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THE VENGEANCE OF ELEPHANTS

I was on edge. Twenty-nine years old and just out of journalism school, I had lost motivation to report stories. I had also abandoned a book project. Stranger still were the visions: my hand wielding a hammer or an axe, laying waste to inanimate objects in a calm but pointed rage.

To try to figure out what was wrong with me, I went to mystics. They didn't help. The card reader consulted a matrix of dates and told me I was in the phase of the one-eyed king wielding a battle-axe. The shaman waved an egg over my back, cracked it into a glass of water and listened to what it had to say.

"Luchadora," she said. *Warrior*. "Luchadora *activista*," she clarified. In her Spanish accent, she added, "Estás en pelígro."

You are in danger.

I.

In 300 AD, Vietnamese warrior heroine Triệu Thị Trinh fought invading Chinese soldiers of the Wu dynasty. She was also called Lady Triệu, and legend claimed she was nine feet tall, and had three breasts each a meter long that she tied behind her back when she rode an elephant into battle.

If you can believe that after death, a soul implodes into shining light to recycle into a new life, over and again, then it's possible that my mother has a few smoldering particles of Lady Triệu in her.

My mother, Nay H'Nhap, kept a spear behind the front door of the red house in Connecticut. Close by was my Little League Slugger bat and a brick on the windowsill just in case she needed to battle. On summer afternoons, sun speckling down a hillside of trees, I'd watch my mother trim hedges skirting the sidewalk. Her skin was the hue of burnt sugar, and from the jerky movements of her barely five-foot frame, I knew she was buzzed on Carlos Rossi sweetened with grape juice. Stance wide, an orange hedge-cutter cocked and whirring at the hip, my mother reminded me of

Rambo and machine gun, mowing down green rebel shoots.

French and American military used words like "fierce," "pugnacious" and "natural fighters" to describe my mother's people – the Montagnards, an indigenous ethnic minority from Vietnam's mountainous central highlands. Perhaps this was getting to my head. I had resorted to an old issue of National Geographic Magazine on the Vietnam War.

At the red house, we had a stack of these, their bright, yellow spines next to my mother's vinyl record collection of mostly Elvis. On the cover of the April 1968 issue, a boy splashed out of the water with a silvery fish in his mouth. As a child, puzzling over this image many times, I wondered if he had caught the fish in his mouth or if he was eating it raw.

When I was older, I understood this boy was Montagnard, half me, although what that meant was unclear. I had never seen our faces or names in television, movies or books. School texts had a few passages on the Vietnam War, and I understood vaguely that my mother came to the United States from that. But nothing on the Montagnards. Besides this issue of National Geographic, we were unseen.

In my late teens, I picked up this issue again, determined. I scanned the text for women. I was hungry for any indication of who my mother was before she fled, before an airplane lifted her into the sky as Saigon burned and blistered into chaos below.

Instead of women, I found Montagnard men portrayed on the sidelines as stoic and unreadable supporting characters to the Americans. They acted rash in mounting bold raids, sudden attacks and switching loyalties — all while never saying much. Better depictions were poetic passages to noble savages or preliterate, modern-day hunters and gatherers stuck in the Bronze Age.

Lady Triệu led an army of one thousand from the mountains. I imagined they were my mother's tribe, us. We were known to tame and race elephants. Considering our aggressive reputation, wouldn't we also ride them into battles?

I often wondered what would happen if an enemy invader came to the front door of the red house. Was my mother planning on knocking someone out with my bat, or crushing a skull with the brick? Would she grab the spear, wind her arm back and launch it like a javelin? Would she use it like a bayonet?

The absurdity in this was not that the spear was too rusty or dull, or that I cannot picture her doing such a thing. What was absurd was she seemed to believe a

boogeyman existed, dripping with such conspicuous evil that she would reflexively fight back with her stash of weaponry. The truth is all threats came from people she invited into our house – and into her heart — openly. She had been duped and robbed. Having been betrayed, she seemed to believe that only weapons could protect her.

Some historians believe Lady Triệu lost her mother and father to pillaging invaders. Avenging blood aloft an elephant, she aimed for where to lay the hurt with one clean sweep of her bludgeon.

