The Future of Theatre is Trans: An Exploration of Transgender Identities in Diasporic Communities Through Performance Writing

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The Future of Theatre is Trans

An Exploration of Transgender Identities in Diasporic Communities Through Performance Writing

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how performance writing about transgender identities in theatre expands upon histories within the Vietnamese and Black American communities, with regards to cultural practices and assimilation into the United States. With a synthesis of autobiographical experiences and queer theory, I will self produce an original play exploring the nature of intersectional identities across race, gender, and citizenship.

_Last Stop_ is an original full length play that will highlight a cast of only people of colour and especially, a cast of majority Asian Americans. As a transgender Vietnamese and Black American undergraduate, I seek to create work of importance for marginalised peoples and share a history so often underrepresented or simply not performed at all. I plan to also act in the role of the lead transgender identifying character to further explore the process of self producing work as both a playwright and an actor. In this way, I am not only exploring the intersectionality of self identity but also the intersectionality within the theatrical artist profession. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to focus on how personal, transgender experiences can enhance and inform theatrical performance writing, culminating in the production of _Last Stop_ outside of campus through the Denver Arts and Venues grant.
Part One: Statement of Purpose

1. **Defining Gender, Diasporic Community, and the Transgender Storyteller**

   Artists are not meant to provide solutions, but offer the questions that lead society to new horizons through our communal reflections together. When deconstructing harmful, oppressive paradigms, we must look to the source and ask ourselves: what is the truth? Truth is the guiding force for oppressed communities and reclamation of identity can only be successful when truth is investigated. Performance as a genre expands to much more than the stage or the screen, it is how we operate as humans in community with one another and artists are merely those folks committed to exposing performance as a conduit for inclusive problem solving. One of our most performative selves comes from our relationship with gender and once we recognise such a binary understanding of expression is founded in colonisation, other binaries can be investigated and decolonised through artistic pursuits.

   Gender for colonised peoples has never existed under the false pretense of “male” and “female” and it is only after colonisation (and its effects causing the creation of diasporic communities) that the collective consciousness shifts towards the values of the oppressor. More specifically, Vietnamese transgender and queer identities have been consistently misconstrued because of racist, transmisic\(^1\), and homomisic\(^2\) rhetoric created by white supremacist ethnographers\(^3\). Through such influence, the descendents of the Vietnamese diaspora of course struggle to maintain ancestral knowledge purposefully misconstrued by their oppressors both in

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\(^1\) Form of transmisia, replacing “transphobia” with the suffix “misia” to be more specific. Where transphobia is the “fear of” transgender people and has received criticism from mental illness advocates for conflating true phobia with bigotry, misia is the suffix to mean “hatred of” for greater clarity that does not offend people with legitimate phobias and mental illness.

\(^2\) Form of homomisia, replacing “homophobia”. Ibid.

\(^3\) Referred to as “hermaphroditic witches”, any evidence of transgender women or men in Vietnamese culture has been historically misconstrued because of the lack of cultural awareness of ritual, gender variance, and religious ceremony of indigenous peoples in Vietnam. Peletz.
documentation and through the literal violence of burning temples\textsuperscript{4}. For generations it was illegal in Vietnam to even speak about, let alone embrace queerness and transness\textsuperscript{5}.

The truth of Vietnamese transgender identities lies in the stewardship of trans community leaders. Historically and even today, the people preserving Vietnamese culture are transgender people who align with the specific indigenous identity of \textit{hau dong}. Difficult to fully translate into English, the \textit{hau dong} identity is a form of non binary, gender non conforming expression in which the individual is essentially engaging in shamanism to pay homage to all the ancestors who live inside them and also allow their body to be a vessel for saints/spirits of all genders during specific rituals and ceremonies. Such magick\textsuperscript{6} requires the individual to operate outside of the gender binary. However, it is important to make a distinction here from gender performance as the same understanding of gender expression.

Since \textit{hau dong} requires a deep cultural connection and operates as the radical preservation of culture\textsuperscript{7} in addition to being part of a trans experience, there is a theatrical quality to how the identity serves a larger community and, from an artistic lens, is inexplicably linked to the survival of Vietnamese people. Trans leaders are the heralds of culture in this capacity and the link to the history of drama is clear: “gender and sexual nonconformity has long flourished, and continue to do so, ...particularly in...genres of popular drama and ritual mediumship” (Peletz, 2009, p. 128). Therefore, it is not a stretch for Vietnamese, non binary artists to engage in autobiographical, performance work today because the preservation of our past leads to the commitment to our future.

\textsuperscript{4} Tucker.  
\textsuperscript{5} Yên.  
\textsuperscript{6} In reference to the difference between illusion (magic) and ritual practice (magick).  
\textsuperscript{7} Peletz.
Part Two: Evidence

1. The Writing Process

Performance writing at its core must answer a very simple question for an audience: why do I need to see this? It is a common argument that representation matters and art must reflect society, but it is incredibly reductive to the nature of theatre to solely focus on the presence of identity and herald it as finished work. The goal of my writing about non binary experiences can never be based upon representation of our identities, as this perspective only serves myself and mirrors how oppressive systems operate. I am not interested in becoming the new face of oppression, nor am I interested in oppressors looking like me. An audience needs to hear a compelling story, an interesting perspective, and they deserve to be fed nuanced, artistic feasts when they engage with performance. The purpose of creating Last Stop is to explore a multifaceted understanding of transness, dedicated to showcasing a spectrum of love, and dependent upon audience inclusion.

In my work, subversion is key when queering performance texts and guides the choice to craft an audience inclusive, queer story rooted in how much a family loves one another and forgives each other, rather than stereotypically end in tragedy. For Last Stop, I wanted to cultivate an immersive theatre experience in a nail salon because the story had to be one that could not be told in any other context or setting. The audience must see this family in the performative environment of a nail salon because they must understand the relationship of the private and public self for every character. They must see how the characters play into or reject the public self in order to be included in the plight of the main character, Nga, and truly

8 “Queer” is used here as a verb in the vein of queer theorists, “[to] employ it instead as a kind of position against normative and dominant modes of thought” (Whittington).
empathise with transgender experiences. Inciting real, tangible empathy is what makes this text subversive, rather than talking about transgender experiences for the sake of the audience simply being exposed to the representation of them.

My attraction to immersive theatre comes from my desire to enhance cultural awareness through storytelling that is dependent upon community. The role of the nail salon in society is deeply ceremonial and performative in that the act of beauty preparation is intimate; it is designed to be seen, and both the nail technician and the customer become the witness and the witnessed simultaneously during their designated time together through a series of tasks founded on touch and trust. Moreover, when we realise how nail salons are typically a catalyst for stereotypical understandings of the Asian American experience, the United States’ history of orientalism, its current obsession with exotifying “the Far East”, and the caricature of Asian subservience and femininity; the setting easily lends itself to being a formative character in a play about being a person of multitudes. Again, the work challenges the idea that art about identity can only be about one identity to be successful. The experience of being non binary and removing one’s self from the colonised gender binary will of course lead to removing one’s self from the binaries of being Black or white, American or immigrant, gay or straight. Therefore, creating a work in a nail salon that is site specific and immersive is fundamentally queer and foundationally trans.

Furthermore, the need for the play to take course in a public space begins to include audiences into a setting infamous for being a bilingual space and makes the unknown, (any language other than English) the known (English) in order to inspire both accessibility and inclusion. It is no secret that Vietnamese speakers at nail salons are a caricature in American society and, in some regard, are known performers because they realise their customers are
watching them speak a “foreign” language. The nail salon is of course already a theatrical space because nail technicians are being seen as much as they are seeing. Community can then only be created when recognising how the public versus the private self impact and alienate cultural exchange. It is the goal of Last Stop to amplify a culturally acceptable unofficial performance space to a named performance space, which allows the illusion of disbelief to be challenged actively while the action is happening.

Now that the work is finished, an evaluation of the text itself is possible only from a literary lens. The production of Last Stop will premiere on April 20th of this year and largely be focused as a workshop production to mirror professional practice about producing new work. Last Stop’s intent is to explore the multifaceted nature of transness and not be hindered by identity politics or representation for hollow representations sake. As a writer, I feel satisfied in the outcome of the play because it aligns with this intention at present and I look forward to how it will grow and shape after audiences are exposed to them.
II. The Play

LAST STOP

A play in two acts

by

Ayla Sullivan
CAST OF CHARACTERS.

NGA TRAN. 19. First Generation Vietnamese and Black American. Assigned female at birth, trying to find language for not identifying with that and struggling. Must be played by a trans identifying actor.

KIM TRAN. 37. Nga’s mother. Vietnam Born, but would never want to be seen as “Fresh Off the Boat”.


THUY NGUYEN. 35. Vietnamese immigrant. Thuong’s littlest sister.


PLACE.
Any city in the United States with a Vietnamese population.

TIME.
Late summer of 2008.
ACT ONE.

OVERTURE.

A lonely *dan bau* note is plucked. And then, another. Almost as if rain is falling. Until, suddenly, a duet between live water droplets and the monochord begins to swell in the darkness. With the swell of another note from the instrument comes the slow crescendo of a child crying and the two build upon each other intimately until the child’s crying turns into a mother’s wailing and then: only breath. Hot, hot, breath. A man is running, or maybe a child, or, of course, a woman, and, of course, police sirens are now mingling with the *dan bau* awkwardly as the sound of heavy feet dropping, or maybe bodies, begins to echo. Slowly, a voice, deeply muffled, creeps into the overture. It might sound like a president of the United States. It might sound like four. It is competing with news reports of the recession, the housing market collapse, and police related murders.

Welcome to the late summer of 2008.

We return to the simplicity of the *dan bau* until suddenly, a small flicker of light is seen in the darkness. And then another. Soon, a bouquet of lit incense sticks illuminates and we see them stand atop a simple piece of driftwood or banana leaf. Warm lights reveal to us the simple labyrinth of water that encapsulates the nail salon/stage, showing some rivers larger than others, some areas simple pools, some paths seemingly going back into each other. Floating along the labyrinth are famous images of Vietnamese refugees and screaming civilians during war time, as well as simple family photos of the Tran family. A match is lit and with its crack we are sharply taken into a summer morning inside Saigon Nails.
SCENE ONE.

MINH is aggressively sweeping the dust from shop floors out into the shops main entrance. We may even hear light drops fall into the labyrinth of water, though to MINH (and everyone else) there is no regard for the pools of water onstage.

Saigon Nails is a humble nail salon, with four manicure stations, two pedicure chairs, and a drying station littered with TV Guides and other magazines people pretend to read in waiting rooms. Downstage is a hallway that leads to three doorways: an employee backroom, a waxing room, and a restroom. Upstage somewhere, is a reception desk and the shop’s front doors.

A flush is heard and out comes NGA, who turns on the pedicure chairs, straightens up the nail tech chairs, rearranges the magazines, and eventually fiddles with the reception desk. At the end of the morning routine, MINH gives NGA a meaningful cough. NGA turns on the stereo and the muffled sounds of oversynthesised Vietnamese covers of Boyz II Men or Celine Dion songs play. Another cough. NGA reluctantly also turns on a television. Audio from *The View* or some soap opera like *Days of Our Lives* is lightly playing. Besides that, there is a silence where only MINH is comfortable.

NGA. Long day today...lots of clients coming.

Silence.

NGA. Miss V.V. too...She'll probably give a big tip. She likes your stories so much.

Silence.

NGA. I have to leave early/ today for school stuff.
MINH. Why?
NGA. For school.
MINH. You've never left early before.
NGA. They made it a mandatory registration time or something. I can't change it.
MINH. You registered last year, didn’t you?
NGA. You have to do it every year.
MINH. Your father didn’t have to do it every year.
NGA. Yes, he did.

MINH waves her off. A breath, and then with unbelievable gusto
THUONG and THUY enter through the shop’s front doors
and begin their own morning routine.

THUONG. I told you/ not to go with that color.
THUY. You said it would/ make the room pop.
THUONG. I didn’t mean in a good way! You want/ your whole kitchen to look like Tet year round?
THUY. That sounds like a good way! (noticing MINH and NGA) Hi/hi!
NGA. Hi.
THUONG. Hi, hi! Good morning/, sir!
THUY. Good morning/, sir!
THUONG. A kitchen looking like a damn pile of fireworks/ every time you go in your eyes are gonna pop out.
THUY. It was supposed to give it life! My mother is always saying,/ “The Kitchen is the Heart of the House”.
THUONG. “The Kitchen is the Heart of the House.” Your house is gonna have a, what do they call it, the Widow Maker!
THUY. The fuck is a Window Maker?
THUONG. WIDOW MAKER.
THUY. You think I should get someone to redo the windows, too? I want those bars/ all the fancy rich people keep so nobody comes to rob their shit.
NGA. Auntie, she means the heart attack. Widow. Like a wife without her husband.
THUY. I’m without my husband most of the time, does that make me a widow?
THUONG. You wish that old fuck would die already/ you could finally afford windows with bars!
THUY. I could finally afford windows with bars!

They laugh horribly.

THUONG. (To NGA) What’d you do to piss off the old man? He’s quiet.
NGA. I told him I had to leave early.
THUONG. Hey, Sir! Don’t pick on the little one for doing what she needs to do. She needs to leave early, she comes in here early, earlier than either of us, that’s balance.
MINH. If you keep chattering like little birds, you’ll scare away the customers.
THUY. They love it when we talk to them! We have (suddenly uses a stereotypical Vietnamese accent) The Charm, Sir.
MINH. All you have are big mouths that never know how to close.
THUY. You’re too cranky. Wake up and smell the coffee!
NGA. Roses, Auntie.
MINH groans at THUY and waves her off, begins
tidying the manicure stations and turning on the
pedicure chairs.

THUONG. Why would you wake up and smell the roses? We have coffee for breakfast/ not roses.
NGA. It’s an American expression, I don’t know.
MINH. Don’t you all have something better to do?
Beat.

THUY. (to NGA) You look so fat lately, your boyfriend feeds you too much.
NGA. I don’t have a boyfriend.
THUONG. Then why are you eating for two?

THUY and THUONG laugh horribly.

