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DIANA KHOI NGUYEN

The Exodus

Saigon to Los Angeles, 1975–2015

For a long time, it didn't seem
possible. Then the whispering
grew louder, the blur and hum of synchronous movements,
as in a murmuration—
leaderless, with the shades drawn

A poet burning his life's work, a mother
measuring out small bottles
of poison

As my grandfather and his sons were ushered through the droves,
remorse rose up in him,
tear gas bowling over and over and over

Then
everyone became equals,
each one disappearing in the shadow of another

Touch as a bird rarely seen unless believed in,
wretched.

A youth points a toy gun at her chest, stupid
girlish pleasure returning for a moment

Still, every living body finds a routine
no matter its damage.

Two minutes after I was born

I had already made my first evacuation

Years later when I found myself in Saigon,
I bought a lighter at the war market. Etched on one side
was a nude woman
reclined with her legs spread, an owl
at her sex, one wing in,
the other wing out, two owls standing by

Why should we mourn?

Isn't this the history we want
one in which we survive?

After many days at sea, my mother's guised boat
found rescue. A young man collapsed and died
beside her, the journey's end too much to bear

Before my brother was born, all four of us
slept beside one another in one bed.
In an effort to resist memory,
my mother asked me to shake her awake

The night before the monks came
to usher my brother out of the realm of the living,
we gathered on the same bed, sifting through photos
and stories of him.
At the funeral, his hand was warm
where my mother would not let go

Maybe you'd forget
why you were here, that you
didn't belong,
that just because it was like life,
didn't mean it could be life,
that you could come back to life
but not return to living.
And if you bypassed a war, a war
wouldn't bypass you