# Speak of the Dead

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In my family, every story came with a silence. It pressed behind their words, hid within closed doors and whispered phone calls. Because of it, my knowledge of where we came from remained skeletal. I knew abstractly that my eldest uncle, cậu Nhiên, had left Vietnam after the war, studying abroad then gaining refugee status in 1975. His brother, my cậu Huỳnh fled by boat soon after. My mother and her sister stayed behind until cậu Nhiên could sponsor them over to Vancouver by 1989.

The first time I tried to ask for any more than that, I was re-directed to cậu Nhiên, the unofficial historian of our family. Over the phone, he listened to my questions, pausing for a moment. Then slowly, years of untold stories began to unspool. The day my grandfather fished out the body of an American soldier from the stream behind their house. The times they dug bunkers with their hands to hide from bombs overhead.

Even as war loomed over his childhood, cậu Nhiên had hoped that the worst of it would pass them by. “But by 1968, it found us too,” he told me. “North and South had agreed to a ceasefire so that soldiers could go home for the New Year. But the North was cunning. They used those nights to flood their soldiers throughout Southern territory. Before the sun rose, they fired their cannons from the mountains, the sharp *crack* startling us awake.

“We grabbed our things and ran west from Tâm Hải into Tâm Kỳ until we could no longer see smoke on the horizon. Days later when we returned, the South had won back our island, but many neighbors had lost their lives in the crossfire. Your grandparents’ hamlet had been burnt black, barren in the seasons afterwards.

"And your great-uncle, ông Bác Lạng–he was a xả trưởng, a village leader, which meant that he openly supported the Southern regime. He knew that he would be captured by the North if he stayed on Tâm Hải. When we ran west, he set off alone to the countryside to wait out the battle. But some Northern soldiers tracked his path, and a week later, they forced their way into his hideout. They dragged him from his bed out into the night, and they killed him."

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The first generation of refugees have the power of selective memory. When my parents spoke of Vietnam, it was to remind me to be grateful for what I had in the United States. "We were so poor that we only had fish sauce and rice to eat. You have no idea how lucky you are," my mother would chide whenever I left my bowl unfinished.

She never explained to me why her family was so poor. Years later, I would read about Vietnam's socialist reforms and their resulting famines, along with postwar discrimination against those who had followed the South. But maybe my mother never said these things because then she would have to talk about the war, and all the other memories less easily translated into lessons.

Vietnamese Americans, how do we navigate the silences within every story we are told, knowing that silence is a choice our families make to survive? What do we do with the questions that we cannot ask?

If I wanted to know more about my great-uncle's life, I would have to ask my mother: "Remember Ông Bác Lạng, your uncle who was killed by Northern soldiers in the war?" The words die in my throat before they can begin. Asking cậu Nhiên had been a rare moment of courage, but even then I wondered what telling that story had cost.

Instead, children like me learned to tiptoe around our families. We quickly memorized the faraway look in our parents' eyes, the suddenly brusque tone in their voices indicating that we had disturbed one of the many lines we were not allowed to cross. I didn't ask about my great-uncle again. But his story kept stirring in my mind, a restless presence that gradually took shape. In secret, I imagined him to be like every other uncle in my mother's family, round-faced with a penchant for large belts and flashy watches, men whose laughter filled the room whenever they gathered to nhậu, drink beer and play cards until dawn.

Maybe he became a xả trưởng because he truly believed in the promise of Western democracy in Vietnam. But no one else in my family is like that, which makes me think that my great uncle did not choose a side so much as it chose him by accident of geography. Tâm Hải was under Southern control and working for the South Vietnamese government would have offered higher earnings than fishing or farming. In a family as hungry as my mother's, my great-uncle must have learned to grasp any opportunity he could to survive.

As the war crept closer, he might have heard neighbors talk about their family members hiding from unending torrents of bombs, or the thick, noxious rain that left villages sick for generations. In 1968, when he knew the North was coming, he embraced his wife and children before stepping onto the ferry to Quảng Nam. He wouldn't have told them where to find his hiding place, a family friend's empty shack several kilometers southward.

My great uncle spent the next few days alone in a village where no one knew his name. Behind walls sagging from years of flooding and decay was a small windowless room where he set up his provisions. With each day, the banality of waiting began to overshadow his fear of being captured. When his final night came and the Việt Cộng knocked down his door, maybe

part of him was almost relieved. He had already accepted how small he was in the great wheel of history that had set our family in motion.

Lying on the ground, in the moment before they shot him, my great-uncle looked up at the black sky and thought of his daughter, my dì Đạm. She would survive the war and eventually resettle in California, becoming the matriarch of our family gatherings. Every New Year, we drove up from San Diego to Westminster to visit her and her grandsons. My sister and I accepted her red envelopes fat with bills, mumbling our quick thanks before running outside to play with our cousins. No one had ever told us what she left behind.

