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## Saigon Syndrome

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# Saigon Syndrome

Gabrielle Vatthanatham

Seemanyeet was a dangerous woman born betwixt and between the fine line of a land neither here nor there: and anywhere she might run to would always be fought over.

She let three of her daughters be Vietnamese. The last one she smothered in her sleep because Seemanyeet was afraid of being called a whore.

It was so hard back then; I wouldn't understand the conditions that kept a Hakka woman tied to children because she was afraid of dying alone.

She let my grandmother be raped by the father of her dead child.  
She let her daughters grow up scared.

When they were old enough to feed themselves, they ran from home like an IV drip of Mekong water threading black hair.

My grandmother sold opium to survive; ran the dens like an Oriental bazaar; handed samples of her crystalpoppygoo to old men who only moved against their cots to make another pipe.

Life was hard.

And my mother had only asked once where her mother had gone—had only felt want once—

When the time had come to grow up and no one had taught her how to be a Hakka woman.  
How to move and breathe carrying an ancestral legacy of grief in flesh-pink bundles on her back.

My mother says her mother was only a smell that she remembered from time to time.  
When she took me to get my driver's license at the DMV,

A woman sitting beside me held a coffee to her lips after rubbing floral scented lotion on her hands.  
My mother closed her eyes a bit and said, *there is no smell like opium—*

Art by Lauren Dial

Nothing like it.  
Sugar in an iron pot. Robusta coffee. And chicory root. And

flowers too—  
Except the flowers were burning.

They made her eyes sting.  
And she remembered that not even the napalm burned as bad as the blue-black smoke that  
curled underneath  
her eyelids—

Gouged into the scleras—pulling out a memory from its dusty roots in the brain—beating it across the  
frame of a folding mahjong table with tiles

spelling out the name:  
Saigon.