THUY. Don’t get so upset, honey, we’re just teasing you.
THUONG. I know why she’s so round, it’s because she wants the fat ass all those girls have now.
NGA. I don’t want a fat ass.
THUONG. What’s wrong with a fat ass? I have / a fat ass.
NGA. No, that’s not/ what I meant.
THUY. No, you have a Chinese ass. Flat like incense!
THUONG. At least I got somebody who gets on their knees/to use this incense ass.
NGA. Please stop, Jesus Christ.
THUONG. (still on the incense bit, starts mixing praying hands with obscene motions) Nam mô A Di Đà
Phật! Nam mô A Di Đà Phật!
THUY. I’m married!
THUONG. To a fucking crypt keeper!
THUY. The sooner he dies, the sooner I am naked on a beach/, rolling in cash.
THUONG. With sand up in your coochie? No thanks.
THUY. It’ll be the first time there’s anything in me in the past ten years.

They laugh, MINH has become still. The sound of moving water begins
to rise, until an abrupt drop of his broom.

NGA. Ông ngoại?

MINH goes into a backroom and gently shuts the door behind
him.
THUONG. Look what you did, you talked about your coochie so much he had to go rub one out before the customers come.

They laugh.

NGA. Hey, masks up, they’re coming in.

At this point, designated members of the audience are invited onstage for a cosmetic experience of their choice in either the pedicure chairs, the manicure stations, or sitting along the drying station. THUONG and THUY put on disposable surgical masks common to the nail technician profession, but the masks have painted smiles on the outside. Every time the mask is on, THUONG and THUY speak in a stereotypical Vietnamese accent and are perceived to be speaking English. When their mask is off, they speak without the accent and are perceived to be speaking Vietnamese.

THUONG.

Hi, hello, hi, welcome! You look so good, honey! Hi, hello! What you want today? You want special? You want French manicure? I do very good for you!

THUY.

Hi, hi, welcome! You so beautiful, honey! You want wax? No, you want special? Pedicure, Manicure, special design? I do very good for you!

NGA. Welcome to Saigon Nails, if you have an appointment, please check in with me!

THUONG and THUY begin to work and chat with customers.

THUONG. Isn’t her English so good? I ask her to teach me, she never do.

NGA. Auntie!

THUY. Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. Honey, your cuticle look like, how they call, like shit, you so good for coming in today! (laughing) I just kidding! They not bad like Nga!

THUONG and THUY laugh.

THUONG. How you work in a nail salon and your hand look worse than a man?

THUY. She the owner granddaughter, don’t worry, she know we just funny.
MINH enters with a strangely jolly fervour, mask on as well.

MINH. Welcome to Saigon Nail! Hi, good to see you! Hello! I do the Special now, who need to be help?

MINH begins to work with customers.

MINH. Oh my God, so beautiful! You want the square nail or the round nail? Round nail very old fashion, you want the square, you want the square. I do the square for you, okay? Okay!

THUY takes her mask off while doing work.

THUY. Fuck, Thuong, what the fuck did you put in dinner last night?
THUONG. (taking her mask off) If you have a problem with my bò lúc lắc you can suck my whole dick.
THUY. Where’d you buy the meat?
THUONG. Where I always get it.
THUY. I think they gave you bad meat.
THUONG. You buy from Far East too! / You haven’t said anything!
THUY. No I don’t! They’re run by the mafia now.
THUONG. Mafia is only Italian, stupid.
THUY. A bunch of thugs laundering money and chopping people’s dicks off sounds like a fucking mafia to me.
THUONG. Where’d you even learn a word like that?
THUY. This nice lady told me to watch the Sopranos last time because she used to watch it with her husband or some shit.
THUONG. Stop pointing to her, she’ll think we’re talking about her, idiot!
THUY. We are talking about her!

They laugh horribly. Put their masks back on.

THUY. You like the Sopranos, Miss! I remember! The mafia, huh!
THUONG. If I was in the mafia, I take the, how you call, the Snitch, and...(she makes gun noises) be like Jet Li!
THUY. No, no, Jackie Chan!

They laugh. The phone rings and NGA promptly answers.

NGA. Saigon Nails, how can I help you?
MINH. Don’t sound so tired on the phone! No one will want to come here!
NGA. Saigon Nails! How can I help you!
MINH. That’s my grandbaby. She so smart only when she want to be. I know I look so good for my age, can you believe your eye? Me! A Grandfather! (*he laughs*)

THUY takes her mask off again.

THUY. THUONG.
THUONG. (*mask off*) What?
THUY. I think I’m gonna shit my pants.
NGA. Do you need me to cover for you?
THUONG. The meat wasn’t the problem! Don’t blame me!
THUY. If you cover for me, I still get tip.
NGA. Not if you’re gone the whole time.
THUY. Deal.
THUONG. Thuy! It wasn’t my food!
THUY. What the fuck else could it be?
THUONG. You keep eating cheese, bitch.
THUY. So what?
THUONG. You’re fucking lactose intolerant, idiot.
THUY. Those cow wheel things have lactose?
THUONG. Get thefuck out of here before you shit on all the customers.

THUY exits. MINH takes off his mask.

MINH. Where is she going?
THUONG. Bathroom, don’t be so cranky.
MINH. I don’t pay you to yell at me and run off to the bathroom.
THUONG. The more you talk to me the more you embarrass yourself in front of the customers.

MINH puts his mask back on.

THUONG. See, if you speak up for yourself, little one, you always get what you want.
NGA. Not with family.
THUONG. Stop moping and start chatting.

She puts her mask on.

NGA. Hi, she just needed to go to the restroom. I’m just as good, I promise.

MISS V.V. enters through the shop doors, glamorous as hell and unafraid to call anybody out for being disrespectful.
Big Auntie Energy.
MISS V.V. Helllllooo Saigon Nails!
THUONG. Miss V.V. ! You do like Oprah, huh?
MISS V.V. I was going more for Robin Williams. *Good Morning, Vietnam!*

THUONG and MINH laugh, but they very clearly do not understand the reference.

MINH. What you getting today, Miss V.V.? French Manicure?
MISS V.V. And wax, Mr. Minh! I wanna get my upper lip done.
MINH. You sit down and I be there just second.
MISS V.V. Y’all got People yet?
MINH. We have TV Guide, National Geographic.
MISS V.V. I’ll just watch TV. What you got on, Nga?
NGA. The View.
MISS V.V. They put the guest on yet?
NGA. I don’t think so.
MISS V.V. Why you so quiet today, what happened?
NGA. I’m covering Thuy, she’s in the bathroom. I wanna be focused.
MISS V.V. I don’t wanna disrupt your focus, baby girl, so don’t mind me.
MINH. No, she slack off! She leave early today, too!
MISS V.V. Leaving early for a hot date, huh?
MINH. No one want her fat ass around! *(he laughs)*
MISS V.V. I think you’re very beautiful, don’t listen to him.
NGA. Thank you, Miss V.V. I’m leaving for a...school thing.
MISS V.V. Mmm hmm, a school thing.
NGA. It is!
MISS V.V. You’re bad at lying, you better watch out.
NGA. I’m not lying!
MISS V.V. Then why you smiling like you lying?

They laugh.

MISS V.V. You’re so busy today, Mr. Minh! It must be a good day for you.
MINH. No, it’s a very sad day for me.
MISS V.V. And how is that?
MINH. My brother die on this day. Many year ago.
MISS V.V. I’m sorry to hear that.
MINH. Everybody die, Miss V.V.
MISS V.V. You can’t quit dying, that’s true.
MINH. And I can’t quit working! Look at my hands, so rough!
MISS V.V. You could take the rest of the day off, you don’t have to work today.
MINH. But then I not see you today! And it would be a very bad day too!
MISS V.V. Well then, today don’t have to be a sad day, Mr. Minh! Today we can celebrate him, ain’t that right, Nga?
NGA. I didn’t know you had a brother, Grandpa.
MINH. I have many brother, you just never listen.

THUY re enters.

THUY. Miss V.V! You been help yet?
MISS V.V. No, but I’m patient.
THUY. You need wax today? I can do wax for you, first, just second!
MISS V.V. Thank you, Thuy.

THUY goes to grab waxing strips, aloe vera, and other tools necessary for the wax room from a manicure station. She takes her mask off.

THUY. (to THUONG) Should I still come to the house tonight?
THUONG. (mask off) Your nephews miss you.
THUY. I haven’t been gone that long!
THUONG. Too busy keeping Dracula company! You don’t have time for family.
THUY. Dracula is how I can afford to bring the boys gifts every time. Don’t complain so much! Is that guy still bothering you?
THUONG. What guy?
THUY. The money guy. For the house?
THUONG. I think he’s finally moved on.
NGA. Are you selling / the house?
THUY. Why you / listening in to someone else’s conversation? Are you spying on us? Shut your mouth and focus on the customers for once!

THUY hits the back of NGA’s head.

THUONG. Don’t speak when you’re not being spoken to! What’s the matter with you? This is a private conversation! Shouldn’t you be working?

THUONG hits the back of NGA’s head.

NGA. Sorry I asked.
THUY. We don’t need / your attitude, little girl. Did you forget who you’re talking to?
THUY hits the back of NGA’s head.

THUONG. Respect your elders! No one likes a big mouth! Who do you think you are?

THUONG hits the back of NGA’s head.

THUY. I don’t think you should sell the house to that man.

THUONG. I don’t want to, unless we have to.

THUY. You should never have to. Robert does investments or some shit like that, I can get you a phone number.

THUONG. Why would one of Robert’s friends help me? He wouldn’t even understand me when I speak to him.

THUY. I’m trying to be helpful, I don’t know what else I can do.

THUONG. Make sure your sister doesn’t go homeless.

THUY nods and puts her mask back on.

THUY. Miss V.V.! Okay! We ready for you, come to back, please, Miss V.V.!

MISS V.V. Already? That was fast!

THUY. Anything for you, Miss V.V.! Anything for you!

MISS V.V. and THUY exit to the waxing room. The phone rings. NGA gets up to answer it.

NGA. Hi, Saigon Nails, how can I help you?

MINH. (mask off) What are you doing?

NGA. (covering the phone) This lady wants to make an appointment. What’s wrong?

MINH. Never leave a customer alone!

MINH hits the back of NGA’s head, then goes back to work.

NGA. Who would answer the phone?

MINH. Let it ring!

NGA. We don’t have a voicemail.

MINH. I told you to set that up!

NGA. When would I have time?

MINH hits the back of NGA’s head.

MINH. Stop talking! Go to the customer!
NGA, while on the phone, goes back to the customer.

NGA. *(to phone)* I’m sorry to put you on hold. *(to customer)* I’m sorry about that, would you like hand massage? *(to phone)* What day would you like? Next Monday, 11 am? And what services would you like to have done? *(to customer)* What lotion would you prefer? We have Cherry Blossom, Cucumber, or Unscented. *(to phone)* We do have massage chairs. Would you like the manicure and pedicure special? We do wax. No, it doesn’t hurt as bad as people say. We use a very special technique *(MISS V.V. yells in pain from the wax room)* that allows for little to no pain *(MISS V.V. curses)*. Yes, we also do bikini. *(MISS V.V. yells again. THUY laughs a horribly loud laugh)* Okay, I have you down. Thank you and we’ll see you Monday. *(to customer)* Is this pressure alright?

NGA sets the phone down, as THUONG eyes her.

THUONG. I can answer the phone next time.
NGA. Okay.
THUONG. What, you think my English not good for the phone? *(to customer)* Excuse me, you think my English too bad for phone?
NGA. No, Auntie.

THUY and MISS V.V. reenter.

THUY. *(mask off, to NGA)* Get the fuck out of here, Cow. I can do this one.
NGA. You’re welcome.
THUY. Don’t be smart with me. *(mask on)* Hi, hi, hello. Thank you / for be patient. The girl nice, huh? She owner granddaughter. She would be so beautiful if she was skinny, huh?
MISS V.V. Are you ready for me yet, Mr. Minh?
MINH. *(mask on)* Yes, yes, I ready for you! Sit, sit, sit!
THUY. *(mask off)* Don’t forget, I get the tip now.
NGA. I didn’t / forget.
MINH. How the wax, Miss V.V.?
MISS V.V. You said it would hurt less the more times you do it.
MINH. Yes! It start to hurt not so bad now.
THUY. Why are you in such a bad mood?
MISS V.V. *(laughing)* You’re a damn liar.
MINH. No, no. You need more practice.
NGA. I’m fine.
MISS V.V. You’re just saying that so I keep coming in!
MINH. You very funny, Miss V.V.!
MISS V.V. And very right!
They laugh.

THUONG. (mask off, to NGA) What crawled up you and died?

THUY laughs.

THUY. (mask off) Her problem is, she never gets when someone is teasing her.
THUONG. When I was your age, I never talked back as much as you do.
THUY. When I was your age, I already had two kids and had no time for attitude.
THUONG. Look at her /, born in America, thinks she is so much better than the rest of us.
THUY. Little American, always thinking you’re the princess. Only young people these days think like that.
NGA. Don’t call me that.
THUONG. Princess?
THUY. American?
NGA. Both.

THUONG and THUY laugh.

THUY. Miss America doesn’t want her title!
THUONG. All the young people today, they are so sensitive! This one would never make it back home.
NGA. I’m not too sensitive.

THUONG and THUY laugh.

THUY. You’re so funny, why don’t you be a stand up comedian or something? Get famous so you can move us all into your big mansion!
THUONG. She’s too lazy, she’ll never get anywhere! We’ll be lucky if she invites us over to her cardboard box!

They laugh.

MINH. I sorry about the hens. All they do is talk, talk, talk.
MISS V.V. I don’t mind, Mr. Minh. Talking passes the time during work.
MINH. They’re too loud!
MISS V.V. I think they’re fine.
MINH. You are nice person, that’s why you think so. They sit around and bull shit.
MISS V.V. Maybe you can be my translator. I’ll help you decide.
MINH. They say my grand baby too lazy.
MISS V.V. She works so hard!
MINH. Not today! She leave early!
MISS V.V. (*laughing*) You’re too hard on her!
MINH. I don’t trust her to take care of me. Or her dad. I going to die alone and have no one to wipe my ass.
MISS V.V. I’m sure Nga will take care of you.
MINH. I going to have to find nurse from Vietnam and bring her here. No one in my family care for me.
MISS V.V. What about your daughter?
MINH. All Kim do is smoke cigarette and work for big company. She so busy. No time for family. She too American.
MISS V.V. She was born here?
MINH. No, she born in Saigon.

