

There is a reintegration shelter at the northern border of Vietnam for survivors of trafficking. A twenty-minute walk from the shelter will lead to a path where one can look, across the river, to China. Here, on this side of the border, the shelter girls were children, they worked in the fields with their parents, they believed the trusted family friend who said they would be paid to be dishwashers and restaurant workers and cinnamon dryers. There, on the other side of the border, they were still children when they were instead sold to be wives and prostitutes.

The stories don't shrill or demand. They are quiet girls' voices, so soft I have to lean in to hear. They are a child's drawings of a multi-colored bird perched on a water buffalo, and of arching pink lotuses in a ceramic vase. And a girl's laughter when she says, "And then I tried to kill myself but I didn't die." These are the bright hauntings that will remain with me when the other details fade away.

*This is a memory I am making.*

I spend much of my last few days at the shelter beading with the girls. We sprawl around the large conference table, loose beads scattered across the table- aqua blue and chive green and pearly white and cotton candy pink- and squint, with pursed lips, trying to stab the end of a plastic string through tiny holes. This requires much patience, this slipping of one bead after another. We sit in a circle, and sometimes the girls sing, in Hmong or Vietnamese, their voices high and slightly off-key and haunting.

Sometimes I ask them questions about their family or their villages, and they tell me about how they would play make-believe when they were younger, imagining entire meals of meat and vegetables out of mud, leaves, and rocks, a lavish feast to overpower their grumbling stomachs and their dinners of rice and chili pepper. Sometimes, we just sit in silence, and if I look up across the table and catch a girl's eye, she smiles widely back, and then we go back to our own beading. And in the midst of that quiet, that gentle slowing of time, it feels as if is only that present moment, listening to young girls sing of love and loss, their hearts breaking in their mouths, and beading these pearls, one at a time, onto a string I carry with me.

*This is a memory I am.*

Sitting around a circle, we share affirmations of our strengths. One of the girls remains in silence for several minutes when it comes to her turn; she can't come up with anything positive to say about herself. Last year, she had been sold so far across the border of China that, after she escaped, she had to be flown back to Vietnam. She had told me that, as she was running away from her captors in the middle of the night, she ran next to the cliffs of the surrounding waterfalls. This was so that, if they found her, she could kill herself by jumping off the edge.

She finally whispers her one positive trait to a nearby girl, but I ask her to say it aloud using her own voice. When she does, a barely audible, “Sometimes I try to help people,” her voice breaks under the strain of what it means to believe that there is something good in her.

*This is a memory.*

From Sapa, the beautiful tourist destination a few miles from the shelter, if you drive about ten kilometers northwest from town and then walk along a winding trail for another kilometer, you’ll find Thác Tình Yêu at the end of the road. The cascading water tumbles across jagged rocks and churns into a mist that hovers like dewy lace across the trees. It’s unabashedly romantic. The legend of Love’s Waterfall goes like so:

Many years ago, twelve goddess sisters came down to this waterfall to bathe and play for the day. When evening approached, the sisters all flew back up to the heavens, except for the youngest, who was still enjoying herself and wasn’t yet ready to leave. A while later, night slid into the forest, chilling the air and covering the sky in blackness, and the little goddess suddenly realized in panic that it was now too dark for her to fly back home. Hungry and cold, she wandered through the woods, trying to find a warm place to sleep, when she heard the strands of a beautiful flute song. She followed the song to its source, a warmly lit house with the smells of dinner cooking and a woodsman singing through his flute. Enchanted with his songs, she asked if she could join him for dinner, and he happily agreed. Throughout the night, the music he played wrapped around them in a serenade and the goddess became enamored of the woodsman, so much so that she stayed another day, then another, and finally ended up marrying him and bearing a child.

Three years passed on earth, which was only the span of one day in the heavens. At this point, the heavenly king had heard of his missing daughter, so he sent a messenger down to bring her back. The goddess didn’t want to return, for she now had her child and husband on earth, but she couldn’t refuse her father. Once she was back in the heavens, however, her grief was inconsolable. Her tears fell from the skies and turned into rosefinches that flew back to the forest where she lived, calling out her husband’s name. To this day, you can still hear the cries of the rosefinch throughout the forest, mourning her separation from her husband and child.

The word *thuong* is love, and its variant, *bi thuong* means sorrowful, whereas *bị thương* is to be injured. If language affects how we understand the world, what does it mean to come from a culture where the word *love* sits within the shadow of *sorrow* and *wounded*? Or perhaps conversely, and more hopefully, what does it mean when the words *sorrow* and *wounded* cannot be said without also saying *love*?

*This is.*

A girl asks me, “Do you remember the last time you visited, one day there was a double rainbow?”

“I do.”

“It was so pretty, wasn’t it?”

I smile at her, “Indeed, it was.”

We are sitting on the front steps of the shelter, gazing out at the stillness of the street and the cloudless blue sky. Her hair is lit up by sun. There are no rainbows in sight, but it is still a sight to behold.