

TERMINAL BURROW

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ngoc Pham is a poet from Hanoi, Vietnam. They earned a BA in English from Macalester College and are currently an MFA student in Poetry at Cornell University. Their poems have been featured in *The Adroit Journal*, *Couplet Poetry*, *The Penn Review*, the Academy of American Poet's website, and the anthology *Dear Human at the Edge of Time*. They currently write and teach in Ithaca, New York.

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Christmas 2019

Me in your old ski jacket, you
in your skin and a name like a list of saints,
your station wagon's wood panel taking flight:
past Dollar General, knock-off diet Coke,
what the fuck is Shasta, 24/7 Walgreens,
unsalted almonds rattling in your sleeves like
rosary beads, prayers whistled through acid-
loosened teeth; past Days Inn discounts, CSL Plasma,
you traded blood for bottles, equivalent exchange,
until they said no more, please, there's nothing left
of you, so you waterlogged yourself, pocketed
hand weights from your triathlete days, and they took
you back like your mother did; past food shelves, magic
tricked feasts from canned tomatoes, more economical
to drink on an empty stomach;
past ICU beds, low thread count blankets, midnights
you rubbed my hands like kindling, named every bone,
metacarpal, phalanx, lunate, our fingers heat
reanimating nightmares; past basement hallway,
whale carcass cathedral, your organs hummed
white on X-rays, Scooby Doo on VHS, 24/7 MPR, *wait
wait don't tell me*, first impeachment inquiry; past plastic
coins shrine, nickel-and-dimed second chances;
past oh-god-you're-really-dead-this-time;
past your bedroom door, Star Trek posters, shame
skittering on the floor, newspapers I scanned
for your face in the obits, no relations but you know
I would've called, *you wouldn't believe what I saw, he turned white
like a ghost*, would've reluminated the dead
pixels, reunited your high school band
with your old trumpet; past accordioned
sheets, I would've found
just a puddle: proof of you

entropy, memory

a shadow puppet.

At the Hospital¹

for the Dead and Rapidly Decaying (see also:
Institute for the Nutritionally Challenged, All-You-Can-Eat),
I collaged in the Solarium, clipping my medical record,
women laughing with salad bowls
from donated *Country Livings*. Sun pulsed
in my NG tube like prescribed
photosynthesis. In the basement dining room,
we scraped our plates, licked our yogurt lids,
played another round of Family Feud.
*Name 10 things you keep in your wallet. 8 things
people most often lose.* I tracked shadows of bird
decals a nurse put on our windows after they found
piles of dead pigeons outside, their intricate circuitries
corrupted by artificial lights.
When they unlatched the gates at 7, herded
us out onto the trail, we watched bats
darken the sky in droves, threw pebbles
to watch them dive, not out of cruelty, at least
not entirely.
I asked my dead grandfather
for a sign through moths or fireflies.
Instead, he sent weevil larva spilling from acorns.
I asked the bees burrowing in hollyhocks for a sign,
despite forest fires, Colony Collapse Disorder, pesticide
dripping down hollowed hives.
Asked cicada broods, winged tinderboxes
of inexplicable desires, only puffs of husks by September.
Asked them how they knew when to call it quits.
Asked the crows clawing through our scraps, driven by nothing
but hunger, their bird brains tuned to survival's thrum.
I told the doctor I wanted to die and he upped my venlafaxine.
I told the chaplain I wanted to die. She gave me a copy of "Wild Geese."

¹ Previously published on *The Penn Journal*

Said to *let the soft animal of my body*
love what it loves but never told me how.

Portrait of the Poet as Magician

And for my next trick, I shall disappear
half of myself. No saw necessary.

When I emerged from the grave
my mother cried. Said I was beautiful

when I fit into her wedding dress
she wore at my age. I am most

beautiful when I remind my mother
of how she whetted her teeth on weeviled sorghum,

when I wick my tongue on sugar-free gum. Swallow
smoke for dinner, exhale birdlime and a blade.

When I hunger for sweet mouthfuls that could
kill, but haven't had the chance.

Wormwood and tansy.
Flights of fancy. Fantasy of vertebrae

lined up and legible as book spines.
Our story could go on forever.