My earliest nightmares, fever dreams, were also my earliest memories. In bed with chickenpox in Care Bear pajamas, I dreamt up war: I was lost running through a maze of barricades, walls and ditches. My feet beat hard against the ground as I searched for escape. The pounding in my head echoed fanning lines of marching boots. The sky brooded crimson, the horizon breaking with flashes of white light. The air tasted like the tips of my mother's cigarette matches.

As an adult, one fever dream had me slamming windows shut in the red house so monkeys climbing its sides wouldn't get in. Then I saw that the monkeys weren't monkeys at all and instead my mother's old boyfriends. Like a video game, I almost won but one stepped through.

When I was ten years old, my mother started to date Ernie. In his early twenties, between my mother and me in age, he drove a Camaro, wore spandex shorts, neon colored muscle shirts and loved to roller-blade. A child of the 90s, I could've been impressed but wasn't. He teased me in the way boys did in elementary school, what felt like juvenile attempts at flirting. His immaturity embarrassed me, and stood as proof, I believed, of my mother's bad choices in men after her divorce to my father. I resented him also for taking sidelong glances at my legs when I wore shorts.

Our second-floor apartment was airless and boiling in the summer. On a night when it was too hot to fall asleep, I abandoned my bed and stole to the living room. Ernie was on the couch watching TV, the lights off. His face glowed blue. I wasn't sure where my mother was, but figured she was smoking a cigarette on the porch.

"I can show you how to be cool," he said in a gentle voice missing its usual antagonism. *I'm fine*, I said, and that he didn't need to. I still can't say if I was trying to get away, or to get it over with. I went to my bedroom and he followed.

"Think how ice feels," he whispered, kneeling at the side as I laid on the bottom

bunk, my sister asleep above. Lights off, the door ajar, my head drummed with heat and the bone-knowing that this was bad.

"Put your shirt up. A little," he said. I didn't know whether I should disobey. I didn't want to appear like I was over-reacting. What if over-reacting made things worse?

"Just a little bit," he said, "I'm not going to hurt you."

I pulled up my shirt slightly, exposing my belly button, my head sounding a silent alarm. I felt his fingers brush the bottom of my ribs when he pushed my shirt up further. He blew on my stomach. I was aware of how close he was. How ready my knee was to spring up and kick his head if his hand went too far up or too far down.

"See? Doesn't it feel cooler?"

"Yes, I'm cool now. I'm better. You can go now," I said. Before he left, he blew again as I braced myself, lying rod-still. Could he see my fear in the dark?

Later that week, my mother was angry at me. Her nagging was common, but something had changed. Her eyes were spears.

"You wanted him to do that," she said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You know," she said, her lip a curl of disgust as her eyes flickered up and down my body.

Not long after, I didn't see Ernie at the house anymore. My mother stopped answering the phone at the time he usually called. Still that didn't change what I felt then, and would feel for many years: that instead of a mother, she had become my enemy. I hated her more than him. I confided in my older cousin and told her not to tell anyone. She told my aunt and that was that: I was leaving my mother, sister and the red house to live at my father's home in Maine.

Years later when I was fourteen, my younger sister and I traded places for a school break — she went to Maine to stay with my father, I visited the red house. On the last day, my mother convinced herself that it was a good idea to invite boys over. *Boys*. Like a few years older than me. She told me she met them in the ballpark down the street.

I pictured the awful scene: the tennis court, a set of metal bleachers near the baseball diamond; my mother both beseeching and coquettish, striking up a random conversation with strangers; their defensive half-smiles and snickers at her

friendliness laid bare — yet another stamp of her foreignness. Had I been there, I would've yanked her away, and sabotaged the invitation, sparing all humiliation. *I told them we could have a barbecue*, she said, enthusiasm brimming. I shook my head, my eyes rolling and said, *Please no*.

The doorbell rang. Five guys who looked around seventeen and eighteen shuffled in. I tried playing it cool. Until she sat next to one on the couch. I watched as he put his hand on her knee. The smile plastered on her lips stretched wide into a line, her eyes unblinking. I caught the lewd glance he gave to his friends.

"Get out," I said, my voice quivering. They looked at me, one stupidly grinning as if eager to see what would happen next.

"Get the fuck out of my house, or I will call the police!" I yelled. My mother told me to calm down and that it was fine. *They're my friends,* she said.

