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Suffering Self  
~ Khổ Mình, Mình Khổ ~

One day in Saigon in 1987—nine years after he had failed his escape attempt by boat, was captured, was imprisoned, ran away, was beaten unconscious and recaptured, was imprisoned, dug hundreds of thousands of spoons of dirt, ran away, was recaptured, was imprisoned, chained, and hung upside down in a cell every night, escaped with the help of a Communist friend, had arrest warrants posted on him, five years after he had settled in Dalat in his mother's house, waited day by day for the police to come get him, met my mother, married her, and had two children—my father was hiding out and talking with his uncle, who translated American papers and documents for clients, and his uncle told him about a certain document he had translated recently, and this document explained that veterans of the Army of the Republic of Viet-Nam (ARVN) were welcome to petition for their and their family's emigration to the United States of America.

They were sitting in the shade, out of the dust, typewriter, cups of tea, and a pack of cigarettes in front of them on a low desk, both of them sitting cross-legged on bamboo mats, and my father was smoking, hacking a little, spitting into the dirt. His uncle might have teased my father, asking him, in Vietnamese of course—*You still have your army documents stashed somewhere? Are there any left?*

*Yes, of course!* My father might have exclaimed, or he might have said a softer *yes, I still have something*, because it was a public shame to be known as a soldier who had fought with the Americans. Twelve years before, in 1975, three years after the last official American troops had left Vietnam, my father had been on the losing side of the Vietnam War, had fought the bloody battles of those last desperate months and had lived to see the Communist youths, ragged, gaping, and gaunt, walk into Saigon beside their gleaming tanks on another such dusty hot day.

*What about the trại học tập cải tạo? Are they going to hold it over you?* His uncle the translator might have continued.

My father spit again into the street. *I served my sentence. They released me voluntarily.* In May 1975, after hiding out in Saigon—soon to be renamed Ho Chi Minh City—for a few weeks with a couple of girlfriends, he had resignedly reported to the reeducation camps and stayed there for the next three years, where he was never successfully educated to hate America and their capitalist ideas. *Well*, his uncle continued, giving my father a copy of the document itself, *here's good news indeed!* His uncle explained that Vietnamese men with my father's past were now being recognized as former political prisoners worthy of receiving sanctuary—i.e. going to America—by the current American president (he did not know the president's name), but the president had a party called the Republican Party.

The last question his uncle asked him was the most important—*And are they going to let you go?*

*I'll find a way*, my father said, the only thing he could say.

*Well, get along with you! Here's your ticket out of this mess, you rascal*, my uncle would have concluded. My father would have been ecstatic, and filled out this document, one of many

he filled out and sent out year after year during the 1980s. Finally, twelve years after the Vietnam War ended, here was a legitimate, legal, and safe way to get to America. My father decided—right then or sometime during the four years it took for us to finally reach the New Orleans Airport on July 21, 1991—that the best way to show his gratitude to this president (God bless whoever-he-was, his family, and his ancestors) was to join the Republican Party when he arrived in America. During my childhood in America, whenever I exclaimed at the fact that we were in America, *Americans!*, my father always told us to love this Republican president and to honor him for giving us a chance to be Americans, and we have always done so, even after my father got to know American politics, changed his mind, and declared us Democrats.

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Throughout my childhood in America, my parents fed me story crumbs over dinners, on family outings, in brief moments etched colorless but not soundless in my mind, short words that smoked and flamed finally when I was sixteen and caught a glimpse of my birth country in a Vietnam War documentary in high school history, and my country was on fire. Expanding emotions filled my chest as I viewed vast jungles from a helicopter's vantage. I felt strange pride in the splendor and beauty of my country, its nature, the green covering gently sloping hills. *My own*, I thought. Then bombs fell, an American anti-war song beat out, and nature caught fire and turned green to red and orange. Startled and horrified, I watched the land disappear in the glow of bombs. I saw strange people. Prostitutes in Saigon. Villagers weeping and crowding among each other as hamlets burst into flames. Stoic prisoners labeled as the enemy. The Americans stood at the forefront, sweating and dressed in the greenery of the jungle, throwing flames. And throughout, as American faces, American politics, American sorrow, American hurt, American howls, American evacuation filled the screen, as I followed the heroes of this drama in mind if not in heart, I wondered where soldiers like my father were, where starving teenagers like my mother were. I will wonder and be haunted by their absence for years afterwards, and frightened, imagined that they have gone up in flames.

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Throughout 1987, at home in Dalat, waiting for my father's return from Saigon, waiting for knocks on the door, my mother's clearest memory is of feeding us, my brother and I, as we sat in front of her. She spooned out the fruit. She gave my brother a spoonful. He swallowed his spoonful. She turned to me with a spoonful. Already, my brother opened his mouth wide and waited. I swallowed my spoonful. My mother turned to my brother. Already, I opened my mouth wide and waited. When there was no fruit left inside its skin, she looked at us, and we looked at her, our mouths open wide. My mother called us her baby birds. We were always hungry, but we did not cry or whine or scream. We sat quietly, our heads tilted back, our eyes patient, our mouths open wide, waiting for spoonfuls. When my mother visited her mother's house and was given a piece of fruit or a piece of bread, she saved the morsels for us. One day, at her mother's house, her sister told her—*You cannot have the fruit unless you eat it right now*. My mother explained that she had baby birds waiting at home for her, and any food she swallowed was less food for them. She told her sister about the mouths open wide waiting to be filled. She told her sister about how quickly the mouths open again and again, exactly like baby birds. Her sister gave her the fruit. Her sister might have also asked—*What about for the baby you are carrying?*

If there was no food, we sat in the kitchen, and my mother put on a pot of boiling water, and we would watch the steam rise and flow, and that had to be enough. Or perhaps my mother was painting and doing handcrafts for a bit of money. Or washing our cloth diapers. Or drawing water from the well and boiling it for our weekly baths. Or just sitting, waiting, fear running around freely, gathering her two children close to her, her head pounding from weariness. She

could have been doing any of dozens of daily chores or doing nothing at all, because it did not matter, the knocking would begin at any time of the day or night.

