

Nhớ: to miss, to remember

The wall above my bed in my apartment in IV is covered with prints and postcards, and my favorite one is an illustrated postcard of the subway as it crosses the Han River. The card takes the perspective of a passenger on the train, with the river visible through the window in the background. When I look at it, the still image comes to life vividly behind my eyelids. I recall the time not long after I first arrived in Seoul, when I rode the subway across the river in the light of the early summer morning just to sit in one particular cafe for a few hours. The earlier days were, admittedly, filled with perhaps too much amazement at every little thing, every detail and discovery about being in a new country, but riding across the river never failed to fill me with newfound wonder.

The last time I made that trip was a few days before my flight back to California, five months after I had first left, and nearly two years after the start of the pandemic. Once again in the early morning, though this time covered from head to toe in warm clothing, my friend and I rented bikes to ride around the Han. Pedaling laps on the empty paths around the glistening water, our sweat cooled instantly with each gust of chilling winter air. It was so cold our fingers bled, simply being exposed to the air for too long, gripping the handles of our worn rental bikes, but the memory is warm in my mind. Maybe this is what it means to remember something, for a moment in time to live preserved in the senses.

Thinking of my time in Korea feels like a dream. Temporary, vivid, and forever elusive. The kind that makes you wish you had been there longer, savored it just a little more. It's inevitable that the pandemic limited my experience there, even if it wasn't necessarily cut short – whether in the form of cafe rejections or strict gathering limitations. Still, it was an experience almost too good to be true, overall. That's why it was hard. Coming back to IV, and adjusting to

the mundanity of life here, for the first time in two years. It's hard to feel connected to school again, while also wanting to remember that the world is bigger than the one I spend every day in. To miss the days when every second was full of awe, and excitement, and a curiosity as to what the day would hold. I realize that it's impossible to live this way forever, but I don't want to forget that I lived this way for a moment in time.

---

The thing about my grandparents' house in Anaheim is that it doesn't feel much like a home. It was always cold, the floor always dusty. The most at home I ever felt there was in their garden, and it was one my grandparents tended to religiously, consisting of a small patch of land next to endless collections of black plastic pots of succulents. Here, my grandfather liked to show me the different sizes and shapes of the pumpkins he'd grow in the fall. To the left of these pumpkins was a small shed that was once home to a functional hot tub, but was now host to nothing but dust and insects. One year, though, we found a kitten and her children nestled in the corner of the pale pink plastic of the hot tub; life sprung from every corner of my grandparents' yard.

My favorite part of the garden by far was the looming pomelo trees on the wall adjacent to the neighbors', trees which were always heavy with the bưởi fruit. We would stand on ladders and pick them off, examining their various shades of lime green, putting them into any containers we could find, from shiny metal bowls to old pink plastic wash baskets. They would go into big brown paper bags, and we would take them home, bursting at the seams, five of them in one.

The sight of my grandparents, them from another time, lingers in my mind. Pulling up to their driveway to see them standing on the steps in front of their door, waving to us and inviting us in, where directly inside the entrance, there is a mirror. Beneath it is a table, where a UCSB

pamphlet perpetually sits from when they visited me my first year, when my grandpa had said the lagoon looked like the lakes in Louisiana, had asked me if it had alligators, had walked around with his cane and when I had been too eager to get back to my dorm, to return with a rush I'm not even sure I knew the meaning of. My grandma had sat in her room in the on-campus inn peeling tangerines and eating them with the white parts, because those were the best, she said. I still believe they are.

---

I can only see my ông bà nội every few weeks now and we're forced to wear masks. Even if I can't see their faces, I can see that they're getting sick – really sick. I see them in snippets, so with each visit they are exponentially worse off than before. My ông nội is a fraction of the person he once was, his body the husk of something once far more alive. My bà nội mirrors his condition, but mentally. It hurts to look at them, heart hammering in my chest. Bà nội used to say, whenever I visited, that I looked like a model. She used to read Vietnamese translations of *Harry Potter* and I never once saw her without eyeliner on her eyes, jade jewelry dangling from her wrists. Now, she can't even come out to see us. All I can hear are the labored breaths coming from her room.

It's the first day of the new year. We're sitting at the long oak table, where my legs once dangled off the edge of the chair. Ông nội is talking to my brother, and it's strange. I don't know how to feel; I don't know how much longer I'll be able to see them, but I don't know how I can make the most of our time together. The terrifying thing about time is that it slips like sand through your fingertips if you can't find a way to catch it. There's water on the kitchen floor, unwashed dishes in the sink. Ông nội spent all day mopping the water he spilled, but the water's still there. It pains me to walk through the kitchen. My crayon drawings still line the creaky

wooden cupboards. There are photos of me and my siblings scattered everywhere. The pictures have done more than we have, been here for my grandparents far more than we have this past year. My brother doesn't know much Viet, but he can say yes and no. Dạ có, dạ không.