My ancestors won't touch altar offerings. Survived
this far on famines. I circle my family tree

severed at the waist. Excavate our ossified
history: years of drought, hollowed grounds. Once,

I found the bone on the inside of my wrist.
Now, I could pull from my mouth a museum.

Self-Portrait with My Family's Poet at 21

You died at 21. I did the math.
Heard the story from my mother. Your mouth
opened to a comma's hook. Fireflies
pulsed in bullet holes. Hemorrhagic shock.
They took your letters. Promises to lend
a girl your life's better half, unpunctured
with wounds. Poems for your friend doused in burnt
umber. Apologies to your mother.
Envelope flaps sealed like the dead's eyelids.
They placed your face on the altar behind
incense smoke, foreign cigarettes, paper
dollars. American cars. When I left
the country we prayed to you. Recited
chants. Good health. Good luck. Bowed our heads three times.

At 21 I emailed my mother
From a hospital's computer after
4 years of no talking. *I'm so alone*
in my irreparable mother tongue.
I thought about my prayers. If I'd been
sincere, a good daughter, you'd have given
everything I wanted. Good health. Good luck.
Real dollars. American car. Instead
I survived. When I came back home alive
my father said I sounded like a ghost
when I paced the house at night. My mother said
I looked like a corpse. I wrote about you
in a language your killers spoke. About

hunger. Old homes. Anything but the war.

Grammar Lesson

Again I am learning to pluralize the uncountable.

In Vietnamese, “cam” can mean one orange or countless oranges.

English doesn't allow such ambiguity.

My mother calls me at 3am.

To her, the moon always rises on time.

When I was born my mother said she counted

my fingers and toes before she could sleep.

Now I dream of losing teeth and count them in the morning

like blessings. How lucky I am to have them,

to know when not to add an *s*. When I wake

to snow outside I know my mother, who gave me all

ten fingers and ten toes, has never seen snow. To her,

one snowflake is a skyfull. She tells me to keep warm. Again

I am trying to quantify my luck. Despite warnings

I want abundance. Snows. Waters. Rices.

I look straight into the horse's mouth. Hope for a chance

of snowfall in hell. But I have learnt the importance of words
and their order, how to string them together,
extract them from my throat like a magician's sword.

The executor claps and stamps my passport
so I can live in a country that snows. I know

I'm asking for too much. Instead I put on my jacket
and walk outside. Snow strokes
my face like a million fingers.

Signs

for EJ

Like the decapitated birds—thawing
inkcaps on every lawn along your commute
for the first week of snowmelt. Like how two former lovers,
years apart, had called me some variation on *Little Prince*.
Life has narrative significance but only in retrospect.
When you thought the world was ending, you hoarded
plants, exchanged your alveoli for their stomata.
Then the world didn't end and the plants died
so you took up breathing in their stead.
How could we have known, years ago,
watching *Twin Peaks* on your floor, each holding
a mug of microwaved chai and Old Crow
that David Lynch would die before either?
That we couldn't stop our loved ones from dying
by outdying them? You'd never seen a tide pool then.
My family presumed me dead. It's snowmelt season, meaning
moss is again soft to the touch. I touch it
weeping. I keep an eye out for headless birds. I have to.
It's not superstitious to look for signs. I'm only trying
to make loneliness worthwhile. To show I'm grateful
for new beginnings, I've learnt my lesson from all this death.

Late Stage²

Poets know about the pomegranate's
poeticism: its blood-warm chambers,
gossamer membranes. Where are the poems
for de-ribbing kale or gutting a squash?
After her husband died, my grandmother
quit cooking, let her hair go white. She said
she'd gone senile, laughing over the phone:
how she called his name when she couldn't find
the salt. I started believing in ghosts
after his wake—a butterfly landed
on his headstone. *They can fight each other*
she laughed, tapping her chest. "They" means cancers.
A secret about grief: it turns every
cliché true. But also very funny.

² Forthcoming in *Shō Poetry Journal*. Borrows its last line from Louise Glück's "Telemachus Detachment."

Portrait of My Family's Poet, Alive³

after Vũ Đình Văn

And when you come back from the war,
sling your pelt over
the three-step staircase, your camouflaged
backpack across the tiles,
you kneel before your mother,
a picture on an altar,
incense curled down to the stem.
Gecko's chirps shimmer the night
and on wooden slats you lie
counting, deciphering their Morse code.
Odd for rain, even for sun.
As if still waiting for a telegrammed order to live
or die in the morning.

