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Apsara in New York

What hand framed this chalk drawing
for fallen deities from Cambodia's kingdom?

Flash.

Camera turns living deities into halved beings
below the white cloud of light and chalk.

Cotton and silk sarongs cradle cellophane-wrapped treats.

Graduation.

Chalk airplane hovers above my mother and her plaid. Her eyes far away.
She's not heard of New York.

Angkor towers crown apsara heads, different shades of olive.

The airplane ascends above Cambodia's national monument
beyond their powdery orbs.

Dedicated to the memory of my brother, Svay Sothear, to all the Khmers lost during the Khmer Rouge era, and to my Khmer American community which still struggles with this dark legacy.



Molding

Cambodian girls
in roadside salons
idolize them in curls.

Eternal female
sculpted for worship,
protector of the temple city.

Communist bullets
graze stone nipples.

Humanized by the King,
royal court dancers are poised
in gleaming headdress.

In twilight
an apsara
costume slumped
beside the royal bed.

Storytelling hands and feet
ancestral mudras,
reminiscent of lotus
unfurling beside the Buddha.

Foreigners cup their breasts
shiny from years of exploration,
hold them captive
in their viewfinder
to retrieve for pleasure
in future moments.

Dear Grandmother,

We peaked at Angkor Wat,
saw the red sandstone of Bantei Srei,
the citadel of women.
Ornate arches curved
into thighs and hips of women:
homage to the devata,
a fortress of deities.

My last day in Phnom Penh
you made eggs; my beloved staple
tastes impossibly delicious
beside somlau machou,
this country's chicken soup.
I let myself miss you.

Baguettes are sold by men on cyclos
in baskets strapped to their backs.
I imagine bread dough
beaten as it rises.
I try not to need you.
I want to push it down.

The lines on your skin
map my lineage
like a family recipe.

It's easier not to see your face.
To know you is to feel you,
to love and lose you
when you leave me.

Embody

1.

Rain limits and frees; the sun-loving majority stays
while I relish ten-blocks beside dogwood trees.

2.

Indecipherable languages beckon like elaborate prayer rugs
with designs diverse as world tongues.

3.

A co-worker's fasting means lunch money in my palm;
I would trade sustenance for that kind of faith.

4.

In a dream, white shirt and tie interrogate about The Book of Revelations.
I answer, "My parents are Buddhists."

5.

In my new home, I want the bliss of Khmer bodhisattvas, saffron-hued and all,
chanting the ancient language beside my Bed, Bath & Beyond curtains.

6.

The doctor called you a cheese doodle at two months and 1.57 centimeters.
These 9 months are not a song about one's self.

Postpartum Depression on Loop

The nursery soon darkens with a lullaby
tinkling from a plastic butterfly projector.
A baby alienates her with a cry.
In one day, she became a protector.

Tinkling from a plastic butterfly projector,
she absorbs the music for future replays.
In one day she became a protector.
A lasting scar paired with pills leave her dazed.

She absorbs the music for future replays
through an iPod, a mix of wistful songs.
A lasting scar paired with pills leave her dazed
in this eternal day. The mother longs

through an iPod, a mix of wistful songs.
She returns from her daily walk to silence.
In this eternal day, the mother longs
for an end. This new world makes her tense.

She returns from her daily walk to silence.
A baby alienates her with a cry
for an end. This new world makes her tense.
The nursery soon darkens with a lullaby.

Morning Song

I can hear you calling
in a hunger cry
to reveal your need.

I can hear you coo
as you discover your hands
and your eyes light up.

As you soften your voice
I'll be the embrace you seek
to carry you to sleep.

I imagine you will rise
with the sun, my morning call
at the start of each new day.

Ode to Mother's Sarong

Refugee wallpaper
for family portraits
a knotted baby carrier
on mother's back
monsoon covering

black and blue
night tapestry
midnight inquiries
unwrapped questions
to be encased
covered
coveted

a heart-wrap
rice field shawl
Mekong towel
black hair threads
cross blue rivers
cover of ocean and kmao
between thighs

in jungle flight
this mother-landing
carried my brother
and monsoon rains
across infinite jungle