

David Mura

To H. N.

It is always easy to sentimentalize old lovers. They are distant
 and distance, we have heard, increases desire.
 You live now a few miles down the freeway, and years ago.
 How I wish there were rice fields, an ocean, between us,
 a hedge of foxgloves, rows of sweat peas, cedar forests, canyons,
 deserts,
 and a story of plane wheels screeching on the tarmac
 or helicopters lifting above a city, tiny figures, stick-like, like those
 a child draws,
 hanging from the landing rim, falling to the sea.
 It would have been history then, not me, who failed you.
 My guilt would be greater and therefore, more easy.

I recall your father, who still sews in a store I sometimes pass.
 And your mother who served me steaming bowls, riddled with
 coriander, globes of oil,
 a pepper that stung my eyes to tears. And your sisters, each
 younger,
 more fluent than you. And one, more beautiful. (In those days
 there was little I refused.) And your brothers who, with sticks on
 strings,
 fought on the streets, in school corridors, the shouts of chink and
 gook,
 claiming a fierceness that surprised their larger white opponents.
 Twelve of you in a three-bedroom flat. I sat at the table
 and read with you through Fitzgerald, O'Connor's story of the
 Bible salesman
 who steals the crippled girl's crutches, leaves her stranded in the
 hayloft
 in a cracker Georgia. You were eighteen. Your mother thought
 I was teaching you English. Seeing in your family my father's
 a half century before, I almost believed that. Sometimes

we went roller-skating, to a movie, disobeying your parents.
 I went home afterwards to the woman I was living with. Who
 became my wife.

What else? You'd lived in Vincienne, spoke Laotian, Vietnamese.
 I recall moments in a car, on my couch, in my bed.
 And still can't stop. Won't make amends.
 A cousin of yours was among the bones they dug up
 in Hue. You got used to our winters, their icy winds.
 I flunked out of grad school. You graduated one May.

And what it all adds up to I can't tell.
 An accident of history? Something sordid, brief, betrayed?
 You were beautiful. The only Asian woman I've ever touched,
 reaching
 beyond the mirror of my own self-hatred, propelled by my lust.
 And there was this night, at the top of the tallest building in town,
 looking down at the lights and cars beams shuttling towards the
 horizon,
 when you bent by a candle-flame, said you would never forget this
 night.

But somehow I suspect that for you, as for me, that memory now
 means little.
 You're probably indifferent. Which is just as well.