The pools of water on stage begin to rush.

MISS V.V. Does she remember it?
MINH. You ask her. I don’t know.
MISS V.V. Do you miss it?
MINH. My country?
MISS V.V. Yeah.
MINH. I miss pretty women.
MISS V.V. You don’t think American women are pretty?
MINH. If they were, would they come to me?

They laugh.

MINH. No, I just kidding. I miss my country some day. But I go to visit last year, with my sister, and it not the same.
MISS V.V. It’s not?
MINH. Everything move so fast, all people want to do is sell to American. If I want to sell to American, I just stay here!

They laugh.

MISS V.V. You don’t like cities, then? You like slow pace?
MINH. We Vietnamese, we very...romantic people. No one like romance that go ch-ch-ch (*he makes a fast kind of gesture*).
MISS V.V. That’s true, we all like a long, slow romance. Like a good ballad.
MINH. Yes! Like a song!
MISS V.V. My husband is like you.
MINH. Old?
MISS V.V. (laughing) Romantic! Married seventeen years and he still leaves me love notes every morning.
NGA. What did this morning’s say, Miss V.V.?
MISS V.V. “Good morning, my Sweet, I hope your day is as beautiful as you are.”
NGA. Wow, I don’t think I’ll ever get anything as cute as that in my life.
MISS V.V. You’re so young! Worry about fun, the cute will come. Men are terrible / at your age.
NGA. Right.
MINH. Miss V.V.! Please don’t move your hand too much.
MISS V.V. Sorry, Mr. Minh. Better?
MINH. Better.
MISS V.V. You don’t talk about your wife.
MINH. What there to talk about?
MISS V.V. Were you romantic with her?
MINH. I can be the surprising!
NGA. Since when?
MINH. Don’t you have work to do?

NGA starts awkwardly sweeping the shop to look useful.

MINH. (to MISS V.V.) We have, uh, we don’t pick each other.
MISS V.V. Arranged marriage?
MINH. Yes. So, we both very lucky we like each other!
MISS V.V. I didn’t know Vietnam does arranged marriages.
MINH. My mother make me. She did not like me alone. She afraid when she die, I never marry. On her deathbed, she told me to find a woman.
MISS V.V. She made a good pick, then!
MINH. Well, first she pick my wife sister and my wife sister talk too much so I pick my wife. Lucky guess!
MISS V.V. You said you like gambling last time I was here!
MINH. Oh, yes! But only when it not my money!

They laugh.

MISS V.V. Is your wife’s family still in Vietnam?
MINH. No, they all here.
MISS V.V. That’s good.
MINH. Not for me, all they do is talk! My wife the only quiet one!
MISS V.V. Is your side more quiet?
MINH. No, but we have less women! All women do is talk.
MISS V.V. And all you do is talk to women for a living! So what does that say about you?
MINH. Only to nice women like you.
MISS V.V. Did your wife’s family live with you in Vietnam?
MINH. No, but we did not have a house long. When we were young, all we want to do is get out. We try three times before we get a boat.
MISS V.V. Oh, wow. And look at all you have now! Did you get to see your home when you went back?
MINH. Our home and where Kim is born, they have, how you call? Like, the gang?
MISS V.V. Gangs? In Vietnam?
MINH. They at my mother’s grave too.

The sound of water dripping onto itself.

MISS V.V. Why would they be there?
MINH. They protect the grave from robber, they say. You pay them to keep grave look nice and no, (he gestures some sign to show defacing a grave), you know what I say?
MISS V.V. Spray paint? Vandalism?
MINH. Yes, no the vandal, and so they not stab you in the street. You get stab, no one find you for day.
MISS V.V. That’s horrible.
MINH. My mother grave, so beautiful. I pay to make sure. She has, uh, like garden around. With many flower.
MISS V.V. It sounds beautiful. Were you a mama’s boy, Mr. Minh?
MINH. She was not like mother. She like, more like, best friend? She always look out for me because I was small and my father hate me.
MISS V.V. Why did he hate you?
MINH. I want to do my own thing. I don’t like to listen to him.
MISS V.V. What son likes to listen to his father? Our son has been a handful since he came out. I always wish he was more like Nga.

MINH laughs.

MINH. You don’t want a lazy daughter like her! And my father was a very, very bad man. That why I promise I never like him.
MISS V.V. I’m sure you’re not.
MINH. Okay, Miss V.V., you have to be very still, I start to paint now.
MISS V.V. Okay.
MINH. My mother always have beautiful nail, just like you.
MISS V.V. What was her name?
MINH. Nga.
NGA. What?
MINH. Nothing! I not talking to you!
NGA. I thought you said my name?
MISS V.V. I didn’t know you were named after your grandmother!
NGA. Yeah.
MISS V.V. I’m sure you make her proud.
MINH. Miss V.V.! Don’t move!
MISS V.V. Oh! Sorry!

Three gunshots are heard in succession. NGA and MISS V.V. are the only ones who react.
THUONG, THUY, and MINH continue to work. Then, the sounds of tires screeching.

NGA. Should we call someone?
MISS V.V. We don’t know anything yet.
NGA. Ông ngaoẹ?
MINH. It just firework, you scare for no reason.
NGA. It’s August.
MINH. You have firework any time.
MISS V.V. Do you see anything?

NGA crosses to the shop front windows.

NGA. A red sedan hit a pole in the parking lot.
MISS V.V. That’s probably the screeching?
NGA. I think a window’s busted out.
THUONG. (mask off) Stop spying on other people’s business.
THUY. (mask off) It’s not polite to stare.
MISS V.V. Are they wondering about it too?
NGA. No / they think we shouldn’t look.
MINH. Yes, they just want to be distracted. It nothing, Miss V.V.
MISS V.V. What time is it?
NGA. Almost 11:30.
MISS V.V. Charles said he’d meet me here.
NGA. He can still get in the back way if they close the lot.

The sound of sirens.
MISS V.V. Charles is never late.
NGA. How late is he?
MISS V.V. Charles is never late.

MISS V.V. abruptly gets from the chair to look
out the shop front windows. She knows the car.

MISS V.V Charles?

MISS V.V. starts to wail and runs out the shop.
NGA begins to go after her.

MINH. NGA!
NGA. She needs---
MINH. Do not go get involve! This not your business!
THUY. (mask off) She left her things.
THUONG. (mask off) Don’t steal from Miss V.V.!
THUY. That’s not what I meant! Nga should give her her things. She’s not busy like the rest of us.
MINH. (mask off) No one is leaving!
NGA. She needs help. What if that is her husband?
MINH. Not our problem! That’s her problem!
NGA. I’m not going to just watch her!

MINH smacks the back of NGA’s head.

MINH. How are you going to help, stupid?
NGA. I don’t know / I think I could at least bring her stuff.
THUONG. Respect your elders! Stay inside!
THUY. I’ll do it. I’ll bring her stuff.
MINH. I don’t pay you to run errands! You’re staying in here.
THUY. It’s not just some random stranger! It’s Miss V.V.!
MINH. No one leaves!
THUY. Why are you so heartless?

THUY gets up to grab MISS V.V’s belongings.

MINH. Anyone who leaves is fired!
THUY. I’ll come right back. Everyone is shook up, no one wants their nails done.
MINH. They need to be preoccupied. Go back to your seat.
THUY. It’s Miss V.V., Minh! Her husband could be dead.
MINH. We don’t need to get mixed up in all of that. You want to go talk to police? They wouldn’t
even understand you! They’d think you’re the one that shot him!
NGA. So you did know they weren’t fireworks!
MINH. Of course I knew, but that doesn’t mean the customers needed to!
THUONG. Everyone needs to stop yelling. They’re all getting uncomfortable.
THUY. They’re uncomfortable because we’re not speaking their language after someone just ran out of here screaming. Let me go, Sir.
MINH. Don’t come back.
THUY. She’s our friend.
MINH. She’s our customer. Not our friend. You think I would tell a friend the bullshit I tell her? Don’t mix friends and business.
THUY. All you hire are friends!
MINH. And I never bullshit you.
THUONG. You don’t want to get involved with Miss V.V. and her life. I bet her husband is a pimp.
NGA. He’s not a pimp.
THUONG. All of them, they are only trouble. Drama and drugs and crime.
MINH. And no one needs to get into her life. We could never be friends with people like that.
NGA. People like what? She’s a good woman.
MINH. For a Black one.
NGA. And what about me?
MINH. You’re not like her.
NGA. Grandpa, I’m still Black even if you don’t like who my father is.
MINH. You’re not black Black. You don’t even look it. You’re not Miss V.V. And that’s why you don’t get into trouble like she does.
NGA. This is just a bad accident! It has nothing to do with the fact she’s Black.
THUY. She’s a good woman and she needs help.
MINH. I’m not arguing anymore.

THUY leaves with MISS V.V.’s belongings.
On her way out, she bumps into or trips in front of several customers.

THUONG. You’re not really firing her, are you?
MINH. Now, I have to! She can’t harm the customers---
THUONG. Please, she’s my sister. She needs this job.
MINH. If she needed the job, she wouldn’t have embarrassed us like that.
THUONG. You gave her the job because of me, you know I am responsible. Just let me talk to her.
MINH. Do you want to be fired too?

Beat.

NGA. I think everyone should go home.
MINH. If you tell them to go home, the customers won’t pay.
NGA. We'll just reschedule them later. We'll get paid.
MINH. No one can leave.
NGA. We can't trap people in here.
MINH. If they wanted to leave, they'd leave. No one is leaving. Get back to work.

MINH puts his mask back on.

MINH. Okay, if you have not been help, I can take you. Please do not be alarm, we will be safe if we stay.

The sound of bodies falling into water underscores the operations at the nail salon. Maybe, too, the faint crying of a child. The pools of water illuminate in some way.

KIM rushes in through the front doors.

KIM. (to NGA) Are you okay?
NGA. I'm fine.
KIM. The old man?
MINH. Everything fine. You come to help or you just stand around, look stupid?
KIM. Thuy told me there was an accident?
NGA. We heard gunshots.
MINH. People need to be help, Kim!
KIM. Alright, alright. I came to cover for Nga.
NGA. I don't know / if I should go.
KIM. If you don't leave now, he'll make you stay.
NGA. Okay.
KIM. Here, take the keys. You're not going to be gone long, right?
NGA. I don't know / the lines could be long, there's a lot of stuff to do.
KIM. Okay, fine, fine, fine. Do what you need to do.
MINH. You leaving already?
NGA. I have to.
KIM. I'm here now, let her go.
MINH. Fine, fine.
NGA. Okay, okay, I'm leaving.
KIM. Be safe, alright?
MINH. Bye.
KIM. Bye.
NGA. I love you.
MINH. Okay / Bye.

NGA exits.

KIM. Why are all these people still here?
MINH. (mask off) Will you shut up and get busy?
KIM. You should have let them go home.
MINH. If they leave, we don’t make anything today. We waste the entire day.
KIM. You’re going to scare them and they’ll never come back.
MINH. What do you want me to do, Kim? I have to eat. I have to live.
KIM. One day isn’t going to ruin you.
MINH. What if it does?
KIM. You’re holding these people hostage.

The sound of coins falling into water.

MINH. They can leave any time they want! I told them to stay for their sake! Don’t talk back to your elders.
KIM. Dad, come on.
MINH. I’m not keeping anyone against their will!
KIM. You want to test that?
MINH. Don’t be an idiot.
KIM. Uh, hi, everyone! I’m sorry for what happened today. Hi, I’m the owner’s daughter and I think it’ll all be safer for everyone if we all just go home to our families. We can reschedule you a different day, free of charge.
MINH. Why did you say free?
KIM. We’re closing for the rest of the day. Please go home.

At this time, the audience is invited to leave the stage.

MINH. You are so fucking stupid! I can’t believe you let them go!
KIM. You need to calm down.
MINH. Don’t tell me what to do, I’m still your father. You’re so selfish!
KIM. There is something serious going on outside! You can’t keep people here just because you’re greedy.
MINH. I am not greedy!
KIM. Thuy said you fired her? For leaving?
MINH. She could have hurt one of the customers!/ Don’t tell me how to run my business. You don’t know the first thing about running a business.
KIM. She went to go help your favourite customer. Her husband was murdered outside your shop. And you don’t think that’s going to affect business? People seeing you hold your employees hostage?
MINH. They didn’t know what we were saying!
KIM. You caused a scene!
THUONG. (mask off) She shouldn’t have left. We didn’t know what was going on.
KIM. Why are you still here? Go home! You have little sons.
THUONG. I paid for daycare for the whole day, what am I supposed to do?
KIM. Get them anyway! Does no one want to go home? What’s the matter with you two?
THUONG. You are so disrespectful. No one should talk back to their father like that. You’re too spoiled.
KIM. You don’t have to defend him, Thuong.
MINH. See, she’s loyal! She understands!
KIM. She’s only being nice because you fired her sister today and she’s afraid you’ll fire her too! Thuong, please, go home. Get your sons. Do whatever you need to do, but I need to be alone with my dad.

THUONG checks with MINH. He nods and she exits.

KIM. What’s going on with you?
MINH. You ruined my day and cost me money.
KIM. Besides that.
MINH. Nga is better than you at listening.
KIM. You’re mad she left?
MINH. She should have told me earlier.
KIM. She told me, I’m the only one who has to know. I came in to cover for her.
MINH. You let her run around and do whatever she wants.
KIM. She’s grown, she can do what she wants.
MINH. People talk.
KIM. They always talk. They used to talk about me, they used to talk about you, they’re bored.
MINH. I don’t care what they think of me. But if it affects the customers---
KIM. Has it?
MINH. Not yet /, but it could.
KIM. Then you have nothing to worry about.
MINH. You only think about the small picture. You never see the whole frame.
KIM. Why worry about something that isn’t happening today?
MINH. You think too much like an American. Lazy.
KIM. That’s a Buddhist principle, Dad.
MINH. When was the last time you went to temple?
KIM. Does it matter?
MINH. Wrong answer.

MINH starts cleaning up the shop.

MINH. Are you going to watch me like a stupid cow or are you going to help?
KIM. You’re so angry today.
MINH. I have a lot on my mind. And having a piece of shit girl like you ruining my business isn’t helping.
KIM. Alright, alright. Sorry I didn’t want you to look like a terrorist.
MINH. I wasn’t keeping them hostage.
KIM. You were kind of keeping them hostage.

