

TILTING THE CONTINENT

Southeast Asian American Writing

Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Cheng Lok Chua, editors

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*for Gershon (S.G.L.)
and
Lu-Hui and Poh-Pheng (C.L.C.)*

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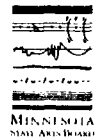
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Introduction

Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Cheng Lok Chua

The southeast region of Asia sticks out of the lower right-hand corner of the Asian landmass like a thigh and a foot, with thousands of islands and archipelagoes sprinkled below, crowding the South China Sea and extending into the Pacific Ocean. According to the historian D. G. E. Hall, the term "South-East Asia" became generally used during World War II to cover "the mainland states of Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, North and South Vietnam and Malaya together with the two great island groups . . . the Republic of Indonesia and the Republic of the Philippines" (3). The history of the region has been one of simultaneous mixing and maintenance of local differences. As Hall notes, "There has obviously been a great deal of intermixture between the earlier inhabitants and later comers. The whole area, indeed, has been described as a chaos of races and languages" (5).

The Southeast Asian region had been traditionally viewed as divided into two cultural spheres, one in which Indian influences predominated (sometimes identified as "Greater India"), and the other, "Greater China," in which Chinese influences ruled. Similarities abound in these countries, separated by seas and borders. They share a similar tropical or subtropical climate, flora, and fauna. In many places, societies possess a kinship system based on strong family and community bonds and uphold East Asian Confucian values. Together, their common histories include Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim, as well as Christian, influences and a syncretic approach to multiple cultural and racial crossings.

Geographically, however, the region is characterized by a tremendous variety of indigenous peoples, languages, and cultures. Distinct tribes and political systems dominate territories that are separated physically by rivers, mountains, and seas, as well as by linguistic, religious, and social differences. This tendency to fragmentation was exacerbated by the actions of Western colonial powers. Beginning as early as the fifteenth century, Portugal and Spain, and later Holland, England, and the United States, seized much of this territory for markets and resources, and imposed dissimilar Western cultural and

language policies on adjacent lands. Buddhist Thailand remained an independent state throughout the period of Western colonization, while the British colonized Burma, now known as Myanmar. The countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, colonized by the French as "Indochina," share a francophone colonial history; emerging from years of internal conflict and wars with Western nations, including the United States, these countries are now rapidly modernizing toward a globalizing anglophone present. These states on the mainland of the continent are seldom confused with Indonesia, a nation composed of thousands of islands, colonized by Holland and now a secular state with a large Muslim majority. Nor does Malaysia, a post-British colony with a Muslim-dominant but multi-racial population, resemble the Philippines, a majority-Christian independent state that was colonized by both Spain and the United States. Brunei, now independent of British sovereignty and blessed with vast oil reserves, remains a stable society, significantly wealthier than its neighbors.

Today, Southeast Asian nations are looking for a shared identity and destiny without, however, sacrificing their political and cultural autonomy. ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, inaugurated in 1967, has helped create a regional identity based on common security and economic goals (Sandhu xiii-xvi). The ten member states of ASEAN are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Together, the population of Southeast Asia is almost five hundred million, and its total economy equals nine-tenths that of China, the most populous nation in the world (Commonwealth of Australia 9).

In crossing over to the United States of America, immigrants from Southeast Asia carry with them their multicultural histories, histories that are peculiarly resonant with contemporary social and cultural phenomena in late-twentieth-century America. But it is these very multicultural strains that have made Americans of Southeast Asian descent less visible, not only in the mainstream of American society, but also in the consciousness of the ethnic community now recognized as "Asian Americans." A number of excellent anthologies on the writing of specific national-descent groups have already appeared. For example, Nick Carbo, *Returning a Borrowed Tongue* (1995), focuses on Filipino American authors, while Tran, Truong,

