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Leave Them Nameless

Lilian Thai

The first night in Ha Tien is unbearable. I'm sleeping on my back and trying not to move on the tiled ledge — our family's bed for the next four nights.

The dream thins out and I can feel the tile even more keenly under my hips, with all of its upside-down oppressiveness. I have to sit up. Even the act of waking up is exhausting. Whining mosquitos prick the stale air and the tiles underneath my legs glow blue and white like a canvas of moons.

I prod Mum awake. She folds a blanket for me to lie on top of.

We're going to the beach tomorrow, where the sand is blackened by the volcanic islands rising out of the bay. Mum says a dragon's spine surrounds Vietnam, but some places make it easier to see.

My grandparents were South Vietnamese tailors. Mum says that one day, South Vietnamese soldiers came to have their uniforms altered. Some North Vietnamese soldiers saw this, and came to the conclusion that my grandfather was against them. They didn't believe him when he said he was innocent.

Anyway, the Viet Cong soldiers went into the shop. They made the family kneel — the husband and wife and seven children. At this time the eldest child was my aunt, at twelve years old. The second-born was a boy, aged ten.

He threw himself at the soldiers' feet. *Please don't shoot my father*, he begged.

They shot him first. Then they shot my grandfather and he died, and shot my grandmother so she was crippled.

'I was three months old,' Mum says. Their mother, even weakened by the recent birth and the wound, lasted another three years.

Auntie raised the surviving siblings on her own. By then the nameless soldiers had blinked in and out of their lives, long gone and never encountered again.

We pull the suitcases up to the fourth floor, our eyes half-closed and stinging from the cold. The sky outside is ashy grey over a long and vacant road. It's my fifteenth birthday and we've landed in Mannheim, Germany.

All of Auntie's hair is grey, and she's the only one of my aunts to have false teeth and glasses thick enough to distort the size of her eyes.

Mum taps my brother to hurry him into the flat, wrestling a suitcase around her foot. Then she greets Auntie with a wordless shriek and a slap on the arm.

They come together and the differences leap out. Mum seems bigger boned in front of her sister; Auntie, in her sixties now, comes up to Mum's chin. The youngest and the oldest of the brood, on a continent neither of them had been born on, 50 years after the death of their parents. Now they stand on the same doormat and claim the woven rectangle as their own country.

I stay in the hallway until Auntie takes my arm. 'It was your second birthday the last time I saw you. Your cake is in here,' she beams.

And she pulls me, unrelenting and irresistible, to the coffee table in the living room.

I've no clue how Auntie ended up in Germany while her siblings headed for Australia. Regardless, the result consists of three grown children and a smattering of Vietnamese-German grandchildren.

At the dinner table, I bounce an infant niece on my thigh. We are smitten with each other: she with the braces on my teeth and I with her fat cheeks, brown hair and eyes.

Beer bottles move over the table, between hands and up and down from laughing mouths. Mum's lips are puckered around a ring of emerald glass and her cheeks are already pink.

'Why do you have such a silly thing in your bathroom?' she asks Auntie.

She means the bright red toilet, which has a gold star in the middle of the lid. The colour of the star had thrown me off a bit — it was dark and metallic, so it took me a few extra seconds to realise it was meant to be the yellow star on the communist flag of Vietnam.

I'd gaped at it. 'Oh, my God. We're literally shitting on the —.' And Mum had laughed.

Now Auntie's eyes are wide behind her glasses. 'You were too young. You didn't see. They shot our father and mother. They killed our brother. I was 12, and I had to watch.'

A lump of fish sticks to my tongue. I look between Mum and Auntie, but my hand stays on my niece's belly. She's soft and tender, full of uncomprehending laughter.

Only Mum knows the graves behind a house in the Vietnamese countryside. They're raised prisms covered in jade green tiles. A middle-aged woman owns the house — or at least it was she who pinched her lips together and led us

through the vines. The graves have a clearing to themselves. One is much smaller than the other two.

My brother gets fidgety the instant we stop there; I squeeze hard on his shoulders and tap his lips with my forefinger.

Mum just stands near them — the twin beds of her parents. She can't remember them. Not a word. Not a touch.

But, without doubt, there had been a woman. Someone who'd carried the last child in her belly, and held the infant in her arms as her husband and son were executed. The bullet had missed the baby — possibly the soldiers only shot to wound because of that baby. Her leg had bled all over the floor.

Mum looks long and hard at the blocks of stone. I remember sleeping on a tiled ledge just like them. A humid stopover at a relative's house.

Now I can't remember if the names were written on the graves. They were very clean despite the bugs and the dust. They could have been perfectly blank. If the names had been there I wouldn't have been able to pronounce them anyway.

Lilian Thai wrote this in 2012 when she was in Year 12 at St George Girls High School in New South Wales.