get to celebrate
my actual birthday
even though I turned
a year older
like everyone else
at Têt.

I, the only daughter,
usually get roasted chicken,
dried bamboo soup,
and all-I-can-eat pudding.

This year,
Mother manages only
banana tapioca
and my favorite
black sesame candy.

She makes up for it
by allowing
one wish.

I dye my mouth
sugary black
and insist on
stories.
It’s not easy
to persuade Mother
to tell of her girlhood
in the North,
where her grandmother’s land
stretched farther than
doves could fly,
where looking pretty
and writing poetry
were her only duties.

She was promised to Father
at five.
They married at sixteen,
earlier than expected.
Everyone’s future changed
upon learning the name
Hồ Chí Minh.

Change meant
land was taken away,
houses now belonged
to the state,
servants gained power
as fighters.

The country divided in half.

Mother and Father came south,
convinced it would be
easier to breathe
away from Communism.

Her father was to follow,
but he was waiting for his son,
who was waiting for his wife,
who was waiting to deliver a child
in its last week
in her belly.

The same week,
North and South
closed their doors.
No more migration.
No more letters.
No more family.

At this point,
Mother closes her eyes,

eyes that resemble no one else’s,
sunken and deep like Westerners’
yet almond-shaped like ours.
I always wish for her eyes,
but Mother says no.
Eyes like hers can’t help
but carry sadness;
even as a child
her parents were alarmed
by the weight in her eyes.

I want to hear more,
but nothing,
not even my pouts,
can make Mother open her eyes
and tell more.

April 10
Wishes I keep to myself:

Wish I could do what boys do and let the sun darken my skin, and scars grid my knees.

Wish I could let my hair grow, but Mother says the shorter the better to beat Saigon’s heat and lice.

Wish I could lose my chubby cheeks.

Wish I could stay calm no matter what my brothers say.

Wish Mother would stop chiding me to stay calm, which makes it worse.

Wish I had a sister to jump rope with and sew doll clothes and hug for warmth in the middle of the night.

Wish Father would come home
so I can stop daydreaming
that he will appear
in my classroom
in a white navy uniform
and extend his hand toward me
for all my classmates to see.

Mostly I wish
Father would appear in our doorway
and make Mother’s lips
curl upward,
lifting them from
a permanent frown
of worries.

April 10
Night
Every spring
President Thiệu
holds a long long long
ceremony to comfort
war wives.

Mother and I go because
after President Thiệu’s
talk talk talk—
of winning the war,
of democracy,
of our fathers’ bravery—
each family gets
five kilos of sugar,
ten kilos of rice,
and a small jug of
vegetable oil.

Inside the cyclo
Mother crosses her legs
so I can fit beside her.
The breeze still cool,
we bounce across the bridge
shaped like a crescent moon
where I’m not to go by myself.

Mother smells of lavender
and warmth;
she’s so beautiful
even if
her cheeks are too hollow,
her mouth too dark with worries.
Despite warnings, 
I still want her sunken eyes.

Before I see it, 
I hear downtown, 
thick with beeps, 
shouts, police whistles. 
Everywhere, 
mopeds and bicycles 
race down the wide road, 
moving out of the way 
only when a truck 
honks and mows straight down 
the middle of the lane.

We get out 
in front of an open market. 
We push our way to 
a bánh cuốn stand. 
I love watching

the spread of rice flour on cloth, 
stretched over a steaming pot. 
Like magic a crepe forms 
to be filled with shrimp 
and eaten with 
cucumber and bean sprouts.

It tastes even better 
than it looks. 
While my mouth is full, 
the noises of the market 
silence themselves, 
letting me and my bánh cuốn 
float.

We squeeze ourselves 
out of the market,
toward the presidential palace.

We stand in line;
for even longer
we sit on hot metal benches
facing the podium.

My white cotton
hat and Mother’s flowery umbrella
are nothing
against the afternoon sun,
shooting rays into
my short short hair.

I’m dizzy
and thirsty;
the fish sauce
in the bánh cuốn
was very salty.

Mother gives me a tamarind candy.
I have never been
so thrilled
to drink my saliva.

Finally President Thiệu appears,
tan and sweaty.
*We know you have suffered.*
*I thank you,*
*your country thanks you.*

Then he cries actual tears,
unwiped, facing the cameras.
Mother clicks her tongue:

*Tears of an ugly fish.*

I know that to mean
fake tears of a crocodile.

*April 12*
Twisting Twisting

Mother measures
rice grains
left in the bin.
Not enough to last
till payday
at the end of the month.

Her brows
twist like laundry
being wrung dry.

Yam and manioc
taste lovely
blended with rice,
she says, and smiles,
as if I don’t know
how the poor
fill their children’s bellies.

April 13
A siren screams
over Miss Xinh’s voice
in the middle of a lesson
on smiley and bald
President Ford.

We all know it’s bad news.

School’s now closed;
everyone must go home
a month too soon.

I’m mad and pinch the girl
who shares my desk.
Tram is half my size,
so skinny and nervous.

Our mothers are friends.
She will tell on me.
She always tells on me.

Mother will again
scold me to be gentle.

I need time
to finish this riddle:
A man usually rides his bike
9 kilometers per hour,
yet the wind slows him
to 6.76 kilometers
for 26 minutes
and 5.55 kilometers
for 10;
how long until he gets home
11.54 kilometers away?

The first to solve it
gets the sweet potato plant
sprouting at the window.
I want to plant it
beside my papaya tree,
where vines can climb
and shade ripening fruit.

Again I pinch Tram,
knowing the plant
will be awarded
today
to the teacher’s pet,

who is always
skinny and nervous
and never me.

April 14
Five papayas
the sizes of
my head,
a knee,
two elbows,
and a thumb
cling to the trunk.

Still green
but promising.

April 15
Uncle Sơn,
Father’s best friend,
visits us.

He’s short, dark, and smiley,
not tall, thin, and serious
like Father in photographs.
Still, when classmates
ask about my father,
sometimes short and smiley
come to mind
before I can stop it.

Uncle Sơn goes straight
to the kitchen,
where the back door opens into
an alley.
Unbelievable luck!
This door bypasses the navy checkpoint
and leads straight to the port.

I will not risk
fleeing with my children
on a rickety boat.

Would a navy ship
meet your approval?

As if the navy
would abandon its country?
There won’t be a South Vietnam left to abandon.

You really believe we can leave?

When the time comes, this house is our bridge to the sea.

April 16
Should We?

Mother calls a family meeting.

Ông Xuân has sold leaves of gold to buy twelve airplane tickets.

Bà Nam has a van ready to load twenty-five relatives toward the coast.

Mother asks us, Should we leave our home?

Brother Quang says, How can we scramble away like rats, without honor; without dignity, when everyone must help rebuild the country?

Brother Khôi says, What if Father comes home and finds his family gone?

Brother Vũ says, Yes, we must go.
Everyone knows he dreams
of touching the same ground
where Bruce Lee walked.

Mother twists her brows.
I’ve lived in the North.
At first, not much will happen,
then suddenly Quang
will be asked to leave college.
Hà will come home
chanting the slogans
of Hồ Chí Minh,
and Khôi will be rewarded
for reporting to his teacher
everything we say in the house.

Her brows twist
so much
we hush.

April 17
Brother Khôi shakes me
before dawn.

I follow him
to the back garden.
In his palm chirps
a downy yellow fuzz,
just hatched.

He presses his palm
against my squeal.

No matter what Mother decides,
we are not to leave.
I must protect my chick
and you your papayas.

He holds out his pinky
and stares
stares
stares
until I extend mine
and we hook.

April 18
Dinnertime
I help Mother
peel sweet potatoes
to stretch the rice.

I start to chop off a potato’s end
as wide as a thumbnail,
then decide to slice off only a sliver.

I am proud of my ability to save until I see tears in Mother’s deep eyes.

You deserve to grow up where you don’t worry about saving half a bite of sweet potato.

April 19
Early Monsoon

We pretend
the monsoon
has come early.

In the distance
bombs
explode like thunder,
slashes
lighten the sky,
gunfire
falls like rain.

Distant
yet within ears,
within eyes.

Not that far away
after all.

April 20
On TV President Thiệu
looks sad and yellow;
what has happened to his tan?

His eyes brim with tears;
this time they look real.
*I can no longer be your president
but I will never leave my people
or our country.*

Mother lifts one brow,
what she does
when she thinks
I’m lying.

*April 21*
Uncle Sơn returns and tells us to be ready to leave any day. Don’t tell anyone, or all of Saigon will storm the port. Only navy families can board the ships.

Uncle Sơn and Father graduated in the same navy class. It was mere luck that Uncle Sơn didn’t go on the mission where Father was captured.

Mother pulls me close and pats my head. Father watches over us even if he’s not here.

Mother tells me she and Father have a pact. If war should separate them, they know to find each other through Father’s ancestral home in the North.
Crisscrossed Packs

Pedal, pedal
Mother’s feet
push the sewing machine.
The faster she pedals
the faster stitches appear
on heavy brown cloth.