and Khoi, *Watermark: Vietnamese American Poetry and Prose* (1997), includes only Vietnamese American writing. The present volume, *Tilting the Continent*, is the first anthology of Southeast Asian American writing to be published. It foregrounds and privileges the writing of Americans from the entire region of Southeast Asia. By gathering these stories, poems, and essays into a collectivity, we hope that they will illuminate each other. In bringing together the writing of American writers who are of Southeast Asian origin, we hope to make emphatic the voices of these new Americans. They speak from shared experiences, as refugees, as first-generation immigrants moving from a colonial history to a postcolonial present, with common social, political, and cultural concerns and traditions. Southeast Asian Americans have come from a region that is a "chaos of races and languages," entering an American nation that is itself a crucible of races and languages. The writing in these pages testifies to the emergence of Southeast Asian American literature written in English. Other languages—Thai, Cambodian, and so on—form a communal well whose water nourishes the imagination, and in whose depths cultural traces and memories are suspended.

♦ ♦ ♦

Southeast Asian Americans, like Euro-Americans, are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. The 1990 census counted more than 2.5 million Southeast Asian Americans, who thus formed the largest bloc of Asian Americans, outnumbering the 1.64 million Chinese Americans (Anderson and Walker 6). It may further surprise some readers to learn that Southeast Asians have been coming to the Americas since the sixteenth century. When Spain colonized Mexico, it also colonized the Philippines (named for Philip II), and the Manila galleon trade flourished between the Philippines and Mexico from 1565 to 1815. In 1763 (even before the American colonists broke away from the British), a band of Filipinos rebelled against their oppressive Spanish masters in Mexico and migrated to Barataria Bay in Louisiana, thirty miles from New Orleans. There they constructed a Southeast Asian-style fishing village on stilts (Chan 25); and some of these Filipinos fought against the British and alongside Jean Lafitte (whose stronghold was in Barataria Bay)

during the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 (Gall and Natividad 175). It is also noteworthy that in California in 1781, when the little Pueblo de Nuestra Señora Reina de los Angeles was founded by forty-six settlers, there was among them a Filipino named Antonio Miranda (Gall and Natividad 175). That little pueblo is now known as Los Angeles.

After these modest beginnings, the immigration of Southeast Asians to America rose dramatically during three historical time periods. Two of them occurred on the heels of American political and military involvement in Southeast Asia. One of these followed upon the Spanish-American War of 1898, when the American dream of westward expansion and predestined empire reached out into the Pacific to embrace the then Spanish colony of the Philippines. The other began on April 29–30, 1975, when 86,000 South Vietnamese refugees were airlifted from their homeland in the wake of the failure of American military and political strategy after the decade-long Vietnam War against the North Vietnam-led Communists (Takaki 449; Wieder 165). Yet another historical time period followed upon the relaxation of anti-Asian U.S. immigration laws, after the 1965 Immigration Act removed “national origin” as a basis for immigration quotas and allowed for family reunification (Chan 145).

The Spanish-American War involved the Philippines, which, at the outbreak of hostilities in 1898, had been a colony of Spain for four centuries. On May 1, Admiral George Dewey led the U.S. Asiatic squadron into Manila Bay and defeated the Spanish flotilla without a single casualty. Dewey also brought with him Emilio Aguinaldo, a Filipino nationalist leader of Chinese and Tagalog ancestry whom the Spanish had exiled to Hong Kong in 1897. Aguinaldo resumed his struggle for Filipino independence, allied his ground forces with Dewey’s, and defeated the Spanish. On June 12 (celebrated as Independence Day), the Filipinos declared their independence and began setting up their own government with Aguinaldo as its president. However, in the Treaty of Paris, signed in December 1898, Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States, and the Filipinos then had to fight a bloody guerrilla war against the Americans, their former allies now become their masters. After casualties estimated in the hundreds of thousands, Aguinaldo was captured by the Americans in 1901, and the Filipino resistance wound down (Chan 17; San Juan 2).

With the American annexation of the Philippines, a modest number of Filipino students (*pensionados*) were sent to the United States for education and returned to their native land to positions of influence and affluence (Melegrito 73). However, the Philippine annexation came at a time when cheap Asian labor was dwindling because of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) and the Gentlemen’s Agreement with Japan (1907). Because of their colonial status, Filipinos were “American nationals” (though not full-fledged American citizens), and thus exempt from exclusionary immigration laws. Hence Filipinos began to be extensively recruited as cheap labor for American agriculture. From 1911 to 1920, 869 Filipinos immigrated to the United States; from 1921 to 1930, this figure grew to 54,747 (Melegrito 65). Immigration to Hawaii was even more dramatic: during 1907–1929, 71,594 Filipinos were brought to work in the cane fields there, and in 1920 Filipinos already accounted for 30 percent of all plantation workers in Hawaii.