You raise chickens, slaughter one every New Year's Eve,
the barrels of their throats
in one hand, finger feeling for a pulse's
trigger. Tucked away in your sister's drawer: letters
home, paper creases
where you pressed your secrets,
your promises to quit smoking,
to come home. *Next May, June, when season sours
on dracontomelon branches.*

Outside monsoon unravels

³ Forthcoming in *Shō Poetry Journal*.

and you learn everything you never learnt:
how rain rattles like shells
on our water tanks, which some people call
“hanging bombs.” How your niece was named
after your lover. I read your book
in the land that took your life. Haven’t you heard?
We won the war. Outside, children
play hide-and-seeks, search

for fragments in craters where your twenty one years unseamed
from bullet holes. Yesterday’s landmines
traded for today’s meals. When they trip,
silt-soaked soil shrapnels the sky,
startles sparrows into flight.

How to Tell It's Winter in Vietnamese⁴

You can tell it's winter by the way the fields rise in flames.

Burning hay on the other side of the river
to dispel December frost. The air full of static
like blood draining from a limb falling asleep.
Men spitting sunflower seeds, sucking marrow
from cow femurs on the sidewalks. Cold licks
their eyelids closed and they dream in sweet steam
from a street vendor's sticky rice aluminium pot.

You can tell winter, know what it means
when your mother spools brittle hair from a comb's teeth,
strands of white and dyed umber, once jet black. Once
traded in for jaw-wiring pulled sugar candy on a stick.
Sweetness sealed her mouth so forty years later
you, too, can taste hunger, know how it strips
us clean. Peels sinews, leaves the pips.
Marinates our livers in grief.

Sông Hồng lulls this city, sienna blood slow, sleep-slick.
Old Quarter: Silver Street. Shoe Street. Paper Street.
Tiger's cages threaded with vine. Rows and rows
of tube houses collapsing inward like your grandmother's
calcified spine beside her rusted medicine grinder.
Rows and rows of hand-labeled jars coated in mustard yellow
panax dust. An encyclopedia in a language you don't speak
but memorized anyway, between multiplication tables, chewing
on dried licorice roots, breathing in that cloying perfume

⁴ Previously published on The Adroit Journal

of brown paperboard, cassia and clove and ossified seahorses.

Bear bile, amber wine. Sewage when it rains.

You tell winter in words frayed and fizzled. Mùa Đông:

Frozen season. Time atrophied,
tender as your dead grandfather's gloves.

Mother tongue an arrowhead in your mouth.

You walk this house like a toddler, an amnesiac
pointing at things, saying their names out loud.

Hinge. Dishrack. Con mời mẹ ăn cơm.

I've missed you. I'm sorry. Mildew.

You've been gone four years now and still the year ends

on your right ring finger's knuckle, cracked dry,

not December but Mười Hai, Month Twelfth.

Salt Street. Coffin Street.

Still your hands smell like coriander blooms

in New Year bathwater. Still, an elegy.

A river silt-choked. A blighted field wakes ablaze.

Herb names in your grandmother's writing

selling a new painless life.

Still, were you not someone I loved?

Paper Villanelle

In monsoon season, father folds
a paper house for a paper crane.
At night in the paper kitchen, he holds

a bucket under the paper ceiling spitting cold
moon slivers. Mother scores the rain
with lullabies, tucks silver in the folds

of her eyelids. In a paper cradle they grow
their paper crane. Strike refrains
to keep it breathing. When weather holds

them hostage, father smokes by the window,
yellows their waxpaper panes.
When the rain stops, mother unfolds

their paper crane. Its waterlogged seams mould
to her touch, inks her fingers with its name.
Where struck, its paper neck buckles in her hold.

In the paper house, the paper crane never grows old.
Before monsoon returns, father strikes a match against
their paper fire escape. Mother folds
into the crane's wings, warms herself by their flaming threshold.

