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Survival Etched into Flesh: Migration, Labour, and Debility

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Abstract

This co-written creative piece unfolds as an intimate act of witnessing between a child and their Vietnamese migrant mother, tracing fragments of labour, loss, and survival against the backdrop of racialization. Weaving through memories of factories, kitchens, and relentless drudgery, the narrative explores how the body becomes both a site of endurance and debility under a system that demands gratitude for its violences. At its heart, this work grapples with the paradox of migration: the aspiration toward whiteness as a promise of stability and success, even as that aspiration alienates us from the very people we are doing it for.

Keywords

Vietnamese, migrants, racism, memory, grief, diaspora

WRITING has never come naturally to me, and to say that it does is to admit that it has no correlation to any sort of subjugation. To struggle in the Language Arts is to question the English syntax, to wonder when a sentence should end and another should begin; to doubt the validity of one diction versus another; to articulately and gracefully displace language in a way that the White Man will praise.

It has always been about that, I now realize. For hours, I would sit at the school desk, a wooden pencil in hand, trying to make it so my words didn't seem wrong, out of place. I would stare at the crinkled sheet, stare real hard at the dancing letters and their hidden significations, as if enlightenment would somehow strike upon my yellow self. Inky sentences melding away into a pile of nonsensical meanings, the tops of my knees grazing against the desk's underside, my focus flickering like a sputtering car engine.

And when I found myself hopeless, I would glimpse at the other students, watching their pencils glide across the expanse of their desks in a frenzy of scrawls. Then I would think to myself, resignedly, *I wish I knew anything.*

Writing, rewriting, writing—and then erasing it all over again—leaving nothing but the whiteness of the paper.

Perhaps that is not entirely correct to say.

That, despite arbitrary scribbles no longer being penciled in dark graphite, my sentences are still visible. Ghosts. Evanesced. I am still visibly evanesced. A conditional visibility.

Both you and I, *Mẹ*.

Two green-faced immigrants, and their child, who is not quite Vietnamese, yet not fully quite Canadian either.

A sore sight for eyes that do not see beyond gold and ambition, and yet it only ever seems to look past us. Our yellowness stark against a man-made landscape of rocky mountains and harsh snowfalls. Here, the ground is hardened with concrete; no longer should our feet feel the soil beneath them. Trees of maple and pine sprout across an expanse of frost and black ice, forever stagnant. Surely, this is a juxtaposition from all the colours of your home: grand jackfruit trees, splintered rice hats, hammocks swinging in sweltering heat. A testimony. A witness. But who are we bearing witness to, if not ourselves?

A poor farmer's daughter.

A mother. A woman.

A migrant.

Who are you bearing witness to?

You see, there will always be a word for something in the language arts, I now realize. The world is built on this proclivity of labels, for casting people like you and me into a reduction of words, a series of letters strung together to fit a slot on a piece of paper.

That is how we exist, defined by a language unbelonging to us, on a piece of paper.

Migrant. Asian. Chink.

Mẹ, I write to you in a place I fear you would never reach me, at least not in this lifetime. Yes, I am doing well in school; my grades are fine; and I am eating enough. I hope these words make you proud, and that it is a feeling you remember when we both have forgotten how to reach each other. Isn't it horrific? I miss you more than I remember you[1]. And much like how your body has borne witness to the toil you've surrendered to, I am very much your witness, very much a testament that you exist, existed, still existing, engraving you onto every sliver, every molecule, every tangible thing that this great blue rock has to offer. *Mẹ*, I am your greatest witness, and the most devastating thing about it is the human condition to forget.

So, I write this to you in the very language that has wedged us deeper apart.

For to know you is to love you, and to love you is to know of your hands—their callouses and cleaves and contours.[2] And to know of these

[1] This line was inspired by Ocean Vuong's (2019) passage in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, "In Vietnamese, the word for missing someone and remembering them is the same: nhớ. Sometimes, when you ask me over the phone, Con nhớ mẹ không? I flinch, thinking you meant, do you remember me? I miss you more than I remember you." (p. 186).

[2] This line was inspired by the following passage in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*: "Because I am your son, what I know of work I know equally of loss. And what I

wretched hands is to grasp what sacrifice truly means, to witness a village ravaged by wildfires of loss and labour.

You, who crossed the Pacific with your pinched eyes and sun-loving face. A treacherous journey of hungry waves, packed into the vessel of a wooden boat with hundreds of others who look just like you. You, who came to no man's land and should be grateful to be here, at no man's land. You, who should be a happy migrant.

But that is quite paradoxical, isn't it? To be grateful that you have chosen the lesser of two evils, that you have traded one kind of violence for another, one system of struggle for another, one type of survival for another. But happy you should be, happy you should be, for you are taking their jobs and housing and opportunities.

And I suppose that explains why you slave away in a factory with those yellow-faced just like you; or those migrants just like you. Plowing away as the White Man watches with his clipboard, fat-bellied, bellowing, berating you for tardiness like a parent would their child, but you are no one's child. You are an orphan, just like your mother's tongue, just like me.[3]

They say people like you and me do not know how to speak English, but that is a faceted truth. For it does not truly matter whether or not you could, can, speak English. No. For as long as you speak it with an accent, it is always wrong.

You are wrong. To be reduced because of something that is your own is to say your existence is wrong, not right, condemned.

And we'll spend our lives paying for it.

I know all of this because you once took home crates of plastic boxes and, at the kitchen table with your back against the twilight slipping through the curtains, you sat stapling expiry dates. And I would help, my hands soft and nimble, because in my mind's eye, I found a swelling of pride in the words you spoke:

Giỏi quá! Giỏi quá!