Gail, the tenant upstairs heard me yelling and knocked on our door. For the rest of the night, I stayed with her upstairs.

The next morning, I went downstairs to retrieve my music. The apartment was quiet and without any trace of the boys. The door to my mother's bedroom was closed. I went to my old room and saw my new Cypress Hill CD wasn't where I had left it. My sister's boom box was missing, and the VCR in the living room, too. I knocked on my mother's door once, then swung it open.

"Your idiot loser *friends* robbed us!" I shouted. The blanket pulled around her, she began to mumble something but stopped.

When my stepmother picked me up to drive back to Maine, my mother sat on the steps crying as we pulled out of the driveway. I refused to look at her and instead put my hand up to throw her a back-handed peace sign — the bird with an additional finger. That night, my father scolded me for being callous after my stepmother reported that I hadn't waved to my sobbing mother. I said nothing and went to my bedroom.

In the rules of engagement, my mother established early what was fair game: I was ten years old when she called me a "bitch", which I was old enough to understand; for "slut" I looked for its definition in the dictionary my father left behind after the divorce. Although she never raised a belt, she'd slap me, and once slammed me between a door and its frame. I went slack as a child does to give her nothing else to attack, lest it fuel her further.

As for my sister three years younger, they had always been simpatico with the same open smile and sunny, heart-shaped face. My head was square, and I was young when I acquired my tendency to smirk or squint, requiring mere seconds to scan and size up people and situations into two categories: safe or dangerous, sane or crazy. My sister and mother clung to each other more, both had the tendency to cry more easily. I brooded well before my teens, steeliness marking me as other. My sister had no hesitation in running from our mother unlike me, lacking the conviction that evasion was futile. I remember my vexed and cursing mother chasing her around the dining room table into the living room, like a comedy.

When I grew a head taller than my mother, she didn't dare lay a hand on me. At the age of twenty-two, I moved back to the red house and commuted to New York City to finish college. I didn't trust my mother but the arrangement was tolerable: I had one floor and my mother kept the basement studio apartment, a separate kitchen and bathroom in each.

I had returned recently from a six-month teaching exchange in Vietnam, and needed a place to live. I had written a column for my school's newspaper about the experience and wanted to expand it. Part of that project was a new desire to heal old wounds with my mother. Having met her Montagnard family and understanding more of her past in Vietnam, I considered myself transformed, empathetic and capable of fixing things — even as my old bedroom gave me dreams where, with bare fists, I boxed my mother and won.

I pushed us to overwrite the few stories we had, of our vengeance and heartbreak. In the stairway between our two floors, I asked her why she had blamed me for what Ernie did a decade ago. Her eyes dark pools, she replied that I had made it up, that it never happened. I pushed the question again, then relented. I expected denial but took consolation in at least confronting her. Did I need her to surrender?

One night that summer, she drank an entire, unopened six-pack of Rolling Rock I had just stored in the bottom of my fridge. I hadn't lived with my mother enough to know she couldn't control herself.

With the rattle of the knob, a squeak and swoosh of the door, she appeared as a black silhouette while I laid in bed. At the red house, in my old bedroom, I found myself trapped again, like a child — what I believed I had outgrown. Once again, she lingered, hissing paranoid and deluded scenarios. *Go away*, I said. *Let me sleep. You're*

crazy. With a slam, she was gone. Twenty minutes later, she was back, raving and repeating herself like a broken record. After more than an hour of this, she finally wore herself down and passed out on the couch, the TV blaring. Furious, I barely slept the rest of the night.

The next day, exhausted and washing the smell of pizza out of my hair after a waitressing shift, I fumed. I slammed the shower off, quickly wrapped myself in a large, blue bathrobe, and twirled a towel around my head. I went to the porch where my mother was organizing small, porcelain figurines on a shelf outside. I had emptied the living room to repaint it.

"I hope you realize that the first moment I get to move, I'm outta here," I said. "I can't live with an insane alcoholic."

