

Copyrighted Material

1975: Year of the Cat

Today is Tết,
the first day
of the lunar calendar.

Every Tết
we eat sugary lotus seeds
and glutinous rice cakes.
We wear all new clothes,
even underneath.

Mother warns
how we act today
foretells the whole year.

Everyone must smile
no matter how we feel.

No one can sweep,
for why sweep away hope?
No one can splash water,
for why splash away joy?

Today
we all gain one year in age,
no matter the date we were born.
Tết, our New Year's,
doubles as everyone's birthday.

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Now I am ten, learning
to embroider circular stitches,
to calculate fractions into percentages,
to nurse my papaya tree to bear many fruits.

But last night I pouted
when Mother insisted
one of my brothers
must rise first
this morning
to bless our house
because only male feet
can bring luck.

An old, angry knot
expanded in my throat.

I decided
to wake before dawn
and tap my big toe
to the tile floor
first.

Not even Mother,
sleeping beside me, knew.

February 11
Tết

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Inside Out

Every new year Mother visits
the I Ching Teller of Fate.
This year he predicts
our lives will twist inside out.

Maybe soldiers will no longer
patrol our neighborhood,
maybe I can jump rope
after dark,
maybe the whistles
that tell Mother
to push us under the bed
will stop screeching.

But I heard
on the playground
this year's *bánh chưng*,
eaten only during Tết,
will be smeared in blood.

The war is coming
closer to home.

February 12

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Kim Hà

My name is Hà.

Brother Quang remembers
I was as red and fat
as a baby hippopotamus
when he first saw me,
inspiring the name
Hà Mã,
River Horse.

Brother Vū screams, *Hà Ya*,
and makes me jump
every time
he breaks wood or bricks
in imitation of Bruce Lee.

Brother Khôi calls me
Mother's Tail
because I'm always
three steps from her.

I can't make my brothers
go live elsewhere,
but I can
hide their sandals.

We each have but one pair,
much needed

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during this dry season
when the earth stings.

Mother tells me
to ignore my brothers.
We named you Kim Hà,
after the Golden (Kim) River (Hà),
where Father and I
once strolled in the evenings.

My parents had no idea
what three older brothers
can do
to the simple name
Hà.

Mother tells me,
They tease you
because they adore you.

She's wrong,
but I still love
being near her, even more than I love
my papaya tree.
I will offer her
its first fruit.

Copyrighted Material *Every day*

Papaya Tree

It grew from a seed
I flicked into
the back garden.

A seed like
a fish eye,
slippery
shiny
black.

The tree has grown
twice as tall
as I stand
on tippy toes.

Brother Khôi spotted
the first white blossom.
Four years older,
he can see higher.

Brother Vĩ later found
a baby papaya
the size of a fist
clinging to the trunk.
At eighteen,
he can see that much higher.

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Brother Quang is oldest,
twenty-one and studying engineering.
Who knows what he will notice
before me?

I vow
to rise first every morning
to stare at the dew
on the green fruit
shaped like a lightbulb.

I will be the first
to witness its ripening.

Mid-February

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TiTi Waves Good-bye

My best friend TiTi
is crying hard,
snotting the hem
of her pink fluffy blouse.

Her two brothers
also are sniffing
inside their car
packed to the roof
with suitcases.

TiTi shoves into my hand
a tin of flower seeds
we gathered last fall.
We hoped to plant them
together.

She waves from the back window
of their rabbit-shaped car.
Her tears mix with long strands of hair,
long hair I wish I had.

I would still be standing there
crying and waving to nothing
if Brother Khôi hadn't come
to take my hand.

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*They're heading to Vũng Tàu,
he says,
where the rich go
to flee Vietnam
on cruise ships.*

I'm glad we've become poor
so we can stay.

Early March

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Missing in Action

Father left home
on a navy mission
on this day
nine years ago
when I was almost one.

He was captured
on Route 1
an hour south of the city
by moped.

That's all we know.

This day
Mother prepares an altar
to chant for his return,
offering fruit,
incense,
tuberoses,
and glutinous rice.

She displays his portrait
taken during Tết
the year he disappeared.
How peaceful he looks,
smiling,
peacock tails

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at the corners
of his eyes.

Each of us bows
and wishes
and hopes
and prays.

Everything on the altar
remains for the day
except the portrait.
Mother locks it away
as soon as her chant ends.

She cannot bear
to look into Father's
forever-young
eyes.

March 10

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Mother's Days

On weekdays
Mother's a secretary
in a navy office,
trusted to count out
salaries in cash
at the end of each month.

At night
she stays up late
designing and cutting
baby clothes
to give to seamstresses.

A few years ago
she made enough money
to consider
buying a car.

On weekends
she takes me to market stalls,
dropping off the clothes
and trying to collect
on last week's goods.

Hardly anyone buys anymore,
she says.
People can barely afford food.

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Still,
she continues to try.

March 15

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Eggs

Brother Khôi
is mad at Mother
for taking his hen's
eggs.

The hen gives
one egg
every day and a half.

We take turns
eating them.

Brother Khôi
refuses to eat his,
putting each under a lamp
in hopes of
a chick.

I should side with
my most tolerable brother,
but I love a soft yolk
to dip bread.

Mother says
if the price of eggs
were not the price of rice,
and the price of rice
were not the price of gasoline,

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and the price of gasoline
were not the price of gold,
then of course
Brother Khôi
could continue hatching eggs.

She's sorry.

March 17

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Current News

Every Friday
in Miss Xinh's class
we talk about
current news.

But when we keep talking about
how close the Communists
have gotten to Saigon,
how much prices have gone up
since American soldiers left,
how many distant bombs
were heard the previous night,
Miss Xinh finally says no more.

From now on
Fridays
will be for
happy news.

No one has anything
to say.

March 21

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