

Perhaps I Must Leave You: Pieces of a Memoir

by Alison Nguyen '08

*A tiny bird with red feathers
A tiny bird with black beak
Drinks up the lotus pond day by day
Perhaps I must leave you.*

-Vietnamese folk poem

Perhaps I must leave you. I lay it out for Ted, sliding my hands across the diner placemat to signify places. He listens with National Geographic interest, nodding with those crazy jammed-up blue eyes. Throughout my life, diner booths have served as kinds of confession booths, meeting places. They're where stories get told, diners dotting in and out of stories. The Morristown Diner was the culmination of any wayward night in high school, most crowded, respectably, at 2 AM, all steaming plates of hot fries and cigarette smoke. This is where my friends and I would meet in our plaid uniforms every Friday morning to gulp down pots of coffee and Belgium waffles before school, this is the parking-lot where one of our friends lost his virginity, this is the booth where Ted told me he was gay as he wiped ketchup off his face and I gave him a sticky high-five across the table.

I begin the story, using the Ron's Tattoo ad as the delta region of Vietnam, Hue, explaining how part of my grandma's family were farmers there. I slide my hand up the slope in the model's face. After the Japanese came they moved to Hanoi where they became pretty successful merchants, my grandma had a knack for selling things, trading things, it was there my grandma met my grandpa and you know. My fingers whisk down the placemat, Weichert Real Estate yellow. In 1954, things started to get bad Communist-wise. *Perhaps I must leave you.* They fled to Saigon on foot, by boats, however the hell they could get south, my dad was born a year later. You know, it's funny how the Vietnamese believe that you're a year old at birth. When my dad met my mom at a bar in Baltimore, he took advantage of this when he realized my mom was a couple years older. A bunch of years passed, they moved to Indonesia (my hand travels farther south on the placemat) as part of my grandfather's foreign service job. Civil war happened, you know, Suharno. They were given 24 hours notice to take what they could carry, leave their home. *Perhaps I must leave you.* It's back to Saigon, '64. Hands return to the same Weichert Real Estate yellow. Things weren't so good, too many deaths, at night it was a free-for-all at the river right by their house, my dad used to go down to the square every morning and watch people be executed. *Perhaps I must leave you.* My fingers make a dramatic swoop to the left of the placemat. They immigrated to the United States that year. Dad said he cried the entire plane ride there, they left half the family back in Saigon. *Perhaps I must leave you.*

I found it shocking when one of my friends pointed out that my dad has an accent. Even though he's spoken English fluently for over thirty years, his tenses blur together when he's tipsy or tired after coming home off the train from work. In Vietnamese, they don't have tenses, only intonations. He calls New Jersey home, he calls 30 Bradwahl Drive home, but part of his mind's back in Vietnam. Mental space is another home in itself. If that's the case, then I have all too many homes that I move in between and around at night, never wanting to really set place in one and unpack my things and hang up my coat and rest my hat on the ledge and the leaves fall. The darkness is sweet and unstable and the roads and the turns and the highways and the geography of my house, for me, are like a certain Braille. *Perhaps I must leave you.*

1994. Sitting around the Christmas tree, complete with lights that flicker schizophrenically and Nat King Cole and upstairs the toilet flushes again and again and Mom shuffles around and Em presses the dog ornament's torso and music plays over and over. January hits and the Volvo rolls up and down the driveway during the day. Neighborhood turns to grey; nativity sets are covered in scabs of New Jersey snow. The garage door opening trumpets the sound of my parents arrival, heralds their in and out. That was the year I began to wear headbands to keep back my long, black hair and failed my first math test in the adding and subtracting of time. That was the year, up in my third floor room, that I made it my business to become an expert in each of my family member's specific sounds. I could tell who was roaming around the house at night, flipping on and off the television set, or feeding the aquarium fish, just by the sound of a certain motion, the way someone slammed a lid. There was so much motion. March, I place my lips to the wind and my sneakers still crunch on snow and I watch garbage cans turn over in a storm and roll down the long, grainy avenue. That was the year neighbors, like Mrs. Lee and her six gangly kids, came bearing home-cooked meals in paper Kings shopping bags. Toilet flushed a lot from my parents' room upstairs; the door was closed a lot, medium-dark in the space between the carpet and the door.

