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## *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