

KYOKO UCHIDA

Hiroshima, 7:21 A.M.

What kept us safe then
was knowing that if we were
to jump, our fathers
would be held liable for
damages to the train,

the tracks, delays in
the schedules—to be left
with bone-crushing debts,
no longer able to send
our sisters to high school. That

was enough to keep
us there. Fourteen, waiting in
our ironed uniforms
under the rain-washed clock face
six mornings a week for our

lives to begin, we
knew the single-track local
wouldn't be going
fast enough, already braking
as it came into view.

A safer bet to
leap off the school's chain-linked roof,
an overpass or
a bridge across the city's
seven rivers swift as

hunger, salt rage at
what would never be enough,
that we could never
be: what ingrates to want more
than train tracks, rice, mothers, books.

Hanoi

We go expecting to be hated —
he to have something to overcome
in exquisite triumph, one by one,
new words learned from a street vendor; I
to atone for stolen rice, forced labor,
girls, then collective forgetting.

For those for whom there's no forgetting
one war, I learn *Not Vietnamese*, hated
for being a white man's whore: labored
explanations of who I am: come
on honeymoon, Japanese passport eyed
suspiciously, held to the light one

page at a time. Could I be anyone
worse for those who can't forget in
a thousand years — an eye for an eye —
that other war? Were I hated
for my compatriots' Chanel, Lancôme
blush, the pink ignorance we labor

to keep, could I blame them, belabor
the point of a bayonet? Which one?
A place new to both of us, we'd come
already guilty of forgetting
what we can't undo. The brailled hatred
at the Hanoi Hilton, museums I

can read; not even with closed eyes
the heat off the scooter driver's labor-
burnt back, leaning into hated
traffic: centuries occupied for one
life earned, for getting
ahead. In a Chinese merchant's house become

exhibit, the guide says, *Come,*
tell the truth, in which language do you say "I
love you"? A test of my forgetting.
In the language my love speaks, I labor
to explain. He laughs, *You have one*
language only to love and hate

in. I know now: a language to forget in. What becomes
us, of us, hated or otherwise
we cleave together, labor as one.

In Visibility

Nothing new has happened. I've always been
visibly invisible, neither here
nor there, black nor white, unseen
because safely ignored, non-descript, mere
outline when alone, unaccented, non-.

Nothing new has happened. I've been called names
when noticed—the standard *slant eyes*, *Yellow*
Peril/Fever/Cab, *gaijin*, *traitor*—the same:
Houston, Hiroshima, Toronto,
upstate, Bordeaux, DC, Jerusalem.

Nothing new has happened. I've been stared off
Brooklyn sidewalks, out of rental offices;
taken for a maid, dry cleaner, pros-
titute, nanny; spat at. Harmless near-misses
given *invasion*, *infestation*.

Nothing new has happened. I've been faking:
At Ocean and Church I'm called a virus
and almost laugh in relief at the sun-
catching predictability of us.
Nothing new has happened. I've been mistaken.

If You

Swallow a thorn.

It will thread a beaded stalk down your spine,
snake supple vines through sharpening bone;
sinews growing lithe and spare,
thirst turning southward, spiked.

You won't know why
your throat burns when speaking
until new thorns tipped crimson
pierce the tongue.

Swallow another.

Grow scar tissue
as smooth and pink as a rose petal,
as breathless, as yielding
but unturn.

It will not seep blood, weep pus
or ache itself green each April.
It will be known only by
its hooked end

to fit your erratic seasons.
Do not forget to water it,
fertilize it with animal want,
weed out non-essentials.

And another. Keep swallowing.

Cultivate a garden, lush with fever,
nettled concertina wound tightly round
your voice box.
It will not suffocate; on the contrary,

one morning it will burst forth
a hundred ruby blossoms,
tiny mouths opening all at once
to sing.