Two rectangles
make a pack.
A long strip
makes a handle
makes a handle
to be strapped across
the wearer’s chest.

Hours later
the stitches appear
in slow motion,
the needle a worm
laying tiny eggs
that sink into brown cloth.
The tired worm
reproduces much more slowly
at the end of the day
than at the beginning
when Mother started

the first of five bags.

Brother Khôi says too loudly,
Make only three.
Mother goes
to a high shelf,
bringing back Father’s portrait.

*Come with us*
*or we’ll all stay.*  
*Think, my son;*
*your action will determine*
*our future.*

Mother knows this son
cannot stand to hurt
anyone,
anything.

*Look at Father.*  
*Come with us*
*so Father*
*will be proud*
*you obeyed your mother*
*while he’s not here.*

I look at my toes,
feeling Brother Khôi’s eyes
burn into my scalp.

I also feel him slowly nodding.

Who can go against
a mother
who has become gaunt like bark
from raising four children alone?

*April 26*
Into each pack:
one pair of pants,
one pair of shorts,
three pairs of underwear,
two shirts,
sandals,
toothbrush and paste,
soap,
ten palms of rice grains,
three clumps of cooked rice,
one choice.

I choose my doll,
onece lent to a neighbor
who left it outside,
where mice bit
her left cheek
and right thumb.

I love her more
for her scars.

I dress her
in a red and white dress
with matching hat and booties
that Mother knitted.

April 27
Ten gold-rimmed glasses
Father brought back from America
where he trained before I was born.

Brother Quang’s
report cards,
each ranking him first in class,
beginning in kindergarten.

Vines of bougainvillea
fully in bloom,
burgundy and white
like the colors
of our house.

Vines of jasmine
in front of every window
that remind Mother
of the North.

A cowboy leather belt
Brother Vũ sewed
on Mother’s machine

and broke her needle.
That was when
he adored
Johnny Cash
more than
Bruce Lee.
A row of glass jars
Brother Khôi used
to raise fighting fish.

Two hooks
and the hammock
where I nap.

Photographs:
every Tết at the zoo,
Father in his youth,
Mother in her youth,
baby pictures,
where you can’t tell whose bottom
is exposed for all the world to see.

Mother chooses ten
and burns the rest.

We cannot leave
evidence of Father’s life
that might hurt him.
Wet and Crying

My biggest papaya
is light yellow,
still flecked with green.

Brother Vũ wants
to cut it down,
saying it’s better than
letting the Communists have it.

Mother says yellow papaya
tastes lovely
dipped in chili salt.
You children should eat
fresh fruit
while you can.

Brother Vũ chops;
the head falls;
a silver blade slices.

Black seeds spill
like clusters of eyes,
rich and crying.
Sour Backs

At the port
we find out
there’s no such thing
as a secret
among the Vietnamese.

Thousands
found out
about the navy ships
ready to abandon the navy.

Uncle Sơn flares elbows into wings,
lunges forward
protecting his children.

But our family sticks together
like wet pages.
I see nothing but backs
sour and sweaty.

Brother Vũ steps up,
placing Mother in front of him
and lifting me
onto his shoulders.

His palms press
Brothers Quang and Khôi
forward.
I promise myself
to never again
make fun of
Bruce Lee.

April 29
Afternoon
We climb on
and claim a space
of two straw mats
under the deck,
enough for us five
to lie side by side.

By sunset our space
is one straw mat,
enough for us five
to huddle together.

Bodies cram
every centimeter
below deck,
then every centimeter
on deck.

Everyone knows the ship
could sink,
unable to hold
the piles of bodies
that keep crawling on
like raging ants
from a disrupted nest.

But no one
is heartless enough
to say
stop
because what if
they had been
stopped
before their turn?

April 29
Sunset
In the Dark

Uncle Sơn visits
and whispers to Mother.

We follow Mother
who follows Uncle Sơn
who leads his family
up to the deck
and off the ship.

It has been said
the ship next door
has a better engine,
more water,
endless fuel,
countless salty eggs.

Uncle Sơn lingers
without getting on
the new ship;
so do we.

Hordes pour
by us,
beyond us.

Above us
bombs pierce the sky.
Red and green flares
explode like fireworks.
All lights are off
so the port will not be
a target.

In the dark
a nudge here
a nudge there
and we end up
back on the first ship
in the same spot
with two mats.

Without lights
our ship glides out to sea,
emptied of half its passengers.

April 29
Near midnight
Saigon Is Gone

I listen to
the swish, swish
of Mother’s handheld fan,
the whispers among adults,
the bombs in the ever greater distance.

The commander has ordered
everyone below deck
even though he has chosen
a safe river route
to connect to the sea,
avoiding the obvious escape path
through Vũng Tàu,
where the Communists are dropping
all the bombs they have left.

I hope TiTi got out.

Mother is sick
with waves in her stomach
even though the ship
barely creeps along.

We hear a helicopter
circling circling

near our ship.
People run and scream,  
Communists!

Our ship dips low  
as the crowd runs to the left,  
and then to the right.

This is not helping Mother.

I wish they would stand still  
and hush.

The commander is talking:  
*Do not be frightened!*  
*It’s a pilot for our side*  
*who has jumped into the water,*  
*letting his helicopter*  
*plunge in behind him.*

The pilot  
appears below deck,  
wet and shaking.

He salutes the commander  
and shouts,

*At noon today the Communists*  
*crashed their tanks*  
*through the gates*  
*of the presidential palace*  
*and planted on the roof*  
*a flag with one huge star.*

Then he adds
what no one wants to hear:

It’s over;
Saigon is gone.

April 30
Late afternoon
PART II
At Sea
Our ship creeps along
the river route
without lights
without cooking
without bathrooms.

We are told
to sip water
only when we must
so our bodies
can stop needing.

Mine won’t listen.

Mother sighs.

I don’t blame her,
having a daughter
who’s either
dying of thirst
or demanding release.

Other girls
must be made
of bamboo,

bending whichever way
they are told.
Mother tells Uncle Sön
I need a bathroom.

We are allowed
into the commander’s cabin,
where the bathroom is
so white and clean,
so worth the embarrassment.

May 1
S-l-o-w-l-y

I nibble on
the last clump
of cooked rice
from my sack.

Hard and moldy,
yet chewy and sweet
inside.

I chew each grain
s-l-o-w-l-y.

I hear others chew
but have never seen
anyone actually eating.

No one has offered
to share
what I smell:
sardines, dried durian,
salted eggs, toasted sesame.
I lean toward
the family
on the next mat.

Mother firmly
shakes her head.
She looks so sad
as she pats
my hand.
On the third day
we join the sea
toward Thailand.

The commander says
it’s safe enough
for his men to cook,
for us to go above deck,
for all to smile a little.

He says there’s enough
rice and water
for three weeks,
but rescue should happen
much earlier.

*Do not worry,*
*ships from all countries*
*are out looking for us.*

Morning, noon, and night
we each get
one clump of rice,
small, medium, large,
according to our height,

plus one cup of water
no matter our size.
The first hot bite
of freshly cooked rice,
plump and nutty,
makes me imagine
the taste of ripe papaya
although one has nothing
to do with the other.
Mother cannot allow idle children, hers or anyone else’s.

After one week on the ship Brother Quang begins English lessons.

I wish he would keep it to: 

*How are you?* 
*This is a pen.* 

But when an adult is not there he says, 

*We must consider the shame of abandoning our own country and begging toward the unknown where we will all begin again at the lowest level on the social scale.* 

It’s better in the afternoons with Brother Vū, who just wants us to do front kicks and back kicks, at times adding one-two punches.
Brother Khôi gets to monitor lines for the bathrooms, where bottoms stick out to the sea behind blankets blowing in the wind.

When not in class I have to stay within sight of Mother, like a baby.

Mother gives me her writing pad.
*Write tiny,*
*there’s but one pad.*

Writing becomes boring, so I draw over my words.

Pouches of pan-fried shredded coconut
Tamarind paste on banana leaf
Steamed corn on the cob
Rounds of fried dough
Wedges of pineapple on a stick
And of course cubes of papaya tender and shiny.

Mother smoothes back my hair, knowing the pain of a girl who loves snacks but is stranded on a ship.

May 7
Once Knew

Water, water, water
everywhere
making me think
land is just something
I once knew
like

napping on a hammock

bathing without salt

watching Mother write

laughing for no reason

kicking up powdery dirt

and

wearing clean nightclothes
smelling of the sun.

May 12
Brother Khôi stinks; 
we can’t ignore it.

He stews and sweats 
in a jacket 
he won’t take off.

Forced to sponge-wipe 
twice a day, 
he wraps the jacket 
around his waist.

He keeps clutching something 
in the left pocket, 
where the stench grows.

Neighbors complain, 
even the ones 
eight mats away, 
saying it’s bad enough 
being trapped 
in putrid, hot air 
made from fermented bodies 
and oily sweat, 
must everybody 
also endure 
something rotten?
Finally Brother Vũ holds Brother Khôi down and forces him to open his hand.

A flattened chick lies crooked, neck dangling off his palm.

The chick had not a chance after we shoved for hours to board.

