“They’re speaking Vietnamese,” I say incredulously to my partner, who responds that they are often too loud in the morning.

It’s the first time I become aware of the people living in the apartment above, and I’m struck with a terrible longing, unhinged on the inside. I’m reminded that I rarely hear or speak my mother tongue. Listening to the sounds that once shaped my world, I feel like a stranger down below.

But the neighbours are not actually speaking—the sound is coming from their television. And I can’t make out any words, although the inflection is instantly familiar to my ear. There’s a crack spreading in the ceiling, a spot where the stucco has crumbled. Looking up, the longing is intensified because everything coming through inches of concrete is muffled, arriving not as language but stunted reverb.

Weeks later, I see an elderly couple leaving the building. I catch a word of Vietnamese—đây—and turn my head. It’s a simple word that indicates a location, here. I follow them out into the street and through the grocery store. It’s early fall, but they are both bundled up. The woman is in a puffy jacket and knitted scarf that covers half her face, her glasses foggy. The man has on an ushanka, his hands meeting behind his slightly hunched back. In the store, they stop to inspect the produce, picking up scallions and tomatoes, comparing prices. I’m intrigued by their presence.
in this part of the city, that they live in a condo on a street that has been described as one of the “coolest” neighbourhoods in the world, populated by mostly white hipsters and young professionals.

I make up my mind that they are the neighbours, and I try to make sense of how they came to be here: refugees who’ve lived for decades in an old suburban house, close to others who speak their language, a house they’ve now sold because their children are grown and they’re getting too old to climb stairs. Seeing them disrupts the idea of a life I’ve built for myself, away from my family and away from the past.

They are both the same height, and the way they move together down the aisle is an aching image of heterosexual domesticity, one that neither my mother nor I will ever get to experience. Is this what a Vietnamese couple growing old together looks like? Is this what happens when you survive war intact? Is it the life you get to settle into when no one dies? I exit the store and slip into the crisp air, confounded by how my day has been derailed, and how the things I’ve lost come back in the ordinary shape of two small strangers.

That night, yearning for comfort, which stands in for something I can’t exactly put my finger on, I look for a television serial from my childhood. I find *The New Heavenly Sword and Dragon Sabre* streaming online. Released in Hong Kong in 1986 and starring a baby-faced Tony Leung Chiu-wai, the epic follows an orphaned protagonist as he unwittingly acquires supreme martial arts, going on to save first the wuxia world from nefarious machinations and then China from Mongol invasions. Adapted from Louis Cha’s novel, the serial is dubbed into Vietnamese from the Cantonese original. I play the first episode and it is like a reunion: the storyline and I catch up, the voice-overs are long-lost family members, an old world unlocks, and meanings take their place in words.

When I first came to Canada, I was forbidden from watching these serials, which my aunts brought home as cassettes from video shops in Little Saigon. “Don’t waste your brain,” I was told. The Vietnamese words would crowd my head, preventing me from letting in new English ones. To this day, I’m constantly wary of the limited real estate in my mind, and thus forget, or fail to remember, too many things of great importance. Back then, I’d spend afternoons trying to recall alphabet letters without singing the song out loud while pining to learn if our hero would succeed in mastering the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms.

Binge watching *The New Heavenly Sword and Dragon Sabre* now feels like a rebellious act. I want all the words to crowd my mind again. I’d happily erase Deleuze and Derrida to let them in. When I get to the part where the hero’s parents commit suicide because other people’s expectations are just too much and the world is a tangle of tragic impossibilities, I realize that the Vietnamese words I got from martial arts serials are all about honour, sacrifice, heartbreak, revenge, and gallantry. Maybe my aunts were right; what good are they for a boy who will go on to live in a condo on West Queen West in Toronto and teach university students how to appreciate literature?

What I learned is this: when the hero falls off a cliff, he never dies. He always returns with renewed purpose, a changed man. Midway through the series,
when Tony Leung tumbles from a rocky precipice, he lands in a secret grotto. Inside that grotto is an ancient gorilla, and sewn inside that gorilla’s stomach is the *Nine Yang Manual*, a coveted manuscript. With nothing but time, our hero contemplates the manuscript’s contents. One day, he emerges from the grotto to see the morning light. Using his new chi, he flies to the surface.

A fall is not an end. The return of those who disappear, who seemingly die, is inevitable. The hero’s reappearance keeps the plot going.

My father is not a hero, but he has fallen from our lives.

In the late 1980s, my family decided to flee Vietnam. By that time, my father had been back with us for six years. Before that, he was interned in a Communist re-education camp for seven years. And before that there was war.

