

The Fish Gill

Vignette of a Girlhood in Vietnam

BY ANH HUA

It is noon. The sun blares a dry unbearable heat. Everyone takes naps between twelve and two. Grandma's house in Bac-Lieu is cooler than the one Lila is used to in the capital city of Saigon; there are a lot more dark hallways, dark corners, the wine-coloured ceramic tiles on the floor are cool to the touch. A breeze carries with it the jasmine scent from the front garden, through the sky-blue wooden bars separating the living room from the verandah. At five each morning, Grandma would pick the white jasmine flowers and place them on a plate in front of the statue of Guan Yin, with incense and a glass of fresh water. The scent of jasmine is much nicer in the morning, strong yet delicate. Sometimes Lila would help Grandma with the flower picking.

Now, at noon, the jasmine scent is dense, muggy. Lila lies on her side on Grandpa's bed with her sisters. At night, after the lanterns have been blown out, Grandpa would crawl into the mosquito net and rest his tired large gentle body on this hard wooden bed. After a long day of calculating numbers (*Ab-ma* says he is an accountant), Grandpa would prop his head on his wooden pillow, a small log, which is concave in the center to hold the shape of his neck. This uncomfortable pillow seems foreign to Lila. It makes Grandpa into a foreigner, an old man who grew up in China, a nation even Lila can not imagine, a different lifetime, Grandpa's lifetime.

There is a kind of restlessness about Lila, now that everyone is asleep. In the company of others, Lila seems to blend with the environment, the contour of her body fuses with the boundaries of negative space. No one seems to notice her, a child-ghost so quiet, almost so obedient that her behavior should worry her mother. To the adults, she has lost her tongue and voice, but no one seems to notice Lila travels to many places and adventures in her quiet little world.

Lila slides her thin tanned body off the bed, leaving a streak of sweat, making that patch of wood even darker. The air is so dry, the sweat patch evaporates in almost an instant. Lila walks through the dark hall to the back of the house. On the left side of the hallway is the bedroom, where Grandma and Fifth Aunt are taking their naps. Lila can hear Grandma's snoring through the mosquito net, like soft whispers in a hollowed pipe, so different from Grandpa's snore, which sounds like steel pipes banging onto steel pipes, steadily. The hallway opens onto a large kitchen, also dark and cool, with ceramic floor like the rest

of the house. On the left of the kitchen is the haunting washroom, so dark in there, so damp, so many voices speak in day and night, ceaselessly. Past the kitchen, through the back door, Lila at last comes to the washing space, where children take baths and adults wash their faces in the morning. Looking over the clay tub of water, Lila sees a reflection of her face wavering and the sun over her head. She splashes the cool water over her face, and tastes a few drops at the corners of her mouth. Rain water, even after three days, is still sweet, like mountain tea, she thought.

Refreshed, she glides out to the front garden. The tiny fish gill is still on the clothesline. Fifth Aunt had killed and cleaned a fish this morning to make fish stew. Lila has seen *Ab-ma* do it many times. Smack the wriggling fish on the head with the butcher knife. Scale the fish one side then the other. Slice the fish open at its stomach, pull out and discard the insides, except the fish eggs; the insides are not edible, too bitter, *Ab-ma* explained. Lila has always hated being in the kitchen when the women kill the live fish or chicken for their meals. There is something very brutal about the domestic space. Lila would hold her nose with a "ugh" of disgust. If she witnesses the killing, her appetite is lost that evening. But that morning, Lila watched Fifth Aunt attentively while she skillfully prepared a fish. Fifth Aunt gently cleaned the fish gill and then laid it in Lila's hand. Like a curious naturalist, Lila examined it carefully. The gill is a smooth translucent sack, with patterns of red veins branching out like red asters, star-burst, thread-like fireworks caught in between epithelium layers. Fifth Aunt told her to pin the gill onto the clothesline.

"Why?"

"No reason. It's pretty."

Now the dried fish gill suspends on the line in the still afternoon air.

Summer months are marked with ennui for Lila. The days seem to stretch; sometimes she waits deliberately for the night to fall, when the sun descends with an orange glow, and the evening breeze begins its daily walks through

The gill is a translucent sack, with patterns of red veins branching out like red asters, star-burst, thread-like fireworks caught in between epithelium layers.