Brother Khôi screams, kicks everything off our mats. Brother Quang carries him above deck.

Quiet.

May 13
After two weeks at sea
the commander calls
all of us above deck
for a formal lowering of
our yellow flag
with three red stripes.

South Vietnam no longer exists.

One woman tries to throw
herself overboard,
screaming that without a country
she cannot live.
As they wrestle her down,
a man stabs his heart
with a toothbrush.

I don’t know them,
so their pain seems unreal
next to Brother Khôi’s,
whose eyes are as wild
as those of his broken chick.

I hold his hand:
*Come with me.*

He doesn’t resist.
Alone
at the back of the ship
I open Mother’s white handkerchief.
Inside lies my mouse-bitten doll,
her arms wrapped around
the limp fuzzy body of his chick.

I tie it all into a bundle.

Brother Khôi nods
and I smile,
but I regret
not having my doll
as soon as the white bundle
sinks into the sea.

May 14
In the middle
of the night
our ship stops.

Mother hugs me,
hearts drumming
as one.

If the Communists
catch us fleeing,
it’s a million times worse
than staying at home.

After many shouts
and much time
the ship moves forward
with just one engine.

Mother would not
release me.

The commander says,
*Thailand is much farther
on one engine.*
*It was risky to take
the river route.*
*We escaped bombs*
but missed the rescue ships.

The commander decides
the ration is now
half a clump of rice
only at morning and night,
and one cup of water
all day.

Sip,
he says,
and don’t waste strength
moving around
because it’s impossible
to predict
how much longer
we will
be floating.

May 16
During the day
the deck belongs
to men and children.

At nightfall
women make their way up.

In single files
they sponge-bathe
and relieve themselves behind blanket curtains.

I always stand in line with Mother.

Every night
she points upward.
At least
the moon remains unchanged.

Your father could be looking at the same round moon.
He may already understand
we will wait for him across the world.
I feel guilty, having not once thought of Father.

I can’t wish for him to appear until I know where we’ll be.

May 18
The horn on our ship
blows and blows,
waking everyone
from a week-long nap.

A sure answer,
honk honk,
seems close enough
and real enough
to call everyone on deck.

A gigantic ship
with an American flag
moves closer.
Men in white uniform
wave and smile.

Our commander wears
his navy jacket and hat,
so white and so crisp.

Now I realize
why I like him so much.
In uniform,
he looks just like Father.

He boards the other ship,
salutes and shakes hands
with a man whose hair
grows on his face
not on his head
in the color of flames.

I had not known
such hair was possible.

We clap and clap
as the ships draw together
and kiss.

Boxes and boxes
pass onto our deck.
Oranges, apples, bananas,
cold sweet bubbly drinks,
chocolate drops, fruity gum.

The American ship
tows ours
with a steel braid
thick as my body.

Our rescue now certain,
the party blossoms
as food suddenly
comes up from below.
Ramen noodles, beef jerky,
dried shrimp, butter biscuits,
tamarind pods, canned fish,
and drums and drums of real water.

Mother says,
*People share*
*when they know*
*they have escaped hunger.*
Shouldn’t people share
because there is hunger?

That night I stand behind
blowing blankets
and pour fresh water
all over my skin.

How sweet water tastes
even when mixed with soap.

May 24
Golden Fuzz

Water, water
still everywhere
but in the distance
appears a black dot.

We are told
to pack
our crisscrossed packs
and line up in a single file.

Twenty at a time
board a motorboat
heading toward the dot.

An arm extends
to help us board,
an arm hairy with fuzz.

I touch it,
so real and long,
not knowing if I will
have another chance
to touch golden fuzz.

I pluck one hair.

Mother slaps my hand.
Brother Quang speaks quickly
in the language I must learn.

The fuzzy man laughs.

I’m grateful the boat
starts to rock,
so Mother hasn’t
the composure
to scold me,
not just yet.

I roll my fuzzy souvenir
between my thumb and finger
and can’t help
but smile.

May 26
We have landed
on an island
called Guam,
which no one can pronounce
except Brother Quang,
who becomes
translator for all.

Many others arrived
before us
and are living
in green tents
and sleeping on cots.

We eat inside a huge tent
where Brother Vũ
becomes head chef,
heating up cans of
beef and potatoes
tasting like salty vomit.

We eat only
canned fruit
in thick syrup,

and everyone wants extras
but we get only a cup.

Brother Vũ somehow
brings home
a huge can,
pumping it to work out
his arm muscles.

We eat
straight from the can
as I search for
cherries and grapes.

May 28
A routine starts
as soon as we settle
into our tent.

Camp workers
teach us English
mornings and afternoons.

Evenings we have to ourselves.

We watch movies outdoors
with images projected
onto a white sheet.
Brother Quang translates
into a microphone,
his voice sad and slow.

If it’s a young cowboy
like Clint Eastwood,
everyone cheers.
If it’s an old cowboy,
like John Wayne,
most of us boo
and go swimming.

The Disney cartoons
lure out the girls,
who always surround
Brother Vũ,
begging him to break
yet another piece of wood.

I can still hear them begging
when I go sit with Brother Khôi,
who rarely speaks anymore
but I’m happy to be near him.

June to early July
Someone
should be kissed
for having the heart
to send cases of fish sauce
to Guam.

Everything is
more edible
with móc mắm.

Brother Vũ
sauté the beef-and-potato goo
with onions
and sprinkles on the magic sauce
before serving the mess with rice.

Lines extend to the beach.

Someone catches
a sea creature
puffy and watery
like a cucumber.

Brother Vũ slices it
into slippery strips

and stews it with
seaweed
and the magic sauce.

So many appetites
wake up
that Brother Vũ
just has time
to cook rice
and serve it with
plain fish sauce.

People begin to cook
as long as they
can get a cup
of nước mắm.

Brother Khôi hands it out
in the same white cups
as tea.

Both dark brown,
so of course
I drink a gulp of the
most salty,
most bitter,
most fishy

tea
ever.

My head whirls
and my breath stinks
for days.

I do not mind.
Mother wants to sell
the amethyst ring
Father brought back
from America,
where he trained
in the navy
before I was born.

She wants to buy
needles and thread,
fabric and sandals
from the camp’s
black market.

I have never seen her
without this purple rock.
I can’t fall asleep
unless I twist the ring
and count circles.

Brother Quang says,
*NO!*
*What’s the point of*
*new shirts and sandals*

*if you lose the last*
*tangible remnant of love?*

I don’t understand
what he said
but I agree.
Some choose to go to France because many Vietnamese moved there when North and South divided years ago.

Uncle Sơn says come with his family to Canada, where his sister lives and can help watch over us until Father returns.

Mother knows his wife would mind. She tells him Canada is too cold.

We stand in line to fill out papers. Every family must decide by tonight, when fireworks will explode in honor of America’s birth.

Mother starts to write “Paris,” home of a cousin she has never met.
The man behind us whispers,  
*Choose America,*  
*more opportunities there,*  
*especially for a family*  
*with boys ready to work.*

Mother whispers back,  
*My sons*  
*must first go to college.*

*If they’re smart*  
*America will give them*  
*scholarships.*

Mother chooses.  

*July 4*
Another Tent City

We are flown
to another tent city
in humid, hot Florida,
where alligators are shown
as entertainment.

The people in charge
bring in Saigon-famous singers
to raise refugee spirits,
but faces keep twisting with worries.

For a family to leave,
an American must come to camp
and sponsor a family.

We wait and wait,
but Mother says a possible widow,
three boys, and a pouty girl
make too huge a family
by American standards.

A family of three
in the tent to our left
gets sponsored to Georgia;

the couple to our right
goes to South Carolina.
Newcomers leave before us. 
Mother can barely eat, 
while Brother Quang 
picks the skin at his elbows.

I don’t mind being here. 
My hair is growing 
as I’ve become dark and strong 
from running and swimming.

Then by chance Mother learns 
sponsors prefer those 
whose applications say “Christians.”

Just like that 
Mother amends our faith, 
saying all beliefs 
are pretty much the same.

July to early August
A man comes
who owns a store
that sells cars
and wants to train
one young man
to be a mechanic.

He keeps holding up
one finger
before picking Brother Quang,
whose studies in engineering
impress him.

Mother doesn’t care
what the man
came looking for.

By the time
she is done
staring, blinking,
wiping away tears,
all without speaking English,

our entire family
has a sponsor
to Alabama.

August 7
Our sponsor
looks just like
an American should.

Tall and pig-bellied,
black cowboy hat,
tan cowboy boots,
cigar smoking,
teeth shining,
red in face,
golden in hair.

I love him
immediately
and imagine him
to be good-hearted and loud
and the owner of a horse.

August 8
Alabama
We’re giddy when we get off the airplane.

Our cowboy, who never takes off his tall, tall hat, delivers us to his huge house, where grass spreads out so green it looks painted.

Stay until you feel ready.

We smile and unpack the two outfits we each own.

One look at our cowboy’s wife, arms, lips, eyes contorted into knots, and we repack.
We sit and sleep in the lowest level of our cowboy’s house, where we never see the wife.

