

Thang Lian

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: East Kentwood High School, Kentwood, MI

Educator: Le Tran

Category: Poetry

Just as Bitter, Just as Sweet

i. Mother latches herself tightly,
her arms suffocating.
In the distance,
summer cicadas hum a midnight's tune,
keeping me awake.

The night prior,
Dad phoned us and told us we would go
to somewhere where life doesn't have to end
when you've barely begun to grow.
To somewhere where the streets are paved in gold
and the cities, like diamonds, glow.

Son, Mother beamed at me, a smile stitched from cheek to cheek.
We're going to America, the Land of the Free.
I was five years old, I didn't understand a thing.
But there was one thing I knew: America meant leaving home.

America, I whisper, barely audible under my breath.
Would grandma come with us?
What about auntie, uncle, and my favorite cousins?

My cousins who let me win tag,
even though I tripped over my sandals.
My grandma who cuddled with me at night,
promising me sugary sweets and savory meats.

What about them?
Where would they go?

Mother sensed my apprehension,
huffing and puffing up like a balloon.
She smiled reassuringly, telling me not to worry.
But I worry anyway.
How can America be so great if nobody I love is there?

As sleep gnaws away at my thoughts,
I try not to drown in what I know is inevitable:
my loved ones are not going.

Before dawn could creep through the valley,
before the sun could frighten the moon away,
I hear the low, rumbling footsteps of grandma.

I hear the raspy, early morning voices of my cousins
rippling through the cool morning breeze.
I hear family.

To my side I turn,
trying desperately to glue my eyes shut,
but sleep does not come to visit,
not today.

Grandma peers her head through my bedroom door,
smiling like a sage.
Her smile is bittersweet, tinged with melancholy.
I know this kind of smile, I last saw it at grandpa's funeral.
When grandma had to be strong like an unyielding oak,
standing as firm as the oldest, wisest tree
for she is the root of our family.
Her smile then was bittersweet:
her smile now is just as bitter, just as sweet.

My son, she croons, coming to greet me.
Breakfast is ready, go wash up.
My son, today is the big day, you're off to America.
Silence roars in the room.
Nobody says anything more, nobody has to.

America means leaving family,
America means leaving home.