

Refractions

Christopher Pham

Submerge

I remember the embrace of the ocean
where its tides lure my body into its palms,
engulfed in a crescent love that never dies,
as the remnants of the Sun's warmth
and the clarity of the waves' riffs begin to dissipate.

To the mouths of the water.

Where I was limbless and light,
I could fly as I chose, with no destination—
with no designation—

I was free

Under the faith of the current's clenches,
Feeling its hands close my eyes,

caress my cheek,

down to my lips,

And catch me by the neck

And close in that grasp

As knives sate my lungs

Until the last bubbles from my breath

cease.

With my back facing the abyss,

I could see the light of the Sun

penetrate the skin of the waters and refract

as a kaleidoscope of memories—

of a fragmented soul

casted on shadows



Sink

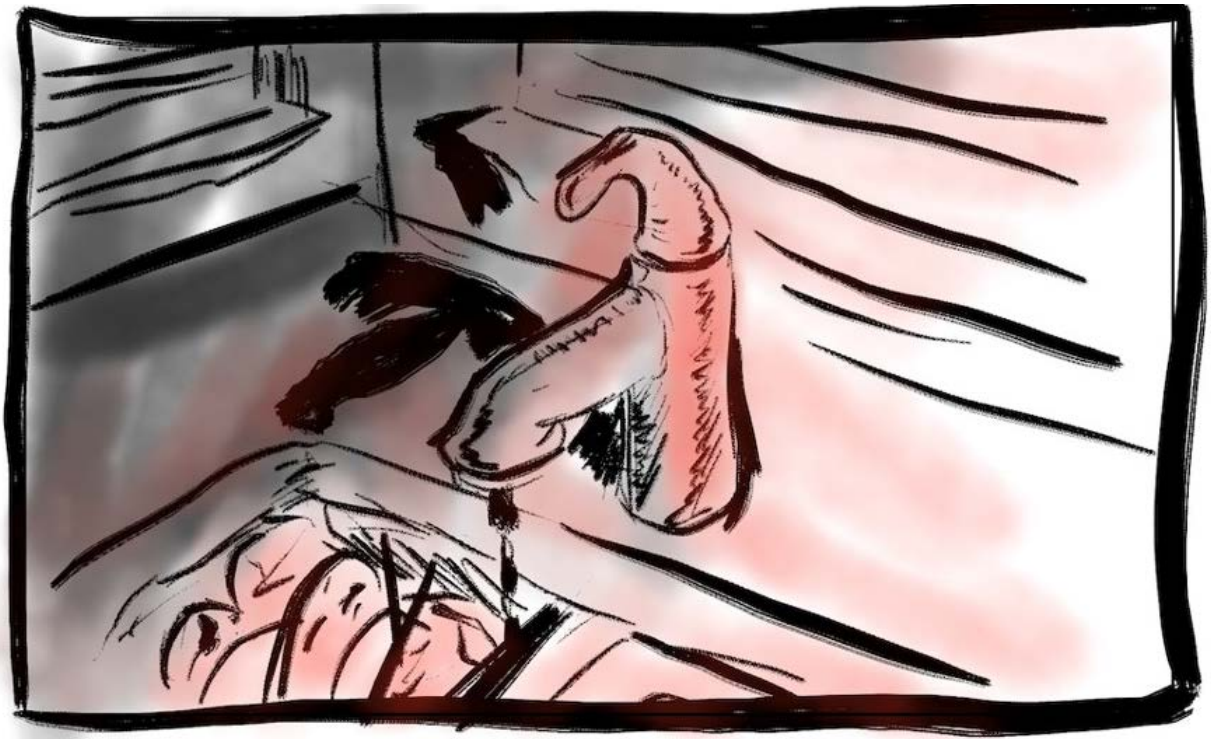
The bright crescent
reflects on the window,
Under the never-ending trickling on
Stained dishes,
A steam of sound that would
Fill the room for us,
Silence the clattering of
Shattered dishes that sliced

bits and pieces
of our bodies

Apart.

I look at the window.