They clean.

MINH. Maybe I should have let them go.
KIM. Something really must be wrong.
MINH. Why?
KIM. You’re being humble.
MINH. Stop.
KIM. You can’t fire Thuy, you know that.
MINH. I have to keep my word.
KIM. She’ll be more appreciative if you let her keep her job.
MINH. That’s enough.

They clean in silence. MINH abruptly leaves
to the back room and comes back with Coronas.
He sets one down for KIM, but doesn’t quite
give it to her, and drinks.

KIM. Thank you?

MINH nods.

KIM. Where’d you get these?
MINH. I keep them for emergencies. No one knows where they are.
KIM. What counts as an emergency?
MINH. This. Now, be quiet.
KIM. Alright.

They drink.
MINH. I need you to open up another account for me.
KIM. Why do you need another account?
MINH. So I can close the other one.
KIM. No one is coming after your money.
MINH. I don’t trust banks! I heard from Quang / if I close that account and open a new one I can have better interest on a savings account. 15 Percent!
KIM. Stop listening to Quang, all he does is scam people. I’m not going to open another account for you.
MINH. You want me to starve? You want to throw your father out on the streets? After today, who knows how long I have!
KIM. Don’t be so dramatic. If you hate banks so much, why don’t you just hide your money under the bed like you used to?
MINH. How did you know I used to do that?
KIM. You’re predictable and bad at hiding things.
MINH. But you didn’t know about the beer!
KIM. I bet I could find it.
MINH. Good, get me another one.
KIM. There’s still / a lot left.
MINH. Get me another one, you think you’re so smart!

KIM disappears to the back room. She immediately comes back with two beers.

MINH. That was too fast /, you have to be watching me!
KIM. Nope, I just know you.
MINH. You don’t know me. I can have secrets.
KIM. I know you do.
MINH. Maybe, one day, I will tell you when you’re older.
KIM. You always say that.
MINH. Because you’re still too young.

MINH chugs the last of his first beer and begins drinking another.

KIM. You shouldn’t keep beer here.
MINH. If I didn’t, we wouldn’t have it today. And I think we needed it today.
KIM. What if Nga gets into it?
MINH. She’s grown enough to drink now.
KIM. I don’t want you calling her a thief and accusing her.
MINH. If she steals it, she is a thief. If she asks, that’s something different.
KIM. What if one of the other girls finds it and you blame Nga?
MINH. No one knows about it.
KIM. You think.
MINH. I know. You’re the only one who knows now besides me. If it goes missing, I only have to blame you.
KIM. Have you been drinking at work?
MINH. Of course not.
KIM. Dad.
MINH. I don’t have to defend myself against you.
KIM. Okay, okay, I’m just asking.
MINH. I’m not some stupid child with shit for brains.
KIM. I didn’t say you were.
MINH. Okay.
KIM. Okay.

MINH chugs his beer. He goes to get another.
He comes back with two.

KIM. I’m alright, I don’t need another one.
MINH. Who said one was for you?
KIM. Do you need to slow down, drink some water?
MINH. Don’t baby me! I’m fine!
KIM. Okay, okay. You’re going pretty fast.
MINH. I lost a lot of money today because of you!
KIM. No, you lost money because somebody died outside your shop.
MINH. I knew we shouldn’t have picked this neighbourhood. We’re too far from Little Saigon.
KIM. We’re not that far.
MINH. And we have to share a complex with that Korean church.
KIM. The Church has nice people.
MINH. Have you ever met a Korean?
KIM. Dad.
MINH. And why do they make their Jesus look like that?
KIM. They’re a Korean Church. They can make their Jesus Korean if they want to.
MINH. So stupid. They never made a Vietnamese Jesus until we got to the States.
KIM. I don’t think that’s true.
MINH. I remember! All the Catholics!
KIM. Why didn’t we ever go Catholic?
MINH. You want me to beg some white man for forgiveness every Sunday? Why would I ever do that?
KIM. I thought Mom’s sister was Catholic?
MINH. Only because she said the windows were pretty at the church. You know your Aunt Mot isn’t really Catholic.
KIM. Doesn’t she wear a cross?
MINH. Only because it’s gold! She thinks it makes her look rich or something.
KIM. Have you talked to her lately?
MINH. Why would I talk to her?
KIM. She’s your sister in law, I don’t know.
MINH. She was my sister in law. I don’t have to talk to her.
KIM. Is that why you’re so cruel today? You miss Mom?
MINH. No, she is onto her new life, now.
KIM. What do you mean?
MINH. She’s probably a newborn baby and she’s going to grow up to be very successful.
KIM. You really believe that shit?
MINH. What shit?
KIM. Reincarnation, all of that?
MINH. It’s not shit. It’s true. In a past life, I bet you were a corrupt priest and that’s why you’re so cynical now.
KIM. And what about you? You think you’re going to reincarnate into a baby again?
MINH. No. I think I’m going to heaven.
KIM. But Mom doesn’t get to go?
MINH. No, she’ll get there. Maybe in two more lives. But, me? I think I have lived a very good life and I don’t have to reincarnate anymore. I think I get to go to heaven. And see my mom. And my brother.
KIM. That sounds Catholic to me.
MINH. The Catholics have it wrong.
KIM. But, heaven? With your family members all there?
MINH. So what?
KIM. It seems like bullshit. A story we tell ourselves so we’re not terrified all the time.
MINH. Stories are what keep us alive, there’s nothing wrong with a good story.
KIM. But how do you know it’s real?
MINH. I don’t have to know. I have faith.
KIM. That seems like such a cop out.
MINH. You would have faith too if you weren’t so ungrateful.
KIM. I’m allowed to disagree.
MINH. I don’t know what I did to make you hate our culture. I raised you the best I could. You always had food. A roof over your head. Stupid, expensive clothes because that’s what you said you needed. Your mother spoiled you too much. Let you run your mouth and think too much.
KIM. I don’t hate being Vietnamese. But we live here, we have citizenship, I have a daughter now. I have to be realistic.
MINH. You don’t even speak to her in our language. When she speaks, it’s so bad! It’s embarrassing. All her aunts make fun of her!
KIM. She lives in America. All they speak is English. She needs to be fluent to survive.
MINH. Why are you so embarrassed of us?
KIM. Have you met me? Or our family?
MINH. Did I fail you?
KIM. You’ve had a lot to drink. You can’t drink like you’re eighteen anymore.
MINH. Sometimes, I look at you, and I don’t know who you are.
KIM. Old age will do that to you.
MINH. Who is this girl I raised? She talks back to his father. She ruins his business. She drops out of college to have a daughter with some Black thug/ she found off the street.
KIM. Are you done? I think you’re done.

KIM takes away MINH’s beers.

MINH. You throw away your whole future! For what? A mỹ đen who never stayed! You could have been a doctor / or a lawyer or something worthwhile.
KIM. Or a pharmacist or a CEO or something who made enough money for you to retire early and live in my house? It’s always about money with you.
MINH. You have so many opportunities, Kim. You waste all of them. Is it because of me? Did I not push you hard enough? Why did you do this to us?
KIM. Maybe it is your fault. Maybe it’s my own. Dad, I’m not doing this again, with you. It’s always about how good I make you look. It’s never about what I do for you.
MINH. You could have been so much more. The psychics all said you would have great potential if you would stop smoking. You’ve angered all the ancestors, you know that?
KIM. They’re probably all mad at me because I don’t have ass backwards ways of thinking and don’t think they’re constantly watching me.
MINH. Don’t say that. You’re going to get cursed saying something like that.
KIM. Curse me! I dare you! Look, nothing happens! I’m still alive!
MINH. Where did you learn to be so disrespectful?

MINH struggles to get up to have another beer.

KIM. No, no, you’re cut off. Don’t go back there.
MINH. I’m your father!
KIM. When you feel like it.
MINH. You are so cruel to me. You are so ungrateful.
KIM. I don’t want you to do something stupid.
MINH. I already did. I had you.

MINH starts to head for the back.

KIM. Dad! I’m serious!
MINH. You’re giving me a headache. I’m going to lay down. That’s all.
KIM. No more beer!
MINH. Fine! Fine!

MINH exits. KIM drinks, gets up to turn the stereo on. A dan bau remix of an r&b or hip hop song plays. KIM dances in a quiet, lonely way. NGA eventually enters, watches her for a careful moment.

KIM. It’s late.
NGA. I know/ I didn’t think it’d go long.
KIM. The car is a privilege. I can’t be waiting on you forever.
NGA. I’m sorry.
KIM. We have to take Grandpa home with us.
NGA. Why?
KIM. He passed out.
NGA. Is he okay?
KIM. He’s just drunk.
NGA. Oh.
KIM. Yeah.
NGA. Should we wake / him up or?
KIM. No, no, it’s nice to have quiet in here for once.
NGA. Okay.

KIM gets up to grab another beer.

KIM. Do you want one?
NGA. Are you driving?
KIM. We’ll see who’s the most sober and pick.
NGA. Why are you being so nice?
KIM. I’m always nice.
NGA. You know what I mean.
KIM. You had a weird day and there’s nothing you can do to fix it. Have a drink with me. It’s what adults do.
NGA. Alright.
KIM. Here.

They drink in silence. NGA clearly hates it.

NGA. Do you ever wish you had a son?
KIM. What?
NGA. Like, a real...man’s man for a son. Instead of me?
KIM. What kinda stupid question is that?
NGA. I don’t know, I didn’t think it was stupid.
KIM. You always ask me that.
NGA. I do?
KIM. When you were young. You thought if you were a boy, your Dad / would stay.
NGA. He’s not my dad.
KIM. I know.
NGA. I don’t want to talk about him.
KIM. It’s not about him.
NGA. You make everything about him.
KIM. Hey, watch your tone, remember who you’re talking to.
NGA. Fine. He has nothing to do with what I’m asking.
KIM. Okay, what are you asking?
NGA. Did you…want kids?
KIM. I never wanted kids. Except you.
NGA. Oh.
KIM. It’s always just been the two of us, against the world. And wanting a boy, I only wanted a life that was easier for you. It’s always harder for us.
NGA. What do you mean?
KIM. Women. You and me. You’re grown, now. You know what that means.
NGA. I don’t really know anymore.
KIM. It’s especially hard for us because we are strong. We’re not meant to be like Thuong and Thuy, obedient and quiet. Being a woman is more than that.
NGA. I hate this, can we just go back to, I don’t know, drinking in silence?
KIM. You need to hear this, Nga. I won’t be around forever.
NGA. Oh my god, you’re not even that old yet.
KIM. I don’t want you to let Grandpa get to you. And I need you to be able to hold everything together in the future.
NGA. Grandpa doesn’t bother me.
KIM. He has always wanted a son, I don’t want you to think you’re any less for not being his grandson.
NGA. I don’t.
KIM. Good. (beat) Alright, I have a question.
NGA. Okay.
KIM. You have to promise you won’t lie.
NGA. I won’t lie.
KIM. Promise.
NGA. I promise.
KIM. Where are you really going?
NGA. What?
KIM. It’s not school.
NGA. Yes / it is.
KIM. I know it's not school.
NGA. How?
KIM. Some of the old ladies / who come to the shop say you're with friends.
NGA. You're gonna believe them?
KIM. Are you?
NGA. I'm not allowed to be seen with people I know from school?
KIM. No, I just don't like you lying to me.
NGA. I'm not lying.
KIM. Nga, I can put up with a lot, but I can't have you lie / to me, that's the only rule.
NGA. I'm not lying.
KIM. Don't yell, Grandpa's sleeping.
NGA. Ông ngoai is passed out, that's not sleeping.
KIM. Why are you getting so defensive?
NGA. You're calling me a fucking liar / for no goddamn reason.
KIM. Hey!
NGA. Are you serious?
KIM. Show some respect. Okay?
NGA. Sorry.
KIM. So, this school thing, that you always have to go to, and it's only been the past maybe two weeks / that you've been doing it---
NGA. Because school is starting soon, it's registration.
KIM. Okay, fine, whatever. What do you do?
NGA. Talk to advisors.
KIM. So why would the ladies see you at other places?
NGA. You're spying on me?
KIM. They're the ones telling me. Do you know how embarrassing that is?
NGA. You're not the one being followed!
KIM. They tell me because they're trying to keep it from Grandpa.
NGA. Why would they keep it from him?
KIM. You know what old women think.
NGA. They only ever care about my Vietnamese being bad?
KIM. You've only been seen with other boys, your Vietnamese has nothing to do with it.
NGA. Are you serious?
KIM. You have to think about how your actions look on the family. And the business.
NGA. I'm out of the house. I come visit every weekend. I work here during the summers.
KIM. I know.
NGA. I'm doing everything you're all telling me to do.
KIM. You don't have to do everything / we say, that's not it.
NGA. Yes, I do!
KIM. I just want you to be smart. You are a reflection of me. Your actions and my actions reflect on Grandpa. When I was your age---
NGA. You got knocked up by the first guy that talked to you.
KIM. Okay. Watch who you’re speaking to.
NGA. Sorry.
KIM. I get being rebellious and having fun. I was the same way because I didn’t want people to think I was fresh off the boat and only listened to my parents.
NGA. That is literally what you are asking me to do.
KIM. Stop interrupting. I’m not telling you to do that. I’m saying, learn how to play the game. You nod to Grandpa. You say okay. You do whatever the hell you want to do, so long as it doesn’t get back to him.
NGA. I thought you didn’t want me to lie.
KIM. To me. I’m not going to judge you. If you want to hang out with guys /, I get it. I never had female friends because it was too much drama.
NGA. That’s not what I’m doing. And, it’s not about…drama.
KIM. It’s really for school?
NGA. It’s...really for school. Mostly.
KIM. Don’t ruin your life for some man, Nga, it just is not worth it.
NGA. Trust me, you don’t have to worry.
KIM. Men are only distractions. You should be focusing on your future.
NGA. I know.
KIM. Just, stay away from them for as long as possible.
NGA. Yeah...you...really, really don’t have to worry.
KIM. Are you...a lesbo or something?
NGA. Or something.
KIM. What?
NGA. Forget it.
KIM. Those boys aren’t…
NGA. They’re...like me.
KIM. Vietnamese?
NGA. No, they’re all white. Uh...we’re trying to get help.
KIM. For what?
NGA. We’re trying to meet people like us who have...questions, I guess, and the school therapist kinda put / us all together.
KIM. It’s a therapy group?
NGA. Kind of/, it’s free, though, so.
KIM. How much is this?
NGA. It’s free. It’s part of school fees.
KIM. And why are they all boys?
NGA. Uh, well, we're / all boys.
MINH cuts NGA off with his entrance, immediately distracting KIM.