Diana Dean, "Waterfall III," 54" x 48", Oil on Canvas, 1993.

the village pebbled streets. At the moment, time seems to stand inert. Out of desperate boredom, Lila crawls back onto bed, hoping sleep will fold and quicken her time.

Lila thought she dreamt of LB crying, only to find LB's tiny hand tap tap on Lila's belly.

"What is it?"

LB's face is wet with tears. She must have cried softly for awhile now.

"What?" Lila is slightly annoyed.

"It's wet." LB, short for Little Basket, points to the puddle of pee. There is a look of guilt on her moon face. Lila takes LB to the washing space; there she orders her three-year-old sister to peel off her damp clothes. Lila rinses her tiny bum; LB shivers from the cold water. Suddenly Lila recalls *Ab-ma's* teaching voice telling her not to bathe babies in cold rain water or they'll catch a cold or even fever. Lila quickly dries LB's body with a towel, and dresses her in a new jumpsuit — the red and white stripe one.

On the verandah, Lila climbs into a hammock leisurely. The verandah is a junk space really, boxes are piled in one corner, a home of dust gathered cobwebs. But here, Lila can escape her responsibility of LB and her other two sisters. Although only eight, Lila is already taking care of her siblings, as it is expected of the eldest female child in Chinese culture. But Lila secretly resents the role; she would rather sit in this hammock and daydream, of the fish gill dangling on the clothesline, of the tiger relief carving on the temple wall across the street. That tiger

haunts her, taunts her, lures her into other worlds, worlds where monks once carved animals onto walls for days without eating, and when they did eat, they only ate tofu, black mushrooms, and bean sprouts with steamed rice donated by the local villagers. Monks who lived in subtle silence behind concrete walls, who spoke in hums and chants, who wrote only in ink-and-brush cryptic signs and symbols which resembled animals—animalwords with elegant tails trailing off. Monks are secretive, they are Lila's own secret.

LB wriggles her tiny body to the verandah, contentedly curls inside the same hammock where Lila is resting. Soon enough LB falls asleep once again. Lila gently gets up, careful not to wake her. She decides to steal a mango from Grandma's kitchen. Peeling the mango, sucking its yellow skin, the juice stains the corners of her mouth.

* * * * *

Grandpa, Grandma, Fifth Aunt and M live in this house in Bac-Lieu, the town where Lila was born and where *Ab-ma* and *Ab-pa* grew up. After *Ab-ma* and *Ab-pa* married, they moved to Saigon. Every summer, *Ab-ma* takes Lila, H and LB to Bac-Lieu for a visit, mostly to see M, the four-year-old sister who was raised by Grandma. Bac-Lieu is eight hours from Saigon; you have to take a bus and two ferries to get there. The bus is always congested with chattering travelers, crying babies, noisy chickens, and luggage piled high on the bus roof top. It is a jerky ride, as the bus jostles over pebbles and pot holes. But the air is breezy. Most women have to wrap their heads with a scarf to keep their hair out of their faces. Lila loves the adventurous ride, as she observes the coconut and mango trees, rice paddies and small thatched-roof houses go by. When they pass through a small village or town, the farm women and men would carry their baskets of refreshments to sell to the exhausted travelers: chilled and cut pineapple, mango and guava, rice pudding, sticky rice with mung beans cooked in coconut milk, and iced fruity drinks served in a plastic bag with a straw in the middle.

Lila is daydreaming about the bus ride to Bac-Lieu. Memory is a fox trickster, a shape-shifter, changing from one moment to the next. In one moment, Lila remembers the nice cool fruity drinks during the sultry bus ride. In another moment, she recalls a strange man with leery dark hollow eyes. *Ab-ma* and her sisters were sleeping then. Lila was watching a Vietnamese woman breast-feeding her baby. Her breast was large and white, it seemed to hang with a languid heaviness, as if tired from carrying the excess milk. The baby stopped crying once the brown nipple was in his mouth, his forehead was damp from the moist heat and his cheek damp from tears. As Lila stole glances at the breast feeding with a familiar curiosity, the strange man across from her nudged her at the elbow. He whispered something in Vietnamese and gestured her to sit on his lap. Lila was afraid of him, her muscles tensed. She willed herself not to move, and wished *Ab-ma* would wake up soon. She pressed her head against *Ab-ma's* warm

bare arm, pretended to fall asleep, and wished the man would leave her alone. Suddenly she felt a large sweaty palm over her bony knee.