I must stand on a chair that stands on a tea table to see the sun and the moon out a too-high window.

The wife insists we keep out of her neighbors’ eyes.

Mother shrugs. 
*More room here than two mats on a ship.*

I wish she wouldn’t try to make something bad better.

She calls a family meeting.

*Until you children master English, you must think, do, wish*
for nothing else.
Not your father,
not our old home,
not your old friends,
not our future.

She tries to mean it
about Father,
but I know at times
words are just words.

August 16
Brother Quang says
add an s to nouns
to mean more than one
even if there’s
already an s
sitting there.

Glass
Glass-es

All day
I practice
squeezing hisses
through my teeth.

Whoever invented
English
must have loved
snakes.

August 17
American Chicken

Most food
our cowboy brings
is wrapped in plastic
or pushed into cans,
while chicken and beef
are chopped and frozen.

We live on
rice, soy sauce,
canned corn.

Today our cowboy brings
a paper bucket of chicken,
skin crispy and golden,
smelling of perfection.

Brother Khôi recoils,
vowing to never eat
anything with wings.

Our cowboy bites on a leg,
grins to show teeth and gums.

I wonder if he’s so friendly
because his wife is so mean.

We bite.
The skin tastes as promised, crunchy and salty, hot and spicy.

But
Mother wipes
the corners of her mouth
before passing her piece
into her napkin.

Brother Vũ gags.

Our cowboy scrunches
his brows,
surely thinking,
why are his refugees so picky?

Brother Quang forces
a swallow
before explaining
we are used to
fresh-killed chicken
that roamed the yard

snacking on
grains and worms.

Such meat grows
tight in texture,
smelling of meadows
and tasting sweet.

I bite down on a thigh;
might as well bite down on
bread soaked in water.

Still,
I force yum-yum sounds.

I hope to ride
the horse our cowboy
surely has.

August 20
Green mats of grass
in front of every house.

Vast windows
in front of sealed curtains.

Cement lanes where
no one walks.

Big cars
pass not often.

Not a noise.

Clean, quiet
loneliness.

August 21
Second Rule

Add an *s* to verbs acted by one person in the present tense, even if there’s already an *s* sound nearby.

*She chooses*  
*He refuses*

I’m getting better at hissing, no longer spitting on my forearms.  

*August 22*
American Address

Our cowboy
in an even taller hat
finds us a house
on Princess Anne Road,
pays rent ahead
three months.

Mother could not believe
his generosity
until Brother Quang says
the American government
gives sponsors money.

Mother is even more amazed
by the generosity
of the American government
until Brother Quang says
it’s to ease the guilt
of losing the war.

Mother’s face crinkles
like paper on fire.
She tells Brother Quang
to clamp shut his mouth.

People living on
others’ goodwill
cannot afford
political opinions.
I inspect our house.

Two bedrooms,
one for my brothers,
one for Mother and me.

A washing machine,
because no one here
will scrub laundry
in exchange for
a bowl of rice.

The stove spews out
clean blue flames,
unlike the ashy coals
back home.

What I love best:
the lotus-pod shower,
where heavy drops
will massage my scalp
as if I were standing
in a monsoon.

What I don’t love:
pink sofas, green chairs,
plastic cover on a table,
stained mattresses,
old clothes,
unmatched dishes.

All from friends
of our cowboy.
Even at our poorest
we always had
beautiful furniture
and matching dishes.

Mother says be grateful.

I’m trying.

August 24
As soon as we have an address
Mother writes
all the way to the North
where Father’s brother
anchors down the family line
in their ancestral home.

It’s the first time
Mother has been allowed
to contact anyone in the North
since the country divided.

It’ll be the first time
Father’s brother
learns of his disappearance.

Unless,
Father has sent word
that he’s safe
after all.

I shiver
with hope.

August 25
Always an exception.

Do not add an *s* to certain nouns.

*One deer,*
*two deer.*

Why no *s* for two deer,
but an *s* for two monkeys?

Brother Quang says
no one knows.

So much for rules!

Whoever invented English
should be bitten
by a snake.
I study the dictionary  
because grass and trees  
do not grow faster  
just because  
I stare.

I look up

*Jane*: not listed

*sees*: to eyeball something

*Spot*: a stain

*run*: to move really fast

Meaning: _______ eyeballs stain move.

I throw the dictionary down  
and ask Brother Quang.

*Jane* is a name,  
not in the dictionary.
Spot is a common name for a dog.

(Girl named) Jane sees (dog named) Spot run.

I can’t read a baby book.

Who will believe I was reading Nhã Linh?

But then, who here knows who he is?

August 27
Brother Quang
is tired of translating.
Our sponsor takes me
to register for school alone.

As my personal cowboy
for the day,
he will surely
let me ride his horse.

I start to climb
into his too-tall truck
but his two fingers
walk in the air.

This means
I’m to walk to school.

Turn right where flowers
big as dinner plates
grow strangely blue.

Turn left where
purple fluffy wands

arch on tall bushes
inviting butterflies.
Sweat beads plump up
on my cowboy’s upper lip.
My armpits embarrass me.
I must remember
to not raise the reins high.

We walk and walk
on a road
where the horizon
keeps extending.

Finally,
we stop at
a fat, red
brick building.

Paperwork, paperwork
with a woman who
pats my head
while shaking her own.

I step back,
hating pity,

having learned
from Mother that
the pity giver
feels better,
never the pity receiver.

On the walk home
I take a deep breath,
forcing myself to say,
*You, hor-sssse?*
*Hee, hee, hee.*
*I go, go.*
My personal cowboy
shakes his head.

I repeat myself
and gallop.

He scrunches his face.

I say, Hor-ssssse
and Hee, hee, hee,
until my throat hurts.

We get home.

Brother Quang
has to translate,
after all.

No, Mr. Johnston
doesn’t have a horse,
nor has he ever ridden one.

What kind of a cowboy is he?

To make it worse,
the cowboy explains
horses here go
neigh, neigh, neigh,
not hee, hee, hee.
No they don’t.

Where am I?

August 29
Fourth Rule

Some verbs
switch all over
just because.

I am
She is
They are
He was
They were

Would be simpler
if English
and life
were logical.

August 30
Starting tomorrow
everyone must
leave the house.

Mother starts sewing
at a factory;
Brother Quang begins
repairing cars.

The rest of us
must go to school,
repeating the last grade,
left unfinished.

Brother Vũ wants
to be a cook
or teach martial arts,
not waste a year
as the oldest senior.

Mother says
one word:
*College.*

Brother Khôi
gets an old bicycle to ride,
but Mother says
I’m too young for one
even though I’m
a ten-year-old
in the fourth grade, when everyone else is nine.

Mother says,
Worry instead about getting sleep because from now on no more naps. You will eat lunch at school with friends.

What friends?

You’ll make some.

What if I can’t?

You will.

What will I eat?

What your friends eat.

But what will I eat?

Be surprised.

I hate surprises.
Be agreeable.

Not without knowing
what I’m agreeing to.

Mother sighs,
walking away.

September 1
Sadder Laugh

School!

I wake up with
dragonflies
zipping through
my gut.

I eat nothing.

I take each step toward school evenly,
trying to hold my stomach
steady.

It helps that
the morning air glides cool
like a constant washcloth
against my face.

Deep breaths.

I’m the first student in class.

My new teacher has brown curls
looped tight to her scalp
like circles in a beehive.
She points to her chest: *Miss SScott*, saying it three times, each louder with ever more spit.

I repeat, *Miss SScott*, careful to hiss every *s*.

She doesn’t seem impressed.

I tap my own chest: *Hà*.

She must have heard *ha*, as in funny *ha-ha-ha*.

She fakes a laugh.

I repeat, *Hà*, and wish I knew enough English to tell her to listen for the diacritical mark,

this one directing the tone downward.

My new teacher tilts her head back, fakes
an even sadder laugh.
I face the class.
MiSSS SScott speaks.
Each classmate says something.

I don’t understand,
but I see.

Fire hair on skin dotted with spots.
Fuzzy dark hair on skin shiny as lacquer.
Hair the color of root on milky skin.
Lots of braids on milk chocolate.
White hair on a pink boy.
Honey hair with orange ribbons on see-through skin.
Hair with barrettes in all colors on bronze bread.

I’m the only
straight black hair
on olive skin.

September 2
Midmorning
The bell rings.
Everyone stands.
I stand.

They line up;
so do I.

Down a hall.
Turn left.
Take a tray.
Receive food.
Sit.

On one side
of the bright, noisy room,
light skin.
Other side,
dark skin.

Both laughing, chewing,
as if it never occurred
to them
someone medium
would show up.

I don’t know where to sit
any more than
I know how to eat
the pink sausage
snuggled inside bread
shaped like a corncob,
smeared with sauces
yellow and red.

I think
they are making fun
of the Vietnamese flag
until I remember
no one here likely knows
that flag’s colors.

I put down the tray
and wait
in the hallway.

September 2
11:30 a.m.
Another bell,  
another line,  
this time outside.

Every part  
of the rainbow  
surrounds me,  
shouting, pushing.