MINH. KIM! / KIM!
KIM. What? Jesus, you’re so loud.
MINH. KIM! Your uncle was the smartest man I ever met.
KIM. I know, Dad.
MINH. He didn’t even get to know he was your uncle. He was seventeen when we found him. But my brother, my brother, he would have never done that. He would have never done that. He was a good soldier. He wanted to fight, he said it was important. He learned everything on his own. He didn’t say goodbye to anyone but me when he left. And when, when I saw him, hanging there. I know that my brother would never have done this himself. They wanted to make it look like a hanging, like he was weak. Like all the boys from the South were weak. But look who is still alive, huh? Look who is alive!
KIM. We lost the war, Dad.
MINH. Look who is alive!
NGA. We should go home, Ông ngoại. You’ve had enough.
MINH. We have to pray for him.
NGA. Okay, okay, we will.
MINH. Look in the back! I made holy water. I prayed in front of it, one hundred times a day for one month. We can send him holy water.
NGA. Okay, I’ll get it.

NGA exits.

MINH. KIM!
KIM. I’m right here.
MINH. She looks like my mother.
KIM. I know, Dad.
MINH. She looks just like her.
KIM. You always say that.
MINH. She used to be so small. And so did you.
KIM. Yeah.
MINH. Why don’t you ever talk to me?
KIM. We’re talking right now.
MINH. So ungrateful. You’re always so ungrateful.

NGA re enters with a plastic water bottle. Where the label should be, instead is a handwritten prayer in Vietnamese.

NGA. Ông ngoại?
MINH. Shhh, shhh, pray with me. Both of you.

MINH stumbles and brings the two to pray over
the bottle. KIM moves, but does not pray. MINH goes into one of the manicure station drawers and pulls out incense, a photo, a long grill lighter, and an incense holder. NGA immediately rushes to help. As they pray, a lonely dan bau note plays, and the pools of water begin to run, drip, or move as we enter a blackout.

MOVEMENT ONE.

A dan bau note sings and the cast performs a traditional Vietnamese fan dance. Instead of normal fans, the fans are made up of newspaper headlines from during the Vietnam War or from 2008 hinting to the mass deportation of undocumented Vietnamese immigrants. MINH carries a traditionally male áo dài (Vietnamese gown) and endows it with life. It is almost as if he is carrying his own brother’s spirit. The spirit “drinks” from the prayer bottle and watches the dance. At its end, the spirit “claps” in gratitude. The strike of a match sounds and NGA is left in the center, praying.

NGA. Bá Cô? I’m sorry I’ve never talked to you before. I don’t know who else to talk to and I think I feel you more than usual because of…what we heard…today. And because my mom brought up death out of nowhere. I know it’s not nearly as big as Miss V.V., so please bless her first. Protect her. Thank you.

I’m keeping a secret, Grandma Nga. My therapist put me in this group with all these white boys who just, like, know who they are and somedays all I know of myself is that I am named after you. Grandpa says I have too much Yang and not enough Yin, which should make me feel like I fit in with the guys, but I’m more in between, than that. He’s really worried about death, lately. He’s been talking about you a lot. He keeps listening to these weird tapes and plays them at the shop. I found out yesterday that Yin and Yang aren’t even Chinese, but it started with us. It’s a Vietnamese principle. The feminine and the masculine. Hot and cold. Dark and light. It’s saying that within a binary there’s also a piece of the other side in its opposition. I still have Yin somewhere in me. Everyone sees me as Yin because, like, when you’re taught to be small and fragile and polite to everyone that kind of just comes off first. But, I know, deeply and truly, that the Yin is a mask. It’s just the white circle. I was always meant to be Yang, you know? People just, they just, can’t see it yet. And I’m stuck in this group with all these boys who are pre-op or getting hormones or something, and I’m not saying it’s easy because it’s not, but I just feel so watched by everyone because I could never see a future where I could afford that. Or even go about asking for help to afford that. Or be able to separate my identity from my family that easily. I’m so, so, scared all the time. And I don’t even know where that comes from. I’m terrified Mom and Ông ngoäi will find out where I’m really going and not understand. How can I ask my family to understand when I don’t even, really, like,
honestly, understand myself? I wish they could meet me halfway. I wish I had those white boy families, where at least they know who they are. My family only knows me as a lie and they don’t even mind.

How do you come out to yourself, anyway? How do you...how do you love yourself? I’ve got all this Yin in the way, Bá Cô, and I feel like when I tell people I want to die and I can’t keep up with anything and I want to drop out...they always make it about this. Am I not allowed to feel, like, everything all at once? Are Asian girls, or like, you know, uh, people who look like Asian girls...are we just supposed to be quiet and giggly and never allowed to feel? Because it makes us weak? Please, send me dreams on how to be strong. I need your strength. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật.

The strike of a match. We are thrown abruptly back into Saigon Nails.
SCENE TWO.

MINH, THUONG, and MARY stand upstage of NGA.

MINH. NGA! Come meet the new girl!

He ushers to MARY, who looks a lot like THUY. If THUY was wearing a rice farmer hat, buck teeth, and costume “Asian” glasses.

NGA. Uh, hi? Where’s Thuy?
THUONG. This one is replacing her.
NGA. Hi, I’m Nga. Nice to meet you.

MARY nods and giggles.

THUONG. What’s the matter with you? You mute?

MARY shakes her head no and giggles.

NGA. What’s your name?
MARY. Mary.
THUONG. No, your real name. Not your American name.
MARY. I don’t say that name anymore.
THUONG. Where the fuck did you get this girl, Sir?
MINH. She’s straight out from beauty school.
THUONG. Fuck, she’s so fresh off the boat, she still smells like saltwater and piss.

MARY giggles.

THUONG. At least she has a sense of humour. You know English?
MARY. A little.
THUONG. That’s all you need here. Have you worked nails before?
MARY. Yes.
THUONG. Are you going to be a fucking robot / the entire time you’re here?
MINH. Don’t be so mean.
MARY. What is a robot?
THUONG. Oh my God, who the fuck is this? To replace my sister, you got a blow up doll?
MINH. She’s quiet. Maybe it’ll help you for a change.
THUONG. This is ridiculous.
MINH. Show her around, I still have cleaning to do.

MINH exits to the back.

THUONG. Are you married?
MARY. No.
THUONG. Well, you’ll want to be. Soon. You’ll only be pretty for so long. Marry someone rich.
MARY. Okay.
THUONG. But don’t marry the first white guy that flirts with you. They always lie about how much money they make. And even if they’re not lying, they’ll keep you from your family.
MARY. Okay.
THUONG. But don’t marry just any Asian boy you see here. They’ll take advantage of you. Especially Chinese. Chinese men always pick on Vietnamese girls. And the ones from Hong Kong are even worse.
MARY. Okay.
THUONG. And, you should already know this, but don’t talk to Korean men. Especially the ones from the church here. All Korean men beat their wives.
NGA. That can’t be true.
THUONG. Have you ever dated a Korean?
NGA. No.
THUONG. Then shut your mouth about shit you don’t know about, little one. Anyway, don’t go after Vietnamese from Vietnam because they’re all drunks. You could marry a Vietnamese American because he probably has a college education and comes from a good family. Never date a Japanese boy.
NGA. What’s wrong with the Japanese?
THUONG. They used to colonise us! The whole continent!
NGA. Isn’t that the same with Chinese?
THUONG. And Korean!
NGA. And that’s why you hate them?
THUONG. I don’t hate them. I just wouldn’t want to go around having their children and marrying their men. Be smart, Mary. You look smart.
MARY. Thank you, Auntie.
THUONG. And good manners! You could learn something from her, Nga.
NGA. Sure.

THUONG smacks the back of NGA’s head.

THUONG. Don’t be so rude!
NGA. Sorry.
THUONG. *(to MARY)* Obviously, you know to stay away from the Blacks because they’re trouble / and don’t marry Mexicans because they’re illegal and sell drugs.

NGA. Can we not say wild shit for one day? For one day?

THUONG. Wait, you’re not illegal are you?

MARY. Illegal?

THUONG. You have papers, right?

MARY. I think so.

THUONG. Uh uh, that’s a yes or no question, honey.

MARY. Yes.

THUONG. Good. Because they’re deporting Mexicans, mostly, but I don’t think it’s fair they don’t deport everyone who came here illegally. I worked hard to get here with a sponsor and all the right papers. I’ll be damned if anyone gets to cut in line before they’re supposed to. I’ll report you if I find out otherwise, alright?

MARY. Okay.

NGA. You got to come here for different reasons, Auntie. You were a victim of the right kind of war so they let you in. There’s wars all over, and only *they* decide which war is right to support and which war is wrong.

THUONG. You have no idea what you’re talking about. You were born here.

NGA. I know that my family, people like my family, people like you, are very lucky / because the United States wanted to win the war in our country.

THUONG. I worked hard! I’m not lucky! I’m not going to have a little brat tell me I didn’t work hard!

NGA. That’s not what I’m saying.

THUONG. And don’t call it *our* country. You’re talking about *my* country. *This is* your country.

NGA. It doesn’t feel like my country.

THUONG. You don’t get to pick and choose where you were born and what country is or isn’t yours. It’s like family.

NGA. You moved here and basically have lived here longer than Vietnam, you could technically call this your country if you wanted to. But you know, just like I do, that this country will never be ours. Or for us. Or whatever.

THUONG. You should be more like Mary. Speak only when you’re spoken to.

NGA. I don’t want to be like Mary! Sorry. I’m sure you’re...fine. Somewhere.

THUONG. Who raised you to be so rude?

NGA. This is ridiculous.

THUONG. If you want to go pout, at least be useful and start cleaning up around here.

NGA goes and turns on the massage chairs, starts the pedicure water, and begins to sweep, doing all the chores MINH would usually do.
THUONG. (to MARY) I'm glad you at least know how to listen. You look like a poster child for obedience.
MARY. Thank you, Auntie.
THUONG. When the customers come in, remember to smile. And always tell them how beautiful they are.
MARY. Yes, Auntie.
THUONG. But don't flirt with them. You're not a common whore. Take this.

THUONG hands MARY a mask.

MARY. Yes, Auntie.
THUONG. Maybe, next time, you should wear some more makeup. You look tired.
MARY. Yes, Auntie.
THUONG. We keep snacks in the back. If you find beer, that's the old man's. He thinks no one knows about it. It's pretty easy to find, but that doesn't mean you should be a thief. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are slow in the mornings. The weekends are busiest, so we'll need you the most, then. If you're not married, that means you have no kids, right?
MARY. Yes, Auntie.
THUONG. That's better. Because I have sons and I'll need you to cover for me.
MARY. Yes, Auntie.
THUONG. I guess that's it. You have some kind of personality besides obedient?
MARY. I don't understand.
THUONG. I guess that means no.

MISS V.V. enters from the shop doors.

MISS V.V. Hello, Saigon Nails.

NGA rushes to her and embraces her.

NGA. I'm so sorry, Miss V.V. I'm so, so sorry.
MISS V.V. Thank you, baby. Where's your grandpa?
NGA. He's doing something in the back. You want some water or something? I think we finally got People for you.
MISS V.V. That's alright, I'll wait for him. I figured with the funeral and all...I'd look ridiculous with only, uh, with only...the one hand painted. So, I said to myself, why not go to my favourite nail salon in the whole world?
NGA. Thank you, Miss V.V. It's okay. We'll get you all squared away. And don't worry about it, it's on me.
MISS V.V. You're too sweet to me.
NGA. Nah, just the right amount, Miss V.V. You sure you don't want anything?
MISS V.V. I might take you up on that water, after all.
NGA. You got it.

NGA goes to the back room.

MISS V.V. Thuong! You’re so quiet. Who’s this?

THUONG is silent. MARY waves.

THUONG. Idiot! Don’t talk to her.
MISS V.V. Is something wrong?

THUONG pretends to clean her desk.
MARY follows suit. NGA re enters.

NGA. Here you go!
MISS V.V. Thank you. Is something the matter with Thuong? And who’s the new girl?
NGA. There’s always something wrong with her, I wouldn’t take it personally. That’s Mary. She’s Thuy’s replacement.
MISS V.V. Did Thuy quit?
NGA. No, my grandpa was shook up after, uh, you know, so he fired her.
MISS V.V. What, for coming to help me?
NGA. Uh, well / kind of.
MISS V.V. It’s okay, Nga. You can be straight with me.
NGA. I’m sorry. I think he was just scared. He’s an old man.
MISS V.V. I know.
NGA. Compassion...is really not his strong suit. I mean, I love him, he’s my grandpa and he’s done so much for us, but he doesn’t know how to care about other people.
MISS V.V. You don’t gotta explain nothing to me about family. And taking care of your own. I understand.
NGA. Let’s give you a good day, huh?
MISS V.V. Thank you.
NGA. Will you tell me about him, while you wait? Your husband?
MISS V.V. What would you like to know?
NGA. Anything. I never got the chance to meet him.
MISS V.V. He was a very smart man. Handsome. A wonderful father. And he always told terrible jokes. The other day, he told me a real bad one. Do you wanna hear it?
NGA. Of course.
MISS V.V. Okay, here, let me see. I remember the punch line, but I can’t think of the set up. Hold on, now. Let me think. Oh! Alright, you ready?
NGA. Yes, ma’am.
MISS V.V. What’d you call a fish with two knees?
NGA. What?
MISS V.V. A two-knee fish. Do you get it?
NGA. Two-knee.
MISS V.V. Two-knee.
NGA. Oh, like Tuna!

They laugh. MISS V.V.’s laugh turns quickly into crying.

