

MY MOTHER DOESN'T TEACH ME MANDARIN

*Nhung An*

or cantonese her mother tongue  
the language she heard from her parents' cries  
the language of bullets tearing rough skin and infectious bare  
feet on wet mud  
with words that exploded  
at her ears reflected from her mother's broken glasses  
and her father's quiet veins,

but she wants to learn your english  
the language of money and soft comfortable beds  
she knows the hello and the goodbye  
and the digits followed by the vietnam dong  
the progressive euros and dollars  
that will get her to bring me to the homes  
of those who enunciate your english  
at her ears with an unnaturally slowed loud voice and wild hand  
gestures  
as she admires the complexion of your skin and your eyes  
the color she wants to see in her grandchildren one day;

perhaps it's only fair that she doesn't let me hear her voice  
for she couldn't understand mine  
my vietnamese and my english  
from the phrase "I like girls"  
that I dare not whisper even in the dark  
to the phrase "I love you"  
I share on my girlfriend's lips only when my mother is  
surrounded  
by the darkness of her eyelids  
and the sound of heavy rain in the ocean that distances  
between her whisper  
and my voice.