Watching River Monsters with My Father

At 6:30, my father rises from dinner, slinks
into his bedroom to watch River Monsters. I follow him.
The host, whose last name *Wade* I find hilarious
but my father doesn't even after I explained the pun,
wades into rivers, tracks fish like a cadaver dog
sniffing for rot. *Save us*, the villagers whisper.
From what? Jeremy asks. The villagers quiver.
We don't know. We don't know what, but he's there.
He (it's always a he) hungers for sacrifice:
fisherman, swimmer, thrill-seeker, child.
Capsizes boats, swallows them whole, spits out slats.
On the shore: no trace but bleached bones.

My father dozes to Jeremy chanting *Yes, yes*,
a priest granting clemency, before paddling out
to the river at night, his lantern a pinprick
puncturing the dark. All silent save for waves
lulling the shore. My father sleeps through the climax
when Jeremy wrests the beast from its lair,
snared for the lens. Moon-slick
isinglass. Man and fish writhe in tandem
as my father's white wifebeater
palpates like gills.

My father snoozes through the credits.
He never sees Jeremy release the monster.
I let him. When he snores,
his mustache glistens and twitch
like catfish whiskers glossed in TV light.

Inheritance⁵

Wedded first to heterosexuality, second
to my father, my mother cursed me

to a lifetime of frozen pre-chopped greens.
As a child, I stood by her in the kitchen

while she beheaded fish, slid a blade
along their spines like soothing a colic,

extracted gallbladders
to stop the flesh from bittering.

*You must learn this one day
to feed your husband*, she said. *He comes*

*hungry. He has his ear to the door
of the slaughterhouse.* I took a vow

to master the microwave. Weaned
on plain oatmeal, baby carrots, cold-brewed

grudge. If my husband came hungry
I would eat him raw. Guts and all.

The years I self-cannibalised, my mother
cleaved our house in half, scavenged

for scraps of her child. When I slept
she simmered. What she fed

I deveined from me, a red string
unseaming my cavity.

⁵ Previously published on *Couplet Poetry*.

She shimmered above the stove:
chicken marrow, a garlic-bulbs-halo.

Meanwhile, I zipped myself back into her
wedding dress she wore at my age.

It sloughed off me like last season's skin.

Family Portrait with Housefire

Every New Year an epidemic of housefires.
You outgrow fishing trips with Father,
whittling canines on knuckles. Your mouth a slaughter
of hunger, fingers flicking incense cinders
from rotting rice on the altar where Mother
kneels. Spring showers make the river

sing. January bellies up on the river
when you recompose your bones. Grief a housefire
that torches your mother
tongue. You watch Father
crumble in a hospital hallway & leap across the cinders
three times before entering the slaughter

-house. Did you forget? He said it was a slaughter,
watching your birth. His once-love split into a river
of umbilicus & silt. Blood-fresh cinders
cauterizing flesh. Her womb your first housefire.
No eulogy. One day I will die, says Father.
One day you will die & I won't be there to watch, says Mother.

That January you mother
a feeding tube, nurse it close to your chest. Your body a slaughter
-ground where your thorax rises & Father
strike each bone like the world's quietest xylophone. A song for a river
funeral. You open your mouth to sing along & out comes a housefire.
Caustic alchemy, shower of cinders

circles the drain. You perfect arson, watching the cinders
rain from Father's cigarettes. You scream at Mother
who screams at you to take a bite. The dining table a housefire:
sacrificial pyre & you the lamb that begged for slaughter.
They float your corpse down river
where at nine you sharpened fish hooks with Father.

After dinner, Father
strokes your spine's keys, notes falling like cinders
incinerating your vertebrae. A river
fermented with grief: altar-wine left at Mother's
feet as offerings. A fevered threnody for the slaughtered,
hollowed bones that once housed fire.

When you wake, they fish you from the river. Father
untangles your tongue to dry on the housefire. Your teeth brittle tinder culled
from Mother's spine. They dress you in dry clothes & name you Daughter.