MISS V.V. I’m so sorry, I’m sorry.
NGA. No, no, it’s my fault. I’m sorry I upset you.
MISS V.V. You didn’t upset me. If anything, it feels good to be able to cry. I’ve been trying to be strong for everybody, keep trying to move forward, but I am extending so much of myself I don’t got nothing left for me. I want to be able to return to myself, have a little bit that’s all mine, because loving yourself is the great joy of life, I promise you that, Nga. It’s hard to love yourself when you’re fighting time, though, and Charles was always the patient one. I guess he is still waiting on me, now.
NGA. You know, I bet my grandpa is going to be the best person to talk to. He just lost my grandma a year ago.
MISS V.V. Oh, that’s right.
NGA. I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful.
MISS V.V. You’re doing just fine, just fine. You work so hard.
NGA. Thank you.
MISS V.V. Would you like to come to the funeral? I know / it might be a little weird, but I’d love to have you and your family.
NGA. We’ll be there. I’ll bring everyone. We wouldn’t miss it.

MINH bursts in. He’s clearly been drinking.

MINH. What the fuck is she doing here?
NGA. Hey, don’t be rude / her husband just died.
MINH. Get her out of here!
NGA. She’s here because she only / has one hand painted and the funeral is coming up and she wants to look nice. She really needs someone to talk to.
MINH. I don’t care why she’s here, but she shouldn’t be here! Clearly, someone is after her! She and her husband were in gangs / and that’s why she brought all that shit here! All of them! They’re nothing but trouble. Get that fucking mỳ デン out of my shop!
NGA. Stop yelling! She just wants help. You’re going to freak her out!
MINH. I don’t want any mỳ デン, Nga! We don’t serve them! Not anymore!
NGA. She’s our best customer /and she’s always sweet to you! You can’t turn her away.
MINH. You want to get shot next? Tell her to leave.
NGA. Ông ngoai!
MINH. I have to keep everyone safe. Including the customers.

The pools of water begin to illuminate.

NGA. And what are you going to do when word gets out you don’t let Black people in the store?
MINH. Business will be better because more people will come from Little Saigon. They’ll know they’re safe here from them.
NGA. No one is coming after you!
MINH. That con di’s husband was murdered / right outside! What if those people come back? What if they try to rob us? Can you fight? I don’t think so.
NGA. Exactly, she’s in shock and she just needs family right now.
MINH. Don’t ever call her family. I’m your family. I’m your blood!
NGA. That’s not what I meant.
MARY. (mask on) Um, excuse me, Miss Black Lady? The man say get the fuck out of here.
THUONG. Shut up, idiot!
MISS V.V. Mr. Minh?

MINH puts his mask on.

MINH. You have to go! Get out!
NGA. Don’t listen to him, Miss V.V.
MINH. We don’t want people like you here!
NGA. You’re always welcome here.
MINH. You bring gang! You bring robber! All you mỹ đen!
MISS V.V. I don’t understand.
NGA. He’s old, Miss V.V. And he’s scared.
MISS V.V. You don’t gotta defend him. I want to hear from him.
MINH. I don’t want you here! Never come back!
MISS V.V. Is that really how you feel, Mr. Minh? After all these years?
MINH. I thought you were different than the rest of them, but you just the same! All of you!
MISS V.V. My husband and I are good people. He was a good person.
MINH. Why he get shot by gang in front of my shop? He a pimp! And you his whore!
NGA. Grandpa!
MINH. Don’t talk back!
MISS V.V. They were looking for someone else. They didn’t mean to shoot him.
MINH. Why he look like the guy they look for? We never have that problem. All Black have problem! Get out of my store!
MINH picks up a broom and pushes her out with it. NGA tries to stop him.

NGA. She’s not an animal! Please, let me at least walk you out. I don’t want you to leave, I really just think he’s upset.
MISS V.V. I can walk myself out, Nga. Don’t you worry about me.
NGA. I don’t agree with him!
MISS V.V. I know.
NGA. I don’t want you to leave.
MISS V.V. It looks like we don’t have a choice in the matter.
MINH. Get out! Get out!
MISS V.V. One day, Mr. Minh, I hope you get over whatever is keeping you from healing.
MINH. Get out!
NGA. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.

MISS V.V. begins to exit.

MISS V.V. Learn to stand up for yourself, Nga. No one else can do it for you.
NGA. Miss V.V. / I’m so sorry. Please.
MISS V.V. You and your mama are still welcome at the funeral. I know he won’t come.

She leaves.

NGA. I can’t believe you.
MINH. (mask off) This is the only way she will understand!
NGA. Understand what? That she’s alone? She thought you were her friend.
MINH. One day, when you take over this business, you will have to make tough decisions.
NGA. I’m never going to take over this place. Ever. I’m getting out of here.
MINH. This is your inheritance. This is why we all work so hard.
NGA. I don’t want anything to do with this business if you’re going to treat people like that. I don’t want to inherit that.
MINH. You are so ungrateful!

He goes to smack the back of NGA’s head, but misses.

NGA. Are you drunk?
MINH. That’s none of your business.
NGA. Oh my God.
MINH. Don’t talk back to me!
NGA. I can’t deal with this. Not today.
MINH. Why, do you have to leave us again for school?
NGA. Yes, actually.
MINH. You leave too much! You'll never learn how to work.
NGA. I have three jobs during the school year just to afford going there.
MINH. Those are just school jobs. Those aren’t real jobs.
NGA. A job is a job. You have no idea how hard it is.
MINH. All I do is work. I take whatever job available, I work hours you would never believe or agree to, I do all of that without knowing any English, and you think I don’t know how hard it is?
NGA. I’m sorry.
MINH. You’re just like your mother. So ungrateful. And selfish. It’s not all your fault. You were raised to be like him. And being an only child makes you spoiled from the start. This is why I have to be hard on you.
NGA. What?

The sound of bodies dropping into water.

MINH. Just like I told your mother. The evil spirits want to take good children, ones who get praise and all the best clothes and look the prettiest. We have to tell you that you’re bad, it’s for your own protection. They don’t want children who think they’re bad.
NGA. From evil spirits?
MINH. Robbers, pirates, guards, they always went for the pretty girls. Evil spirits like anything shiny.

The muffled sounds of women screaming, mixed with water dripping on itself. Jewellery appears in some of the smaller rivers, floating on driftwood and banana leaves.

NGA. You can’t work like this. Please, go in the back / and sleep this off. At least until Dad gets here.
MINH. Little girl ordering me around like a princess! You’re not a princess!
NGA. Please, Ông ngoài.
MINH. I’m not even drunk.
NGA. Only drunk people say that.
MINH. I’m fine!

He knocks over a chair.

NGA. Are you?
MINH. I’m not drunk!
NGA. You’re going to scare the customers away and embarrass yourself. Please. Go.
MINH. Kim!
NGA. Nga.
MINH. Whatever! I had a dream / about your grandmother.
NGA. Oh my God.
MINH. She touched my face while I was sleeping on a beach of grey water. The water started to rise and I floated. But she was drowning. She swallowed matches, lighters, anything that makes fire to get rid of all the water. She couldn’t stay afloat. In the water, I saw the bodies of my brother, my mother, my sisters, all sixteen of us. We could float. We could survive anything. We were built for it. But your grandmother, all she could do was cough up matches. Then she turned into a bed of smoke.
NGA. Okay, Grandpa. Okay. Let’s go. Come on.
MINH. She died the next day. I never told your mother.

He exits into the waxing room.

NGA. No, no, what if we have / a wax today? Get out of there!
THUONG. Nga, forget it. Let him be!
NGA. Does this happen when I’m not here?
THUONG. Sometimes. Usually closer to closing.
NGA. What are we going to do?
THUONG. Work. That’s all you can do.
NGA. Why didn’t you help me with him?
THUONG. What am I supposed to do? Get fired over some mỳ’ den?
NGA. What the fuck is wrong with everyone?
THUONG. Don’t curse! No one wants to marry a lady with a bad mouth.
NGA. Good for me! I’m not a fucking lady and I never want to get married!

NGA pulls out cigarettes and exits out the shop doors.

THUONG. What the fuck does that even mean?
MARY. I don’t know, Auntie.
THUONG. I know you don’t know, robot.

A gong sounds. MARY giggles, grabs a large match, which is more like a kind of cane for a soft shoe number. There is a crack of a lighting match and the lights shift. We are taken into a harsh, performance environment that rivals vaudeville.
MOVEMENT TWO.

MARY.  *in a stereotypical Vietnamese accent* Hello, hello, oh you all look so beautiful...from far away! *(laughs)* You come for a show, no? I always say, talking to American, they always want things big; your men are tall, your food is fat, your occupation of land never stop. *(giggles)* I sorry, I not serious! I want to give you a big show! A big song! A dance! I like the King and I! I like the Flower Drum Song! Mickey Rooney in the Breakfast where Tiffany! I the Perfect Oriental. Like the rug. That’s why you call us the Oriental, huh? You like us under foot. Because we have the, how you call, exotic look? American, they like things big, but always want their girl small! Like me! Can you shout Asian actor you like? In the movie? In TV?

MARY waits for a response. The actor can invite and adlib any way to get audience participation and tweak below to fit their responses.

No one say Lucy Liu! You don’t like the Kill Bill? Charlie and his Angel? Don’t say Constance Wu because you see the Crazy Rich Asian, okay. We set in 2008. Stay on theme. You not see the newspaper and hear Obama at the beginning? Tsk, tsk, tsk. No one listen unless we sing. So I sing for you. Special song. I make up just for you.

*A dan bau* note plays. MARY sings the following in a voice mocking the style of Vietnamese *cai luong* ballads/instruments in general.

*(singing)* I am the perfect girl
   I am smaller than the Pearl
   Of Siam
   Look at me so virgin
   But a virgin so sexy
   I bow to white man
   I bow to white man
   I am not a person
   That’s why they can play
   An Asian
   Yellow face, yellow face
   Bamboo, chopstick
   Ho Chi Minh, Tet Offense
   Panda Express, Panda Express
A flourish or signal sounds. “I Enjoy Being a Girl” from *Flower Drum Song* begins to play. MARY invites a now vaudeville Asian caricature version of THUONG, MISS V.V., and an uncomfortable NGA onstage.

MARY, THUONG, and MISS V.V. perform a classic musical theatre lip sync, using large matchsticks for canes and rice farmer hats as top hats. NGA clearly does not fit in. At the end of the number, THUONG and MISS V.V. exit while MARY tosses the rice farmer hat to NGA.

MARY. Who do you think you are, Fa Mulan?

She exits. NGA overturns the rice hat and looks inside. The sound of rushing water gets louder and louder. NGA finds a pack of matches inside, lights one, lets it fizzle, and throws it into the hat. This continues until reaching a manic, feverish energy. With the last fizzle of a match, we enter a blackout.

**End of Act One.**
ACT TWO.

SCENE ONE.

In the darkness, we hear the crackling of fire. MINH screams. With his screaming, we are taken abruptly back into Saigon Nails. The salon is empty. MINH screams again, then silence. NGA enters from the bathroom, wiping off blood. There’s still plenty on NGA’s hands. They try to wash it off with acetone.

NGA. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

KIM enters, like a whirlwind, through the shop doors.

KIM. You can’t leave / him alone. You should have waited for me.
NGA. I had a ride, I told you I needed to go /, and I came back! I shouldn’t have to be responsible for him.
KIM. I know, but he’s getting worse. He doesn’t even notice when we close down early. And he has more than one stash here now.
NGA. He’s probably passed / out again. So, we’re fine.
KIM. What’s on your hands?
NGA. Nothing.
KIM. You should have waited for me. What’s on your hands?
NGA. It’s gone, it doesn’t matter.
KIM. Show me your wrists, Nga.
NGA. It’s not that.
KIM. Roll up your pants.
NGA. It’s not that.
KIM. Are you going to make me do it for you?
NGA. I didn’t do anything to myself.

KIM moves to grab NGA’s wrists, checking for cuts.

KIM. _Troi Dat Oi, Con._ Do we need to take you in, again? Where’s all this blood from?
NGA. I don’t know, / it just, there’s a lot of it. I’m really confused.
KIM. Why do you smell like cigarettes? Since when did you start smoking?
NGA. Since I could buy them myself.
KIM. I wish you wouldn’t smoke.
NGA. I wish we were home.
KIM. This is home. Anywhere family is, that’s home.
NGA. Why don’t you believe me?
KIM. You’re not always reliable when you’re like this.
NGA. I didn’t cut myself. I didn’t try. I’m just, I don’t know, I’m not even supposed to be on my period right now.
KIM. Did you make a mess in the bathroom?
NGA. I was cleaning it up.
KIM. We have customers who use that, what are they going to think?
NGA. I know, I know.
KIM. Nobody is supposed to know you’re bleeding, you should know better.
NGA. Something is wrong.
KIM. You’re fine, you’re fine, you always blow things out of proportion. We just need to clean the bathroom.
NGA. You never believe me. You’re never going to believe me, are you?
KIM. Why are you being like this? You know I hate it when you get all dramatic.
NGA. Something is wrong.
KIM. You’re just having a heavier day. It’s probably stress.
NGA. Every time I ever try to tell you something you never hear me! You’re just like Grandpa.
KIM. You have no idea what it was like growing up with a father like that.
NGA. I had you.
KIM. I was nothing like him when you were growing up / and I’m not him now.
NGA. I was grounded all the time for no reason. I had to get straight A’s, I couldn’t settle for anything less, in order to just do basic things.
KIM. You got to go out! You could have friends! I didn’t even have my own room. I slept in a closet, I was never allowed to leave the house unless it was for school. You have it so easy.
NGA. So all the horrible things you said to me growing up, literally what you’re doing right now, that’s not bad?
KIM. I never said anything that bad. You always make shit up. You remember your childhood wrong.
NGA. What about the time when school called you?
KIM. So?
NGA. You don’t remember telling me when I was thirteen that I can never embarrass you like that again?
KIM. You were too young to understand what you were saying.
NGA. And when they told you I already had two suicide attempts, do you remember what you said?
KIM. Why do you always bring this up? You’re not thirteen anymore. We moved past it.
NGA. You told me if I wanted to die so bad, I should just go ahead and kill myself already. So I kept trying because I knew you didn’t care.
KIM. You tell me this so you can hurt me. I never understood why your childhood was so bad. I gave you everything I had. You always had food, a roof over your head, clothes to wear. You had friends! You had your own room! People only want to kill themselves when their life is unbearable. You’re saying I made your life like that. I didn’t provide enough!
NGA. It has nothing to do with you. It’s an illness. I just don’t tell you about it because your first reaction is to look for cuts and not what I’m trying to say.
KIM. I want you to be able to tell me anything.
NGA. Why would I ever tell you anything about me when you react like this?
KIM. You keep holding shit against me that happened years ago!
NGA. Because you want me to forget that it happened!
KIM. I hate when you get all emotional like this. How am I supposed to talk to you?
NGA. Fine, I think I had a miscarriage!
KIM. You said you weren’t hanging out with boys like that.
NGA. Not those boys.
KIM. Your mind always goes to the worst possible / scenario. It’s just stress that’s changing your cycle.
NGA. Mom, I know this is something different. There was too much, there’s / still too much, and I didn’t even know I’m or was?
KIM. Okay, okay, I believe you. I believe you.
NGA. None of this makes any sense. I’m not even, I’m not supposed to be even, I’m not you!
KIM. Nga, you’re okay. We need to clean the bathroom. And then we need to take you in.
NGA. We can’t afford / to go to a doctor, right now.
KIM. Let me worry about that.
NGA. At least we didn’t have to pay for an abortion.
KIM. That’s…one way to look at it.
NGA. *Fuck*.