A pink boy with white hair  
on his head  
and white eyebrows and  
white eyelashes  
pulls my arm hair.

Laughter.

It’s true my arm hair  
grows so long and black.

Maybe he is curious  
about my long, black arm hair  
like I was curious  
about the golden fuzz

on the arm  
of the rescue-ship sailor.
He pokes my cheek.

Howls from everyone.

He pokes my chest.

I see nothing but squeezed eyes, twisted mouths.

No, they’re not curious.

I want to pluck out every white hair to see if the boy’s scalp matches the pink of his face.

I wish this but walk away.

September 2
Afternoon
The pink boy and two loud friends follow me home.

I count each step to walk faster.

I won’t let them see me run.

I count in English, forcing it to the front of my mind.

I can’t help but glance back.

The pink boy shouts, showing a black hole where sharp teeth glow.

I walk faster, count faster in English.

Not that I care to understand
what Pink Boy says, but I have to if I’m to laugh back at him one day.
Brother Khôi is home, 
not talking.

We sit together 
shelling peanuts. 
I keep my day inside.

Mother comes home 
with two fingers 
wrapped in white. 
The electric machine 
sews so fast.

Brother Quang comes home, 
throws down his uniform shirt, 
goes to the bathroom. 
At dinner 
his fingernails are still 
rimed in black oil.

Brother Vũ comes in 
whistling.

He eats 
two, three, four 
pork chops.
I eat
one, two chops.

I have a feeling
having muscles
makes whistling
possible.

September 2
Evening
I sneak into
my brothers’ room.

The full moon shines on
the bulkiest lump.

I shake it awake.
Outside!

Brother Vũ swats my hand
but follows me.

Moonlight turns us silver.

They pulled my arm hair.
They threw rocks at me.
They promised to stomp on my chest.

Brother Vũ yawns.

A boy did pull my arm hair!

Brother Vũ pats my head.
Ignore him.
It’s not like I follow him around.
Why were you whistling?

Someone called me Ching Chong.

Is that good?

Didn’t sound good.
Then he tripped me,
so I flew up and
almost scissor-kicked him
in the face.

You missed?

I wanted him to stop,
not hurt him.
I didn’t even like
seeing him scared.

I would have kicked him.
Teach me to fly-kick, please.

Not with your temper.

I shout, I’m so mad.
I shouldn’t have to run away.

Tears come.

Brother Vũ
has always been afraid
of my tears.

*I’ll teach you defense.*


How will that help me?

He smiles huge,
so certain of himself.

*You’ll see.*

*September 2*

*Late*
Next morning
halfway down the block,
away from Mother’s eyes,
I hear the *clink clank*
of Brother Khôi’s bicycle.

He stops and pats
the upper bar
of the triangle frame.

I sit sidesaddle,
holding on to the handlebar.
The edges of our hands
touch.

As we glide away
I ask,
*Every day?*

I feel his chin
nod into
the top of my head.

*After school too?*

Another chin nod.
We glide
and I feel as if
I’m floating.
MiSSS SScott
points to me,
then to the letters
of the English alphabet.

I say
A B C and so on.

She tells the class
to clap.

I frown.

MiSSS SScott
points to the numbers
along the wall.

I count up to twenty.

The class claps
on its own.

I’m furious,
unable to explain
I already learned
fractions
and how to purify
river water.

So this is
what dumb
feels like.

I hate, hate, hate it.

September 10
I wish

Brother Khôi wouldn’t
keep inside
how he endures
the hours in school,

that Mother wouldn’t
hide her bleeding fingers,

that Brother Quang wouldn’t
be so angry after work.

I wish

our cowboy could be persuaded
to buy a horse,

that I could be invisible
until I can talk back,

that English could be learned
without so many rules.

I wish
Father would appear
in my class
speaking beautiful English
as he does French and Chinese
and hold out his hand
for mine.

Mostly
I wish
I were
still
smart.

September 11
Hiding

Brother Vũ
now makes everyone
call him
Vũ Lee,
a name I must say
without giggling
to get defense lessons.

I need the lessons.

I’m hiding in class
by staring at my shoes.

I’m hiding during lunch
in the bathroom,
eating hard rolls
saved from dinner.

I’m hiding during outside time
in the same bathroom.

I’m hiding after school
until Brother Khôi
rides up to
our secret corner.

With Vũ Lee
I squat in
đứng tần,
weight on legs,
back straight,
arms at my sides,
fingers relaxed,
eyes everywhere at once.

I’m practicing
to be seen.

September 13
Neighbors

Eggs explode
like smears of snot
on our front door.

*Just dumb kids,*
says our cowboy.

Bathroom paper hangs
like ghosts
from our willow.

*More dumb kids,*
says our cowboy.

A brick
shatters the front window,
landing on our dinner table
along with a note.

Brother Quang
refuses to translate.

Mother shakes her head
when Vu Lee pops his muscles.

Our cowboy
calls the police,
who tell us
to stay inside.

Hogwash,
our cowboy says,
then spits a brown blob
of tobacco.

I repeat, Hogwash,
puckering for the ending of
ssssshhhhhhh.

Mother decides
we must meet
our neighbors.

Our cowboy leads,
giving us each a cowboy hat
to be tilted
while saying,
Good mornin’.

Only I wear the hat.

In the house

to our right
a bald man
closes his door.

Next to him
a woman
with yellow hair
slams hers.
Next to her
shouts reach us
behind a door unopened.

Redness crawls across
my brothers’ faces.
Mother pats their backs.

Our cowboy leads us
to the house on our left.

An older woman
throws up her arms
and hugs us.

We’re so startled
we stand like trees.

She points to her chest:
*Missississippi Washington.*

She hugs our cowboy
and kisses him.

I thought only
husbands and wives
do that when alone.

We find out
*Mississippi Washington*
is a widow and retired teacher.
She has no children
but has a dog named Lassie
and a garden that takes up
her backyard.

She volunteers
to tutor us all.

My time with her
will be right after school.

I’m afraid to tell her
how much help I’ll need.

*September 14*
MiSSSisss WaSShington has her own rules.

She makes me memorize one new word a day and practice it ten times in conversation.

For every new word that sticks to my brain she gives me fruit in bite sizes, drowning in sweet, white fluff; cookies with drops of chocolate small as rain; flat, round, pan-fried cakes floating in syrup.

My vocabulary grows!

She makes me learn rules I’ve never noticed, like a, an, and the, which act as little megaphones to tell the world whose English is still secondhand.

The house is red.
But: We live in a house.
*A, an, and the*
do not exist in Vietnamese
and we understand
each other just fine.

I pout,
but Missss W worshington says
every language has annoyances and illogical rules,
as well as sensible beauty.

She has an answer for everything,
just like Mother.

*September 16*
I now understand

when they make fun of my name,
yelling *ha-ha-ha* down the hall

when they ask if I eat dog meat,
barking and chewing and falling down laughing

when they wonder if I lived in the jungle with tigers,
growling and stalking on all fours.

I understand
because Brother Khôi
nodded into my head
on the bike ride home
when I asked if kids
said the same things
at his school.

I understand
and wish
I could go back
to not understanding.

*September 19*
Our cowboy says
don't you know?
our neighbors
would be more like neighbors
if we agree to something
at the Del Ray Southern Baptist Church.

I've seen the church name
on a sign
where blaring yellow sun rays
spell GOD.

Our cowboy and his wife
wait for us
in the very first row.
He’s smiling;
she’s not.

A plump man
runs onto the stage
SHOUTING.

Everyone except us
greets him,
HA LE LU DA.

The more he SHOUTS,
the more everyone sings
HA LE LU DA.
Later a woman
smelling of honeysuckle
signals for all of us to follow.

Mother and I are told
to change into
shapeless white gowns.

We line up in a hallway
too bright and too bare,
where my brothers await us
frowning,
all wearing the same
shapeless white gowns.

I giggle.
Mother pinches me
then steps forward first.

The plump man
waits for her
in a tiny pool.
One hand holds her nose,

another hand on her back,
pushing her under.

I start to jump into the pool,
but Mother is standing again,
coughing,
hairstyle matted to her face,
eyes narrowing
at me.

Each of my brothers
gets dipped.

My turn comes,
no matter how
I laser-eye Mother
to stop it.

And yet
it’s not over.

We must get dressed
and line up onstage
next to the plump man,
our cowboy,
and his smiling wife.
Her lips curl up even more

as people line up
to kiss our cheeks.

Drops from wet hair
drip down my back.

Bumps enlarge on
my chilled skin
as I realize
we will be coming back
every Sunday.

September 21
Can’t Help

Mother taps her nails
on the dining table,
her signal for solitude
to chant.

I shuffle off to our room
but am still with her
through my ears.

She chants,
*Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật*
*Nam Mô Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát*

Such quiet tones
after a day of
shouts and HA LE LU DAs.

*Clang clang clang,*
a spoon chimes
against a glass bowl.

Nothing like
clear-stream bell echoes
from a brass gong.

Instead of jasmine incense,
Mother burns dried orange peels.
Ashy bitter citrus
invades our room.

