

we emerged from the dirt

I know this road, I know these tales.

The legato rise and fall of stories told in the night—

over cups of half-drunk tea, teeth-stained—

stories of the long line of people who toiled, who lived, who died;

our voices droned on like cicadas' summer song.

Somewhere along that line, a great grand uncle beheaded, poisoning the French army.

In another, an ancestor jumped into the sea, stone tied, protesting innocence.

Kings unmoved, names changed.

Lives minutely detailed: in barely legible scribbles, hung together, a genealogy.

In files, branded red: blood debt to the country.

In reports and in summons, in certificates, in meeting minutes.

In a map of migration — from north to south, from mountain to sea.

A people always moving: for fortunes. Fated to leave, so they can live.

A people needing to move: for survival.

A people forced to move: land split in the middle, Progress masking the odour of Monetary gain. A people's committee, sans people. None for thee.

Lives measured in metrics: in kilos, in parcels.

in production capacity, in deadlines, in responsibility to the State.

in harvests, in mud raked, in brick burned.

Five thousand đồng an hour.

A bike ride, a young love.

Selling your face to the ground, selling your back to the sun,
days pass toiling and burning.

You leave: to live. But we are made from land, rooted into the earth,
the umbilical cord never cut.

You stay: tongues curl around strange vowels so you may say: come, into our home, voyeur to our lives.

Let me tell you about my land: the river that flows, the fruits that ripen, and the things we have done so many times they now became tradition.

Come, and let me sell you: a land that is mine, it's ours, it's revolutionary.

Labour sold to the Party.

Come, and let me show you: an ancestral house invaded.

The spirit rises; and the dead and the living learn to live

side by side. There but remain remembrance of what was yours, once.

Memories tied up in leaves: rice, banana, flushed green.

A shy lover, never confessing.

The yearning that will pass, when the season is done.

In the songs someone once sang you to sleep, the stork stretches his wings, and flies
over open fields and unending sky.

In a generous mood, he made it home;

a child returning from his quest for gold.

In a cautious tone, he tumbled, and fell;

if you have a heart, boil him in clear water—

so in death, he will still be of use.
A life measured in production capacity.

The fire burns; you look, and pull down the tarp.
tomorrow you will do it all again: the harvest cut and the brick stacked.
You are surrounded by ghosts you never know—
so what if it all burned down.
The rooster crows; you wake, hands never stop moving.
Plates of foods wrapped in cling film, photographed and admired;
the thank you said while the heads already turned—
For some, an exotic excursion; for you, the only way to live.

Our stories, our songs are the only things still ours.
We pass them down, the stanza, the poetic devices,
words and rhythms chosen carefully, dispensed economically.
So one day they may fall, freely.

WORKING NOTES

Everytime I start writing, I write it as if I'm talking to you.
You taught me everything I know about poetry.
The stanza, the poetic devices.
The six by eight, the seven by eight, the five by four.
Words and rhythms chosen carefully, dispensed economically.
All my sentences are in free fall, the punctuations where thoughts dissipated, returned, trailed off.
A conversation began, stilted, stopped, and restarted.
The vowels unpolished, the words hastily cramped in.
If you hear them now would you recognise its poetic form?
Or are they but sentences forced together, leading nowhere

you'd sing to me of the land and the fields
the crane stretches his wings, flying home
tumbling in the dark.
the toil, the toil,
selling your face to the ground, selling your back to the sun,
burning.

bà hay hát cháu nghe về đồng quê ruộng lúa
con cò bay sải cánh, về thăm quán cùng quê,
cái khổ, cái khó,
cái số bán mặt cho đất, bán lưng cho trời,
cháy da.

làm ra một đồng xót mồ hôi
bệnh đầy là bệnh ngu

chỉ nhớ cái vó chuối — bao giờ hết mùa hoa chuối thì hết nhớ

cái số tha hương cầu thực
tắc lòng cố quốc tha hương, đường kia nổi nọ ngồn ngang tới bởi

the topography of life: the ridges of muds, caked to skin. the callouses and cuts from thousand of rice blades

life and days and years measures in harvests, in mud raked, in bricks burned. five thousand dong an hour. a bike ride, a young love. days sweating, skin burning, toiling

life measures in production capacity, in deadline, in responsibility to the state

you leave: for foods, for money, for survival
you never forget
we are made from land: rooted into the earth
trees have roots, water has source
the umbilical cord never cut

cây có cội nước có nguồn

the stories we pass down: cicadas sing, in the dark of night
over cups of half-drunk tea
tracing lineage only remembered
by the keeper of the memories
the houses no longer yours. but you are always reminded: it was once ours
the modern life rush into: the ancestral house invaded. the spirit became corporeal: the dead and the living, learning to gather under one roof. space reduced to one.

i know this road, i know these tales
the staccato rise and fall of stories told in the night over cups of half-drunk tea, cicadas whispering under heavy, humid summer air
the stories passed down: the pork cooked for death day remembrance; the people born; the people died
somewhere, a great grand uncle beheaded, poisoning the French army
in another, an ancestor jumped into the sea, stone tied, protesting innocence. the king unmoved, the name changed

the things i never get to ask you: the lines that break when you were born my grandmother. the eldest. the brothers you reared, the family you cared for. the siblings you acquired when you said "i do" to who would be my grandfather.
eight, nine — the number became names, because somewhere, someone forgot how many kids now roam the land.

remembrance and reverence.
memories tied up in leaves: rice, banana, flushed green.

we mined the land: for survival.

we put ourselves on display: a way of life, lives lived, became storied.

language learned so we can tell strangers: come into our home, voyeur to our lives, gawk at the things

we have done so many times they now became traditions.

i will tell you about my land: the river that flow, the foods cooked, the things we have done so many times they now became traditions

in a language that is not my own

the ownership of land entangled: it's mine, it's ours, it's for the revolution

it's ours, with the capital O: labour sold not to capitalists but to the Party

lives minutely detailed: in reports, in summons, in lineage recorded

lives displaced. a map of migration — from north to south, from mountain to sea. a people always moving: for fortunes. a people needing to move: for survival. a people forced to move: land split in the middle, Progress masking the odour of Monetary gain. but none for thee, the people, unrepresented in the committee

The hammock swings — the only rest

From the streams of people coming and going: smiles, snaps; the cooing and the awing

Everything is an Exotic Excursion

It's life, for you

We pass them down, until the lines break when you were born, dear grandmother.

We pass them down, eight, nine, ten — numbers to name, because somewhere, someone forgot how many kids now roam the land.