"*Ah-ma*."

Lila gently shook *Ah-ma's* forearm.

"What? What is wrong with you? Try to get some sleep. We're almost there."

Ah-ma was slightly irritated; Lila had woken her up from a sweet dream.

For the rest of the bus ride, Lila was apprehensive. She couldn't enjoy the breeze or the view. She kept her hand over her bony knee, as if to protect it from further violation. Her knee was still wet from the contact. She tried to wipe it clean with the hem of her dress, and avoided looking in the direction where the strange man was sitting. Soon she was glad to see the river in the distance, the site of the first ferry ride. The ferry ride was quick and short. They passed by a few canoes carrying recycled goods to sell: duck feathers, old tires, broken glasses, and colourful plastic containers. Then the bus jolted along for another couple of hours before they reached the stop for the second ferry. There they had to wait for another two hours for the ferry to arrive. It was too sweltering to remain on the bus, so *Ah-ma* took her children to her favorite restaurant nearby, where they served the best grilled pork chops on steamed rice drizzled with a spicy sweet fish sauce.

On the second ferry, Lila was standing by the railing, surveying the water's concentric circles. In the distance, she could see some Vietnamese children bathing in the water; a few women were scrubbing and cleaning their daily laundry. Suddenly a group of bare-footed homeless children, their clothes torn and soiled, swarmed around *Ah-ma* and other travellers, begging for change. *Ah-ma* gave them a couple of small bills. They were momentarily content, and resumed their playing. Next to Lila sat a scrawny boy with an amputated left leg; his right leg was bone-thin, his left leg ended at his knee. Lila wondered how the boy lost half of his leg. She has heard of children losing their limbs from the war; U.S. soldiers randomly dropped their air bombs onto villagers in northern Vietnam. It seemed there were more homeless children since the war started. One of his friends gave the boy with the lost limb a small bill; he chuckled and frolicked with his playmates. Lila found it strange to see homeless children so happy. Suddenly, she felt a slight discomfort in her homemade burgundy dress, with its pink embroidered heart shape in the front.

Once on land, everyone had to hop back onto the bus. Lila was anxious for their long journey to end, her buttocks were sore from sitting so still in one place. She was still conscious of the strange man with the leering eyes gazing at her. For the rest of the ride, Lila drifted in and out of sleep. Before she knew it, they arrived in Bac-Lieu. Once again, Lila was excited about their trip. She began to recall her favourite sights. Yes, there was the market, where

one could buy delicious vendor foods, and women bargained for the best price they could get on meat, vegetables, and fruits. There was the noodle soup cafe, where Grandpa would take Lila to have breakfast before he headed for work. He would order his single meatball steamed in tomato sauce with his black coffee, Lila would have a deep-fried flat bread and ice coffee with condensed milk. Grandpa never spoke a single word, he would only read his morning paper in a contented silence. There was a familiar comfort in Grandpa's reticence that made Lila enjoy those morning treats.

* * * *

"Lila! Lila! I am thirsty and I have to pee!"

LB is tugging at her arm. When did she wake up? Lila didn't even notice.

"Lila! Lila! I have to pee and I am thirsty!"

Lila pours a cup of green tea for her sister. Grandma always keeps a tall pot of tea on the livingroom table, kept warm by a teapot pouch she had made. LB gulps the tea as if she just came back from a trek in the Sahara, then the little devil skips to the back of the house for her red potty.