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For days, weeks, months, and altogether two years after I witnessed the burning forest, I searched public and university libraries, and found shelves upon shelves of books on the Vietnam War, and read as many as I could, searching, seeking. After two years, I stopped reading the history books and never returned to them again. Before I stopped reading the history books, in my senior history class, my high school teacher asked me to ask my father to come and talk about his Vietnam War experiences to our class. I never let my father know of this request. I listened to the history books and reasoned—*What has he done to deserve this honor? Why should he tell his story when the history books have already told his story so well? What could he say, with his thick accent, with his weak English?* Instead, months after my teacher's unanswered request, I volunteered myself to lecture on the Vietnam War. *I've spent two years analyzing the Vietnam War*, I reasoned to my teacher, and he agreed, letting me give three lectures.

I ranted. My hands shook. I sweated. One of my classmates asked me for the meaning behind *gook*, the racial slur against the Vietnamese. *It means shit*, I said. *Shit. Shit. Shit. That's me*. They laughed. I could not hide my discomfort, but I forced myself to speak, to teach my classmates. Look, I told them, all the facts are in the history books. Let me show you, I said, why, after the last official American troops left Vietnam in August of 1973, the Communists inevitably had to win less than two years later in April of 1975. The history books have named the ARVN soldiers, of which my father was one—*deserters, cowards, criminals, corrupted, and useless*. Search, and you will find that no other names live. Search, and you will find that the history books have instead photographed and immortalized the story of the courageous Communist youths, ragged, gaping, and gaunt, who walked into an undefended, meek Saigon, their gleaming tanks rolling freely and undeterred along the deserted, unprotected Saigon streets in April of 1975.

Then, during my third lecture—when I searched behind my learned words and found an inexpressible emptiness, I tried to tell my classmates of the necessity and the honor of the Vietnam War. *How can we regret this war?* I asked. *We cannot wish a whole war away*. My pleas were personal. I spoke unclear, emotional arguments. The history books spoke against me, so I turned away from them, and in the end, alone and inarticulate, I could not win. I could not prevent my teacher and my classmates from regretting the Vietnam War and telling each other that it would have been better if the Vietnam War had never existed.

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In 1987, the reason my father was hiding out in Saigon and the reason my mother was waiting for knocks on the door in Dalat was because a Dalat policeman named Binh was playing a game with them. My father was considered a criminal by the Communist police. He was—as his uncle might have alluded to once—a rascal in a mess. It had all started years ago, right after he got out of the reeducation camps, the *trại học tập cải tạo*, in 1978. He looked around, and realized that at least in the camps, everyone had two bowls of rice to eat, and here, outside, when he returned home, he could do nothing but watch his mother starve. He decided that it was time for him to go to America.

It seemed as though, in the second half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s, if you were an able-bodied South Vietnamese man—a veteran sneered at, a man scorned—you had to make at least one attempt to escape from Vietnam. My father's younger brother, my Uncle Minh, shortly after his fourth child was born, made it as far as Thailand, where he was stuck in a camp, and would not be reunited with his family again until six years later. Around the same time my

father and his friend saved money and made a deal with two people to get a boat for their trip overseas, my mother's two younger brothers also got a boat, cheated two people out of their share of the boat, made it as far as a small island off the coast of Vietnam, where their boat was captured by the Communists, but in which they themselves eluded capture, and where they hid for six months with nothing except for the clothes on their backs and a French copy of the felon and fugitive Henri Charriere's novel *Papillon*, which they read for inspiration and laughter until they caught another boat, went far out to sea, where one was picked up by a Canadian ship and became Canadian and where the other was picked up by a Norwegian ship and became Norwegian. Meanwhile, my father and his friend waited along the shores of Vietnam for the boat ride he and his friend had been promised by two people; they waited and waited until they realized they had been cheated, and then my father made his way back home to Dalat, and along the way home, he was caught by the Communist police for the first time.

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When I moved two hours away from my family for college in Columbia, Missouri in 2004, my family also moved into our first owned home, a pale yellow doublewide trailer set in a valley park in Fenton, Missouri. The roof and walls and flooring were thin wooden panels. Until I turned twenty-one, during cold-cramping winter vacations home, I constantly pursued my parents down the corridors of their memories, asking them for story crumbs, saving all the morsels they allowed—in unguarded, relaxed moments—for me to hold.

The history books I left behind had taught me how to feel the absence, how to grope among the ashes for the pieces of history forgotten, denied, rewritten, overwritten. My three lectures on the Vietnam War continued to haunt and fill me with bitter shame. I began to learn how to travel backwards through time—if not to rewrite history then to travel back to lift the stories from the flames and stop the burning. I searched, I pursued, I harassed, knocked on their memories' locked doors, bribed them with love and patience, never telling them about the burning forest that haunted me, because its shape was still inexpressible. I showed them my story drafts and my writing notebooks. I sat at our cold glass dinner table, slurping my father's spicy noodle soups, letting the warmth soak in and spread outward to my fingertips, and asked him for another story, just one more story. I asked him for the war years and the reeducation camps. I sat with my mother on my parents' bed, the blankets piled high around us and the space heaters next to us fighting the cold stiffening my fingers. I asked her for the starving years.

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The stories of tangled webs of overseas escape attempts and failures and uncertainties after the Vietnam War ended must have kept the people stuck back home lively and entertained, must have fed the people with hope if not crumbs.

