

LAN DUONG  
HONORABLE MENTION

**In This House**

We take refuge from the wars  
we had just come from and the wars  
that were just beginning.  
Father, who has carried all of his battles  
in his hands,  
tattoos his rage onto our flesh,  
one and one and one.

He was a lieutenant colonel  
in the South Vietnamese army  
and has lived through the French, the Japanese,  
and then, the Americans.  
Wars he has known  
he carefully places in the closet  
a thick, triangular mat of a flag,  
the three red stripes folded onto the yellow  
along with a parachute  
we used as cover  
on the boat ride.

In this house we will live  
without the mother  
*for far too long.*  
She will come later to America  
to reunite with her children 20 years  
after they left in 1975.  
This armchair of a woman,  
she does not tell us why  
she stayed  
and she cannot  
*for the life of her*

tell us  
what she did  
with the money.

In this house sisters' furies  
will be born.  
The anger of *ót* blooming  
on their skin like watercolors  
(blues and purples mostly).  
In this house the eldest brother  
hatches a plan  
to take his country back  
from the Communists.  
In this house the artist brother  
becomes a thief first,  
and then a runaway second.

In this house I don't know time  
by the months  
(*tháng một, tháng hai, tháng ba ...*)  
or the days (*thứ hai, thứ ba, thứ tư ...*).  
I count time by the years we've left,  
the years since others have *vượt biên*,  
their days spent in the camps, and  
the months and years  
I've left home.

In this house I will *always*  
lay with 2 other bodies  
on a double bed.  
In this house I will grow an ache  
for the snaking of  
my arms with other arms,  
the muscling of my legs

with other legs.  
Because, you know,  
this is what love looks like.

In this house I will cut  
fish with hands  
that are really  
like broken scissors in the kitchen.  
In this house I will pull white hair  
from black heads,  
laying them on dark surfaces  
in exquisite patterns.

I will use *dầu xanh* on legs and temples,  
nest my fists into flesh,  
and on heatless nights I will skim  
my sisters' backs as if  
I were reading braille,  
unseeding pustules of acne,  
as hard and small as rice grains.

In this house my fingers absorb *all*  
of my family's sicknesses,  
their sweat, their smell.  
This is how I know they are family,  
this is how I know they are mine.  
Not by numbers  
(*chị hai, anh hai, chị ba, anh ba,*  
*chị tư, chị năm, chị sáu, chị bảy, chị tám*)  
or other polite designations, but  
by the color of their skin,  
the shape of their bodies,  
the size of their pores.

In this house I devour *all* of my sisters'  
fears and strengths—*every last one of them*.  
And on days they don't want to work,  
I hold them still  
and listen  
(ear to belly)  
to the eerie sounds of thunder  
their stomachs make.

In this house I find the best hiding places  
to fold my body into two  
when the fighting becomes too intense.  
In this house I touch  
the nub of skin between my legs and  
love myself open  
during late summer evenings.

In this house we women hold on  
because we need to.  
We are bulletproof,  
don't you know,  
holding in all of  
our sound, all of our fury,  
because this is what strength looks like.

In this house I listen to stories  
and scavenge for what is useful.  
I take the fragments with me  
for when I leave  
and come back,  
for when I leave  
and come back.