

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## **Alixen Pham: Three Poems**

Alixen Pham · Monday, October 2nd, 2023

### **Exodus of the Boat People**

1 *Stay and die. Or leave...and maybe live,*  
 Father said. Formless was night. Charcoal  
 the earth. Car was. Ten were we. Canned  
 tightly. Desperation drove. Headlights,  
 killed. Rabbits, our hearts. Darkness, friend.  
*Good is this,* Father said.

2 Coming Communists. Coming killing.  
 Died car. Pointed Father: *Ships, America*  
*waiting. Promised.* Linked hands, prayed we.  
 Walking started we. Two rows. Boys. Girls.  
 Mom. Dad. Smells were darkness. Tires  
 burnt. Plastic melted. Holes were darkness.  
 Streets. Buildings. Houses. Broken was city.  
 Brine licked were noses. A slithering  
 landscape, the ocean. Friend was this.

3 Americans were not. Ships were not.  
 Piers were. Tears were. Prayers were.  
 Friends were none. Grey, our faith. Heaven  
 was not. Stars were not. Food was none.  
 Hands searching. Shouts pummeled ears,  
 seagulls wailed. Darkness only. *Good is not*  
*this,* Father said.

4 Dawn. Backs ached. Tongues dried. The  
 earth. The sky. One bowl boiling. Night  
 thieved us. Overhead, candle-lit cathedral  
 flickered. Parted was darkness. Ships came.  
 Horns cried. Hallelujahs sung. Cargo nets  
 our bodies climbed. Whole was family. Glad  
 were eyes. Long was thirst. Night, wet ink.  
 Faces, red ink.

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## Haunted House

— inspired by Victoria Chang's poem on Agnes Martin's painting, *On a Clear Day* (1973)

5 Suns rose. Moons set. Food was none.  
 Water was little. Death came. Death ate.  
 Young. Old. Male. Female. Bodies drank  
 ocean. Sinking was ship. *O God, us thou has*  
*forsaken?* Last money Father sacrificed. Jade  
 bracelets Mother sacrificed. Thirst watered.  
 Then dawn came. A Danish ship. *Clara*  
*Maersk.* Rescued were we. Refugee camps  
 were Hong Kong. *Good is God,* Father said.

6 Refugees 3,628 were. Tent city was. Rice  
 was. Medicine was. Limbo was. Prayers were.  
 Politicians were many. Months waited. Suns  
 rose. Moons set. Children played. School was  
 not. Jobs were not. Mother prayed. Father  
 dreamed. Red. White. Blue. Life. Liberty.  
 Happiness. Then. Sponsored were we. Joy  
 was this.

7 Plane was first. Statue of Liberty was  
 first. Washington state we came. Church was.  
 House three bedroom was. Snow was first.  
 Cold were we. Gold streets were not. Car was  
 not. Vietnamese was / was not. English was.  
*And this was our new beginning,* said Father.

My father's traditions fitted into sixteen cells, like a house equally portioned for nine children when one is disowned.	Each of us circumscribed inside four walls, linked head to feet, voices boxed at right angles.
The vertical lines nailed tongues to roofs, muted eyes and dimmed dreams.	The rust in Father's iron broke under the weight of my sister marrying without his permission.
His wired fence imprisoned our tongues:	<i>She is no longer one of us.</i>
My sister's picture was talked about as if she were dead.	We lit no candles. Uttered no prayers. No scabs grew on our knees.
I asked God, <i>Why?</i>	He said, <i>A crow carries ghosts in its voice, the weight of what bombs destroy, knows only the salt of fleeing.</i>
Trauma had lashed his body into grids of thrashing nightmares and perennial loss,	dismembering family, allowing wind to hollow us into haunted rooms.
No matter how often I tried to erase his traditions, covered them with white wafers, ashed them with palm,	they incarcerated my mouth and body.
I counted the years, wondered if on some clear day,	How much blood is needed for the dead to return to life?

\*

## Cannibalized

*I can count your ribs,* Jesus said,

leering down. If he was a woman,  
would she be where I am right now?

*Do you take the body of Christ?*

Frankincense dripped from the priest's  
mouth, anointing my head. On collapsed knees,  
my mother pokes my remaining ribs.

*Open*, she hissed.

I opened my mouth. The priest's phallus fingers  
menaced the sky. The pale wafer  
caressed my tongue, dissolving tastelessly.

There was a red mess staining my white communion  
gown. I couldn't bondage it with a gold ring or  
a fertile bed of obligations. So I learned to play

Life with Mother clinging to my back. Her long  
fingernails pinned my fingers to the steering wheel,  
collecting money and bruises along the ride.

Each time she bent my knees onto a kneeler, forced  
my head into defiant submission, the priest made  
the sign of the cross, echoing Jesus' promise:

*Drink of me and you shall live forever.*

I drank His blood and ate His flesh. I kept on eating  
and drinking from the sons of Adam, kneeling on  
two and sometimes four limbs. Open. I opened.

Bend. I bowed. Kneel. They broke my knees.  
How many times did I kiss their heads, endure  
their entries, begging:

*I wish you would love me.*

O God of my mother. I swallowed the wrong men.  
In my dreams I lost a rib each time I rose from  
my knees. Jesus roasted and ate it, exclaiming:

*It tastes like lamb.*

Waking up from the nightmare, I found my pillbox  
emptied of blue ellipses. Only a wafer on a pink satin.  
I cauterized my stigmata burning my faith, wondering

if Mary dreamt of being childless. I only know after  
years of kneeling, offering my mouth, sucking on men's  
egos, swallowing my anguish and spoons of their semen,

the wafer cannibalized me.

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