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To Make A Return

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To Make A Return

by
Mai Der Vang

*"In a way, we are nothing more—or less—than an encoded memory of our heritage."
- Eva Hoffman, Letters In Transit*

You are born here,
someplace alien to your ancestral tongue.
Cars replace your two feet
on a spiraling superhighway.
Tract housing becomes a destination
on dizzy roads that look too much alike.
Your father. Your mother.
A young couple far from home
and anything familiar. Stretched
beyond sanity like hitting walls in a maze.

You go to public school,
where you are taught how pilgrims and Indians
ate together, how to pledge allegiance,
and become invisible by turning off your voice
like taking off a jacket.
Never getting the one you want
because of the jobs your parents do not have.
And what you learn on back-to-school night,
when your mother does not know how to
write your name on the chalkboard
of your fourth grade class.

You become jaded by senior year,
swallowed by the language you can
hardly speak, and the assignments that
swarm inside your backpack.
In the midst of eight kids, you feel alone
because they will not let you be.



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Vang – To Make A Return

You wake at 6AM on a Saturday morning
to move couches before the shaman arrives.
There are chickens fussing in the backyard, and
the neighbors might hear.
The night you come home late,
your father burns his words
into the cracks of the narrow driveway.

You move away from home,
chart your course in a crowded landscape.
The cup of freewill flowing to the rim,
like the expensive red wine in your kitchen pantry.
You pour wax from the candles next to the tub
where you soak. No one to bang on the door
while you sink in salts and yesterday's
edition of The New York Times.
On the subway, you watch the high rises
shield your sight beyond the city walls.

You wander the streets,
yearning for the recognizable. How you
almost cry at the sight of lemongrass
in a stranger's yard. The old woman
a few doors down whose embroidery
looks like the neon cross-stitched fabric
collecting dust in your mother's closet.
Even the homeless vet who says
he knows of your people
because he fought in 'Nam.

You comb through books, magazines, journals
to uncover scabs, peeling from the wounds
left by a war your parents did not explain,
except to say they had to run.
You shrug it off, and now, years after,
you know the reason why your mother feared
fireworks on Fourth of July.
Why she keeps an old piece of clothing
locked in a suitcase, the same one she wore
the night they left Laos.
And your father, a man of tangled emotions
who says he was only showing love
the day he cursed you from the house.
When all along you think the only war
is the one inside you.

Vang – To Make A Return

You return home.
To loathe something, but to need it.
Like the twisted red string your mother tied
around your left wrist.
Its tainted mildew scent sometimes polluting,
your skin, but never taking over its purpose.
Never forgetting to bring you back.

About the Author

Mai Der Vang is a Hmong-American writer/poet who lives in Fresno, CA in the United States. Poems of hers have been published in *Paj Ntaub Voice*. In September of 2009, she completed a residency at Hedgebrook, a program for women writers. She is also a member of the Hmong American Writers' Circle (HAWC) and currently serving on the editorial board for an upcoming Hmong literary anthology with HAWC for Heyday Books.

Vang – To Make A Return



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