

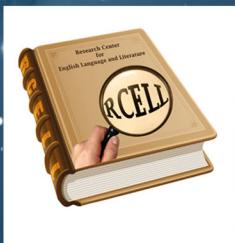
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Once Upon a Time in Vietnam

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Ho Chi Minh commits suicide. In my bed, in the blackness of shut eyes and a valley with no electricity—I am afraid. He walks out to a busy Saigon road, sits next to a monk and they set themselves on fire.

They burn quiet statements. My body jerks, the windows shake. The cold mountain air seeps under my sheets. Alone in my freeze, the top floor of this hostel is a windy penthouse. In the birth of dawn when the distance to my country feels smaller, my mother comes to mind and the beauty of the sunken weight of her morning smile. From the balcony the sun rises and I can see the French: the colorful tops of colonial villas spread, while wine country vineyards end in the white blurs of Da Lat peaks.

The other girls have freckles; they're old mates, they share a bed at night and don't see war. When they awake hunger comes and we walk down to Lai Chai. The girls and I are giddy and giggle about riding mopeds through old Koho hills and basking in the mist of Elephant Waterfalls. Licking our lips, we point to the fried rice – our mouths are wet but it's only a picture. This restaurant is open. We are a part of this city. Without walls, we sit in the street. Hundreds of mopeds zip by; toddlers hold onto rear handles, shiny black hairs sweeping their plump cheeks. The women driving only have eyes. In their face masks and pink helmets; they balance entire families and heavy bags of fruit.

My tomatoes are so fresh and succulent, the juicy strips of beef so tender and sweet. My rice is orange, it's shiny, it's glowing. The limey salt startles my throat. I'm choking on a grain. I'm looking for saliva. One of the girls calls my name, as I'm coughing and catching my breath to two children standing over table: their arms are out, their palms are open. Her face is burned. Her lip is gnawed. And he—is missing fingers. How many? I don't know. The city stops talking.

My head is up for long enough to meet old wounds, the holes—the holes in their eyes before I drop back to the orange food for one dollar. A noisy silence consumes my body, like the height of bloodshed and chaos on the battlefield. Le Petit Paris? We are not a part of this city. When I look up, without a word they are gone. We continue to eat, pay the bill and leave two dollars in some box with a red cross. Da Lat cowboys wander the streets of the Valley of Peace, looking for "America". It's back there, in the orange where my head fell. My country's over there by the crosswalk where we see the little girl again standing still, now she carries a baby on her back close to a woman whose feet, hands and limbs are twisted.

Up the hill, to the penthouse, one of the girls asks: "Do you remember—any more about the suicide, about Minh?" No. Just that. I'm reading his letter: I have it in my hand. It is the last of many

that he wrote when he couldn't take the flies, the smell of burning children. He says, "my obsession, its agency, my pores, they smell. I let the peasants pay. Too old, too sick, am I for talk. Is this what it means to win: burning children. When you're too old, too sick to have your talk matter—after three years of Rolling Thunder, and infinite years of mutations, I'm out of

names.” My mother read the letter with me. Afterwards, we watched the paper blow away from the tips of our fingers as we shivered from the balcony’s wind. The city was crying for him. No villas, just broken bodies – scattering. Like the heat of heavy tears. Oh their wailing – their screaming: “Linh hồn của tôi! Linh hồn của tôi!” “What’re they saying?” My mother held my wrist. I looked at her and said, “My soul.”