The luckiest ones, the luckiest families, like my family in July of 1991, would leave Vietnam by airplane, sanctioned by the United Nations, approved by the United States of America. Program name: Orderly Departure Program. Operation name: Humanitarian Operation. Named *Orderly* and named *Humanitarian* because it was an operation which was to stop us Vietnamese from throwing ourselves onto boats and leaving the country in droves in the wake of the Communist takeover in April of 1975. An *Orderly* operation which requested that we wait our turns patiently and not take to the seas so desperately, so alarmingly ill-prepared, because our neighboring countries were tired of cleaning up after us, of having to bear witness to our dying in droves as our boats capsized, as our boats were set afire by Thai pirates, as our women were raped and our men murdered, as our women and children were kidnapped, sold as prostitutes and slave laborers, as along the beaches where our bodies washed up, other countries had to dig graves all along their golden shores to bury us, we nameless, we forgotten. And at home in Vietnam, family waiting and waiting for the letters from overseas, waiting to hear that the lottery

had been won, that the boats, leaking and overcrowded, packed shoulder to shoulder, had somehow landed in safe harbors, waiting and praying to Buddha and God and Mother Mary, and yet never—to this day—finding out the fates of their loved ones.

But before we left in an *Orderly* and *Humanitarian* fashion, a lot of things happened.

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After two years of college and after two years of my mother asking me in Vietnamese *Why don't you study science?* and *Is there any money in writing?* and after two years of my telling her in English *Hmm, I just don't think about science* and *No, there's not much money in writing*, during the winter vacation of my twenty-first year, I sat with my mother in my parent's cold room one night, the blankets piled high around us, and I discovered that the cold had finally frozen and sealed my lips shut, and I could no longer ask for stories of Vietnam. For the next three winter vacations until my twenty-fourth year, I stopped bringing home story drafts and writing notebooks. Instead, I brought home science textbooks—physics and chemistry, biology and biochemistry, physiology and nutrition, and when my father and I sat at our cold glass dinner table and when my mother and I sat on my parent's bed in their chilly bedroom, I told them stories of the human body, the world, and the universe. We talked of the day when my science degree would bring money. I told them my dream of finding enough money to build a roof, walls, and floors thick enough to keep out the cold, so that warmth constant and soothing would create enough room for stories. And at night, back in Columbia, Missouri, during brief free moments from studying and during long midnight walks outside to escape heavy headaches and a desk piled high with exam study guides, I dreamed of another desk where story drafts and writing notebooks could freely pile. It was a desk that always existed by night. I dreamed of asking my parents to let me inherit their stories and I dreamed of them giving me all the stories I wanted. I dreamed of fullness.

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During the summer of 2009, months before I turned twenty-four, two semesters after I failed two science classes for no other reason than that I was too tired, too dizzy, and too sleepy to study, and one semester after one, then two, then three, then four of my fingers stiffened and refused to straighten, and the line between aching and hurting began to blur, I fell into my habit of escaping into sleep, sleeping for as many as sixteen hours a night, searching for a better existence in painless dreaming, and I found comfort in recording my most haunting dreams into my journal. In one of my dreams, *my father is with me, and he asks—Do you want to see where I hide my things? It is the safest place in the world. We drove into violent white rushing water, and my father opens his car door. Somehow, we are not soaked by the water. I cannot feel the water. He reaches into the water and I can suddenly see into another car. There is another car under the flood waters and it is locked into place. My father looks at me and says—This is the safest place I could find. I look at his treasures, and I see old, ragged, tattered books written in Vietnamese, carefully placed on a makeshift shelf hammered on the dashboard. How sad, I think. These are all he has, and they will be swept away. This place is not as safe as he thinks.*

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All of my father's escapes from Communist prisons after his release from the reeducation camps in 1978 produced in 1981 an arrest warrant for one Tan Duy Nguyen (my father), a one-time failed-escapee-to-America, a three-time successful escapee from Communist prisons, guilty of forging government documents, guilty of faking official government seals, guilty of fighting on the Americans' side in the first place, this Tan Duy Nguyen was wanted by the Vietnamese police for all crimes mentioned thus far and especially for his last escape, in which he somehow escaped from a locked cell, even though he was hung upside down from the ceiling with chains wrapped around his body and his thumbs tied tightly together. So around the time my father was

in Saigon sending documents to the Vietnamese government, to the American government, to the American embassy in Thailand, letters to overseas relatives living in Norway, Canada, and America about exciting expectations, *and would you please include some money*, there were knocks on our family door in Dalat, knocks made everyday by a policeman named Binh who, when my mother answered the door, would go through his daily routine of presenting the arrest warrant, demanding to see her husband the criminal Tan Duy Nguyen, feigning surprise when my mother told him she did not know where her husband was, and waiting, sometimes patiently and sometimes not, for my mother to bribe him.

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When I was twenty-four, in the year of the water buffalo, my year, weeks before I withdrew from Immunology with the kind professor's willingness to put a W instead of an F on my record, I learned that it is essential for the immune system, the body's defense system, to recognize what is Self and what is Non-self. When the defense system fails to distinguish between Self and Non-self, it wages guerilla warfare on everything it used to protect faithfully and efficiently. While I was in the midst of withdrawing from Immunology, because the subject was too difficult for me to understand and because I was distracted during class and exams when my fingers turned stone white and went numb one by one, I will not know yet that my defense system has already been going haywire for six months, attacking my hands, my knees, my lungs, and my gastrointestinal system, which is to say, the system that nourishes the body, the Self. One month before I finished the semester, I admitted to myself that I was no longer strong enough to enter the Clinical Laboratory Program, which requested that I be able to control the fine motor skills of my hands and lift fifty pounds. I dropped out of the program, a program that I had been pursuing for two years, a program that promised a starting salary of \$40,000 when I graduated. Three weeks before I finished the semester, my right hand refused to hold a pen for two weeks, as though it had suddenly forgotten how. When I finished the semester with no Fs, my hands slowly regaining their strength, I was grateful that I had not repeated the history of the semester when I was twenty-three and finished the semester with two Fs. After I finished the fall semester of the year of the water buffalo, 2009, my year, I finally heard from my doctor about auto-immunity: self-guerilla warfare: self-betrayal: the self suffocating the self, not necessarily because it wants to but because the self has become indistinguishable from the enemy, the line between Self and Non-self having been suddenly and irrevocably erased.

