

Doug Rice

Rainskin

“All through the foothills of Vietnam,” she tells Doug, “there are people whose skin is made of rain.” Mai’s body waits for the sun to vanish behind the clouds. Her fingers childish and curious pulling blackberries from a bush. “Some say such people are only the people of myth, of old stories dropped along the way, the wet underside of river rocks.” Her eyes witness the appearance of these words, her words, her breath, her dreaming. “These people say this as if myths are not true, as if the people of myths are not real. But I have met these people. I have touched the water of their skin. I have listened to their damp voices, their whispers, their murmuring sentences.”

A Moment Beneath

Mai's tongue, her throat, her bones, her muscles, her feet, her skin shaped her words, rooted in water, into a tiny desire for raw beginnings. She pulled word after word from beneath her silent and still tongue. A few of these words occasionally burned her lips before she could say them. The earthly branches of her roughened syllables moistened by careful morning rain. To write, Mai only needed to feel the breath of her body—the language and longing of her lungs, of her womb and of her ribs. Where her body was most tender, Mai wrote one single word in pencil. She translated all of her memories from the refugee camps onto the seams of her clothes. Her silent prayer to history. With each step, these memories rubbed against her flesh, awakened her tender muscles. While I slept, Mai hid other words carrying her memories of the time before the bombs fell on her village beneath my fingernails so that I would always remember her remembering.

Breath Before Birth

The subtle curve of Mai's words made from dirt, made from stone. From the bark of lonely pomegranate trees, she carved ancient, muddied words. She cut fairytales from the fruit of these trees, their innocent seeds. Red, wet letters scrawled across her dark skin dreaming of weeping rivers. Mai refused to form the breath of her sentences merely from words. She mixed the pulp of pomegranates with the insides of lotus flowers. She learned secret ways for writing on the surfaces of water. Onto the whitewater of the American River, Mai scribbled these lost words. A diary of her innocent travels up and down green mountain trails. Familial stories of water written directly from her tongue, her parched lips. She carried each of these stories beneath her skin, near her womb. And she listened while she wrote sentence after sentence onto the rivers.