

Phở bò

Mama squeezed a wedge of lime over the hot soup
its surface iridescent with fat and scrumptious
floating islands of beef. She poked my legs, my legs
folded up on the chair, toes curled in, "Like a farm
girl," she snapped, "nhà quê quá." I flopped them down.

Saw a child running once, limbs flailing, hair streaming,
free like the ocean sh-sh-ing next to her glinting
the sun back. White noodles glinting through greasy
broth. No, no, no basil please. No mint. I can't stand it.
"Không muốn." No want. Not even able to use pronouns.
What must you think of me? Can't eat. Can't speak.

"Tại sao con không muốn?" Mama adds the leaves anyway
Nudges the bowl toward me. Eat. The vegetal sharpness
fills my nose as I slurp. Pearls that stick in my throat.

Mỗi chân

Feet gnarled and bent,
like branches of trees I never climbed,
stir clouds of dust as they whirl and leap
to mother's conduction.

Arches suck into themselves,
as if to avoid needles underfoot.

They dance on the slick lips
of a tangerine cliff and ache
with trodden voice that whispers
through cracked soles
from toes to God's ears.

what mama gave me

the moon broken off like papa's voice when he said goodbye
casted liquid shadows across the hard set of your mouth.
your knuckles turned white like the mourning band wrapped
around your head at ông ngoại's funeral. you did not cry then either.
my battered, leaky boat that bobbed and tipped me to shore;
it has taken buckets of salt to dry me out.

do you ever release the tsunami that rages against the walls
of your tender heart? tell me, mama, where do you stuff
the girl whose chin ran with juices from the loquat tree?
where do you hide the pretty young thing whose mouth
split pink like grapefruit against the michigan snow, who
threw laughing snowballs at her new and shiny husband?

the unyielding dragon swept from canteen to canteen, searching,
searching for her lost father. you sloughed off the grotesque
stench of war and reached for the beauty of your survival.
i once saw your face swollen like the blazing skin of a blister;
your backbone ridged like an oyster shell, broken against the rock;
your eyes flashed wild, and i knew the fear of a trapped rat.

and yet—and yet:

the sun splashes on your shoulders, brilliant as lotus flowers in mud;
your fingers dance delicate like the wisps of jasmine perfume;
if you looked, you would see that they are just like mine.