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When a relative made it overseas during the 1970s and 1980s, it meant that the whole family back in Vietnam had won a lottery. Once, my mother asked me to imagine those years from 1975 to 1978—the years before my mother's brothers made it overseas in 1978—to imagine a bird who is flying free, who is suddenly caught. She was sixteen when the Communist tanks rolled into Dalat in March of 1975. She explained it this way—imagine, in school, in all the subjects you used to love, you encountered the same world you loved but it is a new world now, a new world that you saw every day when you walked down the street, a world that you hate because it was wrong. Imagine, in math, having to solve this problem, the scenario thus—*There are forty American soldiers and eighty ARVN soldiers hiding in the rice fields. How many American soldiers and ARVN soldiers are left when fifteen of our Communist soldiers kill twenty American soldiers and forty ARVN soldiers? How many are left to kill? Show your work.* And in history, another assignment, another scenario—*Write a five page essay on how the war against the Imperialist Americans was won. Write of the freedoms we have achieved from the evil influences of American Imperialism. Compare and contrast.* This world was a heavy curtain falling over her future, and she left school at sixteen, and never went back, and stayed home, and watched her father lose his job, watched her older sister commit suicide, attempted suicide

herself, failed, watched everyone in her family starve, and begin her habit of boiling a pot of water when there was nothing to eat.

Hope arrived in 1978 when her two brothers made it overseas and began sending money and food and medicine and essential necessities back to her family, and my mother began to see golden threads flowing from her overseas brothers to her and she began to dream of them finding a way to save her. And when she married my father in 1983, she imagined that my father had a golden thread too and would find a way to use it to save her.

But before my father could save her and us too, she had to deal with the policeman Binh and save my father first.

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During the winter vacation of my twenty-fourth year, when I could no longer carry a twenty-five pound bag of rice the ten steps from our food closet to the kitchen and must instead drag it, when I could no longer chop onions, cabbage, and carrots because my hand could no longer grip the knife, when I had to ask others to open my pill bottles for me, when carrying two plastic bags of groceries home during afternoons translated into pain for the whole night, when my muscles atrophied, leaving me stranded, I sat at my computer and typed. My fingers ranged freely across the alphabet, not needing to grip, not needing to hold onto anything. Seeking. When the cold invaded between the window cracks, wrapping tight manacles around my wrists and finger joints and turning my hands into frozen claws, I stood in my kitchen and boiled a pot of water, letting the steam cloud the windows and wrap my hands in ease. When I called my parents and tired of complaining about the things I could no longer do—ride a bike, wield a paintbrush, use chopsticks for the entire length of a meal—when myself as subject became tedious and painful, I began again to ask my parents for their stories.

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The policeman Binh, nicknamed Tiger by my mother, was haunted by the memory of a pair of authentic American jeans and waited patiently for my mother to bribe him. He wanted my mother to send letters to her relatives overseas. He wanted my mother to spin a golden thread from those overseas Vietnamese, those Viet Kieu, to my mother, and from my mother to him.

The knocks on our door continued. Every day, the knocks came, regular as clockwork. The policeman Binh watched and followed my father whenever he left our house. My father remembers my brother, then two years old, lifting his head at the sound of knocks, and walking slowly to stand at the door, not opening it, but pressing his fist against the door and through it, hollering perhaps the first sentence he learned to speak, his voice trembling, the way it still trembles when he is frightened—*My father is not home. My father is not home.*

When faced with the policeman Binh, my mother refused to bribe him. She did not want to make the same mistake my father made with a pair of authentic American jeans.

Ever since 1975, the Communists, many of whom were no better off than us, knew that there were golden threads stretching from our relatives overseas to us. They came to—if not love American capitalism—then to desire American culture, and they knew all about authentic American jeans and Madonna's *Material Girl*, hamburgers and hippies, cowboys and skyscrapers. My father, when it was his turn to do the bribing sometime in 1986, would bribe the policeman Binh with a pair of authentic American jeans. And once, I asked him what else he bribed the policeman Binh with, and I do not know, because as suddenly as the story comes together, here it falls apart again, darkness on the scene, as my father clams up and will say no more, and I know that this story, this fragile thing, should be a secret, unwritten, but here it exists, impossible for me not to tell, not to probe the hurt. I do not know the whole story, but I know my father makes a mistake with a pair of authentic American jeans, and that was why there were daily knocks on the door.

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The story I wanted to lift from the flames during the winter vacation of my twenty-fourth year was the murmured story of my father's arrest warrants. My science textbooks, too heavy for me to carry around, remained on their shelves, and I began to carry around featherweight loose leaf papers, and I waited for ways to ask my father to open this story. One day, while my father was cooking a pot of noodle soup that steamed the windows and loosened the aches in my hands, I sat at our dinner table with my computer screen open to an empty Word Document and I asked him hesitantly, slowly—*Do you remember, Daddy, do you remember those years when they wanted to arrest you, and you had to run away to Saigon, do you remember, and can you tell me* — And my father's face closed down, shut up, shut down, and he said, all in Vietnamese, the language of his distress—*No, not this story. No. Okay? Don't mess with this story. A lot of things happened. If they find out this story, they'll never allow me to return to Vietnam. They'll never give me peace.* I looked at my father, frustrated, and I could feel my face burn. He returned to cooking the noodle soup, slowly telling me about the stories he was reading in the histories of the Vietnam War and about how I should try to tell those stories instead— I felt trapped, stifled from the heat of the soup's flowing, suffocating steam. I closed the Word Document, got up from the dinner table, and cut my father off. *I'm going for a walk. It's too hot in here.* For an hour, I walked in circles, chilly, my hands aching in my jacket pockets. I wondered how I was going to teach myself again to give up these stories. When my father denied me, he said a certain Vietnamese expression, *Khổ Bố*, which haunted me during my walk and for weeks afterwards. *Khổ Bố*, when translated into English, means *Poor me, Poor father*. A short, direct translation is *Suffering Daddy*. Which means, *Have pity*.