Other Lonely Animals

Stop. You are not 52 Blue. You are something worse. Your vocalisation is perfectly audible to your species. Your incomprehensibility is self-induced. We've never seen her but you're sure she is beautiful in her sadness the way a skinny blonde's collarbones shield her like wings while she weeps. The way an Asian lady beetle is a ladybug, you are a taxonomical rounding error. Pest masquerading as lucky sign. And while we're at it you're not the European starling, whose foreignness is redeemed by its namesake silver specks, who in large numbers are called murmurations. A gathering of you's would be called something like mumblings and who could hear poetry in that? Have you tried repenting for invasiveness? Have you ever considered a nose job? Stop. Speak up. Say *yes* when people call you *No*. You can be the other lonely animal. Any dead girl would come if called enough, even by the wrong name. Like sweet autumn clematis you undress in sheets of white. To the untrained eye, in the dark, you could be someone's high school sweetheart, her locker room perfume, exotic bottled good enough to taste. Someone could track your scent trail and never question where it starts.

Dumb Luck

It's true: I've never been catcalled. Should *count*
my lucky stars. I had *my mother's eyes*
but I returned them. I don't *knock on wood*.
Dead man walked this far alone. *Test my luck*
like strike-anywhere matches. Sure. I own
my foolishness like I own this body.
I busy men with guessing my species
before they can tell if I'm good to eat.
It's true I keep my headphones in walking
at night. Of course I'm afraid. But when men
hiss *have I seen you 'round before* I know
it's their first time seeing a chimera.

Q&A

Are you eating well? Are you in love? every call,
she incants the same prayers, her voice a diminished chord

vibrating undersea fibers to reach my ears.
At 84, words slip from her like keys falling

out of tune. What she really means: fear
that one of us will die before I'm married.

I answer with the same lies. We tell each other
our dreams. She dreams of her dead

husband but only as his young self,
who followed her sister all the way home

because they look identical from behind.
This is an old story. We laugh every time.

I dream of fighting with her son,
of lining up all the men in my life against the wall

& making them say *sorry*.
I ask if she's sleeping okay, taking her meds,

if her cough subsided. She tells me to come home.
Her waterlogged voice brushing past my ear

like a hand pruny and ghost-soft, parts
my hair's curtain to look at the thin girl wearing her old

face, asks her the same two questions:
Are you eating well? Are you in love?

Ode to Being Vietnamese on Bad Days⁶

On March 16, 2021, Robert Aaron Long killed 8 people and injured 1 in a mass shooting in Georgia, Atlanta. 6 victims were women of Asian descent. A Georgia police officer, Jay Baker, answered an interview in which he cited Long's motive as him having had "a really bad day."

In Vietnamese, most children's first word is not mẹ or má
but bà, the diacritic softer on their unbroken tongue.
Not mother but mother of mother. Their mouths opening
for the first time not in screams. Bà.
So close to a breath exiting.

⁶ Previously published on the *Academy of American Poets's* website

At 5 my first word was an echo,
mimicking the doorbell of my grandparents' house.
My grandfather alive, my grandmother with hair
still dyed black, her tattooed eyebrows so faded
her grandchildren coloured them in wax
bright blue. She watered night-scented jasmine,
white dwarf stars on our balcony.
He lulled me to sleep with static
searching for French radio broadcasts.
They curled my hand
around the cursive N's bowed head
to spell my name. Ngọc. *Gem*. O tròn như quả trứng gà.
O round as a chicken's egg. Gravitized
by dấu nặng, *heavy mark*. Grain of sand
in a clamshell's mouth.

At 18 I learnt to swallow my name.
Gritty going down. When asked I choked
on the swollen O, the cursive N coiled
its head around my uvula. Dấu nặng
rattling the roof of my mouth.
No? They laughed, *Your name is No?*
I laughed like a bell sounding an exit.
Shelled my teeth around my name
hardening into something worthwhile.

At 21 a man blazed bullets through bodies
with faces anagrams of mine.
A bad day said the kiler
and I dreamt bad dreams about bullets unfurling in flesh.
Exploding stars, shells
clattering on concrete like rotten teeth. Lightyears
searing shadows in my retinas.

At 22 I learnt how to say
hemorrhage, my tongue rolling one syllable
into the next. *He-More-Rage*. I memorized it
by picturing an angry man
beating someone wearing my face until I bled
in ways no-one could see or pronounce
until blood bruised my black eyes blue.
I watched bodies on screens, silhouetting
each with my finger like caution tape
circling crime scenes. Estimated their proximity
to mine, searched for the same crook
at the base of their necks, the same mole
on their pixelated ankles. Muted
cries, familiar syllables exiting their bodies
like spent shells, each one lodging in
my throat heavier than the last.
One captioned *Victim of hate crime fights back,*
sends attacker to hospital. The grandmother collapsing
star, her black eyes blued, hands curled
into fists. *Go grandma. Show the fucker*
something to fear. The comments cheering
like cockfighters around a caged match.
Her cries rattling against the other side
of my screen, ricocheting
back into her throat.