Nothing like
the floral wafts
that once calmed me.

I try
but can’t fall sleep,
needing amethyst-ring twirls
and her lavender scent.

I’m not as good as Mother
at making do.

Finally she comes in
and turns from me,
her signal for more
time alone.

I lie frozen,
sniffing for
traces of lavender.

Too faint
yet I dare not roll closer.

She sighs,
extends it
into a sniffle.

*Where are you?*
*Should we keep hoping?*
She thinks
I am asleep.

More sniffles,
so gentle
I would miss them
by inhaling too deeply.

_Come home,
come home and see how
our children have grown._

All my life
I’ve wondered
what it’s like
to know someone

for forever
then _poof_
he’s gone.

Another sigh.

_It’s more difficult here
than I imagined._

I thought so,
despite her own rule
Mother can’t help
yearning for Father
any more than I can help
tasting ripe papaya
in my sleep.
Spelling Rules

Sometimes
the spelling changes
when adding an s.

Knife becomes knives.

Sometimes
a c is used
instead of a k,
even if
it makes more sense
for cat to be spelled kat.

Sometimes
a y is used
instead of an e,
even if
it makes more sense
for moldy to be spelled molde.

Whoever invented English
should have learned
to spell.

September 30
Our cowboy likes
to bring us gifts.

The breathing catfish
was Mother’s favorite.

I couldn’t watch Vu Lee
kill and clean it,
but it tasted so good.

After getting us dipped at church,
our cowboy brought gifts
even more often.

Vu Lee always asks for beef jerky,
pointing to his muscles.

I prefer really fat grapes.

Today our cowboy brings
chips and chocolate.

My brothers and I
finish the chips
in a flash.
Later Mother
throws away
what’s left of the candy.

After she falls asleep,
I retrieve the bars.

They’ll be better
than hard rolls
for lunch.

October 4
My word for today
is delicious,
ḍi lit-sì-ishss.

MiSSSisss WaSShington asks,
Was your lunch delicious?

Before speaking,
I have to translate
in my head.

She waits.

I eat candy in toilet.

MiSSSisss WaSShington
looks panicked.
WHAT?

I realize my mistake.
Oh, the toilet.

She doesn’t look
any happier.

I add,
Not candy all time.

But you always eat in the bathroom?

I nod.

Why?

How can I explain
dragonflies do somersaults
in my stomach
whenever I think of
the noisy room
full of mouths
chewing and laughing?

I’m still translating
when her eyes get red.

I’ll pack you a lunch
and you can eat at your desk.

No eat in class.

I’ll fix that.

Things will get better,
just you wait.

I don’t believe her
but it feels good
that someone knows.
At lunch the next day
I stay in class.

MiSSS SScott nods.

Can it be this easy?

Inside my first
brown paper bag:
a white meat sandwich,
an apple,
crunchy curly things
sprinkled with salt, and
a cookie dotted
with chocolate raindrops.

Something salty,
something sweet,
perfect.

I hear pounding footsteps
in the long hall.

I stop chewing.

Two students
run into class,
giggling.

I firm my muscles,
ready for the giggles
to explode into laughter
thrown at me.

But smiles appear instead.

The girl has
red hair swaying to her bottom,
a skirt falling to her calves.

She says, Pam. I hear Pem.

The boy of coconut-shell skin
is dressed better than for church,
a purple bow tie,
a white white shirt
that wouldn’t wrinkle
even if he rolled down a hill.

His shaved head

is so shiny and perfect
I want to touch it.

He speaks slowly and loudly,
but I don’t mind
because he’s still smiling.

He says, Steven.
I hear SSsì-Tì-Vân.

I have not
seen them in class.
But then, I mostly
stare at my shoes.

I will write in my journal
October 14 is
Most Relieved Day,
as I have noted
April 30 was
Saigon Is Gone Day
and September 2 was
Longest Day Ever.

Though I was saving
Most Relieved Day

for Father’s return,
he can have the title:
My Life’s Best Day.

October 14
Pink Boy
stands at the board.

He can’t multiply
18 by 42.

I go to the board,
chalk the answer
in five moves.

My cheekbones lift
to the ceiling
until I see horror
on the faces
of Pem and SSì-Tí-Vân.

Pink Boy is glowing red
against white hair,
white eyebrows,
and white eyelashes.

MiSSS SScott
nudges me toward my seat.

Pem reaches for my hand,
hers trembling.
I know
Pink Boy will get me,
but right now
I feel smart.
One day
the honey-hair girl
takes her pink ribbons
and knots pigtails in my hair.

She stares,
shakes her head,
yanks back her ribbons.
*Pink don’t look good on you.*

Then three girls
of bronze-bread skin
remove colorful barrettes
from their hair
and twist onto my head
so many braids.

The girls’ hair holds
the shape of braids
even without barrettes.

Pem and SSsi-Ti-Vân nod,
so I keep still.

Walking home,
my shadow shows
eels dancing on my head
with tails in shapes of
brows, stars, hearts.
Mother and Brothers
notice,
pause,
then go on with their day.

It isn’t easy
to sleep on a pile of
plastic barrettes.

The next morning
when the girls
slip off the barrettes,
my hair falls back
to being straight.

The girls
yank my flat strands,
walk away.

I’ve spent my life
wishing for long hair
and this is what I get.

October 23
Vu Lee no longer has time for just me.

At sunrise he throws newspapers onto porches.

After school he flips perfect circles of beef.

At sunset he teaches Bruce Lee moves in our front yard.

We line up in five rows, squatting and shifting, the only moves he has taught us.

I make sure to get in the front row.

First came the eager boys.

Next came
the giggly girls.
Then came
our neighbors who
couldn’t help their curiosity.

They wave back now,
at times bringing
jiggly, colorful food
we don’t eat.

Everyone in Vu Lee’s class
wears yellow.
Some even bought suits
exactly like Bruce Lee’s.

Brothers Quang and Khôi join too.

Once I saw Mother
behind the curtains,
smiling.

I squatted low and sturdy then.

October 28
MiSSS SScott shows the class photographs

of a burned, naked girl running, crying down a dirt road

of people climbing, screaming, desperate to get on the last helicopter out of Saigon

of skeletal refugees, crammed aboard a sinking fishing boat, reaching up to the heavens for help

of mounds of combat boots abandoned by soldiers of the losing side.

She’s telling the class where I’m from.

She should have shown something about
papayas and Têt.

No one would believe me
but at times
I would choose
wartime in Saigon
over
peacetime in Alabama.

October 29
Pem is dressed
in a skirt to the floor
like the pioneers
in our textbook.

SSsi-Ti-Vân
wears a beard
like President Lincoln.

I didn’t know
today is pretend day.

Pink Boy keeps asking,
*What are you?*

By the end of school
he yells an answer:
*She should be a pancake.*
*She has a pancake face.*

It doesn’t make sense
until
it does.

I run,
hearing laughter
*loud loud loud,*
which still echoes when Mother comes home.
I can’t keep the day inside anymore.

Mother asks, 
*What’s a pancake?*

Tears gush
because I can’t
make myself explain
a pancake
is
very
very
flat.

October 31
Halloween
Mother’s Response

Mother strokes my head.

*Chant, my child,*
*Breath in, peaceful mind.*
*Breath out, peaceful smile.*

She strokes my back.

*Chant, my daughter;*
*your whispers will bloom*
*and shelter you*
*from words*
*you need not hear.*

*Chant*
*Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật*
*Nam Mô Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát.*

She strokes my arm.

I chant,
wanting the gentle strokes
to continue forever.

I chant,
wanting Mother’s calmness
to sink into me.
I’m quiet
during my lesson
with MiSSSisss WaSShington.

For a long time
I stare at the floral wallpaper
and shelves full of books,
then I notice
a framed photograph
of a boy in uniform.

I had not known of her son Tom
or of his death as a
twenty-year-old soldier
in the very place
where I was born.

I never thought
the name of my country
could sound so sad.

I’m afraid to look
at MiSSSisss WaSShington.
You hate me?

Child, child.

She comes close
and hugs me.

Right then I tell her about the pancake.

She hugs me tighter, then pulls out a book.

A book of photographs:
a dragon dance at Têt,
schoolgirls in white áo dài,
a temple built on a tree trunk.

Tom had sent home these photographs of a hot, green country that he loved and hated just the same.

I suck in breath:
a photograph of a papaya tree swaying broad, fanlike leaves

in the full sun, showing off a bundle of fat orange piglets.

Excited, I yell, Ðu ðú! I’m stabbing at the image. 

Best food.
Papaya?
Your favorite food is papaya?

By the time I teach her
\textit{d\u{u} d\u{u}}
and she teaches me
\textit{doo-doo}
we’re laughing so hard
we’re hungry for pancakes.

She tells me
to take
the book home.
Before school
our cowboy shows up.
MiSSSisss WaSShington told him
about the pancake.

He whispers to Mother and Brother Quang.
All will escort me to school
with MiSSSisss WaSShington.

I do not feel good.

In the principal’s office
sit Pink Boy and his mother.

It’s very hot in here.