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When the daily knocks bore holes into his mind during 1986 and 1987, my father fled to Saigon and stayed with his uncle. He did not exactly flee, no, first, he had to ask permission to flee. In Communist Vietnam, there were invisible gates in each village and each town and each city. Behind each gate were Communist police who held the stamps of approval for each person to move from one gate to another gate. That, after all, was how the Communist police caught my father almost to the day of his failed overseas escape attempt. He thought he would never again need stamps of approval, and did not get it when he left behind the last village on his journey towards the shores of Vietnam, where he finally stood waiting, waiting, waiting. When he did not escape after all, the Communist police were waiting in each village, in each town, and in each city for him. Now, when he must flee from the Policeman Binh, my father dutifully played the game of going to the police station in Dalat and asking for permission to travel to the police station in Saigon, and the Policeman Binh, aware of where my father was going and where my father was at all times, still dutifully went and knocked on my family's front door and asked my mother to see one Tan Duy Nguyen.

My father stayed in Saigon with his uncle for long stretches of time, until he could no longer bear to be away from us and then he returned home to Dalat, holding us close again, singing us to sleep again, eating with us again. He stayed until the knocks on the door drove him away again. Back and forth, back and forth, he was our father, our refugee, our fugitive. There was no way out for him. All he could do was wait and wonder if he should try to escape, leave his family behind like his brother, think and wait, send letters overseas and wait, torment himself and wait.

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I lay on my side with three electrodes attached to my bare upper chest. The technician moved the echo transducer over my left breast, looking for my heart. After telling me about auto-immunity, my doctor had sent me to get an echocardiogram. The technician was going to map

my heart. The room was dark except for the computer screen. We watched for my heart. There. We looked sideways at the gates between the four chambers. We watched the perfect rhythm and the rapid succession of the gates relaxing, sealing, relaxing, sealing. We looked into the entrances of the gates and they looked like mouths opening and closing, gasping. They looked hungry. Colors flowed through the chambers, blue and red, cold and hot, dirty and clean. The technician narrowed in on each gate and graphed the patterns of their lengths and widths and the patterns of their openings and closings. The patterns made orange waves on a black background. We listened to the waves, and I was startled by the swishing sound they made, a swishing sound I recognized well. I often heard this sound at night and I could never describe it precisely to my doctors. Here it was. I had been listening to my heart. We listened for the story of why my heart was not strong enough to force my blood to flow to the tips of my fingers, of why at night I woke to my hands numb, curled into lifeless claws, and of why I must revive them again and again to waves of pain, only to feel them, before I drifted back to sleep, die again and again.

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After my mother gave birth to a baby girl, without my father—who was hiding out in Saigon—there to help her, she could not produce enough milk to feed her weak newborn.

A friend told her—*Go and talk with Hanh Nga. She will find a way to help you.* Hanh Nga, whose name means Moon Lady, the Goddess who grants wishes. Hanh Nga, who was the daughter of the Police Chief of Dalat. Hanh Nga, to whom my mother was kind back in 1975.

Before my mother left school at sixteen in 1975, she shared her classes with Communist teenagers who had emerged from their caves and their dug tunnel hideouts and moved south with their families, families who will eventually dominate Dalat society. My mother remembers the laughter among her relatives and friends, the laughter and derisive jokes before the Communists forced all the Southern families to burn their Western books and their Western possessions, before the Western nations placed an embargo on Communist Vietnam, and before the whole country starved. The laughter in her classroom was aimed at Hanh Nga, who was illiterate, who dressed like a country bumpkin, at whom everyone sneered and whom everyone snubbed and thought—*Your family and people like you were able to win the war?* My mother, one of the best students in her high school, did not sneer and laugh, or, if she did, only in private, and talked to Hanh Nga, gave her kind words and valuable advice, such as—*No, televisions are not animals that run down the street. Or—That dust mask you are wearing on your face, it's not a dust mask. It's a sanitary napkin that you put in your underwear when you have your bleeding time of the month. Or—They are laughing because that garment with cups that your father uses to strain his coffee is not a coffee strainer. It is a bra, something that Western women put on under their clothes to hold their breasts.*

My mother had nothing to bargain with Hanh Nga. She had no money, no possessions of great value, and neither has she charm nor sophistication. I know, because I am like my mother in this way. My mother could not save my father the way her mother-in-law had for seven years, which was the use of old world charm, which prevented the previous policeman from arresting her son for five years. What my mother has always had is frankness, honesty, and kindness, traits which will win her loyal customers when she becomes a nail technician nine years after she arrives in America. What my mother hoped, the key to what could save her from losing her husband and us losing our father, was that Hanh Nga remembered my mother's kindness back in 1975.

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Hours after my doctor suggested scleroderma for the first time, hours after she mentioned dead tissues in my fingers and loops taking over in the dead areas, I googled scleroderma, just like I googled rheumatoid arthritis and lupus for months before this. *Okay, I thought. I can*

*handle this.* I saw pictures of hands. I thought, *my hands.* Expanding emotions filled my chest. I read, *begins with the hands. Progresses.* I saw more pictures. Hands bent into claws. Claws and stiffened limbs contorted into unmerciful shapes. I read, *irreversible.* I read, *incurable.* I read, *nickname: the disease that turns people into stone.* I read, *skin tightens around openings of the body, such as the mouth.* I read, *narrower mouth results in difficulty eating.* More pictures. Scars on the body. Scars inside the body. I read, *scars the body, outside and then possibly inside.* I read, *strangles the heart.* I read, *suffocates the lungs.* I read, *damage possibly controllable.* I thought, *incurable.* I thought, *my heart.* I thought, *my lungs.* I thought, *my hands.* I saw, *my hands.* I felt, *my hands.* I cried, *oh gods.* I cried. I cried.