Readying for another match, she began loudly, "I'm not a —"

I didn't wait to hear her and grabbed an old plastic chair. I lifted it over my head and threw it hard onto the patio's concrete floor. She took a step back and said *No*. I snatched it up again and swung it around me, my bathrobe a trail of blue, and thrashed it against the ground again. White shards splintered and flew. I grabbed it once more and I hurled it at the shelf, toppling it and sending her figurines smashing at our feet. A porcelain choirboy, a rose bloom and a small doe lay cracked in pieces.

Elephants remember, my mother told me once. In Vietnam, it was known that the scent of an elephant's past abuser could trigger rampages. Elephants would knock tribal houses off their stilts and trample the crops that had been sown and culled for months. My mother saw elephants quickly wrap their trunks around the feet of grown men. If they didn't hit their heads as their feet were lassoed out from underneath, an elephant could bash their skulls by dropping them upside down, or by stepping on them. They hate alcohol, she told me. It's not hard to imagine the cruelty exacted by humans, made crueler by inebriation. Likewise, an elephant had no hesitation in killing the person just for stinking like booze.

II.

When I looked closer at the 1968 National Geographic Magazine issue, I found women. I had not acknowledged them initially. For the story, *Viet Nam's Montagnards: Caught in the Jaws of War*, photojournalist Howard Sochurek wrote

that an elderly woman he met along a jungle path was "shriveled". I looked away. When an American missionary told Sochurek that Montagnard women in the village inquired if he'd take a wife, and all they wanted was to make him happy, I resisted seeing them.

I needed to see our multitudes as women, as Montagnards. I needed depictions beyond victims of war. I wanted them to be bold and dignified. My unwillingness to see them was bound up with my privilege; I needed them to have choices and convictions they'd fight for. That was the paradox: to want more for them is a sign that I couldn't accept them or their reality; yet, how could I want anything less? I'd then have to accept less for myself this line of thinking seemed to imply.

Yet, when I looked even closer, I found her. There was a photo caption for a portrait of a handsome Montagnard chief whom was charged with collaborating against the Americans. In tiny print, the last sentence read*: His sister remained with the Viet Cong and operates in a unit only a few miles away.* She may have been impressed into forced labor by the Viet Cong. But it was just as likely, she chose to be VC. Regardless, I filled in the blanks, my mind pictured her working quietly in the margins for something she wanted.

In the battle against the Wu soldiers from China, Lady Triệu's brother begged her to save herself and surrender. History recorded her response, her most famous words: *I want to track storms, ride hazardous waves, hunt sharks in the open sea, expel the invaders, restore the country, untie servitude, and never descend to be someone's concubine.*

And yet, she was erased. In Chinese accounts, history written by the victors, there was no mention of her. Only on the Vietnamese side of history, do we know that she rode into battle fearlessly, her army outnumbered and overpowered, death imminent.

III.

We were losing the red house, where my mother had lived longer than anywhere else. It belonged to her first husband, Tracy. He had allowed her to live there after their divorce, in exchange for landlady duties. His son was to move in and take over the repainting, the hedge and grass cutting, the collection of money from tenants – chores my mother tended for almost thirty years.

I hated that house. Memories that suffocated me seemed to live in its walls. I felt our dysfunction had seeped into the cracked sinks, the wood of the creaking floor, the water-stained ceiling, the yard mottled with burrowing voles. Still I tried to forestall the move and asked Tracy to wait until I finished an eighteen-month master's program in journalism I had barely started while living in Brooklyn. He gave my mother half a year more.

Near the end of my first semester, my mother and I had our last major clash. I had filled out low-income housing applications for her, what she would not do on her own, even if she knew how. The last thing needed was her signature. With interviews to transcribe and three stories that needed work on for school, I was curt and pushy. She was in denial of having to move. I told her to sign the forms. She yelled, *Get the fuck out of my house.* I slammed the garage door behind me, got a cab and the next train to Grand Central, giving her nothing else to attack. If she ends up on the street, babbling to herself, *it wasn't my fault*, I repeated to myself.

But my bravado was a sham. She was losing her home while I was losing the clarity and confidence I once had for becoming a journalist. I had been digging around for stories of mismanagement or corruption in real estate and around the 2008 presidential election — anything to get a breakthrough byline as a rookie student reporter. However, the more I probed, the more anxious I felt. It seemed that the tornadoes in my life — big and small, old and new — made me unfit to report on the missteps of others. To be a skilled journalist required knowing your facts and possessing confidence — but did it also require a sense of being right and faultless? I felt my self-assurance slipping. In the back of my mind, I interrogated myself: what demons plagued my mother? Had I been fair with her? Why did I keep fighting her? Was I supposed to drop everything to help my mother — whom I felt had barely mothered me?