The house begins to stir with the noises of mosquito nets being rolled up, feet in flip-flop slippers on the ceramic tiles, of faces being washed in the back of the house. Fifth Aunt is starting the cooking fire, slicing chopstick-sized firewood with a small ax, building a teepee of sticks and charcoal. She throws in wood chips and hay to help the fire get going. The kitchen is filled with a dense black smoke as Lila enters. Lila quietly helps Fifth Aunt by fanning the fire to keep it going. The smell of rice and fish stew begins to fill the house. Lila's stomach rumbles with anticipation for the fish stew—fish meat cut in rings and



Diana Dean, "Angel of Ecstasy," 56" x 55.5", Oil on Canvas, 1992.

stewed in a mixture of soya sauce, fish sauce, sugar, and black pepper until the juice thickens to a dark goopy sauce. When the fish and rice are done, Fifth Aunt scoops rice into a silver round container, fish stew in another, and bitter-melon soup with shrimp in a third. She stacks these containers in a tower, and instructs Lila to bring it to *Ab-ma* at the market.

Grandma and Fifth Aunt run a textile stand at the market, under a large tent with other small textile businesses. Each business stand is about one by four metres wide, a box really, where colourful fabrics of all sorts are displayed in the daytime and stored inside the box at night. Ordinarily Grandma and Fifth Aunt do the selling at the market. Today *Ab-ma* offered to stay at the market so Grandma can rest. Grandma is not well again, she complains of backaches and headaches. The grandchildren have to take turns giving her back massages with eucalyptus rubbing oil.

Grandma intimidates Lila, she is relieved for a chance to leave the house, get out of Grandma's way. It seems everything she does is not right for Grandma.

"Your child can't do a thing right," Lila overheard Grandma complained to *Ab-ma* one day. "She is too quiet. You should teach her to be tough, or she'll be eaten alive."

"Lila has always been quiet. That's the way she is." *Ab-ma* replied, but with a new worried wrinkle on her forehead.

Ab-ma sat Lila down another day and said, "You know, if anyone ever does you any wrong, you should speak up, defend yourself. Or at least tell *Ab-ma* about it, okay?"

Lila nodded a yes.

"Has anyone ever done anything wrong to you?"

Lila shook her head with a hesitant no.

* * * *

Lunch is late today, *Ab-ma* must be hungry. The sun is still hot, few people are on the streets, everyone rests under umbrellas or in shady patches. Already, Lila's back arms feel sticky from the dust, heat, and sweat. It's hard to stay clean in Southern Vietnam. Everyday, our skins have to be scrubbed clean from the dust, floors have to be mopped, and still the black dust keeps coming, clinging onto new surfaces. As Lila steps out the door balancing the heavy lunch for *Ab-ma*, she suddenly remembers the fish gill on the clothes line. There it is, still suspended in the dry afternoon air. Why is the lung of a fish called a gill? Why don't we have gills? Gills with veins like paint brush ends tracing the contours of flower shapes. Lila imagines her lung-gills hanging on the clothes line. Only they are not dried and deflated like the fish's; they hold the hot afternoon air with a slight scent of jasmine.

Special thanks to the editors of the Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme for their great support, to my mother My Tran for her great storytelling, and to my sisters.

Anh Hua is a doctoral candidate in the Graduate Programme of Women's Studies at York University, Toronto. In addition to her academic research on travel, displacement, and the politics of storytelling for refugee and immigrant women, she also writes fiction.

Inanna Publications and Education Inc.

is proud to announce the publication of

Our Words, Our Revolutions: Di/Verse Voices of Black Women, Women of Colour, and First Nations Women in Canada

Ed. G. Sophie Harding

"A variety of genres are represented here – from life-writing to poetry to short autofiction. Students will buy, read, and enjoy this compelling collection, which presents the voices of women who have not been visible in more ways than one. There is a repeated theme in these works: 'see me for who I am' – a theme that begs readers to see better – to look and see."

—Marlene Kadar, Professor, Women's Studies and Humanities,
Faculty of Arts, York University, Toronto, Ontario

Order your copy today!

\$17.95 + \$1.25 GST = \$19.20. Please add \$2.50 for postage and handling in Canada; \$2.75 for the U.S.; \$9.00 overseas.

Please send cheque or money order to Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 212 Founders College,
York University, 4700 Keele Street, North York, ON, M3J 1P3.

Tel: (416) 736-5356. Fax: (416) 736-5765. Email: cwscf@yorku.ca <http://www.yorku.ca/cwscf>