~

Armed with memories of kindness, my mother went to Hanh Nga, who, twelve years after the war ended, had a comfortable house and who had proven that she did not care about what anyone thought by easily divorcing her first husband to marry another man she happened to fall in love with. Hanh Nga, who was now one of the most fashionable ladies in Dalat.

Hanh Nga, who also loved to put on lavish parties, told my mother—*Okay, I will help you, but I want to have a little fun. I want to throw a party for my friends, buy food and drinks. I will need money. Just a little money. Just for a little party.*

—*How much do you want?*

—*One ounce of fourteen karat gold.*

—*I will get it.*

My mother sent letters overseas.

~

When nerve fibers die, they disintegrate. Dead nerve fibers, unlike bone tissue or stomach lining, cannot be regenerated. Once disconnected from the great chains of nerve fibers, they are like cut threads and cannot be rejoined, and stranded, die and dissolve into the surrounding tissues. However, before they are gone forever, they leave traces. The other nerve fibers, which have somehow survived months of inflammation and numbness, can sense the damage, the death, and the loss of these threads, and they can lengthen, searching out the emptiness. Malleable and flexible, the nerve fibers can stretch and extend, curl and enfold. In their search, they form loops. In my hands, in the regions most damaged by my defense system, which has decided to attack my hands in the search for an enemy that is not there, there are nerve loops looping around loops, loops wrapped around ever more loops, loops, unfortunately, that can also strangle my blood vessels in the relentless search for a reconnection.

~

All my life, my parents have often told me of the miracle of my childhood hands—malleable, astonishingly flexible, and almost boneless in their manipulability. Now, aged twenty-four, after my hands stiffened, became inflamed, and I could no longer straighten any of my fingers or make closed fists, my father told me to tell the story of those childhood hands to my doctors. Tell them, he told me, that when I was a baby, I had the most flexible hands my parents have ever seen. *Tell them, my father told me. When you were a baby, we could hold your fingertips and bend your fingers backwards until they touched your wrists.* I never told my doctors this story. It was an irrelevant story. Instead, I began to tell another story that held more truth for me.

As a child and a teenager, I collected magnets, round and square and rectangular. I was fascinated by the sides of the magnets that did not want to meet each other. I had to press them close with my fingers. No matter how long I held them together, using my mind powers to urge them to stay glued, they always slid uncomfortably apart when my fingers relaxed. There was something there that I could not see. I could use two magnets to shape it out—a half sphere, an

invisible bowl. I wondered why it was there and what purpose the empty, invisible bowl served if it could hold nothing that could be seen. I still wonder this.

Now, when I can no longer make closed fists with my hands, and I look for words to describe the sensation of trying to make my fingers meet in the center of my palm, I say my fingers are like those sides of magnets that repel the act of joining. My fingers can approach my palm but not join it, because I am holding something invisible in my hands.

~

The most literal translation is not the most accurate. The truest, clearest possible meaning—beyond the literal translation—of Suffering Daddy and also of Suffering Mommy and of Suffering Child is Suffering Self, *Khổ Mình*. When my father refuses to tell stories to me, his child, he uses Suffering Daddy, *Khổ Bố*. When my mother tells stories to me, her child, she could use Suffering Mommy, *Khổ Mẹ*, if she wishes, but she has never done so. When I tell stories to my parents, if I still speak Vietnamese, which I do not, I would use Suffering Child, *Khổ Con*.

In Vietnamese, the personal pronoun, the I, exists, but it is used as insult, as anger, as joke among drunken close friends, as address to strangers, and as address to the enemy. The Vietnamese I, the Northern *Tôi* and the Southern *Tui*, is used when the other self, the self addressed, is exiled from itself and its community. Excluded. Lost. Alone. Extinguishable. When stripped of our essential familial bonds, the Suffering Self cannot and does not exist. When we address one another, when we tell stories, when we live, when we exist, we do not exist except in relation to each other. When we speak to each other, there is no separation between Self and Non-Self. They are one and same. I, Minh, and my Suffering Self, and my Suffering Daddy and my Suffering Mommy, we are all ourselves and myself, myself and ourselves.

The Suffering Self suffers in relation to someone else. The Suffering Self does not suffer alone.

~

Eventually, my mother's brother, the Canadian, living in Edmonton, Canada, sent the ounce of fourteen karat gold. He would be the one most dependable, who sent medicine when we were sick, money when I was born in 1985 and my mother had nothing. He sent gifts from the other side of the world, always sending just enough to keep the golden thread—even if thin and unraveling—connected, so that my mother herself did not unravel.

But not only from kindness. The most probable reason he sent the gold was because of guilt. Chains of guilt.

My father will tell me that after he married my mother, when he looked through her family pictures, he saw pictures of her two brothers, one now Canadian and one now Norwegian, and he recognized them as the two men he had given money to share a boat with and who had not returned for him.

~

Somewhere in my strands of DNA, history written in me from the beginning, there is the story of why my body has decided to betray me in this time and in this place. I cannot read that story. Even if I could, I do not know if I want to seek that understanding. I am afraid to know how and when the story ends.

In my hands, inflamed, continuously dying and yet reweaving, life and death exists side by side. I, my parents' second eldest child, have inherited their nightmares, and now the nightmares exist in the loops covering my muscles and blood vessels, binding me like threads, strangling me like chains. My hands, stripped to their barest functions, yearn to escape my body: my prison: my enemy. My body's defense system is attacking me and I know there is no other defense system waiting in the wings to rescue me. If this is all the strength I have left, if my

strength is running out, then I must follow the well-trodden path back to the stories I first sought out at sixteen. I must run after the stories and know their completion, so that the ending of myself is not an ending but rather a reconnection.