On a windy, early spring day near the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway bridge in Williamsburg, I interviewed an older Ecuadorian woman for a story on day workers. In Spanish, I asked how she fared finding employment and whether she worried about Obama's tough talk on illegal immigration. *It's hard being so far away from family,* she said, her smile warm despite the chill in the air. Her face was round like my mother's. I held my breath to stanch the tears. My notes became illegible pen scratches.

At my mid-semester performance review, the instructor of my fundamental reporting class said I kept missing the point of the assignments and was in danger of failing.

"You also need to take 'I' out of your writing," he said, jaw squared and grey eyes sharp. "No one cares about what you have to say. No one cares about what you think," he said, punctuating each sentence with a jab of his finger on the table dividing us. "This is journalism."

He was right. For the assignment to dig up a story walking around Times Square, I found nothing and resorted to Gonzo style, stream-of-conscious commentary. It fell flat. A class on the fundamentals of reporting was not the time and place for such experiments. On a rational level, I understood.

Yet his words shook me. I had admired this instructor and wanted to impress him. Instead, I had underperformed and seemed to commit the ugly sin of egoism.

I was similarly blindsided two months earlier when a foundation in Maine awarded me a scholarship for journalism school with the stipulation that I submit an additional essay explaining how my work as an advocate was behind me. I was unsure how I had been perceived as an advocate — a label that felt too official and an overestimation of past projects doing amateur oral history or documentary work with a Montagnard American community in North Carolina. Sure, I had some personal stake in our issues. But I was also invested because we were underrepresented: for a Montagnard political rally in Washington D.C., where I filmed an unwieldy mass of shaky video, media was absent. Was it not it a basic duty of journalism to go and cover stories overlooked and untold?

I submitted the extra essay the foundation wanted and the following year, my scholarship was renewed. Still I lashed myself, for not being automatically the *tabula rasa* the foundation seemed to imply was more deserving.

But more than anything, I came away understanding that an opinion and sense of purpose were my biggest liabilities in journalism.

Not long after, I sensed electrical currents of violence shuttle through me. On route to school, my bag felt like a bandoleer weighing on my shoulders, my boots steeled, that I was off to war. Sitting at my computer, editing audio or video, my nerves would suddenly sharpen and feel spring-triggered, my chest hammering against my ribs.

When my mother was laid off from her twenty-year job as a locker room attendant at the YMCA, I started having violent visions: a decisive swing of an axe splitting furniture, the graceful arch of a sledgehammer through sheet-rock, a bat cracking the smooth metal of a car. In the middle of the most unremarkable chore like washing dishes or waiting in line at the grocery store, I'd suddenly see myself leaping like a ballet dancer, tomahawk in hand.

I started having violent visions: a decisive swing of an axe splitting furniture, the graceful arch of a sledgehammer through sheet-rock.

I confided in a program advisor, and she suggested I take a personal leave of absence to help my mother and return the following semester. That didn't seem realistic: taking a break would jeopardize my scholarship; and worse, I was experiencing flashes of clarity accompanied with dread: my biggest issue was I wanted to write about my relationship with my mother, which, if anything, was not journalism. If I postponed graduating, I didn't see how or why I'd return.

I also saw a pattern that compelled me to stay. In the journalism school, the majority of students kicked out, or who dropped out, were people of color. We were so few, the loss palpable. For the students who made the decision to leave, it seemed they didn't see themselves belonging in the program, or the industry. My feelings echoed that sentiment but to leave was to imply it was true. Instead, my knee-jerk response was to resist and prove that I wouldn't buckle under the pressure.

Or at least these were all the things I told myself, leaving the burden on my sister the task of finding my mother housing.

A week before graduation, I asked for publishing advice for a memoir book project on finding family in Vietnam, and the backstory of the Montagnard struggle for autonomy.

"It's old news," my capstone advisor said, an amiable man with a gentle squint, and a receding halo of curls. Walking out of our classroom the last time, he smiled. In his old New Yorker, no-bullshit accent, he said: Focus on something else.