Lots of strained voices
holding in anger.

Finally all eyes
are on Pink Boy,
who wrestles out, Sorry.

I feel like throwing up.

Mother rescues him:
We know you’re from a proper family
and did not realize
the damage of your insult.

While Brother Quang translates,
Pink Boy’s eyes let me know
he hates me even more.

November 5
Boo-Da, Boo-Da

MiSSS SScott
shows photographs
of the S shape
of Vietnam,
of green mountains and long beaches,
of a statue of the Buddha reclining.

She asks me,
Would you like to say anything?

I know Buddha.

I hear laughter
and a murmur building:
Boo-Da, Boo-Da.

MiSSS SScott hushes them.

All day I hear whispers:
Boo-Da, Boo-Da.

I watch the clock,
listen for the final bell,
and dash.

Pink Boy and friends follow,
releasing shouts of
Boo-Da, Boo-Da
as I put one leg
in front of the other
faster
faster
but not fast enough
to not hear them
scream
Boo-Da, Boo-Da.

I turn down
the wrong street,
away from the corner
where Brother Khôi would be.

I have no choice
but to run.

I turn right where purple flowers
curve like baby moons
over butterfly bushes.

Footsteps pound
right behind me.

Turn left where flowers grow blue.

I wish I could control it,
but the plates of flowers
are now blue smears
from my near tears.

Boo-Da, Boo-Da
breathes into the back
of my neck.
Faster, faster.
My legs try,
but the shouts are upon me.

Someone pulls my hair,
forcing me to turn
and see
a black hole in a pink face:
_Boo-Da, Boo-Da Girl._

My palms cover my eyes.

I run.

All the while
surging from my gut:

_fi.re_
_sour.ness_
_wei.ght_
_a.nger_
_lo.ne.li.ness_
_co nf.u.si.on_
_em.barrass.men t_
_sha.me._

*November 7*
Hate It

I don’t make it inside the house,
but sit
under the willow tree,
dig a hole
and into it
scream scream scream

_I hate everyone!!!!_

A lion’s paw rips up my throat,
still I scream

_I hate everyone!!!!_

Hands grip my shoulders.

MiSSisss WaSShington
is on her knees.

_Child, child, come with me._

_I hate everyone!!!!_

She hoists me up
by my armpits
and drags me across
the yard.

*You poor child,
tell me, tell me.*

It hurts too much
to keep screaming,
but it feels good
to thrash about
like a captured lizard.

Inside her house,
MiSSSisss WaSSShington throws
her body on mine.

*Hush, hush,
hush, hush.*

She says it over and over
like a chant,
slowly.
Slowly
the screams that never stopped
inside my head
cool to a real whisper.

*I hate everyone!*

*Even your mama?*
She crosses her eyes, puckers her lips.

I stop myself from laughing.

She pats my hand.

That one gesture dissolves the last of my hate spell.

*November 7*  
*After school*
Brother Quang comes home 
with happy shouts.

He did it, 
repairing a car  
no one else could.

From now on 
he’s to work  
only on engines.

Mother smiles so hard  
she cries.

I pout.

When is it going to be  
my turn?

November 12
It’s time to tell Mother why misery keeps pouncing on me.

I used to buy less pork so I could buy fried dough.

I know.

You do?

What else?

I used to like making the girl who shared my desk cry.

She tilts her head.

I know, Mother, I know, very bad.

She nods.

Now they make me cry. Will I be punished forever?
Forever is quite long.

There’s more;  
it’s really bad.

She lifts an eyebrow.

At dawn on Tết  
I tapped my big toe  
to the tile floor  
first.

She widens her eyes.

I hate being told I can’t do something because I’m a girl!

She doesn’t scold me,  
just nods.

Did I ruin the luck  
of the whole family?  
Is that why we’re here?

My child,  
how you shoulder the world!

I was superstitious,  
that’s all.  
If anything,  
you gave us luck
because we got out
and we’re here.

Lucky
to be here?

Just wait,
you’ll see.

I don’t want to wait.
It’s awful now.

Is it really so unbearable?

They chase me.
They yell “Boo-Da, Boo-Da” at me.
They pull my arm hair.
They call me Pancake Face.
They clap at me in class.
And you want me to wait?
Can I hit them?

Oh, my daughter,
at times you have to fight,
but preferably
not with your fists.

November 14
Brother Quang takes us to the grocery store. Mother buys everything to make egg rolls for a coming holiday when Americans eat a turkey the size of a baby.

She has me ask the butcher, *Please grind our pork.*

I’m sure I said it right, but the butcher sharpens his face, slams down our meat, and motions us away.

Mother wrinkles her brows, thinking, pausing, then rings the buzzer again.

*Please,* she says. It comes out, *Peezzz.*

The butcher turns away without a word.

Mother presses the buzzer
for a long time.

When the butcher returns,
he hears a lot of Vietnamese
in a voice stern and steady,
from eyes even more so.

Mother ends with a clear, *NOW!*

The butcher stares
then takes our meat
to the grinder.

*November 22*
Again they’re yelling,
*Boo-Da, Boo-Da,*
but I know to run
toward Brother Khôi
two corners away.

Enough time
for them to repeat
hundreds of *Boo-Das.*

Enough time
for me to turn and yell,
*Gee-sus, Gee-sus.*

I love how they stop,
mouths open.

My heart lifting,
I run and shout,
*Bully!*
*Coward!*
*Pink Snot Face!*

Words I learned from them
on the playground.

I turn to see
Pink Boy coming
close to me.

No longer pink,
he’s red,
blood-orange red
like a ripe papaya.

Đu Đủ *Face!*

It’s not my fault
if his friends hear
*Doo-doo Face*
and are laughing
right at him.

Brother Khôi is waiting.
I jump on.

*December 4*
Rumor

Friday

SSsi-Ti-Vân heard it from Pem
who heard it from the honey-hair girl
who heard it from the dot-on-face girl
who heard it from the white-hair boy
who heard it from all three girls in braids

that

Pink Boy

has gotten his sixth-grade cousin,
a girl two heads taller than the tallest of us,
with arm muscles that run up and down like mice,

to agree

to beat me up

when we come back

Monday.
A Plan

I don’t have to tell Brother Khôi,
who heard in the halls
of his school
that my face
is to be flattened
flatter
tomorrow.

You don’t have a flat face,
he says.
Besides, I have a plan.

December 7
Five minutes
till the last bell
I lean toward the door,
legs bouncing,
books left on the floor.

Rrriiinnggg

I run,
Pem and SSsi-Ti-Vân
close behind.

Outside
Pem and I exchange
coats with hoods.

Pem heads down
my usual path.
I zip to the left.

SSsi-Ti-Vân
stays to block the door.

Running so fast,
I fly above the sidewalk.

Alone.
They must all be with Pem.

I stop at the new corner
where Brother Khôi said to wait.

Where is he?

Footsteps explode
from the street
that smacks into mine.

Pink Boy!

December 8
3:36 p.m.
Pink Boy plows toward me.

I squat in đứng tần, facing him.

His right arm extends in a fist.

When he’s close enough for me to see the white arm hair, I shift my upper body to the left, legs sturdy, eyes on the blur that flies past me.

A thud.

Pink Boy writhes on the pavement.

I thought I would love seeing him in pain.

But he looks
more defeated than weak, 
more helpless than scared, 
liked a caged puppy.

He’s getting up.

If I were to kick him, 
it must be 
now.

December 8
3:38 p.m.
A roar.

Pink Boy and I turn.

A gigantic motorcycle.

The rider in all black stops.

The helmet comes off.

VU LEE!

WOW!

Pink Boy disappears.

Brother Khôi runs up, out of breath, pushing a bicycle with a flat.

Vu Lee flicks his head.
I climb on first, wrap my arms around a waist tight as rope.
Brother Khôi climbs on next, one hand holding the handlebar of his bike.

We fly home.
Vu Lee
now picks me up
after school.

So
someone is always
saving lunch seats
for me, Pem, and SSsi-Ti-Vân;

someone is always
inviting us
to a party;

someone is always
hoping Vu Lee
will offer her a ride,
as he did the huge cousin,
who now not only smiles
but waves at us.

Pink Boy
avoids us,
and we’re glad.

December 16
Early Christmas

Mother invites our cowboy
and MiSSSisss WaSShington
for egg rolls.

They brought gifts,
not saying
Early Christmas,
not wanting
to embarrass us
for not having anything
to exchange.

From our cowboy
to Mother: two just-caught catfish
to Brother Quang: tuition for night college
to Vu Lee: jerky in ten flavors
to Brother Khôi: two fighting fish in separate jars
to me: a new coat

We laugh and say,
Perfect!

From MiSSSisss WaSShington
to Mother: a gong and jasmine incense
to Brother Quang: an engineering textbook

to Vu Lee: jerky in ten flavors
to Brother Khôi: a hamster
to me: three packages of something orange and dried
My family claps and says,

*Perfect!*

I frown.

*December 20*
Not the Same

Three pouches of
dried papaya

Chewy
Sugary
Waxy
Sticky

Not the same
at all.