It takes ông nội a long time to stand up. Seconds move in what feels like hours, as he moves in slow motion, and my brother hovers, unsure of what to do. We're all on our phones. My ông nội is now trying to wake bà nội up. It's okay, I want to tell him. Tell both of them. It's okay.

Bà nội's eyes are hazy and unfocused when she finally leaves her room. Her hair is a mess, but she still has eyeliner on. Her nails are bright red. I've always thought that I was so much better at speaking Vietnamese than my siblings, but the truth is that I'm not, and it's obvious now. We all sit together in silence, at that long oak table. I can't break it – I don't know how. When ông nội speaks to me, it's in English. I try to respond in Viet but I fail. I don't know the word for recorded, for online, or for lectures. Why don't I? I wish I did. He asks if I'm still studying psychology, and I'm glad to be able to say that I am. He asks if I miss my school, the campus. I could've answered that in Viet. I would've lied and said that I did.

I pick at my nails so hard I think they'll fall off, but they don't. I'm on my phone but I'm not texting – I'm writing. I feel like I have to write about this. What else can I do? Someone has to know, if only myself in the future. That they're both here. They're alive.

My bà nội looks at nothing. She doesn't look at us but rather at the space in front of me. The Getty painting on the wall, of a boat on a body of water I can't remember, is crooked. It's getting hard to breathe in the mask. Ông nội talks to my sister next. She's better at Vietnamese than me. Or more accurately, she's better at talking than me. She says she wants to go to UCSB, just like I do. My palms sweat. I have nothing to offer but stale conversation. I say yes, dạ. That's

it. I can't even talk to my own grandparents. My bà nội doesn't talk, she doesn't smile, or laugh like she used to. I keep looking at my phone, and it's not because I don't want to talk to them. It's because I want it too much. My nails dig bright little crescent shapes into the palm of my hand. My grandma smiles at my sister. Her nails are flawlessly painted, bright red.

Remember and miss are the same word in Viet, but ông nội says “I missed you” in English so I have no choice but to remember. My dad tells me this might be the last time I see bà nội alive, and I would come to learn that the only thing wrong about his prediction was the grandparent in question. I hold back my tears in the car ride home. Grief is a stranger to me.

—

My grandparents came to America during the Vietnam War, or more accurately, my grandma did. She was a teacher in Vietnam, but I know less about the entirety of her career than I do about the one time she was a guest on a game show. She liked talking about the fun, frivolous things in life, making exaggerations and telling me as a child that her diabetes came from eating a whole fruitcake in one sitting. She's never once talked about the fact that she had been separated from her husband for nearly a decade after fleeing her home country. My dad was raised by his mother, a woman so relaxed that just being in her presence was always enough to make me feel at ease.

I have to unfocus my eyes to look fully at bà nội now, sitting on the edge of a bed that's only been hers for as long as we tell her it has. When I see my grandma now, when I'm allowed to see her given pandemic regulations, she stares blankly at a sports game on TV in a language she can't understand. She sits on the sofa, or on a chair at the dining room table, in a house that should be unfamiliar to her but isn't. I watch her sip a bottle of water that was placed carefully into her fragile hands.

I can never look the things I fear in the eye, or maybe it's the things I love too much that I'm afraid of. The things I'm scared of losing, the things I know I've already lost. She says she sees ông nội outside, but he's gone. What is she seeing? She asks where he is, if he's outside. My dad wipes his eyes, and I can't bear it, but there's something in her tone, her conviction, that makes me think I'll look outside and see him. Go greet him, she says. It's impolite not to. He's outside sitting on a chair, the way he always did, and, oh, I can see him now. I can. His eternally crooked glasses, his limp from the stroke he had years before I would ever know him. It's the 100th day today, meaning the day before his reincarnation. Maybe he stopped by to see her one last time.

---

In the major port city of Busan, from which my roommate is a native, I spent the later days of last summer. We stayed at my roommate's grandmother's apartment, left empty during her trip to the States. In the living room, which was devoid of furniture save for the stiff couch along one wall, we set up sleeping mats on the hardwood floors and fell asleep to stories of family drama and Korean traditions long passed.