He came back to my mother, who didn’t get on an airplane to come to Canada with her parents and siblings but stayed behind to wait for her imprisoned husband. At a time when everyone scrambled to get out, she had no choice but to begin again in the ruins of war. She took care of her three young children, my siblings, first by peddling cigarettes in the street and then by buying and selling gold on the black market. She had to learn how to ride a motorbike to get away from the police; those who ran on foot always got caught.

When my father returned, I was born. But the life he’d known was no longer. The nation he’d fought for was wiped from the map. Those he commanded had left or died. His old fatigues burned. In this new Vietnam, a man like him was marked, disposable. For a long time, I couldn’t imagine what he had gone through in the camp. As an adult, I read another man’s experience; it is the closest I’ll ever get to my father’s: “We spent nine hours in the field, with three hours of political orientation followed by one hour of self-criticism and confession when we returned to the base in the evening. A thirteen-hour day, every day.” I wondered about the land mines he had to clear or the trenches he had to dig. The beatings he received or the humiliation he swallowed. I imagine that, in the absence of food, he ate geranium leaves, lizards, snails, and cockroaches to survive. How all this bent his back and battered his mind, how heartbreak stayed with him. All this lives on in me, in the tense and aching body I’ve inherited. They are the things that make these words possible. This is how the story, with its many gaps, continues.

My mother visited him, trekking days and catching different buses to get to the camp. This was his sole reason for staying alive, to hope for another day. He didn’t know how long he would stay in detention or when he would be released. Life went on in the outside world. I can’t fathom what it was like for him to one day come back to so much loss. Freedom can be terrifying. It can return you to a world all foreign. But he himself was also transformed: what was inside him he couldn’t protect from those years away.

From the first few years of my life and the last of his, all I have are mundane and hazy memories. My father couldn’t find work so he looked after me, rocking me to sleep, spoon-feeding me sweet rice, waiting for me by the gates in the afternoon when school let out.
One day, my father placed me on top of his shoulders. My legs dangled on either side of his neck. I remember him walking by a concrete wall outside our house and telling me not to touch the barbed wire above. I remember there was a balloon. I remember I was filling more balloons with water inside. He said, “Child, finish doing that when you come back home.”

This is the last memory I have of him. On that day, my mother, siblings, and I got into a truck, and that truck took us to the water, and in the water was a boat, and that boat took us to Cambodia, and in Cambodia we went into the jungle, and on the other side was Thailand, and in Thailand was a processing centre, and after the processing centre was a refugee camp.

And this was how we fell from his life.

It was now his wife and children in a camp, and my father must make his way to us. I don’t know with certainty why he stayed behind, and I cannot muster the courage to ask my mother. Not knowing what the other knows has been the bond between us. I know that these secret “border crossings,” as we say in Vietnamese, were dangerous and uncertain. Many people were apprehended and sent back. He stayed, just in case, to keep our lives safe so we had something to return to. And my father had managed one reunion before, against all odds, so he must have been hopeful for yet another one.

I have a photograph of him. I’m unsure how it came into my possession. His thin figure leans against a light blue wall. He is wearing a pair of brown leather sandals, dark grey trousers, and a white button-up shirt. His arms are crossed. Next to him is a big vase with long branches of yellow apricot blossoms, a symbol of good luck. It is Têt, the lunar new year. He is smiling and you can see his white teeth.

On the back of the photo, he writes in Vietnamese:

Anh anh chup ở nhà đi Xuân Ky Ty – cuối còn buôn quá em nhé. Mẹ con em là nguồn sống cuối anh – Thiếu vàng đói chẳng còn thì vế. Em có hiểu cho anh oí?? Xa như the quá dừ rỗi – Đoàn từ Tôi nơi rỗi. Yêu dồi lên em nhé!

And then in English: “Your devoted husband.” I’m astonished to read these three English words. Although it shouldn’t surprise me because he must have been in contact with many American military personnel during the war, I’m still brimming when I think I’ve discovered something I hadn’t known about him. English is another thing we now share. If we were to meet again, could we speak to each other in this language? Does this mean that what I feel will be understood? I become just a little closer to him—an amateur archeologist’s reward.

Deciphering the five short lines in Vietnamese is a struggle. As I attempt to read them, only some words reveal themselves to me, like pieces of a broken vase buried in the soil. The writing an ancient script requiring a Rosetta Stone. What my father wants to convey comes as dusty impressions, a shell of his genuine feeling. Even though the photograph I hold in my hand and the quality of the pen’s ink is so real, everything—the past, my father, and his meaning—is so far away, so unreachable. I go to Google Translate for help, but it too is inadequate—the grammar is off,
the meaning imprecise. Together, advanced technology and a grieving child’s desire, this is the best we came up with:

This photo I took at home during the beginning of Spring — the smile is still too sad, don’t you think.
You and the children are my source of life — without you life has no joy. Can you understand me?? I’ve had enough of this distance — a reunion is coming.
Continue to love life!

