

Pho, Questions for My Father

—“If we hadn’t moved to America, what then?”

In Saigon, a *bà nội* cooks the best pho.
Every morning, *người Mỹ* come on scooters.
Their hair trailing behind them
on the wind like satin slips into the sunset,
gliding down the body.
Their hair glazed with coconut oil
like the candied coconut wafers
my *mẹ* brought home from *Miền Tây*

In my dreams,
I am the tiger,
a tiger swimming underwater;
its breath rising into hot petals
melting, breaking like branches overhead
the water stemming from water lilies
and orchids hanging like chimes in the eaves.

“What do you remember about Vietnam?”

I remember where the sun rushes
through a narrow slit in the wall, and spills
into a deep green room. The cat sits by
the window. Your *mẹ* ladled bean sprouts, cilantro,
soft fresh slices of jalapeno, and we taste them
beneath the Jak Fruit trees, crack open river shrimp,
redder than pepper flakes, taste coconut meat, soft
as white tiger paws, over the burning bamboo.
Our sweat dried in the sand, while we sat beside
homes of mud raked leaves.

My *mẹ* remembers my father,
standing in the doorway in his souvenir jacket.
The golden embroidery on the back honors years
of service with wild roses and tigers
beneath violent waterfalls, and nights
commemorated in song.

My world is small. Within it, nobody really knows
what the soul is, though my mother has asked. Asked: “Why
does she have love bites on her collarbone,” orchids, purple

on white flowering into a necklace? My father stiffened like a black cat in trouble in the jungle, or an unripe fig plucked too early from the tree. My mother's lips went pale gold, and I no longer spent cool evenings with my father lying on the beach, though the moon shone bright silver with a slightly greenish tint.

Lying with his hands dipping into the cool brown water of the Mekong, my father kept a gun slung at his side, I wish I could say I resemble as much of a tiger as he did. Ready to strike or run at a moment's notice.

“Who would you want to come back to?”

Someone I am not afraid to remember me,
comforted when they do.

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