~

Hanh Nga arrived at our family house with the arrest warrants, and—everyone in my family will speculate afterwards—there must have been a moment when she stood in that doorway, knowing she was welcome to walk through, knowing that my mother had gotten the ounce of fourteen karat gold as she had requested, had gotten it from those overseas relatives, and that this gold was all hers, and perhaps—even for a brief moment—she felt the pull of that golden thread. Maybe, she saw the rich possibilities of leaving one arrest warrant intact, so that she could ask my mother to pull on that golden thread, again, maybe twice more, maybe. She had gotten something in less than a month, while the policeman Binh had gotten nothing in several months of faithful knocking. Afterwards, everyone in my family will speculate on that moment, and everyone will wonder what finally made Hanh Nga step through that doorway, rip the arrest warrants into thin strips, and hand them to my mother. And everyone will finally speculate that Hanh Nga must have been moved by the sight of my mother sitting quietly with her three children, all of us wearing clothes unraveling at the seams, sitting in that kitchen with the empty cupboards, with perhaps just a pot of boiling water on the stove, sitting with the coals burning and ready, waiting for Hanh Nga, our Moon Lady, who could save our father if only we could do everything just right. The Moon Lady, looking at our mother, must have seen the way life had marked her, how changed she was from that girl of sixteen to this wearied mother of twenty-seven. Perhaps, yes, kindness and compassion are strong threads, too.

~

Weeks after I googled scleroderma, my doctor and I began to form battle plans. I learned to distinguish between the everyday aching pain and the dizzying pounding pain that put my heart in my hand. My doctor explained that we were still waiting for the monster to come out of hiding and show its face. The waiting could be cut short or continue for years, so we began to prepare for the seasons of my life—the harsh aches during the summers, the numbness during the winters, and the possibility of ease in between, when the mildness of springs and falls would hopefully leave enough time for resting and healing before the next confrontation. After my echocardiogram, my doctor found medication, my hands stopped going numb, and more often than not, I slept through the night peacefully again, and if I awakened during the night's passage, my hands were still there, warm and aching with life, curled into gentle claws for sleep.

~

My mother held out her hand, received the pieces of paper from the Moon Lady, gave the Moon Lady the gold that could have fed her family for a year, stared at the remnants that had caused her so much distress, and said, *Let's burn these pieces of paper*. And all of us, my mother, my brother, I, my infant sister, and our Moon Lady, watched over the burning, and my father was finally free, the records of his crimes burned to ashes in his family hearth.

~

My mother was washing our dishes and I was sitting at the dinner table close by, watching her. My siblings and I were pleading with her to leave the dishes and to rest before the car trip back to Fenton, Missouri. My parents had come down this weekend to Columbia, Missouri to celebrate the Year of the Buffalo 2009 giving way to the Year of the Tiger 2010. We were also celebrating our good health and my new future as an apprentice writer. My father was already waiting in the car, they were going to leave soon, and I had one last question for my mother. I hesitated. I could no longer speak—which is to say, sing—Vietnamese. I was shy about my flat American accent. I finally said—*Mommy, tell me about Kho*. My mother turned to me

and asked—*What's that?* I attempted to sing it—*Kho? Kho! Kho. Kho. Kho.* She still looked confused, so I stood up and approached her. When I was standing next to her, I put my hand on the center of my chest, and I sang—*KhỔ BỐ. KhỒ Mẹ. KhỒ Con. KhỒ Minh.* My mother's face lit up, she turned off the running faucet, wiped her hands on a rag, and we sat down at the dinner table to talk about KhỔ.

~

Before the burning of the arrest warrants, there were many other burnings—my father's family Bible burned and his letters and papers blown up by the bombs falling on his troops, his military records burned and his medals melted by his mother as the Communist tanks rolled into Dalat in March of 1975, his life burned and melted in the same hearth where my mother would one day watch over the burning of his arrest warrants. My father's history often went up in flames, his story rewritten, erased by those who love him the most, who claimed him as son, as husband, as father, as they strove to protect him, to help him survive through all the rewritings of history, to help him run away so that he could live for one more day, so he could eventually find his way home to us.

But there was never a true home to return to, neither in the mind nor in the world, and men like my father have been forced to begin over and over, once more, yet haunted. Women like my mother, keeping the family hearth warm and ready, witnessed the erasing and gave a hand in the rewriting of history, taught as they were during childhoods cut short on how the winners of wars write. My mother will say that it was like being a bird, and suddenly, the bird is caught, and the bird starves, in all ways, and forgets freedom, and instead learns the language of its imprisonment.

~

Suffering, my mother told me, exists in two Vietnamese forms, KhỔ and KhỒ. She spelled them out for me. The first form, KhỔ, is spelled with the syllables *ca hát Ổ*. *Ca* and *hát* each also means *sing*. Spell out this form of KhỔ and you are saying *sing, sing, oh, sing, sing, oh, sing, sing, oh*. You can sing while you suffer. The second form of suffering, KhỒ, has a different syllabic ending, *Ồ*, and the ending makes all the difference, because this form of suffering also means *stupid* and *dumb*. I latched on and asked her—*Stupid? Dumb? Dumb as in silent?* I put my hand over my mouth. *As in I'm gonna suffer and not talk about it?* My mother shook her head distractedly. My father was calling to her. She got up from the dinner table, put on her coat, and organized her bags. I persisted, following her around and asking her to agree with me—*In English, dumb also means silent, mute. People can suffer and be silent, right? Just like people can suffer and sing about it, right? You can sing or refuse to sing. Am I right?* My mother nodded, still distracted. She picked out the lightest bag for me to carry and we headed out to the van. I still persisted—*Mommy, this is important. I need to get this right for the story. I wanna name the story something cool, like Suffering, Suffering Self—KhỔ, KhỒ, Minh, right?* Finally, my mother turned to me and said—*Yes! I almost forgot to tell you,* and right before she got in the van and my parents drove away, she told me that the placement of suffering before or after the self determines the shape of the suffering. The suffering placed before the self, *kho minh*, is the singing suffering, and the suffering placed after the self, *minh kho*, is the dumb suffering. After she told me the last piece, I let my mother get into the van and shut the door. I waved goodbye as my parents' van merged onto the street, and I knew that I was grinning like a fool.