I had lost my skin, face, and my mother tongue,
To the drain.



Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

I am in love with your callus
In the way that the torch on
Lady liberty's hand lifts my wings
To fly towards the clouds,
As I slowly become to ash.

I've loved you for many years:
Talked as you,
Dressed as you,
Believed as you,
Living under your skin only to feel nothing.

I know. I am nothing but a liar and a coward—
A murderer—bending on my knees,
Holding my hands together,
Begging to be spared.

Under the gracious hands of Liberty,
She embraces me tenderly.
Her hands brush through my loose skin
And lower my eyelids.

As my eyes open to see Liberty,
All from below, my skinless body
Incinerates in the Hell of the bloodthirsty Atlantic.

Now swim, she says.



Fatherhood

A sharp cry was pierced by his whips that
Straightened our spines with etched sermons
As we drown by a mother's silence.

*A stupid, shy boy you are, to believe
In the cave that echoes into the void
For your forgiveness.*

But a mother's jaded eyes never lie to
A father's beatings to and on
Another woman, on and on,

*For god has forsaken you for your
Unforgiving cycle of lustrous
Temptations that never give back.*

We try to breathe within his brace of love,
Only to have our arms crossed with ropes
That tie our heads down in knots of lies

*And sorrows, casted by shadows
From breathless bodies facing the tainted waters
of blood. Oh, I would kill for another day.*

Anyone can see those dead eyes never lie.
A father's beating is nothing but the past.
He is nothing but a specter that lives

In our lives.

So let the children see so that they can
Remember the man he was.

*So let the children see so that they can
Remember the man I never was.*

So let the children see so that they can
Live another day.

Hoa Lan (Orchid)

you always told me
you wanted to be
a sunflower,
whose petals sing
with such clarity
in the glares
of the sun's rays
that struck your
hand every afternoon
for reaching for
iced coffee that
could wash away
all his guised pleads
with that grainy,
bitter delight.
a sunflower,
whose bright yellow
petals match the
sun's ever warming
kisses to the cheek,
instilling seeds
that'll grow
evergreen in the
parade of everlasting
bloom.
a sunflower,
whose beauty
pollinates those
hollow hearts
into ecstasy,
into the clouds
of surrender,
and reminds them of
the beauty that
stretches into the
horizons, where
their hands can
never reach
for all of eternity.

you were, though,
a hoa lan,
an orchid,
whose petals sing
in the solace
of your room
every night,
where you would
watch the flowers
of your kind
in áo dài
circle you
and carry you
for a dance,
under a cantabile,
to the lunar
as I hold you
with my two
small hands
and call out
your name:
Mẹ,
Mẹ,
Mẹ...
i
clench
onto what's left
of your
sweet floral fragrance
and surrender
to the sun's rays
as you
peter away
into those bejeweled
eyes of yours—
waiting to be heard,
waiting to be seen,
waiting to be loved...
years later,

i reach into
the drain
in search
for the
broken pieces
of my mother tongue.
i collected them,
organized them,
and taped them
together
the best i could
remember.
i gathered
the most beautiful
flowers,
whose bright
petals sing
with such clarity and
match the
sun's ever warming
kisses to the cheek.
and whose beauty
will always be
remembered
as the blossoms
of hoa lans
lay gently
on the
palms of my hand
as I embrace
the cantabile
of the lunar.
I call out for you:
Mẹ ơi,
tôi có còn là con trai của mẹ
không?
(Mom, am I still your son?)