KIM goes to hold NGA. It’s awkward, at first.

NGA. I know it’s only cells, I know it’s not a real baby, but I…*I know*, I know, it was and now everything’s all messed up because boys aren’t supposed to get pregnant / and I just finally started feeling like I could talk about this.
KIM. Trust me, I get it. I never wanted to be a mother, either. / I was always jealous of men.
NGA. (*quietly*) That’s not / what I meant.
KIM. Before you, I was supposed to have a boy, I think. But, Grandma, she was pushy. She never wanted me to tell Grandpa. And so she paid for everything to get taken care of.
NGA. You’ve never told me that.
KIM. I always wanted you, do you understand?
NGA. Do you resent them? Grandma? Grandpa?
KIM. They’re my parents.
NGA. That’s it?
KIM. It doesn’t matter what I feel or felt. I don’t have a choice on whether or not to take care of them, well, just him now.
NGA. You make it sound like an obligation.
KIM. It is what it is.
NGA. Don’t you, you know, want him to feel loved? Not like a chore? He might be different if you just told him once that you loved him.

KIM. I love you’s are for white people, Nga. They talk. We show.

NGA. Not because you want to be. Because you have to be.

NGA. Why do you hate him so much?

KIM. I don’t hate him. Grandpa...he’s different now. You know him in his old age. He teases you, he can be mean, but he buys you whatever you want, he jokes with you. He’s nothing like he was with me. I don’t want us to be like me and my dad. Grandpa did things, he still asks me to do things, that I can’t forgive. I stay because I’m all he has.

NGA. Is that why we don’t talk to the rest of the family?

KIM. You don’t want to talk to them. They’re all fake. And greedy. Our family (you, me, and Grandpa), we are your real family. And there’s nothing more important than that. Your relationship with Grandpa is different than mine and that’s a good thing.

NGA. Okay.

KIM. Good.

NGA. I don’t understand how you can, just, push everything down and forget.

KIM. Memory is unreliable, Nga. That’s why you can’t live in the past. We’re Survivors and you can’t rely on emotion to survive.

NGA. Forgiveness isn’t based on memory, though. You can forgive and still remember how people hurt you. Sometimes, it’s better to love people at a distance.

KIM. You want to love us from a distance? Run away?

NGA. No, that’s not what I meant.

KIM. You sound too much like Quan Yin.

NGA. Blame it on Grandpa, I guess. He’s always liked her more than Buddha.

KIM. Because he needs a goddess of mercy, not a prophet.

Beat.

KIM. Where’s Thuong and the new girl?

NGA. They went out for lunch.

KIM. Good. We can get this clean before they get back, then. Come on, focus.

They move to clean.

MINH screams from the back. It is a horrible, fragile scream.

KIM. Dad?

MINH screams again. KIM runs to the back.

The pools of water illuminate. NGA goes to follow after KIM.
KIM. *(to NGA, pointing to the bathroom)* Go. I'll take care of him.

NGA hangs back. KIM appears in the doorway of the backroom.

NGA. Is he okay?
KIM. Just a bad dream. He’s sleeping.
NGA. Shouldn’t we wake him up now?
KIM. No, we have to let him wake up on his own.

A heavy thud. Another scream from MINH.
KIM rushes back in.

NGA. Ông ngoại!
KIM. *(offstage)* He’s fine, he just fell off the couch!
MINH. *(offstage)* Get off of me! I can get up!

MINH shuffles in. He’s still drunk.

MINH. NGA! I have a present for you!

He shuffles into the waxing room.

NGA. Has that ever happened before?
KIM. A long time ago. It only happens when he talks about Vietnam.

MINH rushes out of the waxing room with a karaoke machine and brings it into the main floor of the salon.

NGA. Oh, Grandpa, thank you, but I don’t / think we should do that right now.
MINH. It's a karaoke machine! For singing! We should try it out and make sure it works! Quang gave me a good deal.
KIM. I told you stop talking to him, all he does is scam people.
MINH. You're no fun, anymore! What happened to you? You loved to sing! Remember?
KIM. I need to take Nga, don’t go into the bathroom.
MINH. What’s the matter with you? No one is supposed to leave.
KIM. Dad!
MINH. Okay, so we can do karaoke / now?
NGA. Uh, I don’t / know.
KIM. Dad, we have to leave you, I need to know you’ll be okay.
MINH. Do you see customers? I don’t see customers! I’m fine!

MINH plugs in the little machine.

MINH. Do you know 500 Miles?
NGA. Like, *(singing)* I would walk 500 miles and / I would walk 500 more.
MINH. NO. 500 MILES.
KIM. Dad, that is 500 miles.
MINH. NO. Listen!

He cues up the song. “500 Miles” by Peter, Paul, and Mary plays.

MINH. *(singing)* If you miss the train I’m on
You will know that I am gone
You can hear the whistle blow
A hundred miles
A hundred miles
A hundred miles
A hundred miles
A hundred miles

NGA. I’ve never heard this one.
KIM. Nga, clean your mess and get your things together.

MINH has completely stopped reading the lyrics
off the machine and drunkenly attempts to
serenade the company.

MINH. *(singing)* A hundred miles, A hundred miles, A hundred miles, / A hundred miles.
NGA. Grandpa, those aren’t even the words!
MINH. *(singing)* A hundred miles, A hundred miles, / a hundred miles, a hundred miles.

NGA exits to the bathroom.

MINH. *(singing)* Lord, I’m five hundred miles from home.
KIM. Jesus, Dad.
MINH. *(singing)* 500 miles, 500 miles, / 500 miles, 500 miles.

MINH stops singing and begins to cry.
He realizes he is alone with KIM.

MINH. What are you staring at? This is Nga’s present anyway. Where is she?
KIM. I told you, we need to leave, Dad.
MINH. Okay, okay.

MINH disappears to the back room.
NGA reenters.

NGA. Ông ngoại?
KIM. He went back again.
NGA. Should we go after him?
KIM. We should put this away. In case of walk ins.
NGA. You’re right.

They clean up.

NGA. That was…
KIM. I know.

Beat.

KIM. Don’t you have the thing today?
NGA. Yeah, soon-ish.
KIM. Can you skip?
NGA. Today, yeah, I think that’s a good idea.
KIM. Okay.
NGA. Mom?
KIM. What? Can you, uh, promise me something? Don’t be like Grandpa /, like, please don’t wait until you’re drunk and old for me to know you.
KIM. I don’t want to be Grandpa.
NGA. It doesn’t have to be today, just please don’t make me wait twenty years to know you.
KIM. I’ll try.
NGA. Thank you.
KIM. Will you tell me, too? One day.
NGA. What?
KIM. Will you tell me who you really are? What you’re keeping from us?
NGA. Not today.
KIM. But soon?
NGA. Yeah. Soon.
KIM. Okay.
NGA. Okay.
KIM. Take the keys, get the car started, I have some more to do.
NGA exits. KIM watches her go. In the stillness, she goes to a Quan Yin statue and incense holder on top of one of the drying stations. She takes some incense out and lights it.

KIM. (softly) Fuck.

She goes on her knees to pray.

KIM. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật.

MINH re enters and sees KIM praying.

KIM. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật.

MINH goes to pray beside her, lighting his own incense.

KIM. Nam mô / A Di Đà Phật.

MINH. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật t. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật t. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật t.

They sit in silence, looking at Quan Yin.

KIM. Who did you pray for?
MINH. Me. And Nga. And you.

Beat.

MINH. Who did you pray for?
KIM. You. I just prayed for you.

KIM takes out cigarettes from her pocket. MINH gestures for one. KIM gives him a look, MINH nods. KIM reluctantly gives him a cigarette. MINH lights it in the shop.

MINH. What? I own it. I can smoke in here if I want to. You can too.
KIM. We'll stink up / the place, no one will want to come in.
MINH. It doesn’t matter anymore.
KIM. Why not?
MINH. Everything ends. Smoke your cigarette.
The lights shift and NGA is alone onstage, rolling tobacco as an offering.

NGA. Bá Cổ, I heard it was your birthday. And I guess that’s funny, that I lost…something on the day you were born. It makes me feel closer to you. Maybe, blood is a lesson, too. I want to send you a gift. I’ve always loved the smell of cigarettes. I don’t know what it is. It reminds me of my mom, I guess. It smells like home. I still haven’t told her about…me…and this…there’s just never a good time. Grandpa started screaming in his sleep. Can you help him? The way he screams…I didn’t even think a human could sound like that. It’s a kind of wailing even children should never make. When Miss V.V. saw Charles’ car last week, I thought that was the last time I’d ever hear screaming like that.

He is so strong and both him and Mom always say they wish I was more like them. Survivors. Proud to be American. This country is the only reason why he had to leave his home in the first place and people still expect me to be grateful I was born here. I don’t think there’s anyone in this world I have ever loved more than him. And to ask me to be proud of a country that destroyed everything he loved, his home, his people, I guess there’s nothing more American than that, is there? I am only proud to be yours, Bá Cổ. Happy Birthday. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật

The lights shift. A dan ban note is played and triggers the sound of rushing water. The pools of water illuminate and along the rivers, float photographs, glasses, jewellery, and other personal effects.

MOVEMENT THREE.

MINH carries fake money, fruit, and incense in a basket. As he sings, he places the offerings on driftwood to float among the water. NGA holds a red áo dài and endows it with life to become a spirit. The spirit accepts the offerings and touches MINH’s shoulder to thank him.

MINH. (singing) Bốp nát sức sống em bằng tiếng ca
Bốp nát sức sống em qua điều nhạc
Bằng lời dịu dàng anh giết em, giết chết trái tim em
Bằng tiếng ca ru em trong u mê, và xót xa nhầm mặt với nỗi đau
Ngọt lịm dạ.
MINH exits into the back room. The stage is dark, except for the illuminated pools of water. NGA and KIM enter from the shop’s doors.
SCENE TWO.

NGA. He shouldn’t be sleeping here.
KIM. You don’t know/ if he’s here or not.
NGA. There’s a light on.
KIM. He could have just left it on.
NGA. You don’t want a light running / all night. The bills are enough as it is.
KIM. Alright, you’re right. Go check if you’ll stop being annoying about it.

NGA goes and checks the back.

NGA. He just left the light on, I guess.
KIM. I told you he went home with Thuong.
NGA. Okay, I’m sorry. I just saw the light and it worried me.
KIM. Let’s go home.
NGA. Wait, we should find where he’s hiding everything.
KIM. Do you want to be yelled at for being a thief?
NGA. We can’t let him go on like this.
KIM. All he’s going to do is get more.
NGA. You’re going to let him drink himself away?
KIM. He’s old, Nga. He’s not going to change.
NGA. I have faith.
KIM. You’re young, you’re supposed to.

NGA goes into the backroom.

NGA.(offstage) I know he keeps the Coronas in here, but you think there’s other places?
KIM. I don’t know, I was just guessing.

NGA re enters with a six pack of beers.

NGA. Can you get me a trash bag?

KIM reluctantly gets one from the receptionist desk.

KIM. What if he needs this?
NGA. He doesn’t need this. It’s ruining him.
KIM. Drinking...it could keep him from losing his mind /. It might keep the night terrors away.
NGA. It’s clearly making things worse! He can’t even paint nails anymore.
KIM. You think him going through withdrawal is going to help with that?
NGA. I don't know! I don't know but this is the only thing I can do. I'm going to school full time soon / I'm not going to be around to help.
KIM. Exactly. It's not going to be your problem in a week. It'll be my problem.
NGA. Mom.
KIM. Nga.
NGA. Please.

They stare each other down until KIM gives in.

KIM. We should look through the manicure desks. He could be hiding shooters or something there.
NGA. Thank you.

They search the desks. KIM pulls out a small notebook. She looks through it carefully. NGA notices.

NGA. Oh, wait, that’s mine.
KIM. You write?
NGA. Just, uh, poems and things. It’s nothing.
KIM. What are these phone numbers?

Beat.

NGA. Uh, for school.
KIM. One is called the Trevor Project?
NGA. Yeah, it’s like a number / to call if you need help.
KIM. Are these all hotlines? I thought you had a therapist now.
NGA. She, she doesn’t specialise in...um...in people like me.
KIM. Gay girls?

Beat.