IV.

Four months after I graduated, my photojournalist boyfriend and I were in Cochabamba, Bolivia, working on a multimedia story around a climate change conference of "los pueblos". Attempting to stretch my remaining scholarship money, we lived in South America. We stayed at an eco-commune run by a young Spanish-Basque woman with long dreadlocks, who also offered also her services as a shaman.

I needed advice, and the esoteric kind felt right considering my low-grade existential crisis. My last year in school had flipped my priorities. I chose to dedicate myself fully to journalism. I also felt lost and spent almost every night awake, filling yellow pads with disjointed thoughts and plans, or trying to write on my computer but mostly staring into the abyss of Facebook.

My boyfriend was curious to try it and took the first session with the shaman. After about twenty minutes, he returned to our hut and reported the mystical message to him was to *Have more confidence*. A little alarm went off in my head. Were we being dumb tourists duped into paying for generic advice fit for a corporate team-building travel mug?

When it was my turn, I said I was an American journalist and revealed little else about myself. She directed me to lie face down in the lawn in front of her hut. The grass looked spiky and uncomfortable but I complied. She traced a brown egg along my spine quickly and unceremoniously. I got up and followed her to a nearby patio table where she broke the egg into a glass. I watched strands of clear yoke hitch and suspend themselves on tiny air bubbles in the water. *You are* a warrior*, an activist warrior. You are in* danger, she said.

I didn't know what to make of it. How was I a warrior? Yes, growing up with my mother felt combative, that our home had inherited a war. But being a warrior felt like a stretch.

As for danger, I didn't know what to make of it, and tried to suppress imagining terrible things.

Soon after and back in the United States, I took my mother to the doctor and surrendered to the stories about her health: the voices she heard and how it impacted our lives.

To qualify for disability insurance, we sat in a corner office of ivory and sea

green. The attending psychiatrist was an Austrian woman who probed my mother with neutral questions. *How do you feel? Do you sleep well? Do you feel stress?* My mother deflected all of them and said she was fine. I reminded my mother to tell the psychiatrist her story about Superman. She shot me a look.

"That's why we're here, mom."

"Well, I know this is going to sound a little crazy — but truly, I'm not," she said sheepishly. The psychiatrist urged her gently. She looked at me again. I nodded. "I'm being complicated by Superman," she said. "He wants to marry me."

The doctor prescribed a medication for schizophrenia that my mother took once, then flushed the rest down the toilet. Being one having often to choose my battles, I focused on the victory: at least, we had the signed forms vouching for my mother's illness. It was an important first step for getting her Social Security Insurance, as she was jobless, unemployable and burning through her savings.

It was 2010, and we were in the midst of an economic recession. I cobbled together writing jobs that paid pitifully. Journalism training proved handy, however, in navigating my mother's disability application. It became a game of beating bureaucracy with dogged persistence. I created an online database that helped my sister and I keep track of how may phone calls it took to speak to someone at the Department of Social Services, the fax number, the new fax number, the old fax number in case the new one wasn't working, the three agents assigned to us and their nine-digit badge numbers starting with zeros. With skills of an entry-level spy, I recorded the phone calls and made transcribed backups of everything said. If they could record me for quality assurance, I could do the same.

Yet despite all that, only after two failed applications, numerous botched and missed appointments, one mailed letter in which I stated in the plainest English to my mother that if she didn't cooperate she would end up on the street and I'd do nothing to stop it — two years from the day I graduated — she qualified for disability.

Since losing the red house, my mother had been living in a private home where two brothers rented almost all the rooms, an arrangement of dubious legality. There another battle was waged, but not one I'd fight. My mother claimed that her gray-haired housemate called her a bitch. Frankly, it wouldn't have shocked me if my mother had provoked the insult. My normally level-headed sister leapt at it, however,

and informed the housemate over the phone that she'd come over and beat the shit out of her if she so much as gave our mother a mean look. The housemate dialed 911 and pressed charges against my sister.