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I thought my great uncle's story would offer me more answers. Instead, it sharpened a hunger that had lived in me for longer than I had realized. Nothing I imagined about my family could substitute for the solidity of actually knowing. If I could place them in a history, if I could sit within the fullness of their stories, then maybe I would finally understand who they were beyond their silences.

I carried that hunger with me last February when I visited Tâm Hải for the first time. The island was still poor as my mother remembered it, with a familiarity only found in the countryside. The man at the coffee stand went to high school with my uncle; his wife knew my mother. Maybe this place still recognized me as its own, even a generation later.

But when I searched the island for signs of the battle that cậu Nhiên told me about, I found no war monuments or markers, only one nghĩa trang liệt sĩ, a government-funded cemetery on the main road with tombstones for Northern soldiers. Nothing but cậu Nhiên's story to prove that what had happened to my great-uncle was true. When I asked him about the cemetery, he

shook his head. “Lịch sử thường viết bởi những người thắng,” he said. *History is written by those who win.*

After the U.S. and South Vietnam lost the war in 1975, the new Vietnamese government began erasing the remnants of war history that clashed with their narratives of revolutionary victory. Southern war memorials were demolished, streets were renamed for Communist heroes, and contemporary history books say nothing of the South Vietnamese refugees now living abroad. Later in Sài Gòn, I visited the War Remnants Museum, a place that rightfully criticizes U.S. military crimes yet chooses to forget that Vietnam also killed their own people in pursuit of revolution. I walked through the Reunification Palace, the Hồ Chí Minh Museum, other nghĩa trang liệt sĩ, feeling distinctly like a trespasser. Việt Kiều like me are the living reminders of a story that Vietnam hopes to forget for good.

My great-uncle was killed by the Việt Cộng and his death is unmarked in the country he loved. In our family, he faces another kind of forgetting, a series of omissions designed to protect children like me from the past. It could very well be that he was as quietly self-sacrificing as the rest of my family is and would think all this is for the best. Better to forget the things we cannot change.

But imagining him as resigned doesn’t answer any of my questions. No, I want my great-uncle to be selfish. I want him to demand recognition, to pound against the walls of our memories so loudly that we can no longer ignore the sounds. I need to know that I am not the only one in my family haunted by all this forgetting. If there is someone else here, searching for the same things I am, then at least the path before us is less lonely than it was before.

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Vietnamese people believe that those who die dishonorable deaths become con ma, hungry ghosts rather than ancestors. Con ma are those without family altars, often because they had no homes, died violently, or have any kind of unfinished business with the living. In Vietnam and its diaspora, temples set aside the seventh month of each year to offer to the hungry spirits, both out of empathy and for fear of their retribution.

My great-uncle could have become an angry ghost as war dead often have, enacting wrath and injury upon the living. But I want to think that if he became con ma, it was in part because he could not bear to leave Tâm Hải, the place where our ancestors lived and died for eleven generations. He recognized my mother's face in me when I visited Tâm Hải for the first time. When I stepped off the ferry onto the sand, he hoped that I could see why my mother loves her hometown so much, the sea stretching endlessly into the sky.

When I wandered through countless war memorials in Sài Gòn, he listened to me wonder about everything they didn't say. He pressed me towards his story because he wanted me to find the question at the heart of who he was, the rupture between him and the country he loved.

Maybe he tried asking the same question to others in my family, but I suspect they no longer want to know the answers. Soon after his death, most of them left Vietnam with the hopes of building new lives beyond war and poverty. Now they wonder why, when they have spent years moving forward, I keep looking back.

But in remaining silent about their grief, my family unwittingly passed down to me another loss, that of the ancestral knowledge that could have helped me understand who we once were. How can I blame them for choosing forgetting to survive? And how can I not think about what will happen as a result: future generations, grasping in the dark for their own histories. Our

generations becoming strangers to each other, so afraid of the hurt in both the question and its answer that we choose not to say anything at all.

Forgetting comes with costs that I am no longer willing to pay. But when I try to speak, my voice is still halting, still worried that I'm only being selfish. If my family has refused to remember for this long, imagine how they would feel about me writing down secrets that I was never supposed to know. Maybe my great-uncle would think I am a thief, stealing his story to name my own silences rather than his.

Then again, sometimes it feels like it might be the other way around, that my great-uncle's story has overtaken me in its efforts to tell itself. It has to be him, the restless presence keeping me awake, crossing out countless pages until I arrive at the first one that mentions his name. I don't know if I can do what he's asking of me. I write in the wrong language; I imagine a war I have never felt. But I am the only one we know who is willing to try.

As I write I listen for him, each silence a new space for his words to find their way in. As part of the dead, my great uncle teaches me to remember. As part of the living, I try to speak his memory into new questions, new strands of possibility that might lead us back to one another.