KIM. You thought I didn’t know? I didn’t forget what you almost /, what you tried to say.
NGA. No. I...I’m not gay. I think.
KIM. It's okay, if you are. And that group is for gay people right? I mean / honestly, I’m relieved.
NGA. No, I mean some of them are gay too. It’s not a gay kid group though. It’s a trans kid group.
KIM. If you’re gay, I don’t understand, how did you get...with what happened?
NGA. Mom, I’m not a gay girl.
KIM. Sorry, woman, I know you’re older.
NGA. I’m not a woman at all. Kind of. I mean, I know I look like one and you think I’m upset about the baby because it’s like a “woman’ thing, but I’m not.
KIM. What are you saying?
NGA. It’s not a group for gay people. It’s a group for guys. People who were born and told they were girls, but they’re guys now.
KIM. You want to get a sex change?
NGA. No, no / that’s not it. I don’t think.
KIM. We can’t afford to do something like that. And why would you do something like that to your body?
NGA. I don’t want to do anything to my body. I’m just...I’m trans. I don’t have the full words for it, but that’s the closest thing I can say to explain.
KIM. Don’t you have to have the surgery and everything to be trans? You’re not trans.
NGA. No, you don’t.
KIM. And if you take those things, how is that going to affect you especially now, won’t you get an infection? Do you really want to do that? I heard every person who went through with that surgery always regretted it. Because they missed their real body.
NGA. Whatever I do, it’s still my real body! I’m just trying to tell you I’m not, I hate being a woman. I mean, I hate being seen as one. Because that’s not who I am.
KIM. None of this makes any sense. I know you don’t want to be like Thuong and Thuy, I didn’t either. But you don’t have to be anything but my daughter.
NGA. I don’t want to be your daughter!
KIM. You don’t want to be my daughter anymore?
NGA. I’m not a girl, I want to be your kid. I want to be your son.
KIM. This is my fault. I told your grandpa I didn’t believe and begged the ancestors to curse me out of spite. And look what they did. They gave me this.
NGA. I’m not a curse. If anything, they gave me strength, Mom. I’ve always felt like I didn’t quite fit in with girls because they didn’t understand me and with guys, it’s like, they’ve always understood where I was coming from. But even then, they’d say horrible things about women that made me feel like I was a target with them too? It’s like, it’s like when I was younger, I always used to say everything would make sense if I was a gay boy. Because gay boys could still like makeup and be pretty and themselves, but no one ever questioned that they were trying to be a girl. They still got to be a boy. That’s how I feel. I feel like there was something promised to me, something I should feel, and it’s not who I am or want to be.
KIM. This came out of nowhere! And look what it makes you do! Lie to your family! Get pregnant! Run around with strange women who want to look like boys but can’t just be like a normal dyke.
NGA. Mom!
KIM. What? I love lesbians. I know a lot of lesbians. I can say dyke.
NGA. I’m not a lesbian. And none of the guys with me are lesbians. We’re all...you know.
KIM. This is just because you’re in college. I get it. I was into piercings because I wanted to rebel.
NGA. This isn’t about me rebelling. It’s about me trying to love myself.
KIM. No wonder you kept trying to kill yourself! You / were confused.
NGA. This has nothing to do with that!
KIM. I promise you, we’re going to get you help out of this phase.
NGA. Me pretending to be your daughter, *that* was the phase. The longest, saddest phase of my life. I don't want to go back to that.

KIM. This is your grandfather's fault. He should have never talked about wanting a grandson when you were younger.

NGA. I'm not anyone's fault. Why do you keep trying to blame someone?

KIM. Because this isn't normal! None of this is normal! First, I have to worry about Grandpa drinking himself to death and now I have to worry about you running around trying to grow a dick or something? Do you have any idea how hard this is on me? I don't ask a lot of you. I really don't.

NGA. I'm sorry I'm such a burden.

KIM. Don't do that.

NGA. What else do you want me to say?

KIM. I don't know. I want you to stop going to that group.

NGA. That's not happening.

KIM. The old ladies are only / going to keep talking and then they'll figure out what you are. Or worse. They'll make up something worse.

NGA. I don't care about them! They're bored old women and the shop is failing as it is!

KIM. I know the shop is failing! And this is only going to make it worse! Rumour kills business.

NGA. Grandpa is the only reason the business is failing. Don't put that on me.

KIM. We'll get through this. I don't want to lose you just because of, whatever this is.

NGA. I'm not going home with you.

KIM. Where are you going to sleep? The street?

NGA. I'll stay here.

KIM. Nga!

NGA. No, fuck you, I don't want to be near you. You don't even know how shitty you're being.

KIM. Don't curse at me, I'm not one your little friends!

NGA. I know you're not! Because my friends would never say the shit you say to me.

KIM. Friends will always leave, don't forget that. Your family is all you have.

NGA. My family doesn't even want me.

KIM. That's not true.

NGA. I'm not leaving with you.

KIM. Don't be like this.

NGA continues to look through the manicure desks, pulling out shooters of whiskey and throwing them in the trash bag.

KIM. Nga!

Silence.

KIM. Nga!
Silence.

KIM. You're not kicked out. You can come home any time. You did this to yourself.
NGA. I don't want anything to do with you. I never want to see you again.
KIM. You'll get over it. You always do.
NGA. Stop talking to me!
KIM. You were always my little girl. When did you stop being mine?
NGA. I'm always this family's little girl. I never wanted to be that. Why can't you let me be who I am?
KIM. Because what you're talking about...it doesn't make any sense to me.
NGA. But if I was a lesbian, it would?
KIM. That's about love and happiness, of course it would. You can love whoever you want.
NGA. Except myself.
KIM. Loving yourself requires living in reality. You're not living with reality. You can't pick and choose what sex you want to be whenever you feel like it.
NGA. I'm not choosing. I want to be happy. I want to be happy so bad. This is the closest thing that makes me feel, maybe, something. Anything.
KIM. Okay, okay, I won't argue with you anymore. Just, please, don't tell your Grandpa.
NGA. That's not your choice to make.
KIM. I am begging you. Don't tell him. I don't want to have to deal with that too.
NGA. This is about me. You don't have to deal with it. I'm living it, not you.
KIM. Come home when you're done/. Call me, I'll pick you up.
NGA. I told you, I'm sleeping here.
KIM. It doesn't matter what time it is, I'll come get you.

NGA goes back to trying to find liquor. KIM exits.
NGA goes to the Quan Yin statue and prays.
MINH enters from the back door, horribly drunk, arms filled with paper bags from the liquor store.

MINH. NGA?
NGA. Ông ngoại?
MINH. What are you doing here?
NGA. I saw a light / left on. I thought you were here.
MINH. Are you stealing from me?
NGA. No, of course not. I was worried about you.
MINH. Why would you be worried about me? I'm the strongest one in the family.
NGA. You're right, Ông ngoại. I'm sorry.
MINH. Are you stealing from me?
NGA. No, Ông ngoài.
MINH. What is this bag?
NGA. It’s nothing.

MINH looks inside the trash bag.

MINH. This is all mine! Why are you lying to me?

He smacks NGA upside the head.

NGA. I’m sorry, Ông ngoài.
MINH. No one steals from me!

He smacks NGA again.

NGA. I’m not stealing! I don’t want you drinking anymore!
MINH. You are not my mother! You don’t tell me when I can drink! Who do you think you are?

He smacks NGA again.

NGA. I’m sorry, Ông ngoài. I’m sorry.
MINH. Why are you always leaving all the time? We didn’t raise you to be a whore!
NGA. It’s for school, Grandpa,
MINH. Quang’s wife says she’s seen you with boys! All the time with boys!
NGA. I’m not with boys.
MINH. I don’t have whores work in my business!

He punches NGA straight in the mouth.

MINH. You will not embarrass me anymore!
NGA. I’m sorry! I’m sorry!
MINH. Do you know what I do to keep you safe? Do you know what I do to make sure you and your mother are fed?
NGA. I’m sorry!
MINH. All I want to do is protect you and you go out and whore yourself to everyone in the neighbourhood!
NGA. I’m not doing that!
MINH. Are you calling Quang’s wife a liar?
NGA. She just doesn’t understand! Those boys are with me for school!

He punches NGA again.
MINH. Never lie to me again! You used to be so obedient, what's the matter with you!

NGA cries.

MINH. Don’t be so loud, I didn’t hurt you. I just want you to understand.

The sound of rushing water. The pools illuminate, but this time different coloured áo dài float. The sounds of war begin to get louder and louder, until MINH collapses. The lights shift.

MOVEMENT FOUR.

NGA holds a notebook, while the silhouettes of KIM and MINH are seen. The dan ban plays a medley of love songs.

NGA. Viet Thanh Nguyen Writes, "we fought to the tune of love songs, for we were the Italians of Asia."
I don't know what a house like without music
Always known our home to be wreckage in waiting, too
But I won't call my family and our lives war when they, of all people, know war should not be pretty in poetry
War just be war
I don't guilt my family for their survival
I carry their sacrifice in my stomach like a barb wire promise

Though sometimes:
our house do feel like a collapse lung symphony
Carried over in saltwater and bullets
My family sings through it all

MINH. (singing) Bóp nát sức sống em bằng tiếng ca
Bóp nát sức sống em qua điều nhạc
NGA. I hear my grandfather’s joy only through his singing, a laugh that sounds real, that doesn’t grind against dead hopes buried in business
He has crooned with death so often my father and I have inherited all his fear, welcome their song, too
Fight so humble, it’s no wonder our community never reports our struggle

MINH. (singing) Bằng lời đâu đang anh giết em, giết chết trái tim em

NGA. Our hearts always on the verge of break
It's not a coincidence this song translates to "Killing Me Softly"

KIM. (singing) telling my whole life with his words
killing me softly
with his song

NGA. my mother has held so many languages in his mouth I’ve always known the love songs to be the hardest to keep
Music been her longest love and I've always been suspicious of those loved by my mother.

Sometimes,
my Grandpa dances
so forgiveness finds itself back into his bathtub
Fills in the cracks and dusts off the mold
Sometimes, he smiles more when he hears "Vietnam" and a dan ban in the same breath
I don't think there is anything warmer than weary cheeks blooming smiles we grew up being ashamed of
I don't treasure anything as much as my mother’s closed eyes, hand over chest, look of love when she listens to music
Don't know anything sharper than her bite
I swear, my mama’s love song soundtrack be stronger than any back scratcher whooping ever seen
And I’ve stopped arming myself with hollow promises and self care affirmations
Been sewing love songs I didn't write for boys and girls who shouldn't have received them back into these sinews
Call the warriors of Saigon left in us to weaponise this love more than ever before
Make this self love, this family love, so bitter blade
We sing violent
the way our pain always documented without our consent
sing as much as we are screaming, naked, in spite of the napalm
We sing gospel
Like how this skin remembers holy before our temples were burnt
We sing travel prophecies
We sing incense burn
We sing Boat People and Saigon streets and eucalyptus heal

This trans body is humming a love song only meant for you to hear
A language to echo the history we lost
Come home
Come home

(singing) Bốp nát sức sống em bằng tiếng ca
Bốp nát sức sống em qua điều nhạc

NGA/MINH/KIM. (singing) Bằng lời dẫu đang KIM giết em, giết chết trái tim em
Bằng tiếng ca ru em trong u mê, và xót xa nhắm mắt với nỗi đau
Ngờ lịm dạ.

Blackout.
SCENE THREE.

The strike of a match. We are no longer in Saigon Nails, but see the facade of a Walmart nail salon, that simply says NAILS in lettering on the top. MINH is sitting at a manicure station. THUONG and MARY sit on pedicure chairs. They all have masks on and are still. Business is slow. The sounds of Walmart shoppers, announcements, and squeaky carts echo the general misery. After a moment, NGA enters. They look different. Their hair is short. They are dressed in a more fashionably masculine way.

NGA. Ông ngoại?
MINH. Nga? What you doing here?
NGA. It’s summer. I always visit in summer.
MINH. Come, sit, sit.
NGA. I’m sorry about the shop.
MINH. It’s Quang’s fault. Nothing is forever.
NGA. Can we really talk?
MINH. We talking now.
NGA. Without the mask.
MINH. No, big rule here. Walmart say we only speak English on company time.
NGA. That explains why the hens are so quiet.

MINH laughs.

MINH. You want manicure?
NGA. No / that’s alright.
MINH. You have to say yes. Otherwise, I look like I not working.
NGA. Sorry.

MINH begins to work.

MINH. How is school?
NGA. It’s good.
MINH. How many year you have now?
NGA. Two more.
MINH. That’s good.
NGA. Grandpa?
MINH. What? You want to pick colour?
NGA. No, I, I came for a reason.
MINH. You say you came to visit.
NGA. A different reason.
MINH. I don’t have any money / to give you, little one. I broke.
NGA. No, no, I don’t need any money.
MINH. Spit it out. What the matter with you? Cat have your tongue?
NGA. I wanted, I feel like I have to tell you this.
MINH. Are you pregnant?
NGA. No, no. I’ve been doing a lot of, uh, reading about our country. And back home, things are different, or, uh, were different, before the French came. And there’s people who are not man or woman, they’re like, uh, they’re both. And, my whole life, I feel like I’ve been living a lie and never telling you the truth. I just, I really want you to know who I am. And it’s not, it’s really hard for me to say, but it’s not your granddaughter. I’m not...I’m not a girl. I was never supposed to be one. I’m sorry, please don’t yell, or get mad. But that’s not who I am. I’m in between. Like Yin and Yang? I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

Beat.

MINH. What the matter with you?
NGA. I’m sorry, Grandpa.
MINH. No, what you cry for? You’re hau dong that all.
NGA. What?
MINH. It is a good thing to be! You’re hau dong. It like a religion. Very important. Because, when Buddha alive, he say there five gender. Not just man and woman. And five sexuality. And in hau dong, the people are not man and not woman. They both. Because they honour all the ancestor who live inside and do ritual. Go on Youtube.
NGA. It’s on Youtube?
MINH. You’re young, you should know!
NGA. I love you.

NGA goes to embrace MINH.

MINH. Tsk, tsk, tsk! I’m working on your nail you mess up!
NGA. I’m sorry.
MINH. Why you say sorry all the time? You don’t have to be.
NGA. Okay. Mom didn’t want me to tell you.
MINH. Why?
NGA. She thought it would stress you out.
MINH. She forget I am not like her mother. Look: Hey! My grand baby hau dong!

THUONG and MARY clap.
THUONG. I knew something special about you, Cow! That why you so bad at being a woman! You still could lose some weight, though!

THUONG and MARY laugh.

MINH. I have spring roll in the back. You want some?
NGA. I’m okay.
MINH. This a big day for you! You find out you bau dong! We celebrate!
THUONG. No drinking!

MINH laughs. He leaves to the back plates of Vietnamese food and the audience is invited to eat onstage and join in on the festivities. Everyone celebrates.

NGA. KIM comes out with the karaoke machine from before.

KIM. I don’t want you to think I’m not with you, it’s just a little hard for me.
NGA. I know.
KIM. Give me some time right now to get used to it, and I’ll give you the rest of my life.

They embrace.

MINH cues up “I’ll Make a Man Out of You” from Mulan on the karaoke machine and sings. NGA and KIM shamelessly join in. In the height of their joy, the lights fade.

End of Act Two.

End of Play.

WORKS CITED