Pacing my apartment, I told my sister we'd figure it out. Meanwhile the voice in my head screamed, *Seriously? Don't we have enough problems without the police involved?!*

A social worker named Sarah was assigned to us, the single condition on which the police department would dismiss the charges. I hadn't anticipated that, nor how the low-income housing forms I had sent in after forging my mother's signature would become Sarah's priority. I also didn't anticipate that months later, I would wonder how many times I had gripped too tight, and tried to quell situations spiraling out of control. How many times I hid what happened in the red house. How many times I tried getting my mother help while she resisted and fought me. How often I abandoned her, then sabotaged myself. How if I had just let go, how we might have gotten help sooner.

In the new apartment, with freshly painted walls that held no suffocating memories for me, my mother and I were able let our guards down. When I'd take the train to Westport for our birthdays, Easter, a summer visit or two, the holidays, my mother and I began to relax into her stories. She recounted where she had worked and what she did at the age of fourteen; how she got the idea to work for the Americans at an army camp in Pleiku; her single memory of meeting her father; the reason she believed her best friend committed suicide; her only time in Paris with her first husband. Usually one question loosened many more, one story unspooling another. Before me emerged a portrait of a Montagnard woman before she came to the United States, my mother clear-headed and determined in ways I needed to see. I recorded these "interviews" on my phone. I had a new question for her each visit, visits that were never often enough. At some point, I will ask about the last time she saw her mother before she fled Vietnam. I suspect that story will make us both cry.

The stories about her mother are always sweet and make tears rush to her eyes. Her mother cared tenderly for my mother as a girl — an image that strikes me with something like envy although that's not quite it. More than anything, it's an experience I sit next to, not inside of.

V.

One doesn't choose the circumstances she is born into that carve her like a sculpting knife. What she makes out of them is what she must learn to wield.

Lady Triệu was orphaned and raised by her brother and his wife. The story goes that the sister-in-law was cruel and the young Triệu fled to the mountains. That period was marked also by suffering: the invading Wu army killed local leaders and 10,000 Vietnamese. If small and personal cruelties carved the young Triệu, she fashioned that pain into a purpose: the young runaway was embraced by mountain tribes, and with them, she raised an army. At the age of nineteen, she sought vengeance and waged thirty successful battles against the Wu invaders.

The few historical texts that remain claim that she wore yellow slippers and a tunic, signs that she adopted the dress of the ancient Cham kingdom — from whom my mother's tribe, the Jarai, are considered descendants. She was from a prominent Vietnamese family in the north but to me she was an honorary Montagnard warrior, the fiercest and most legendary of all.

Historians theorize the story of Lady Triệu took on mythical proportions — her nine-foot stature and three breasts that she tied around her back riding into battle — because Chinese Confucianism, adopted in Vietnam, held women as inferior. According to prevailing belief, a fierce and capable woman warrior could not have been mortal.

Narratives often warp to serve those in power. Victors rely on historians and storytellers; a journalist is never neutral. Narratives can be means of violence. A point of view, a weapon.

Circumstances that carve us may also carve us out of history. What cuts our teeth also threatens to cut us down and out of our own stories. The unseen can find a sense of safety in invisibility, no matter how false it may be. Self-doubt and silence are well-worn defenses. But to surrender to dominant narratives and internalize the stories of our defeat and subjection is a very dangerous thing.

Perhaps the danger, the dreadlocked shaman's warning, was about believing that I had to choose between being a storyteller, or an advocate — *una activista*. Perhaps the danger was yielding my identity and purpose to someone else's sculpting knife. If I can claim anything warrior-like, it was learning how to wield my pen, targeting my aim on the narratives that need to be upheld, and also the ones to be destroyed.

VI.

Archival footage from a 1965 CBS Evening News Special revealed two Montagnard women in black woven sarongs smiling broadly as they planted booby traps for American soldiers. A handful of years after journalism school, I resumed the habit of scouring war footage, photos and books for glimpses of us, the women.

"The enemy in Vietnam is all too often invisible, striking without warning from the shadows," Walter Cronkite said with dramatic flourish. In one shot, two young Montagnard women use a pulley levered to a tree to hoist up a heavy block of wood fitted with long downward spikes. Hand over hand, they pull hard on a rope, using their weight to raise it high into the jungle canopy. For the soundtrack, xylophones and gongs chime rhythmically: what I've learned to recognize as the Montagnard song for sacrificial celebrations, the music of our dancing and feasts.