At 23 I called my grandmother,
her voice blurred and wrung
like clothes hung on a line.
I wanted to unpool
the bad cells from her breast, so many bad days
bent under her four children, monsoon seasons, bombs.
Foreign shells no chemo could extract.

Where she lives they won't let her talk
to the dead anymore, won't let her burn
ghost money. Each bad day another word
exits her memory, another name slips
between her teeth. Her iPad tells her to forgo
earthly pleasures. She teaches me
how to photosynthesize. *I forgive*
all my enemies she said. *Easy to do when they're all dead.*
I keep secret from her: my new name,
the latest ICE round-up, what ICE means,
how one of the victims' sons are my age,
how I call sometimes to hear a voice
calling me pretty. When she asks if I'm in love, I don't say
I'm afraid of loving someone who can't pronounce my name.

I want to curl my hands
around her hands, rub
years from her knuckles, curve her fingers around
the bends of the cursive N,
loop the O across. Show her bad days
something to fear. We land
on dầu nặng. Plant a gem
at the bottom of our throats.

Phone Call with My Family's Poet

When I think of kaze no denwa
I think of you in a phone booth, calling

from a field in Hà Nội.

Not of the mountain pagoda

where you lent a girl your life's
better half, when you thought twenty

was half your life. Not your face
on the back of your book my mother keeps

on our family's bookshelf, uniformed,
smiling, twenty. I think of your hands

holding the receiver the way one holds
a just-hatched chick. Of your voice

asking for Mẹ the way you asked for her
forgiveness when you left for war.

Mẹ, I'm home. I've kept my promise.

I think of you two eating together,

her saving you the last spoonful of rice,
instead of two photos on the altar.

Con mời mẹ ăn cơm. You would ask her
like this, in a voice I never heard

but understood anyway.

When I think of kaze no denwa

I think not of the wind but the sound

it makes spun through the spokes

of your bicycle's wheels as you visit

a morning market, haggling over bundles

of coriander. I think of you

alive, sixty, seventy, your bones undone

only by gravity. Doing what people do

after winning wars. Adjusting

radio antennas to clear static

from broadcasts of bombs still falling

far away. Taking pills to save the organs

bullets missed. I think of xanh in Vietnamese,

how we bookend a life with four letters.

Tóc xanh: young. Xanh cỏ: long dead.

I think of you thinking of xanh,

how it means both blue and green

as you die looking at the sky,

grass levelled beneath your body.

Reunion

You apparate at the bus stop: an oracle
or omen. Crow's nest crown

of brown hair. Hunched in a blue wind-
breaker. I don't say hi. I remember

when I last checked you for signs
of breathing. I remember how flammable

your blood. How something could root
in your guts and spawn at the trachea.

Is it you, face scaffolded into clavicles,
pale hands dug in pockets, ever

searching for what's left of your life?
Is it you with whom I hung

hand-folded birds on a makeshift
Christmas tree, whom I begged to take

my last 20 for driving to rehab?
I don't take the bus. It's not that I'm afraid

of what I'll see when you turn around. I must
let you be. Which means lifting my fingers

keeping yours from shivering, not
asking you to come home safe, or alive,

or something worse. I must let you live
in my imagination: swimming in an infinity

night pool. I watch from the cheap seats.

You're winning. Your hair slicked with moon.

Breath fogging so I can't see your face
or what's become of your face.

The Cloud

In the valley, the cloud hibernates, turns
on its side to lie more snug, slow-
blinks through snow cataracts.

Dormant as a metal-hulled sheep,
the cloud ruminates on a decade
of my life, gone by a deadline I forgot.

I heard of the cloud once before
while doodling cyclones over math equations at my desk.
Is it a cumulonimbus? Wispy cirrus clusters?
How to prevent mould growth on emails? Moss?

