

WE FOLLOW THE RIVER

POEMS

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Caitlin Press 2024

*In memory of Nu Nu and
Chao Tzang Yawnghwe.*



A

Memories are
not enough
for words
to hold on.

The mind shifts
finding new footing,
new ground.

Mountains where
once was jungle.

English: a concrete building.

I see through
its windows.

Myself reflected.

BRAID

Even with hands
 cracked from cleaning

still she beckons me
 to sit by her lap

 amidst the sound of cars rushing
 past the hum of evergreens
 and mountains that loom
 over our small apartment.

She begins to braid
 humming Connie Francis tunes

but only later do I wonder
 what she dreamed of.

 If she longed for late afternoons
 when geckoes begin to appear
 when the air is draped with mangoes
 and reckless chirrups.

Her fingers dreamed forests for me
as her hands twist and pull hard
 so that I wouldn't break.

 Under her palms I fall
 under the tops of trees
 into warmth and spice and waving sunlight
 into memories of green and sky
 and a land where she fits.

Through the tough pull
and tug of hair

bare and strong
her hands tumble
me into her sarong.

MY MOTHER'S HANDS

All she has is a bare-bone life
all bent and swollen fingers.

The knuckling down
the leaving and arriving.

The nothing much to hold on to
but flinty, broken hope
wrapped in torn paper tissue.

Surrounded by whiteness—
this mountain-turned air—

Here.

Time hurries and stumbles.
Wind chills and clouds loom.
This land unforgiving to tropical hands.

Who to understand
her orange light.

Who to carry her life
and take it gently from
her spotted hands.

CROSSINGS

Between us

words
rocks

your arms start to falter.

They are too heavy.

(We fall into oceans.)



A friend says that sons and daughters
somehow carry the tragedies of their parents.

Written on their hands
loss is passed on

(what are mother and father but
loss unnamed).

For the country
they have given up

for the waters crossed
for the poverty of the brand new
for time, uncertain, wavering on a pin.

The river carries it all.
The burdens.
The heavy heart.
Always filling
always emptying.

AIRPLANE MAN

My dad a former pack-a-day man
 now savours just a few cigarettes
 he delicately breaks in half
 inhaling with religious fervency.

I'm vigilant, check that he doesn't buy
 too many bottles hide too many cartons.

When he pours himself a glass I'm fearful it will lead
 to two or more to him veering off losing control
 I want him on stable ground on placid earth but he's not
 that kind of man he makes his own history
 his mind ready to flame his temper a force
 effective for politics for the fight for Burma
 but too much for the thin walls of home.



Over the years he's mellowed some
 body rounded teeth frail and nicotine-stained
 still working for the cause he's since lost hope for.

He denies martyrs and miracle workers.
 But those pesky ideals stay with him.

His feet still don't stay on the ground

they're in the air

crossing continents—

SCAR

For years he stays silent about
that long pink mountain range
knitted across the skin of his chest.

I often mistake his silence for anger
as one of the many things never spoken
many things with other lives other lands.

But when he finally opens up
it's with the Thai backbeat of gunfire—
a goddamn gunshot from nowhere
but it turned out that the bastard was
on the back of a motorcycle imagine
I was on the motorcycle too can you believe it
swerved into the ditch to save myself
shit the bullet just passed my heart was close
to dying and not only that we didn't have
good doctors back then so I almost
died on the operation slab dead and done

Later I get another story from mom—
no, it's from an operation that he'd had 'cause
he was born with a congenital heart defect
that's why he never travelled as a boy
or go off to boarding schools to India or England
like your uncles and aunts that's why
he's less British than the others and
that's how he met and married me
but what're you making that face for
it's true he was actually shot at in Thailand
he was on a motorcycle and drove into
the ditch but it was his friend who'd
sat at the back of the bike who was shot
they were trying to kill your dad though
but his friend didn't survive just died on the spot



In Thailand he'd kept a handgun in a
shiny red suitcase by his bedside.

When scars come
how does one know
if they've healed
or just covering up pain
like blindfold to eye.

If silence is a scar
what wound lies beneath.



In all these years
I'd never thought
he had a weak heart.