Since that initial surge, Filipino immigration has had its ups and downs. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the United States decided to close its gates to the immigration of these Asians. The 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Independence Act created the Commonwealth of the Philippines, whereby the Philippines could then be considered a “separate country” and allocated a quota of fifty immigrants into the United States per year (Melegrito 75). However, during World War II, Filipinos and Americans became comrades in arms fighting the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. Thus in the decade following World War II, 19,307 Filipinos immigrated to the United States.

Another dramatic influx of Southeast Asians into America originated from the countries of the Indochinese peninsula and came about as a result of the American political and military intervention called the Vietnam War. In fact, the Vietnam War was part of the three decades of almost endless combat that ravaged this region after World War II. From 1946 to 1954, the nationalist Vietminh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, fought for independence from their former colonial masters, the French. After the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, the 1954 Geneva Accords partitioned Vietnam into a pro-Communist North and an anti-Communist South. North Vietnam attempted to reunify the country by launching a guerrilla war in the South. Fearing that the neighboring Southeast Asian na-

tions would fall into Communist hands (like dominoes) if South Vietnam were to become Communist, the United States intervened (Ng 1612–13). At first, American military advisers were dispatched. Then, in 1965, U.S. combat troops were sent. By 1968, American troop strength had reached 540,000 (Karnow 682). But the North Vietnamese proved to be tenacious, and Americans at home protested the continuation of U.S. military involvement, so American troops began to be withdrawn in 1969.

When Americans gave up the Vietnam War and fled from Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) on April 30, 1975, hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese, Hmong, Laotians, and Cambodians who had allied themselves with Americans became endangered refugees and sought sanctuary in the United States. Many fled on foot through perilous jungles to transit refugee camps set up in Thailand whence they might be airlifted to Guam and then to the American mainland. Others stole away by boat into the South China Sea, braving pirates and the elements, in hopes of being picked up by American vessels or of making landfall in a neighboring non-Communist country. (These latter refugees came to be known as “boat people.”) By 1989, more than 1.5 million people had left Southeast Asia, many finding their way to the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1,085,612 refugees from Southeast Asia had been settled in the United States between 1975 and 1992 (Gall and Natividad 319). Of these refugees, as could be expected, the Vietnamese were the most numerous. In 1991, there were an estimated 850,000 Vietnamese in the United States (Wieder 165). The Hmong people, mostly originating from Laos, and having been trained into a surrogate fighting force by the CIA, also became refugees after almost two-thirds of their population died either from starvation or warfare (Bankston 81). About 95,000 Hmong had settled in the United States by 1990. A similar exodus from Pathet Lao-controlled Laos is recorded, and the 1990 census counts about 150,000 Laotian Americans (excluding the Hmong); an equivalent number of Cambodian Americans fled Pol Pot’s killing fields (Gall and Gall 451).

Much less traumatic has been the immigration of Southeast Asian Americans that burgeoned after the 1965 Immigration Act and its amendments (Chan 145). Ever since the Chinese Exclusion

Act of 1882, the race-based immigration laws of the United States had sought to prevent Asian immigration into America. But in 1962, President Kennedy urged Congress “to correct the mistakes of the past,” and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 did away with race as a criterion for immigration (Kingston 158). This and subsequent immigration reforms also allowed U.S. citizens and residents to bring over relatives under a family reunification statute.

The Southeast Asian American group that grew the most noticeably under these new laws was the Filipinos. For instance, 19,307 Filipinos immigrated to the U.S. between 1951 and 1960; between 1961 and 1970, this number grew to 98,376; to 360,216 between 1971 and 1980; and to 495,278 between 1981 and 1990 (Melegrito 65). In 1990, Filipino Americans totaled 1,406,770 (Anderson and Walker 7).

