

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Bà n?i

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I am searching. I still can't find her. I look where the cats claw the hardwood floors, at shreds of paper that tumble in and out of my periphery. Above the bend of my neighbor's high-pitched cackle, at each shadow that moves and disappears. A thump outside or a flash of light. They all send my heart racing toward her.

I force my eyes open in the dead of night, when the temperature rises and I kick the sheets half off my body. I think she will be there, watching over me. A bit of sun to keep me warm.

I met her only once. She was, is, was, is, was brown clothes and brown skin. An embrace, buried.

All I offered in that village house was a smile and hands I inherited from her. I gave her a place for her tears to go, in the nook of my body where my forearm and elbow meet. That is as high as her face could reach.

Against the seafoam green painted walls she said my name. It rose and fell to a song familiar to her, but I did not say hers, because I did not know how to. I still don't know her name. Maybe that is why she has not visited. Maybe she does not remember.

Maybe she doesn't remember me. Maybe she thinks I am someone else. Maybe she asked this person, "Do you know my name?" and the person did not know my grandma's name either and so she haunts them instead of me. She thinks they are me. That's her, she says, that's my granddaughter. She gazes lovingly at a body crumpled into sheets, claws at the evening's slow heat, sings to the rise and fall of this person's breaths, mimics the movements of their shadows.

That's her, she says, that's the one whose hands caress pictures of cats who live across the internet world. It's amazing, she says, how this granddaughter can at a moment's notice get news of a vague acquaintance's new baby, new divorce, new job, new shoes, new house, new phone number, new diploma, new art project, new travel plans, new politician, new word in a different language, new fundraiser, new name change, new country, new test, new shirt, new succulent, new favorite snack, new idea, new celebrity sighting, new feeling never felt before.

That's her, she says. The one with magic fingertips that dial anywhere but home. The one who has a Master's degree in something. The one who cannot say my name.

Last Wednesday a shooter came to my workplace. In the dark heavy silence of my locked office, I think she was there. She visited me as the fast-moving specter of misinformation, she split and became three phantom shooters to the west, east, and north.

As she moved across the campus, my muscle memory kicked in. My body remembered to tense so hard that my neck and back ached for days. My body remembered to keep my eyes open. To make myself as small as possible and try to disappear. To prepare to say goodbye. To promise not to cry, because that would distract me and others from survival.

It was grandma, it was her, it was her ghost, moving to the north, west, and east of me. All my life I spent arching my index finger upon spinning globes, following the crumpled lines of borders

drawn into foldout National Geographic pages, tracing the smoothly-etched and orderly streets of Thomas Guides, memorizing the order of written timelines. All this time spent trying to locate her. As I became lost and then grounded in my emotions, I realized, perhaps too late, that my grandmother was the map.

Losing her is, was, is, was, is like waking up with my head at the foot of my bed. Everything has changed, nothing has changed.

She is the cat scratch. She is the neighbor's joy.

I wrote this poem in pieces across a giant sheet of paper. I swathed my words in a robe of mourning. White, the absence of life.

In 1975 one of her sons parted unannounced and his stolen boat glided on, cut across, white seafoam waters. We would spend our lives, my dad, my grandma, and I, waiting for the next time. Or thinking it was the end. Bodies tense from the waiting. Goodbye always on the tips of our tongues.

In textbooks where I used to look for my grandma, in the talcum-powdered bosoms of the old white lady teachers whom others called grandma, I heard over and over again, *Our men died to stop the war, you're welcome. Now tell us about your suffering and how grateful you are because of it.* My grandma and I have lived long lives. We have been allowed to exist because war continues.

A trauma counselor leaned back in his rolling chair and congratulated me for my body's resilience. I rolled my eyes and rolled my chair back and away and as far back as I could. I took the bus to a place I pay to call home. I shed blood from my uterus all over my bed, all over my clothes. My blood in the earth and in material, I pass on the map of her joy and her sorrows into the etchings of the floorboards. Into the arc of the sun's movement. Into the waterpipes. Into the lungs of a whale. Into a crowd of uncomfortable strangers.

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