Mẹ translates to "Mom"

Ba and Mẹ (Dad and Mom)

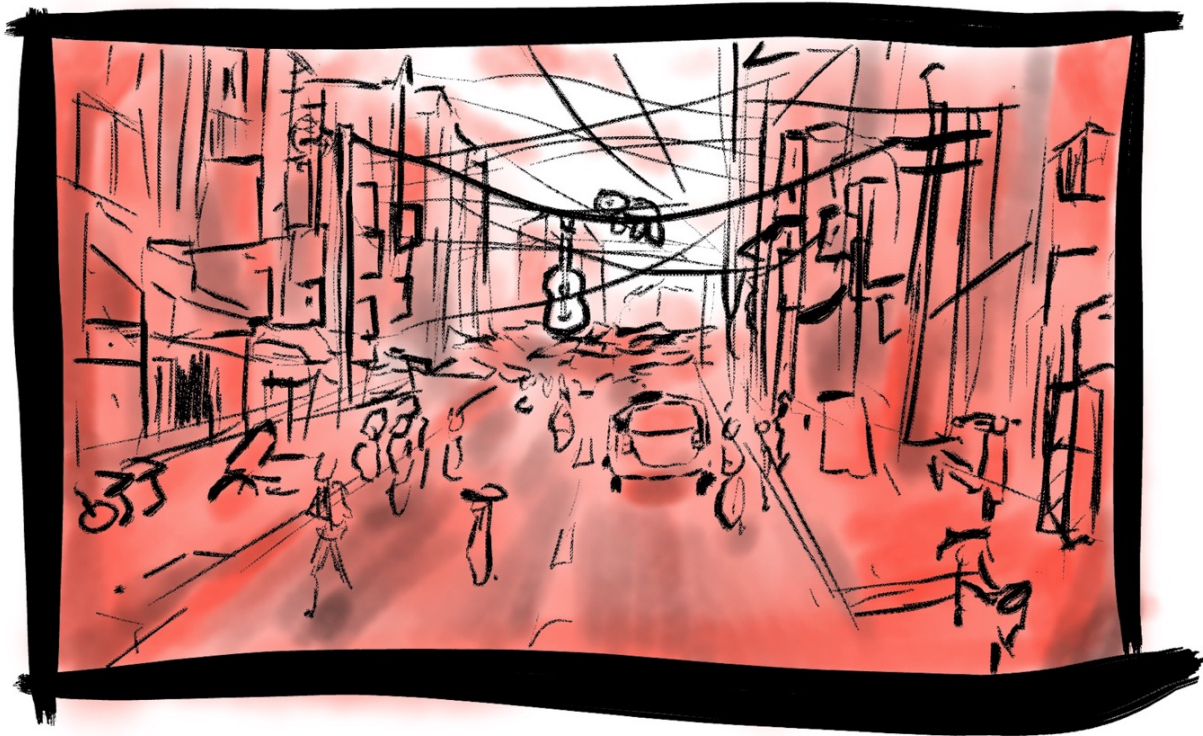
The caramelized, nutty aroma mixes
 With burnt gasoline of motorbikes
On top of damp fish on their side
 Looking up at the chartreuse sky.
Chatters and beers,
 Bright plastic stools, and leers
All live dear under the
 Cold steel of a serenade
From a guitar,
 Whose loose strings
Search for refuge
 In its case that it cannot
Fit in. Home is elsewhere.
 Home is in America,
Where all my brothers
 And sisters are now living in.
And so, I leave in search
 For my family.
And over there, I am met
 With a case dressed
In lustful regalia that fills
 My bark as I am beaten
Like a silly dog
 On its hind legs begging
To be petted
 Until I am nothing but
Splintered wood
 Full of spit for my dry eyes.
With nothing to
 Grasp, I strum each string
To remember
 My cadence of the past.
All I hear is the
 Hollow gape of my love story
Gnashing away to
 Their condescending eyes.
The only home I have
 Is with the children

I carry.
 I squeeze them tightly
Hoping Home will
 Always be here for them.
Where no casket
 Takes them and buries
Them alive.
 No one can take you away,
 Con
The warm laughter mixes
 With the bitterness of cà phê sữa đá
That drips slowly under
 The filters of sweetness and service.
Giggles and cheers,
 Empty drinks, and ogles
All live dear under the
 Blood and sweat
From a family,
 Whose tight-knit strings
refuge the lives
 of brother and sister
in arms. Home is here.
 But home could be in America,
Where all the told promises,
 And prosperity reside in.
And so, I leave in search
 For the promises from my lover.
And over there, I am met
 With his absence
Under tight-knit strings
 That choke my silhouette
Like a play doll
 On its last legs praying in silence
To be put down,
 Forever resting with
Ripped hair and
 Shallow eyes.