Resting on the couch, Mom flips through the channels, alternating between Oprah and a special on PBS. She's wearing soft cotton. I lean my head against her, picturing her cancer spreading across her breasts like a slow blossom. *Perhaps I must leave you.*

Perhaps I must leave you. Sixth period and Anne Frank's eyes are covered with masking tape. The book sits by the side of Sister Josephine's desk, next to the Ken doll that she uses as a prop to prod us along in Spanish conversation. She picks him up, her hand, genderless, as I always thought, clutches his legs and cock-less pelvis. She looks at the class, over-enunciates. Pretend Raúl is a bad boyfriend, a *novio malo*. Put Raúl in the trunk. *Raúl está en el baúl*. Let's say it

together, clase, *Raúl- está-en- el- baúl. Raúl-está- en- el- baúl. Raúl- está- en- el- baúl.* The girl next to me is really getting into it, she hits the second syllable of "baúl" louder than everyone else, eyes eager, chin forward. Words tweak the side of my mouth. I feel my arm raise and ask Sister Josephine why Anne Frank's eyes are covered with masking tape,

Sister?

Muchachas, I think it's because I find Anne Frank's eyes so deep and terrifying. I kept the book by my bedside at night, but, see, couldn't look at her eyes.

I watch her, trying to picture her doing this in her narrow, blue convent bedroom, slowly creasing the tape before ripping it, but she avoids my stare. I watch her put masking tape over Central America, dragging the large wads of tape over solid plains, *dos* revolutions in *dos días*, and over our legs tucked beneath plaid skirts, Don't ever wear shorts to Church, *muchachas*, your beautiful, slender legs will tempt the old men sitting in the pew behind you.

She doesn't put masking tape over the old men's lusty gaze.

I watch her with wads of masking tape, covering the spray-painted, 80's-gone-Nietzschean graffiti "GOD IS DEAD" on the walls of the tunnel below the bridge to 287. I watch her skillfully masking tape over rooms of second-hand smoke and the Mary statue that stands outside our school. I press my back against a wall and watch her as she ravages through crowds, feverish, sweat stains forming around her armpits, she's taping over thousands of hints of cleavage that ease out from women's shirts and dresses, as they protest, try to shoo her away with their purses. And *muchachas* wonder why they get raped! *Perhaps I must leave you.*

That September had an oppressive heat. Tuesday, they fled the city, the jammed-up bridge, leaving behind them two downtown towers blazing in orange flames. *Perhaps I must leave you.* I watched on the news, wishing that the explosion wasn't real, that it was just a large orange blossom looming mid-sky. It brought us together as a country, it united us as a people, we're stronger, the television said. All things happen for a reason, things are meant to happen, a nun said over the loud speaker and I think that was the day I broke a door in a bathroom, I screamed an unstylized scream, watched it ring raw, bare, fluent, darting against black trees, white field, still air. *Perhaps I must leave you. Perhaps I must leave you.*

As a policy, I never spend the night. Mornings, no matter what, I like to wake up alone, myself, between my sheets. Moments before rising I'm curled up in a tiny shell, knees against chest, things have symmetry. Mornings are for slipping on my bathrobe, burning incense, sifting through newspapers. Mornings are for jazz. Mornings are for teabags in a heap at the bottom of my garbage. Ella Fitzgerald chuckle-sings as I brush my teeth, ooh, I wish I was her, wish I could growl like her. People drift about outside the window like doves.