It is what he’s written and what I’ve reconstructed. Already he’s become fiction.
The photograph is signed and dated February 24, 1989. Shortly after, my father got into a boat to join us at the refugee camp. We never heard from him again.
And that was how he fell from our lives.

Twenty-three years later, my sister calls me on the telephone.
“A man said he saw Dad in Saigon in 2005,” she says over the grainy line.
“That’s impossible! He’s dead!” I reply.

Of course, we don’t know for sure. There is no official record, no certificate, no body to confirm his death. And without such things—without what the living call resolution—the dead can return in any shape or form, at any moment in time. Without warning.

During a high-school reunion for Vietnamese refugees in Texas in 2012, a man approaches my aunt and says, I know your brother. How is he? After her stunned response, he tells her, No, I saw him when he was fixing a house. I came up to him and we chatted briefly. He was living with a woman and seemed a bit strange as we caught up. I know that woman, I’ll give you her name. My aunt also asks him to draw a map to her house. My cousin in Ho Chi Minh City, what Saigon is now called, gets on her motorbike and drives there. When she arrives, she meets the woman, who immigrated to the United States years earlier but, as it happens, is back visiting family at the time. She says, Yes, I know him. He hung out with my brothers back in the day.

And that is it, that is all we know. What someone said to someone else. What was relayed to my cousin relayed to my aunt relayed to my mother relayed to my sister and then to me. And a crude drawing of parallel lines that became streets when labelled, a square that was supposed to be a house, a woman’s name, and the year 2005 circled.

“He would never leave us for a woman,” my sister says emphatically.

“So what do we do?” I ask.

I get off the phone, lie down, and fall asleep. In my dream, a rat tears through layers of plaster and fibre, gnawing a hole in the wall large enough for its body.
Out of the opened space crawl small, fleshy lumps. My sister thinks we should speak directly with the man and the woman. My brother thinks the man is old and senile, someone who made up the whole thing or has mixed up his dates. My mother cries at night, everything she’s repressed coming back, Why did he abandon me and the children? Why doesn’t he love me?

Our family thrown into crisis by a man who thought he saw a ghost.

For days, I can’t do anything but stay in bed. One morning, I get up, wash my face, and dress. My
sister emails me: “I know for sure he is no longer alive so what’s the point of knowing the story.” It is a statement and not a question. She’s right. We decide to leave it alone. She adds, “Don’t bring this up with Mom . . . just pretend you don’t know. I don’t want her to think about this any longer.” We have to finally give the story an ending, and in the place of a missing body, we put down a single dot.

I realize that I’ve waited my entire life for this moment—for my father’s return. After her husband’s sudden passing, Joan Didion writes about entering the time of magical thinking. For those who grieve, magical thinking is the cerebral insistence, despite material evidence, that the dead will come back, that death is not final. It is an emotional attachment to hope, a living of time that awaits the rewinding of the clock. The materials of the past have not yet moved, or indeed cannot move, into the past tense. The cold body’s organs, the pair of shoes, last night’s dinner: all hold out for the next moment, the coming return. Without information or answers to help regain a sense of control over death, I’ve spent my childhood and much of my adult life drifting through the time of magical thinking. And yet I’ve never stopped to consider what my father’s return might actually mean.

Didion asks, “If the dead were truly to come back, what would they come back knowing? Could we face them? We who allowed them to die?” Magical thinking has nothing to do with the dead and nothing to do with their return. It is the living’s way of staying in the world, and that is a hard lesson to learn. The dead would come back knowing nothing and we would not know how to face them, we who allowed ourselves to live. We wish that the dead will return to us, but we do not want to believe that they might have nothing to come back to, that in an instant we are forever changed—that days and then years have passed, that addresses have changed, that other people have populated our lives. Shared language is gone, and life has left the dead behind.

If my father comes back and goes to the house we once all lived in together, he’d find an entirely new family. The husband would politely greet him at the door and say, The people before us left long ago, we hear they are in Canada now. The door would click shut and my father would turn the corner alone. Without direction in this new world, he would have no way of finding us.

Months later, I feel an intense anger. How could he leave? How could he let me suffer?

I crawl back into bed, remaining there for days. I’m not sure how or when I’ll come back out. But then I have a deadline to meet, and drinks with friends. My roommate makes me a dal. I make plans to visit my best friend in London, to tell her everything in person. And just like that, life gets going again. When the opportunity presents itself, I do not go looking for him. It is a betrayal of my devotion, but I feel, for the first time, that the void my father left was not as large as I thought it was. It dawns on me that through the years I’ve somehow patched the edges of the gaping hole. Or live around it so life’s fullness might canopy over the absence it encircles. He’s no longer a part of how I live, I say to my friend when we fly from London to Warsaw. We both cry in the hotel room. What comes after magical thinking?
My father died the moment he returned. He needed to come back in order for me to let him go.