The scientists on the evening news answers
none of these, nor predicts my future:
How the cloud will swallow
my first sight of snow, drafts, grandmother
before her hair turns white.

This is going to change our lives, the scientist says. We are never going back.

Alien Temporary

Once, I found a blue phonebook
where every number was foreign. When I dialed,
the creatures answered with their names. *Goldfish,*
hinge, membrane. Hello? When I got bored, I flipped
to the food illustrations. An appendix of spaghetti,
green pearls of olives. I salivated. I gnawed
them right off the page, spat ink back out.
Like a *squid*. Scientists would invent *noctalgia*
for the grief of losing dark skies. I didn't know,
then, echoing Britney Spears' nasal *babys* on the radio,
I would trade one starless sky for another
half a world apart, transmission towers inbetween
bowed beneath our missing. Then, I only called.
Coda: the end of music, the language of whales.
ReCORD versus REcord. Bird brains. Cold feet.
To *verbalise*: to say aloud, to set in motion.
When mothership dropped me off late,
I walked up to the blue-eyed creature and unlocked
my jaw: *Hello. I'm sorry. It was raining cats and dogs.*
He nodded and waved me into his kingdom.
It's okay, he said. I was only passing through.

Future Living

Living in the future you miss many things: dead
grandfather visiting your dream, other grandfather
dying. Solar eclipse. Meteor shower. Visa renewal deadline.
Last flight home already half a day behind.
Wonders pass you by: pollen shivers down
the silk skin of a cashew fruit. Sông Hồng
ran out of silt while you weren't looking.
Where you now live houses no longer have brise soleil.
Fire hazard says your father, speeding pass
the dormant dam where you grew up, the ghost
weight of you damp against his back. You missed
when they took down the last sun brick, put glass
in its place to meld together the splinters of light whole
& too hot to touch. You missed how you
became your father. Everything in the future looks
flammable. You always need a smoke.
Half a century ago a man planted his wife
a banyan tree in the rubbles of 12 days
and 12 nights. Then the flood uproots their tree
and wakes you the morning after.
Did you miss the warning signs?
How summer turns a watermelon
sore with sugar, your nails through the shell
fontanelle soft? Haven't you missed
enough calls home? How rain never falls
there but bores through tin roofs like bones?

at the hospital when my mother said *your father is sick*⁷

all i wished was to have what he's having / so i could be thin. all these years / she never says my
disease aloud. its twisting latin roots. / it *gives her grief* / my disease. all these letters / just to
spell *loss*. / first two syllables stuttering / into *wrecks*. stress placement / calcifies. never gets the
point of x, intruder in her alphabet, how it slithers / from s to z, / self-erasing hiss / leaching
from windpipe. / *xi* & *she* & *see* the same sound / in her northern mouth / weaned on rice
kernels / white in october like hurried snow. / the final sound air struck / from palm into a
newborn's throat. / first thing mothers do to children / to make sure they're breathing. / all
these years she says *why can't you be normal*. / bình thường. / twinned grave / accents where i
excavate marrow / she planted in me. / two dấu huyền slanted like tin roofs. / she says *i love you*
the way one plucks rice kernels, / coaxing each monosyllabic word / from its husk, / uses
thương instead of yêu. / homonym for *pity*. / sometimes, *hurt*. / ư & ơ snag in a diphthong's
twining threads. / its last two letters / spelling my name's beginning. / some days she *pitied* her
firstborn / weighed with nothing / but dấu nặng in my name, / her dreams curdling / into my
bones. / most days she *hurts*. / when my mother *loves* she *loves* in a language i don't speak. /
inheritance i hollowed / from our common mouth. / she *loves* the way an insomniac / stumbles
room to room / feeling for pulse / in wall sockets. / my mother thương / when we sit at the
table / where she coaxes each kernel / back into my throat, strikes / just to hear my breathing.

⁷ Previously published on *Couplet Poetry*.

Ghazal for My Name

Me. In America I flinch hearing our mother tongue.
His voice reaching over continents for my name.

In our bedroom you asked *Is that all* when I told you
how he pinned my shadow to his with my name,

called me what you called me in his attic bed.

July sun lapped the walls while he spat my name

back down my throat. Arranged letters
like chalk silhouetting my body. When he called my name

did he claim me like you claimed me?

