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A Name That Means Flower

Notes take a name that means flower, Hoa, into the night air. Hoa was and likely is a common name in Viet Nam, at least it was when I was there. Standing watch in Danang I heard that name, often spoken

by women and girls named Hoa, pronounced Waa. A soothing sound juxtaposed with the harsh sight of a straight jacket. I heard and spoke the name often, numerous days and nights at

different posts in that city, but saw only once a straight jacket. No one tapped my shoulder and said see that thing, it's a straight jacket, but I knew, standing watch across the street from headquarters called

the White Elephant, a straight jacket was what I was seeing, the man in it was black. He was being taken off a boat, in what was a ferry launch one weekday afternoon, a launch on a street that ran along the Han

River. At that time I didn't know the river's name. Had that man in the straight jacket not been there, the launch would have looked like it did on other days, girls and women in long silk gowns that were blue

and white and peach and green, soft colors,
and men and women in conical wide-
brimmed hats and men, soldiers in green
fatigues. The man in the straight jacket
was a soldier, likely flanked by MPs. His

being there like that caused a commotion
but in a quiet way. There were people in
the launch, debarking and waiting to board
the motored ferry. I don't recall the man
out on the street, though I'm sure my eyes

followed him there. I recall his being in
the launch, among the crowd, he looked
tilted. I don't recall his being carried, but
knew he was debarking not boarding and
he was in a straight jacket as sure as I was

wearing a dark blue helmet with white
letters SP for security police in front. He
seemed neither lying nor standing but tilted.
Though he may have been carried, inside
pushing back as the ones with him pushed

forward, that inner tension, the outward
commotion I saw, something out of the
ordinary that afternoon. I don't recall his
being taken away on the street where the
White Elephant stood across from the river

the man had been on. I recall his being in
the launch. He was black and not old, a GI
in a straight jacket a harsh sight juxtaposed
with the soothing notes take a name
that means flower, Hoa into the night air.

My Reverie

I never thought about Bea Kettlewood
and she never thought about me.
I've no recall of her looking
over my shoulder
down at whatever I was drawing
or painting on the thick sheet of paper
that lay on the long table:
a face or figure or cluster of trees
on a riverbank; but that did happen.
We were in her room to draw and paint.

I recall the long windows' view of
dense woods behind a barbed wire fence.
Dark even in sunlight, deep shade.
No one went in there.
Out the windows, the woods stood
across the hilly street, fenced in, dark.
The room always light, at one long table
sat Raiden with her teased blonde hair
and Martha, taller, more slender,
teased black hair. Raiden wasn't chubby.

Like Martha she had a nice shape. They
were together so much I can't think of one
without the other. Raiden and Martha,
blonde and brunette, and Mrs. Kettlewood's
salt and mostly pepper hair, bowl-cut,
bangs like a monk's.
Her hair and black-framed glasses made
her look like a woodchuck.
I never thought that then, never thought
about her, but she was there, as was Estelle

whose hair was long and dark, just a shade lighter than Martha's, but never teased. Estelle's came down past slender shoulders. She was tallish, thin, with olive skin. Her dark, very dark eyes lit up my world all of me. I believed in her eyes nose, cheekbones, jawline, chin, sensuous shapely mouth. Her long face, not too long. Her thin body I thought willowy, graceful, as she sat at a table, as she got up and

walked in the room. Something else, she was. Raiden and Martha were lovely girls, friendly, never flirty, at least not with me. They were older, where Estelle was younger by a year, than I. When you're fifteen, as I was, fourteen's much younger. I've ever felt about anyone more intensely. Estelle's gone from this world ten years and those feelings are still here. She was, is so lovely, graceful, willowy.

I had a crush like you wouldn't believe. To kiss Estelle would have been paradise, my "dream come true," and it did, one night, one night only, but that's another story. What happened in that room was one day we were both standing in one corner. She said, "Why aren't you talking to me?" I had a funny way of showing I liked her, talking to Martha, Raiden, to others, but not to her. I forget my mumbled reply.

Should have said, "I'm not talking to you because I love you. You are the most beautiful human being I have ever seen. Your beauty.." confounded me, so, for a while, I showed my love for her in my silence. Here

I am trying to make sense of it. What folly!
I recall "Why aren't you talking to me?"
Estelle's voice quiet, breathy. Her eyes.
She had a way of speaking with her eyes.

Ring Warrior

There's an open white paper bag
in your hand, a bag of round candies
that look like gum balls and you offer
a gum ball candy to a little four year old
whose holding his father's hand as you
motion the bag to the kid, whose father
quietly scuttles him down the sidewalk,

the same sidewalk on which you scatter
breadcrumbs. As pigeons gather you smile
down on the winged creatures, it's what
makes you smile, before you go back inside
the cobbler's shop your friend Esposito
owns. Three doors down, the hotel where
you have a small third floor efficiency:

a bed in one corner, a window, a chair,
on the wall an 8X 12 poster signed:
To my pal Bobby from Sugar Ray Leonard.
Right now two guys come into Esposito's
and play on the guitar the song they wrote
about Bobby Chacon, King of the Valley.
You smile, tap your foot to the rhythm.

All of it caught on film, as were your jabs,
uppercuts, hooks, the quick feet owning
the ring. You emerged triumphant, the ref
raising your arm in victory. So it was
the night you entered the ring knowing
your wife, that day, had taken a rifle.
Barrel under her chin, she pulled the trigger

and took her own life. Grieving you chose
to go on with the fight, which you won.
What drove her to self destruction, what
drove you, something within, to step into
the ring that night? Something inside you
only you could see, as the crowd saw you

throw punches, fade, bob and weave
your way to that victory, all the while crying
inside for your lost loved one. In your room
on the third floor a phone rings. Your
daughter needs money to buy a used car.
You address her need, you still know her
name, your name, you know where you are.

This room is home. Downstairs is the door
that leads to the sidewalk where you feed
pigeons, and hold in your right hand a bag
of gum ball-like candies. You offer one
to a passerby, a four year old kid whose
father urges him gently, quickly past you,
not knowing who you are, the warrior you

were, Bobby Chacon, King of the Valley.