Thai, Indonesian, Burmese, Malaysian, and other Southeast Asians also began to migrate into the United States under the post-1960s immigration statutes. These Southeast Asian Americans have settled in the United States because of marriage (or other family-related reasons), for economic opportunity, or for educational advancement. For instance, the immigration of Thais to the United States was nearly nonexistent before 1960, but as Thailand became the rest-and-recreation resort for U.S. service personnel stationed in Vietnam, Thais intermarried with and worked for Americans, who made them aware of the attractions of life in America. By 1990, there were approximately 91,275 Americans of Thai ancestry in America (Gall and Natividad 159). Similarly, 30,085 Indonesians had settled in America by 1990 (Gall and Natividad 95). And during the decade of 1981–1991, 10,180 Burmese, 13,134 Malaysians, and 5,159 Singaporeans immigrated to the United States (Gall and Gall 516–17).

♦ ♦ ♦

Like many other immigrant literatures, Southeast Asian American writing appears heavily focused on expressions of the immigration experience. But immigrant history and experiences are different for each national and ethnic group and for individual authors. Often these experiences are narrated through autobiographical poetry,

memoirs, and creative nonfiction. These writings offer themes and possess cultural presences different from those portrayed in Euro-American literature as well as in many Asian American works published before 1970.

Some of the best examples of Filipino American writing, however, appeared just after World War II. Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, subtitled *A Personal History*, appeared first in 1943. Bulosan (1913–1956) was a prolific writer, and although he died of tuberculosis at the early age of forty-three, he left behind a rich collection of poems, stories, essays, and memoirs. Many of Bienvenido N. Santos's and N. V. M. Gonzalez's stories and novels dealt with Filipino experiences in the United States but were published first in the Philippines. Santos's collection of stories *Scent of Apples*, for example, appeared in the United States in 1979, although the title story was published in Manila in 1948. By the 1980s, Filipino-born writers such as Jessica Hagedorn and Ninotchka Rosca began to be read within an American cultural framework even though their books may be set in the Philippines. Unlike an earlier generation, Filipino American authors in this anthology—Joseph O. Legaspi, Vince Gotera, Ruth Pe Palileo, Oliver de la Paz, Noel Alunit, Eugene Gloria, Marianne Villanueva, Nick Carbo, Geronimo G. Tagatac, M. G. Sorongon, Anna Alves, and Paulino Lim Jr.—identify themselves as Filipino American, no matter their place of birth. Despite their U.S. residence, their writings often share a common imagined tropical landscape. This lush imagery and a strong valuation of family and community are elements that pervade Southeast Asian American literature.

Filipino Americans have had a longer apprenticeship in the English language, for the American colonialists brought U.S.-style education with them to the islands after the U.S. annexation of the Philippines in 1901. Later Southeast Asian immigrants generally arrived with less command of English. The narrators or characters in the contributions by Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Thai writers may often portray recently arrived refugees and immigrants who handle the English language with different accents. Their narratives and poems may be marked by qualities of oral speech and Asian-inflected stylistic registers. Such subtle shadings can be found in the work of Lan Duong, Minh-Mai Hoang, Jora Trang, Chachoua Victoria Xiong, Kay Vu-Lee, U Sam Oeur, Jade Quang Huynh, and Pornsak Pichetshote.