So mad,
I throw all in the trash.

December 20
Night
Mother slaps my hand. 
*Learn to compromise.*

I refuse to retrieve the pouches, 
pout 
go to bed, 
stare at the photograph of a real papaya tree, 
wonder if I’ll ever taste sweet, tender, orange flesh again.

*GOOONNNNGGGGG* 
rings out; 
how soothing a real gong sounds.

Swirls of incense 
reach me, 
hovering like a blanket, 
tugging me in.

I wake up at faint light, 
guilt heavy on my chest.

I head toward the trash can.

Yet 
on the dining table 
on a plate 
sit strips of papaya
gooey and damp,  
having been soaked in hot water.

The sugar has melted off  
leaving  
plump  
moist  
chewy  
bites.

Humm... 

Not the same,  
but not bad  
at all.  

December 20–21
PART IV
From Now On
Letter from the North

Eight months ago,  
war ended.
Four months ago,  
Mother sent our letter. 
Today,  
Father’s brother answers.

Still, we know nothing more.

Our uncle even went south  
to talk with our old neighbors,  
to find Father’s old friends.

He consulted,  
left word,  
waited  
until it became obvious  
he would know nothing more.

His letter  
doesn’t tell us  
what to do  
from now on.

We look to Mother.

She doesn’t tell us either.
Ours is a silent Christmas Eve.
Pem comes over on gift-exchange day with a doll to replace the mouse-bitten one I told her about.

I almost scream because the doll with long black hair is so beautiful.

But I whisper, Thank you.

My high emotions are squished beneath the embarrassment of not having a gift for her.

December 25
Brother Quang asks
what if
Father escaped to Cambodia
and is building an army
to go back and change history?

Vu Lee asks
what if
Father escaped to France
but can’t remember his own history,
so he builds a new family
and is happy?

Brother Khôi asks
what if
Father escaped to Tibet
after shaving his head
and joining a monastery?

I can’t think of anything
but can’t let my brothers best me,
so I blurt out,

*What if*
*Father is really gone?*

From the sad look
on their faces
I know
despite their brave guesses
they have begun to accept
what I said on a whim.
Mother says nothing about Father

but

she chants every night,

long chants where her voice wavers between hope and acceptance.

She’s waiting for a sign.

I’ll decide what she decides.

December 30
First day back
after Christmas break,
I know I’m supposed
to wear everything new.

I don’t have
anything new
except for the coat,
and a hand-me-down dress
still wrapped in plastic.

It’s beige with blue flowers
made from a fabric fuzzy and thick,
perfect for this cold day.

Best of all
it’s past my knees,
perfect for a cold bike ride.

Pem is wearing a new skirt
falling to her calves, as always.

SSsi-Ti-Vân’s new white shirt
looks stiff as a wall.

As soon as I remove my coat,
everyone stops talking.
A girl in red velvet
comes over to me.

_Don’t ya know flannel
is for nightgowns and sheets?_

I panic.

_Pem shrugs._

_I can’t wear pants
or cut my hair
or wear skirts above my calves;
what do I care what you wear?_

_SSsi-Ti-Vân says,_

_It looks like a dress to me._

The red-velvet girl
points to the middle
of my chest.

_See this flower?_

_They only put that
on nightgowns._

I look down
at the tiny blue flower
barely stitched on.

_I rip it off._

_Nightgown no more._

_January 5_
I wear the same dress
to sleep,
telling Mother why.

*I pretended not to care,
then no one cared,
so I really didn’t care.*

Mother laughs.

I tell her
a much worse embarrassment
is not having
a gift for Pem.

Mother nods, thinks,
goes to her top drawer.

*I was saving this for you
for Tết,
but why wait?*

In her palm lies
the tin of flower seeds
I had gathered with TiTi.

Perfect for Pem!
Mother always
thinks of everything.
Gone

Mother runs in after work, hands clenched into white balls, words chopped into grunts, face of ash.

We stare at her left hand.

The amethyst stone is gone!

Brother Quang drives us back to the sewing factory in his car made of mismatched parts.

We search where Mother sat, then retrace her steps to the cafeteria to the bathroom to the parking lot.

We repeat so often we lose count, propelled by Mother’s wild eyes and pressed mouth, frightened of what her expression would be if...
At dusk,
the guards shoo us out.

We’re afraid to look at Mother.

January 14
Truly Gone

When home,
Mother
retreats to our room,
misses dinner,
remains soundless.

At bedtime
we hear
the gong,
then chanting.

The chant is long,
the voice
low and sure.

Finally
she appears,
looks at each of us.

Your father is
truly gone.

January 14
Late
Mother wears
her brown áo dài
brought from home.

Each of my brothers
wears a suit,
too small or too big.

I wear a pink dress
of ruffles and lace,
which I hate,
but at least
it’s definitely a dress.

Each of us faces the altar,
holding a lit incense stick
between palms in prayer.

Father’s portrait
stares back.

This is as old
as we’ll ever know him.

That thought
turns my eyes
red.
Mother says,
*We’ll chant*
for Father’s safe passage
toward eternal peace,
where his parents await him.

She pauses,
voice choked.

*Father won’t leave*
*if we hold on to him.*
*If you feel like crying,*
*think*
*at least now*
*we know.*

*At least*
*we no longer live*
in waiting.

*January 17*
I’m trying to tell
MiSSSissss WaSShington
about our ceremony for Father.

But it takes time to
match every noun and verb,
sort all the tenses,
remember all the articles,
set the tone for every s.

MiSSSissss WaSShington says
if every learner waits
to speak perfectly,
no one would learn
a new language.

Being stubborn
won’t make you fluent.
Practicing will!
The more mistakes you make,
the more you’ll learn not to.

They laugh.

Shame on them!
Challenge them to say
something in Vietnamese
and laugh right back.
I tell her
Father is at peace.

I tell her
I’d like to plant
flowers from
Vietnam
in her backyard.

I tell her
Tết is coming
and luck starts over
every new year.

January 19
Brother Quang
has started night school
to restudy engineering
to become what
he was meant to be.

Mother smiles.

Vu Lee
refuses to apply to a real college,
instead will go to a cooking school
in San-fran-cis-co,
where his idol once walked.

Mother sighs,
twists her brows
to no effect.

Brother Khôi
announces he will become a doctor
of animals.

Mother starts to say something,
them nods.

Mother has always wanted
an engineer, a real doctor, a poet,
and a lawyer.
She turns to me.  
*You love to argue, right?*

*No I don’t.*

She brightens.

I vow to become  
much more agreeable.

*January 29*
This Tết
there’s no I Ching Teller of Fate,
so Mother predicts our year.

Our lives
will twist and twist,
intermingling the old and the new
until it doesn’t matter
which is which.

This Tết
there’s no bánh chưng
in the shape of a square,
made of pork,
glutinous rice,
and mung beans,
wrapped in banana leaves.

Mother makes her own
in the shape of a log,
made of pork,
regular rice,
and black beans,
wrapped in cloth.

Not the same,
but not bad.

As with every Tết
we are expected to
smile until it hurts
all three first days
of the year,

wear all new clothes
especially underneath,

not sweep,
not splash water,
not talk back,
not pout.

Mother thinks of everything.

She even asked Brother Quang
to bless the house
right after midnight,
so I couldn’t beat him to it
by touching my big toe
to the carpet before dawn.

Mother has set up
an altar
on the highest bookshelf.

The same, forever-young
portrait of Father.

I have to look away.

We each hold an incense stick
and wait for the gong.

I pray for
Father to find warmth in his new home,
Mother to keep smiling more,
Brother Quang to enjoy his studies,
Vu Lee to drive me from and to school,
Brother Khôi to hatch an American chick.

I open my eyes.
The others are still praying.

What could they be asking for?

I think and think
then close my eyes again.
This year I hope

I truly learn
to fly-kick,
not to kick anyone
so much as
to fly.

January 31
Tết
Dear Reader:

Much of what happened to Hà, the main character in *Inside Out & Back Again*, also happened to me.

At age ten, I, too, witnessed the end of the Vietnam War and fled to Alabama with my family. I, too, had a father who was missing in action. I also had to learn English and even had my arm hair pulled the first day of school. The fourth graders wanted to make sure I was real, not an image they had seen on TV. So many details in this story were inspired by my own memories.

Aside from remembering facts, I worked hard to capture Hà’s emotional life. What was it like to live where bombs exploded every night yet where sweet snacks popped up at every corner? What was it like to sit on a ship heading toward hope? What was it like to go from knowing you’re smart to feeling dumb all the time?

The emotional aspect is important because of something I noticed in my nieces and nephews. They may know in general where their parents came from, but they can’t really imagine the noises and smells of Vietnam, the daily challenges of starting over in a strange land. I extend this idea to all: How much do we know about those around us?

I hope you enjoy reading about Hà as much as I have enjoyed remembering the pivotal year in my life. I also hope after you finish this book that you sit close to someone you love and implore that person to tell and tell and tell their story.

Thanhha Lai
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THANHHA LAI was born in Vietnam and moved to Alabama at the end of the war. She lives in New York City with her family.

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