Saturday's different, to my surprise, his arm lies across me in my half-sleep. Shadows of morning traffic scatter across my breast. The unfamiliar sounds and lights of his room remind me of being home in the midmorning on sick days as a kid; familiar displacement. Before I close the door, I look back at him, beautiful, covered in white sheets and the early sun zooping in behind the blinds and it's pouring in and I gather my things and I know I've got to go. *Perhaps I must leave you.*

The ceiling fan moves the still air and in the summertime I cannot sit still. I fling myself to little coastal gatherings of friends, hot nights, thighs sticking to car seats on the Parkway, an evening drunk on red wine in Atlantic City, dice flung across the room. On a Wednesday at work, I realize that I cannot be there anymore, nothing in the world can make me finish the week, punch the clock, I'll smash the goddamn clock. At midnight that night Galina and I book tickets for a 7 A.M. bus to Montreal. Jazz fest, jazz fest, I convince her over the phone, my fellow madman, and I can hear her crazy sister speaking to her in rapid Russian in her echoey kitchen. On the bus up I call friends I haven't seen in a year, an old boyfriend I haven't seen in two-he meets me and Galina at the bus station with a huge hug and a cigarette and carries our bags all the way up Sherbrook Street, narrating little tales of corners and cafes and his life, shouting to friends in Quebecew that he catches across the street. That night the fireworks boom and the afrophunk musicians up on stage smile wild like bandits and all of St. Cat's Ave. is closed off. At the end of the set we're still dancing, still sweating, still howling like idiots, Chris dares me to jump into the fountain in Mont Royal and Good God don't dare me to do it because you know I will and it's wet and it's madness and the sun is literally erupting across the city. *Perhaps I must leave you.*

I want to see your house, I tell Mom as we drive down a highway in Maine at the end of the summer, the end of a particular season of flowers. This trip is for her, she feels like her kids are slipping away, so she lassoed us here with a hint of brutality at the end of the summer. I don't blame her. Vacation, this is a vacation, she reminded us. Mom takes the Bath exit and we turn down narrow streets, and Mom starts talking faster-It's really not a big deal, this house. It's crumbly, you know, she tells me, turning the wheel. Lived here from first grade to sixth grade, we walked up this hill in the winter to get to the little movie theater, see? Penny candy, right there. We drive past a little park, rusted swing sets and shady oaks. Used to play dolls up there in the trees, she says and I see her face tangled up in the mirror with the onslaught of cool shadows and road and light. Mom puts on her blinker and we turn into a development composed of long, rectangular rows of brown brick apartments and rain-faded plastic lawn ornaments and people drifting around outside or eating out on porches, paper bags of take-out, straw wrappers flapping in the wind. Look for number nine, I think it's number nine. Our car eases around the development at a creep, shiny, waxed, out of context. Nine, Em says, and we look to the left and see a couple thin kids in snow caps running around outside on a dry lawn, chasing each other with sticks. A woman with white hair burns trash in a garbage cans and the smoke billows into blank blue sky, a lid above the above the house, number nine. We pause for a moment and Mom taps the accelerator, car goes forward. *Perhaps I must leave you.* Better now, Mom says, driving away and the neighborhood blocks unravel and I turn around and watch the smoke and the woman's faded purple T-shirt and the landscape and she catches my gaze. *Perhaps I must leave*

you.

After they've gone on stage, girls wait in a wiggling line in the hall, whispering and laughing in the dark; the air smells heavy of hairspray and chalk and feet. I go to each one in succession and unravel her tiny braids fastened tight to the head by bobby pins. I love the moment of undoing, the fingering out the three interwoven strands, the soft crease of the hair falling onto the back. The feeling, for some reason, is similar to deleting, pressing down the backspace button and watching the words unravel, disappear, starting from the end back to beginning. Fields of white. *Perhaps I must leave you.* Deleting, a celebration of the death of tiny things. But words, they're lively phantoms in the head, tearing through upstairs rooms at a madman's pace, even after the field has been cleared and outside the window is an overwhelming whiteness. But you pick up, you start again with all your strangeness and your awe and your reasons. You put water to your face, catch your reflection in your pupils, *perhaps I must leave you.*