With nothing to
Grasp, I hold my hands together
And bow
To the Buddha who raises
His hand in grace to fill the
Hollow gape of my love story
Gnashing away to
Their condescending eyes.
The only home I have
Is with the children
I carry.

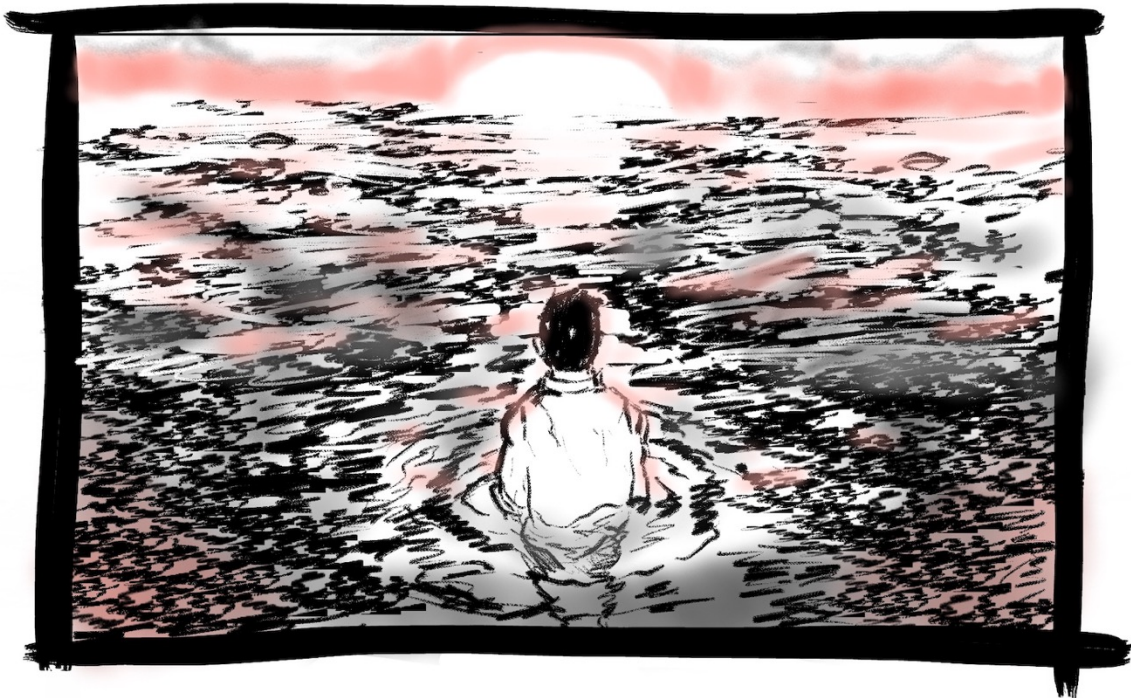
I squeeze them tightly
Hoping Home will
Always be here for them.
Where no casket
Takes them and buries
Them alive.
No one can take you away,
Con

cà phê sữa đá translates to "Vietnamese coffee"
con translates to "Child; Son/Daughter"



Resurface

The ocean is behind us.
Can you hear the wave's riffs, again?
Can you hear it align with the beat
Of your warming heart just as
The Sun blesses your swollen skin with
Kisses of tomorrow?
Are you listening? You are free
Anywhere you go.
Swim in the ocean
And you'll find the reflection from
The surface of the water to follow
Your motions
In ripples.
You can breathe now.
Embrace the ocean,
Where its tides rest into your palms—
Engulfed by your crescent love that never dies.
Remember.



Author's Note: A collection of poems and illustrations, this text expresses and reconciles with the identity and intergenerational trauma of being Vietnamese American. It traces both the physical and affective forms of violence that are created by war, displacement, and oppression. In doing so, this text intends to reflect on American racial politics through an illustrative memoir.