In 2004, my mother, my sister, and I return to Vietnam. My sister’s husband comes with us. This is our first trip back since we left sixteen years earlier. We are tourists who trace the S-shape of the country, going from south to north, visiting cities, beaches, and historical ruins. What we see is a packaged tour for those who’ve been away too long.

During our last few days in the country, we decide, on a whim, to go to our old house. The taxi drops us off in front of a wet market. This is as far as I can take you, there’s no car allowed into those small alleys, the driver says. We make the rest of our way on foot, passing stalls of green vegetables, hanging pieces of meat, and slabs of scaled fish. Buzzing flies. The bustle of prices and women haggling.

We arrive at a house that looks freshly painted. It is smaller than I remember. The concrete wall with barbed wire is still there. My memory expands: I see now that it fences off another row of houses, where other people are living their lives next to the moment I’ve long preserved. Down the alley is a temple that I used to play in front of; the monks there even gave me a Buddhist name, one that I can’t recall.

I borrow my brother-in-law’s camera and take photos of the house and everything that surrounds it. I want this to be real, to not have to rely on memory alone. As I’m clicking the button again and again, I feel a sense of creeping desperation. Somehow, none of this will remain. In the next minute it will all crumble into dust, and who I am will be swept away with it. I’m convinced that these images I’m making now will serve some crucial future purpose. One day, I’ll show them to my nieces and nephews, or to the person I spend the rest of my life with. One day, I might sit down to write about this experience. Everything will have been buried under other things by then.

Later, when my sister and her husband divorce, he takes the photos with him. Clearing out his old life, he must have looked at them and, seeing nothing of significance, threw everything into the trash.

As we are leaving, a woman calls out my mother’s name.

We turn around and she is approaching us with open arms. Welcome home, she says. But we, with our backpacks and cameras and sunscreen, are nowhere near home. Long time no see, are you good? the woman asks. Shocked, my mother embraces her. I could tell it was you from your gait, the woman says. It is as if time has contracted. The past can really come around again. A policeman lives there now, she says, pointing at the house. While we’ve been away, this woman has stayed put, continuing the life we’ve left behind in the same house adjacent to the one that used to be ours. She says my mother hasn’t aged a bit. Sixteen years crushed flat like a can of Coca-Cola. What are you doing back here? she asks. To be recognized is to be ejected from the present. I do not know who she is, but she knows who I am.

She puts a hand on my arm, and I understand that we are the ghosts that have reappeared on a random hot afternoon in the middle of a tiny alley.

Because there is no grave that marks my father’s place in this world, I do not know where to find
him. A meeting with the dead can’t be planned, a reunion always delayed. No flowers placed on a headstone. But he wanders on a path I’ve carefully mapped out for him. He’s walking through one right now. He’s coming closer. He’ll call out my name. I’ll turn around.

Truth is, I do not dream of him, and no, he does not come back to me. Sometimes I struggle to recall what he looks like, a figure flickering in the mind’s blur. If what my mother says is true—that I resemble him—then the image that reflects in the mirror is a negative that cannot be developed. One day, cheekbones will soften and lines will crack and they too shall fade away.

In a poem, Li-Young Lee describes walking up a hill to visit his father’s grave. After forty-one lines, and starting over again and again, he never arrives. The poem is about the difficulty of relaying what is true and accurate about our relationship with the dead. It suggests the impossibility of meeting with them, even if the grave is there, the chrysanthemums in our hands are real, and our longing is infinite. In the end, the poet writes:

And what was far grows near,
and what is near grows more dear,

and all of my visions and interpretations depend on what I see,

and between my eyes is always the rain, the migrant rain.

The migrant rain is what falls between the past and the present, the dead and the living. It is the screen through which everything that was is filtered. The years take on the glassy translucence of water. What we see are blurred shapes shifting in reverse. All our visions and interpretations as we turn back are moving outlines of other people and ourselves. To live we migrate in time, and to speak we learn the language of rain.

All these words are sheltered under an awning. Dripping with the migrant rain.

Forty episodes later, nearing the end of The New Heavenly Sword and Dragon Sabre, I hear again the sounds coming through the ceiling. I stand up on the couch, find my balance, and slowly position my computer under a vent. I turn the volume up—click, click, click—and press Play. Vietnamese words travel through the little slits, along a network of ducts, and into the home above. I know they are garbled or drowned out in all the darkness and distance, but I hope the neighbours know that I am here.