Writers from post-British-colonial societies—Shirley Lim, Fiona Cheong, Hilary Tham, Mahani Zubaidy, and BeeBee Tan-Beck, for example—have a different relationship to English and to English-dominant U.S. culture. Their works possess a literary reflexivity, allusiveness, and consciousness that mark them as coming from a more English-language-based, albeit British, colonial tradition. Shirley Lim, who was schooled in British Malaya had already published several books in English overseas prior to being published in the United States. For example, her first book of poems, *Crossing the Peninsula* (1980), garnered the (British) Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and her 1989 collection of poems, *Modern Secrets*, was published in Australia. Recognized for their poetic exploration of the ironies of finding a voice in a borrowed tongue, the disorientation of living with each foot in a different culture, and the travail of actualizing a female self in a male-dominated society, Lim's American-published books have also won U.S. literary prizes: the American Book Award for the coedited anthology *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Woman's Anthology* (1989), and again for her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces* (1996). Similarly, Fiona Cheong, who grew up in post-British-colonial Singapore, published a well-reviewed first novel, *The Scent of the Gods*, in 1991, and is represented in these pages by a finely crafted excerpt from a work in progress. Although not represented in this volume, mention must be made of the Burmese American refugee Wendy Law-Yone (whose father edited the leading English-language newspaper of British colonial Burma); her first novel, *The Coffin Tree* (1983), was very well received as a sensitive portrayal of mental illness in a Southeast Asian immigrant, and her second novel, *Irrawaddy Tango* (1993), is an ingenious bricolage of American pop culture artifacts. Also noteworthy but not included here is the Indonesian-born poet Li-Young Lee, who came to the United States by way of British-ruled Hong Kong. His first book of intensely felt, brooding poems, *Rose* (1986), was greeted with critical acclaim; his second, *The City in Which I Love You* (1990), won the Lamont Award of the Academy of American Poets; and his memoir, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance* (1995), is a hauntingly oneiric book.

Together, Southeast Asian American writing can be said to tilt Asian American and mainstream American literature in a new and different direction. This anthology reminds us of a Southeast Asian

past and present composed of polyethnic, multilingual, and rapidly modernizing societies. But it is also an inherently American phenomenon, a demonstration of writing as U.S. culture making, and a drawing together of some of the newest immigrant writers to the United States to offer an original collective perspective and voice.

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Family

The Immigrants' Son

Joseph O. Legaspi

In my house, nuzzled in leafy suburbia,
ants nest on the chinaware and chip away
the designs; seafood remains frostbitten
in the freezer; pubic hair thrives under the dampness
of mats and towels; my grandmother's overripe
bitter squashes burst in the backyard,
dropping to the ground, uneaten.

I give you my mother,
mourning our adulthoods
like any other deaths.
She holds nightly vigils
watching shows she doesn't care for.
Forget it. She has given up on prayers;
she doesn't read books. She worries
about her sons chasing white women,
about her daughters being chased
by white men, or worse, black men.
My mother misses the splintered Old World
house where my grandmother resided
upstairs with her unmarried children
and in the apartment rooms below lived
her married children and their children,
families sleeping side by side
on beds pushed together,
dreaming of the archipelago.

And I give you a memory
of that year when my aunt gave birth
to her firstborn, twin stillborn boys,
grayish, mummified cupids.
They were placed in a pickled egg jar
and buried in the dark, musty earth
beneath our protruding house,
creaking heavily under too much weight.

Looking out of a window to our backyard,
leaning on a weakened wall, caressing
the throbbing aliveness of a splinter
in the palm of my hand, I wonder
whether I would find the jar half-filled with
brittle baby bones
if I dug deep enough where
the next overripe bitter squash falls.

The Mother

Joseph O. Legaspi

She took away the crayons and washed
the walls until they were white again.
My mother gave me old newspapers to play with.
My hands itched. I tore
at the gray papers, first, in anger, forming
undefined shapes, later, in increasing amusement,
more intricate two-dimensional figures—
the world taken out of the walls.
For years then I drew out of the rectangles the contours
of elephants, *carabaos*, and people.
I ripped a herd of Appaloosas;
tended to the lacerated bodies of my soldiers;
shredded rain for my reenactment of Noah's Ark.
On the end of each paper-cutting day, my mother
collected the discarded pieces of newspaper
and wiped my hands and face,
tenderly, with a warm towel.
What was she washing away from my skin?
One afternoon, the smudged towel hung
from a chair and I looked at my right hand.
On my thumb, a toppled *a*, a trapped snail;
a splinter of an *i*; a fading *k*.
On my other fingers, the *b*, *d*, and *p* assembled
like musical notes; the hairs on the *o*;
the conjunction *ng*, a bridge.
I licked my thumb, pressed it on the wall,
and the *a* stayed. Twice more
until I spelled *ako*: me, in Tagalog.
I turned around and saw my mother,
her hands on her waist.
She left the room, returning with a pencil and a notebook—clean,
lined paper—and we sat down,
my mother showing me the way
as I rest my thumb on the pencil buttressed
by my finger where a corn will bloom.