~

My brother and I grew up learning to render our father invisible, away, gone, even when he was standing right next to us. *My father is not home. My father is not home,* my brother shouted through the door whenever he heard knocks, because all knocks were monsters, and my

father sat in the background, smoking a cigarette, watching his son, his hand trembling when he lifted the cigarette, sitting and wondering if he needed to make another trip to Saigon. And almost two decades later, in America, I, the inheritor of my father's nightmares, acquiesced when the history books named soldiers and prisoners like my father *deserter, coward, criminal, corrupted, and useless*. When given a chance to redeem my father, I would refuse him his chance to sing, and I would try to take his story for myself, and when I stood in front of an American classroom, I would myself name him *deserter, coward, criminal, corrupted, and useless*.

My father became so used to being invisible, so accepting, that he will, even after living in America for two decades, living in the Midwest, ensconced in the heart land, even with the knowledge that all the arrest warrants had been burned more than two decades ago, even after all that, his lips are still sealed. When I needed to know the story of the arrest warrants, it was my mother who took up the story and who told me the few details I know—of baby birds, of boiled pots of water, of the Policeman Binh, of gates, of Hanh Nga, and of the hearth coals kept burning, ready. And because my mother told me what I needed to know, I traveled back in time and gave her the golden threads, and tied those golden threads to the loops in my hands. I have no golden threads to give to my father, because I do not know how to help him unseal his lips and extinguish his fears. He will never be safe, he will never forget those prisons, he will never forget the gunshots heard in the night as his friends try to escape, and the bodies the next morning, the hundreds of thousands of spoons of dirt dug for the tunnels to freedom, the feel of the chains and bars of wood on his hands and feet, the rush of blood to his head as he is hung upside down every night, his thumbs side by side and numb.

~

After my mother told me about KhỔ, I was tired and went to sleep with afternoon light streaming through my bedroom window. Before I drifted off to sleep, I felt my heart slip into my hand, and when I woke up to darkness, I was still holding it. I went downstairs and sat at my desk, bothered by KhỔ. For the last few weeks, ever since my father said *KhỔ BỔ*, I felt bitter towards him and spoke abruptly to him whenever he called to ask about my hands, my writing, and my life.

I called him. For many weeks after our conversation, my mind ran over and over our shared words, and now, when I struggle to write the clear truth of our shared language, I am left with this skeleton:

—*Hey, Daddy, it's me. Thanks for visiting this weekend. Thanks for all the food.* [I spend the first few minutes haltingly approaching—]

—[My father begins to talk about the history books I have been checking out for him from the university library for the last six years]

—[I roll my eyes and take a deep breath] *Yes, yes, I know. Hey, Daddy. I need to ask you something.* [pause] *There are stories about Vietnam that I need to know. I keep on asking for them, you know. Stories about your life.*

—[My father begins to talk about the political history of the Vietnam War]

—[I cut him off] *That's the history books talking. You need to stop reading those damn history books. Fuck them.* [pause] *I want to spend my life writing, but I can't write without you. There are stories that* [pause] *every time I ask you* [pause] *you keep talking about other things.* [pause] *I don't know why, but these stories are very important to me. I wish that you would tell me.*

—*Which stories?*

—[I rub my hand through my hair] *You know. About the reeducation camps and that time you tried to escape from Vietnam, and then Mommy's brothers took your money and left without you, and then after that when the Communists caught you and put you in prison and you escaped*

over and over, and those arrest warrants for all those years. [pause] I know you told me not to write about these things, but I can't help it. And when I try to write, I feel like I'm lying, because I don't know what happened. I have to keep guessing. My story is a lie. I hate that.

—[I do not remember his words.]

—No. No, I can't wait anymore. I don't know what life is going to look like. I can't wait forever for you to tell me. You know what's happening. My hands are dying. I can't care that I hurt you anymore. What if— [pause] Do you understand?

—[I do not remember his words.]

—I'm tired of waiting for these stories. Will you tell me these stories? Will you tell me what I need to know?

—Yes.

[pause]

—You will? You'll tell me about the reeducation camps and your escapes and the prisons? You'll tell me about the arrest warrants? You'll tell me everything when I ask you?

—Yes. I will tell you.

—Daddy. Thank you.

~

It was safe, the arrest warrants were burned, and my mother finally telegraphed my father and told him—*Come home*—and never had to worry about knocks on the door that would force him to leave on another train soon. My father was safe, he could come home, the last piece of his past burned. He could finally come home to hold his newborn baby in his arms. My father, I imagine, riding in that train from Saigon to Dalat, was carrying a bag of pig's feet, rare delicacies that he always tried to find, using bribery, using his wits, no matter how broke he was, so that when he came home, he could stand in our kitchen, tell my mother and us his adventures, about a certain document he recently sent overseas, and cook, slowly and tenderly, rice gruel with pig's feet, which would allow my mother to produce milk for his newborn daughter.

~

While all of this was happening, while pieces of my father's past were being burned in our family hearth and while my father made his long journey home in 1987, the petitions my father sent overseas would be going through their rounds, getting through the system slowly and carefully. One day in 1989, in an office somewhere a world away, the stamp of approval will come through. And when that APPROVED was stamped on my father's application, a gate will finally open that led to true sanctuary. It will be the first time that he will be offered shelter, recognized as a soldier, as a political prisoner, when, finally, he could look to a future where he will be able to keep documents rather than burn them. He will be able to accept rather than reject who he is, and he will be able to say, *Yes, I was a soldier in a losing war and a political prisoner afterwards, and yes, a criminal too*, and they will still say, *You are welcome here*, and they will offer him sanctuary from the country of his nightmares, his home, offer him a country where he could make a home and find a path towards a history he could keep, even if he could only tell his stories haltingly, always with the refrain, *Suffering Daddy*.