This swelling only ever grew, festering until I couldn't see all the wrongness within it. At ten years old, you took me to the factory with you, the factory where one person became many, and it was difficult to care—difficult to see a difference in all the lives swept away by ice-cold drudgery. At first, it was sitting in empty break rooms with nothing but paper cups, wooden sticks, and sugar cubes for me to play with. Then it was counting plastic boxes in the loading dock, then it was carting crates from one station to another, and then, all of a sudden, it was standing against an elongated table in a unified line; a frenzy of crinkled eyes, sun-burnt skins, and swift hands, blurring, blurring, blurring, all in the same bleached work coats and ratty hairnets, a devastating erasure of you and me.

A lonely portrait. A cut in skin.

It is an epilogue of bygone memories and robbed moments, soiled by bleeding cynicism. It is a meaningless afterword.

Because worthlessness becomes you when I fail to remember where I came from, when the line between legacy and livelihood starts to sound one syllable less different.

Study hard, *work hard.*

A mantra by which I would only remember you when memory begins to neglect and the earth starts to swallow you up. Study hard, work hard, and your wrinkled eyes will convey the rest, a daunting truth: *so you don't become like me.*

But where has all that effort gotten us? What has it gotten *you*?

Hours of lying in bed, the sounds of your groans echoing in an otherwise silent house. The massager gun tossed on the couch, bottles of ibuprofen capped off, and the living room clock continuing to tick in an otherwise silent home. Aches all over, from your shoulders to your knees, migraines sprouting along the cracks of your skull, sickness bleeding into your cuts.

Funnily, these would be the only times I'd see

know of both I know of your hands. Their once supple contours I've never felt, the palms already callused and blistered long before I was born, then ruined further from three decades in factories and nail sons." (p. 79).

[3] This line was inspired by Ocean Vuong's passage in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, "Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where your education ended, ashed. Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war." (pp. 31-32).

you, the only times, albeit fleeting, of intimacy I got with you: the moments when you were closest to eternal stillness.

And still there is something there unspoken—an unvoiced oath—in the moments where the line between naivete and hopefulness is despairingly distorted; in the images of a jilted child watching the hallway lights flicker on and studying the shadows that shift underneath the door; in the eyes of another watching their mother arrive home, cut down from silver tongues, collapse onto the couch, a bottle of medicinal oil twisted open, the scent of eucalyptus and menthol lingering, the couch, a leisure item for guests to lounge on, now a devastating symbol of respite. Is this the future that beholds us?

In which you spend standing upright ceaselessly, slaving away to the litany of oil sizzling and bells chiming, shuffling back and forth as you carry plates brimming with steaming cuisine—swept into a waitress' wretched routine, unable or perhaps undaring to take breaks.

In which you finish one work shift only to spend the remainder of the day slouched over marble desks, holding a white woman's hand, nail dust and polish fumes seeping into cracked skin and healthy lungs.

In which a sheet is pinned on the refrigerator, so meager of a note that it could be mistaken for a grocery list. But it is a more savage truth: a request for a doctor's note, the fruition of those never-ending, wretched hours of standing. The mind so engrossed in its financial survival, so engrossed in the ideals of man that it forgoes the basic necessities of its own body, watching it chill into a pile of kidney stones.

A poignant metamorphosis, then, sickness made tangible in inky scribbles. Rather than a butterfly, you decay. Although, I suppose a butterfly becomes beautiful before its own imminent death; therefore, you are only beautiful right before you die. You are remembered only after you die. A stone-cold truth then confronts me: my own survival is beholden to your very hands. The same hands in which blisters and sores have sprouted, medallions from holding countless of hot plates at the *bánh mì* shop. The same wretched hands that glide so expertly at home, so gracefully across the steaming kitchen stove, over simmering bone broth, hot pans of lemongrass and beef, while I wait, wait and watch as the tendrils of your mind are consumed by age, retaining nothing of substance, my ambitions fueled by rage.

For to know you is to love you, and to love you is to know of your hands, *Mẹ*. For every callous, every blister, every aching limb, every migraine patch that is torn open, I do not forget, carving it deep beneath my skin, in my veins.

The body sustains everything;

the muscle remembers.

It is a theory of debility (Puar, 2017), then, that contains people like you and me, a society that encapsulates us in perpetual vulnerability. A cut-throat world, indeed. A culture of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) and slow deaths (Berlant, 2007). To imagine that you will go on without ever knowing what silk feels like on skin; how might diamonds and jade rest upon your lovely collarbone; days without bodily aches; and daydreams of lottery-winning and lavish living, in which you forgo living at all so that you may see it vicariously through your child's. It is the American Dream; another saying for an aspiration towards Whiteness.

It is death by a thousand cuts.

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Acknowledgments

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Author Biographies

Tanisha Dang (she/her) is a child of Vietnamese immigrants and refugees, whose father escaped by boat during the Vietnam War and shortly brought her mother over to Canada. She is a BA Honours Communication and Media studies major at the University of Calgary with an embedded certificate in Creative Writing. Her research interests focus on intergenerational memory, trauma, rhetoric discourse, and migration challenges.

Thomas Tri (they/he) comes from a family of Vietnamese immigrants and refugees who escaped by boat during the Vietnam War. They are also a community organizer and an incoming Ph.D. Social Work student at York University in Tkaronto. Their research interests lie in disability, migration, and queerness.