Killing a Chicken

Joseph O. Legaspi

My mother killed chickens,
making the same crisp sound
of separation: a guava from its stem,
a fowl's breakage from its life.

I liked chickens enough; I respected them.
My roosters had names: *Kukoro*, *Loro*, *Talisayin*.
But my romance with them was a detachable bridge.
When served to us fried, garnished in
garlic, or in stew, my siblings and I would just
exclaim how tasty *Kukoro* was.

Weeks after my ninth birthday, while feeding
the chickens worms I gathered from a ditch,
my uncle's shadow engulfed me, his hand
rubbed my hair as he entered the coop in a gust
of feathers and dust. He brought out a plain
white hen, one unnamed because she was unappealing,
too common in her whiteness—a finch, a house lizard.
I followed my uncle to the cold cement steps.
Sitting down, he tucked the chicken between
his thighs, its head drawn back, neck exposed
for plucking. Nearby: a pot full of water
over burning firewood, a pear-shaped bowl.
My uncle smiled, his hand beckoned me to him.
He handed me a razor, the kind for shaving. I took it.
He presented me with the tender, plucked neck.
My hand like steel. I rocked back and forth.
The razor sliced smoothly,
with sincere grace.

The hen quivered, but it was not her life
I was thinking of, it was my mother's:
the life she had given up for her children,
the many deaths she performed, the hearts
and gizzards she had eaten. The liver. It is harder
for a mother, a giver of life, one
who carries an egg-filled nest in her body,
to take a life as I had done with ease,
the fire crackling behind me, the razor
as warm in my hand as the blood
trickling into the bowl.

Christmas '95

Isabelle Thuy Pelaud

Mother. Water pouring from your faucet, too strong, too loud, hard splashes clashing with a porcelain-like sink. Prickly daughter of yours, watching you from a spinning chair across the room. I look through the rectangle made by the counter and the pillar on the right, a large and perfect frame, an image I can only watch, inaccessible from where I stand. For I was asked to sit by my father, his friend, and my husband, to translate. To translate the stories of two Frenchmen reminiscing of a life of another time, a space where they were the center, served, free riders on their mother country, with oh, so proper manners! To translate a time in which they were kings in Vietnam, now, a maneuvering to be continued. There are such things as free rides, you know. Colonial leftovers are thus preserved, passed on, rehearsed into normality.

I scrutinize the details of my fork turning in between my fingers and take refuge behind my education, fast provider of tools to dissect, chop, and unveil, nearly comfortable. But I also see from the corner of my eye that my father, once a young man growing up in a poor family, is a man of principles. He is like his father, who was a man of even stronger principles, a man of the Resistance, untainted, who could shut, with a slam of grandeur, the doors of opportunities his son had opened for himself. "My son shall never be a bourgeois," my grandfather yelled. At least this is how the story goes. To be poor in a French village is boring, stifling, agonizing, petrifying all right. I *know* that. So my father left, left for the taste of adventure, for the savor of a better life in a country far away with the scent of exoticism, a suitcase filled with exuberant fantasies held firmly between his legs. But wouldn't I make similar choices if I had been in his place? And what if my father one day had not made a bet with a colleague that a Frenchman could sweep away the soul and body of a "real" traditional Vietnamese woman? Maybe I, too, would have been born a bit later with a Vietnamese father "gone with the war," but on solid ground. Maybe then I would have fought in a guerrilla platoon.