Flood my lungs with waters whose names

I crossed an ocean to forget? Red River, Halais Lake.

Mother, mantle, mouth. My name

last on a list of sounds I strained against flinching from,
awake in our bedroom while outside cicadas rang names

like sirens calling casualties. Me, that is all. You gave me this tongue
so I'm giving it back. Inheritance heavy like *dầu nặng* in my name.

When you had me tamarind leaves shimmered the pavement gold. Heat
cleaved our tenement room where punctured pipes sung you my name,

its meaning worth more than our roof above. Me, take it back.

Trade it in for untouched goods. Rip my name

from his attic's jaws. You told me once how, to stop spirits
from stealing children, parents gave them ugly names

to repel their thirst. Me. Make me

sick. Call me someone else's name.

Uninvited

After feeding on some rats, I fly
to your house, where I addressed
a summer of letters signed *Yours*. I hover

by the streetlight outside your kitchen—
bigger than I imagined, a yellow-lit shadow
box of carcass and knives, glass steamed

from your simmering stove. You strip
flesh from bone while she pares
potato skin ribbons. Butter chicken, I guess,

your marry me recipe. You sit across each other, spoon
from the same pot, ask How was your day,
make weekend plans to see the Lakes, lament

rising prices of eggs, of raising
a child. Cost-of-living crisis, an appetite
I sacrificed for flight and newly-whetted

canines. You wipe sauce from her blood-
warm bottom lip. I consider knocking, knowing I can't
enter uninvited this time. Instead, I perch

on a branch, licking my rat-cruste fangs.
Watch you clear the table, load the dishwasher
together. Maybe she hums a song. I can't tell,

despite my supersonic hearing, if you laugh.
I swat the moths clouding my sight.
You flick a switch. My shadow shimmers

on your darkened window as your silhouettes slink
towards the bedroom, where I can no longer

follow. But I know you brush her hair from her eyes.

I know you see my face mirrored in her pupils
silverless. I know she dips her tongue
in the hollow behind your ear and draws

only sweat.

Month of Legumes, Year of the New Ox

I cut my fingers pulling weeds from my brother's grave today.

Cemetery mosquitos are gutsier, says my father,
smacking the back of his hand pockmarked with bites.

Swollen & rice wine marinated, these entomologic vultures
sniff for rot beneath our mourning clothes.

We slog through the marsh. This weather
good for legumes, bad for everything else. The earth swells
with rain & the dead
coughing from joss paper smoke
wake to feast. Examine the clementines,
waxed & shined into mini lanterns.
Unfurling their fingers to palm
the sticky rice into morsels. I like to think
hell cares little for table manners.
We burn paper cars, paper iPhones,
though I doubt they have use for either. I like to think
food tastes better eaten with your hands
& when you're dead. Something to look forward to.

On the way back my parents discuss whether to move
my brother to the hills. It's sunnier there, my father says.
He won't have to be so wet. Rescue him from the stillbirth-&-baby
corner, untended graves sagging like greyed milk teeth.
We have money now, my father says, & I wonder if I will ever love
anyone so much to work half my life
to earn them a more dignified grave.
Do you know where grandpa lives, my mother asks my sister.
In the big blue-roofed house, my little sister says, echoing
a line in her talking toy book, but we all tell ourselves
she meant heaven.

We pass the old dam once lined yearly
with flower vendors. Once we shoved through the throng
of new year shoppers like salmons swarming upstream,
picking through branches of plum blossoms,
looking for luck tucked between pink petals.
Pass my grandparents' old home where I learnt
the curled ear of a cursive N.
Pass waterlogged spring air when my mother
peels a clementine, gives me the good segments
& eats the dry ones. Just last year we learnt
to say I love you. I hope this year teaches us
I'm sorry. She brushes the pith stuck to my cheek
& smooths the mole underneath
while touching hers in the same place
& I wonder if she's trying to remember
if my brother had it once.

Back at my house we burn
newspaper in the hallway. Jump across three times
to leave behind the ghosts. Stay back,
we say. Stay dead. Don't follow me
across the threshold. So when I shake my coat dry
I won't see raindrops
contour the faces I've forgotten.
I can't stand to see you wet.
The forecast says it'll rain until the end of February.

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