One afternoon, with her cousin serving as an impromptu tour guide, my friends and I made our way to an extravagant oceanside restaurant for lunch. He treated us to their largest array of seafood, the table covered with abalone, writhing bits of octopus, and more fish than I could name. As he practiced his English, we sat talking and laughing as he discussed his retirement from clubbing on account of his new girlfriend. Trying and failing to get the meat out of intricate spirals of shells, the wind blowing through our hair and the waves reflecting beams of mid-afternoon light into our eyes every now and then. It was one of those moments you know, right then and there, that you have to capture somehow. That you have to store, if only to be able

to look back on them at a later time and remember that you were once so carefree, so full of unadulterated joy. To remind yourself that it's possible that you'd feel this way again. As if happiness could be stored like something tangible, bottled like a firefly, warm and bright and something you can reach for and hold onto when the nights are darker. But you don't know how to capture it like this, and neither do I. So the best I can do is to remember this time, and through my memory, miss it.

---

Incense fills the room, and I can barely see anything through the smoke, or rather, the cloudiness of my eyes. I've been kneeling for nearly an hour next to my brother and sister, behind my parents as the rest of the guests watch from their seats to the side. I alternate between looking up at the monks, whose chanting reverberates in my head, and down at the padding beneath my knees. Feeling the pressing weight of the white cloth headband, tied tightly around my forehead.

Soldiers line the walls of the small white room, circling the portrait of my grandfather. In it, he smiles conspiratorially as though he just told me a joke no one else will ever know, cheeks rosy and expression light. His old brothers-in-arms sing the songs of war days long gone and salute along with my dad, who stands with his head bowed in the corner. The same way he's been standing for the last three hours.

A man comes over to my sister and I, sitting and watching guests line up to pay their respects and light sticks of incense. He looms over us, and speaks to us in English, unlike all the other guests have done throughout the day. "Are you Tham's grandchildren?" he asks, a question to which he must already know the answer. "I served in the war with your grandfather, and I have some pictures I thought you might like. Would you like to see them?" Airdropped photos of

a man in uniform, at once so familiar yet one I never knew before. Group pictures and a candid still of a young ông nội holding a giant plastic canister of cheese puffs, tongue out to the side in a ridiculous face and posing with both arms, both legs. Somedays, I'll look at these pictures and think for a long time. About ông nội and the life he led long before I was anything at all, about the wife he left behind who will never even know he's gone, about how through these last secondhand memories of him I understand that language was never the issue.

Sitting in bà ngoại's backyard later with my dad, both of us facing her collection of plants, in the garden in which my mom spent her early childhood days. Talking about the life we just lost. My ông nội's voice echoing in my head, saying "Bring the truck, man!" as dominoes spill out of the toy truck and across the carpet, seven-year-old me squealing with laughter. The way my sister cried for hours on the day of the funeral, the way that was the first time I saw ông nội without a mask in over a year, and I don't want to remember the way life unfolds over time. I don't want to remember any time at all.

—

I went back to Busan for my 21st birthday in November. The day before my birthday, we wandered through the city, eating hotteok from street vendors and savoring the piping-hot sweetness of the stuffed pancakes. At night we had made our way to the beach near Gwangan Bridge, one of the main attractions of Busan. In the deep black of the nighttime, the massive suspension bridge cast its purple and white beams across the ocean waves, and we meandered around the seaside, jumping and laughing at the cold.

As I stood admiring the lights, my friends presented to me a small cake, blue with pink piped frosting along the edges, "HBD Veronica" along the top and the face of a smiling brown bear in the center. My roommate, who forgets her own familys' birthdays, remembers to turn in



assignments weeks after they're due and takes 5-7 business days to respond to texts, custom ordered it for me. On time for my birthday, on a trip to her hometown where a group of people had come, for my sake, and depended solely on her for translations and transactions alike. The act, the trip, touched me severely, and maybe there's something mawkish in the thought, but this night was one I want to remember forever. And forever is an impossible thing, but as long as I live and breathe I hope I will remember it, as I will all the people that have come and gone from my life, and I'll be allowed the knowledge that they once existed to me, and I once existed so dearly to them.

—

No matter how hard I try to block it, sunlight filters in through the blinds of the bedroom of my IV apartment, waking me up each morning. I've decorated the wall above my bed with my favorite prints and postcards. A lot of them came from Korea, but one is a picture of UCSB. It must have come from all the campus welcome material I received all those years ago, the same kind my grandparents kept in a stack under the mirror by their front door.

In this doorway, permission for passage was once granted only through a hug with both of my grandparents, with a greeting of *thưa ông nội, thưa bà nội*. I used to see them at the end of each week. Now, I begin this part of my life that they will never know. But even as I live in this life that my grandparents will never learn of, I once lived in their warm, welcoming embrace. And, if you're lucky, to love someone once is to remember them forever, and in your memory, they'll stay, alive.