Mother, you tell me that one day you suddenly changed your major from mathematics to philosophy because of a teacher's words

describing the blue transparency of the Mediterranean, the cold and noble marble of Greek colonnades, the scent of lavender sensually licking the hills of the south of France. "I liked dreaming of other worlds," you say. You were the quietest and most invisible one among your seven sisters. You were the good girl that no one worried about. Left alone, you waited for your father, who only came home, it seems, to destroy your mother's business and conceive another child. But your father had a charming smile, a mysterious smile that only those living on the other side of the walls of the courtyard in which you were preciously guarded could make. Your father worked for years in a French bank but, since he had been laid off, could not find a place in a society changing at a pace beyond his comprehension. You thought you could understand him. In spite of the pains he caused your mother, you kept looking for his smile in other men, carrier of nonsaturated air and false promises. And this is how, one day, you simply disappeared. No one predicted what was immediately called your "betrayal" and later on your "love," for your French teacher, whose main asset was Frenchness and a ravishing smile.

As a teenager, I ran out of air to breathe under the relentless violence of French gazes. And if only it was for their gazes alone. Their acts, their words, and the odor of lavender obstructed my pores, causing nausea and dreams of escape. So I ran away to "Little Saigon," California, where my aunt had arrived ten years before because of a war I had seen in passing through a black-and-white TV screen. In her home, I felt accepted for the first time and held on to her blouse as if it were a life preserver sent through space. Calling me an idealist, she threw away my French history book and my used copy of *Das Kapital*, taking time in between two jobs to warn me against sweet words of communism and the lies she saw inscribed inside their songs.

Eleven years later it took only two hours to drive from her house to my parents' house, where I am today, translating my father's voice, watching in between intervals my mother clattering dishes, her eyes fixed to the bottom of a porcelain-like sink. To my surprise, she had succeeded in convincing my father to move to California. Thirty years older than her and now an old man, he cannot take the risk of living alone. My mother and her sisters are cooking. My aunts are passing food across the counter to their husbands, three

Vietnamese American men eating quietly. From my seat, I see three backs curved, bending over three hot bowls of soup. "Please, come sit with us," I say, trying unconvincingly to cross over a gap that should belong to another time. "It's okay, it's okay," one of my uncles responds, brushing his hand in the air, and then distracting himself by looking at his kids, who are watching, bored out of their minds, a video of religious Master Ching Hai, chanting what sounds like love songs. My uncle, too, is waiting, waiting to leave my mother's world and return to his home in Orange County. There, he will sit at the center table with his male friends, loud, waiting to be served by his wife. "It's okay, it's okay." What I hear is that it is okay to go on and to translate the good old colonial tales, maintain the old order, and close my lips. Peace is priceless, after all. And, perhaps, habits coalesced with civilities and stories of the past are just too effective and powerful to breach.

This year, my family is spending Christmas for the first time in Rainbow, California, like in an awkward crystal sea urchin sparkling under an indifferent sun. I am spinning inside its shell, whether I want to or not. The only room available belongs to the realm of day-dreams. Lost in my absence, I am yet intermittently awakened by a voice, whispering in my ears across melding clouds piled on top of each other that my ability to plunge eyes-wide-open amidst their boundless forms is not accidental, but due to the privilege and curse of living "in between." *Stillness of the immutable, the unbearable, the so-called natural order of things, centuries of training, infliction of pain, tears, and legacies. Now soft marshes to stand on. In silence, we see, react, unact, and go on with our respective destinies, each of us holding firmly on to our masks. Each carrying more than one. Lips doing the talking, ears doing the listening. Eyes doing.* Tensions I cannot bear but cannot shake. I look at the kids on my right. They are watching an "American Buddha," a daring woman wearing a ten-thousand-dollar dress preaching about spiritual liberation. They, too, are waiting for the time to go home and watch MTV. Behind them, the voices of two old Frenchmen holding on to a past regurgitated to oblivion are mere hubbub.

Everyone in the room is waiting, except for my mother and my aunts, who live in the tempo of the now, hurrying through the chores necessary to maintain the equilibrium of the moment. They are talk-

ing in a language I cannot translate, laughing, and passing Chinese microwave Christmas goodies to their people. The faucet stops running. My mother walks to her room. There she will wrap old tennis trophies with "Tom," "Bill," and "John" engraved on golden plates, garage sale finds and gifts to all the men in her life, young and old, patiently waiting to be served but with the certainty that nothing will be ready on time.