



# PRODIGAL

E. VYVY TRINH

WE ALMOST NEVER missed a Sunday mass. Still, by the time I was in high school, Jesus couldn't compete for my attention, which had been stolen by *Harry Potter*, a pretty girl at school with frazzled black curls, and general fascination with my own wild interiority. All that talk of sin and blood and hell, the mental pirouettes required to will oneself to believe one was ingesting the *actual body of Christ*—the whole thing began to embarrass me. I never fought for the right to skip church, choosing instead to tag along and spend the hour daydreaming. Still, my mother, who had been the one to shepherd us to church and catechism class all through our childhood, sensed my straying and was disappointed. My adolescence passed quietly, without mention of confirmation.

Many things about my upbringing differed from that of my mother, or that of my father, for that matter. My childhood home did not have a bomb shelter, and when I was sixteen I got to go to a summer camp for “young writers,” and I did not in the middle of the night run toward the beach, wade through the water, and climb onto a small wooden boat that might, or might not, be rescued at sea by a German cruise ship, or maybe the American navy. One year my younger sister received food stamps because they were a part of her compensation as an AmeriCorps volunteer. The arrangement baffled my parents, whose entire lives had been devoted to mobilization up and away from the food stamps that had fed them as teenagers.

A few constants did remain, though, across their childhoods and ours, at least on the surface: a father-child love that was communicated mostly through grunts, the meals we ate at home—rice, assorted meats stewed in fish sauce and sugar—and, of course, the rhythm of the Catholic Church: birth in December, death and resurrection in April.

THE SUMMER I TURNED twenty-two I worked in a school and taught social studies to eighteen rising fifth graders with whom I was having a wild love affair. I was particularly smitten with Cresin and Emily, who, when I told them we'd soon be studying ancient Egypt, danced down the hall, each with one hand pointed in front and one hand pointed behind, both elbows bent. That summer we all kicked it in some era several hundred years before Christ was born. We closed our eyes and imagined the Tigris and Euphrates rivers overflowing and drowning our entire families. We debated the Code of Hammurabi, which offered murder as an appropriate sentence for all crimes. We each made a Facebook profile for an Egyptian god of our choice (mine was Anubis; it was just supposed to be a sample for the students, but I got really into it).

That summer I thought a lot about life in antiquity—how at my age a woman might have already birthed and lost several children, how hunger was such a usual state of being that I wondered if our ancestors had a distinct word for it. I thought about how even so, even when their lives seem like mere survival with not a breath to spare, they worshipped. They prayed, they sang, they carved epics into stone, they looked up at the pattern-less scatter of light in the sky and weaved story out of them. I wondered for a moment if the foreverness of human worship was evidence of God, but then I decided it was actually evidence of our capacity to spin purpose out of chaos, our eternal hunger for meaning—rawest, maybe, when one has to make meaning of hunger.

I DEAL WITH A DAILY anxiety, with triggers I'm told I should catalogue. The most consistent spark, I have found, is sitting alone in front of a computer and forcing my body to produce hundreds of academic words for an entirely theoretical exercise, which is an

unfortunate trigger for a graduate student. In these moments, in these seizures of soul, I return to my motif, the daydream of my future: I'm sweeping a floor surrounded by an orbit of children. I have never been able to tell, in the daydream, if any of the children come from my own womb. (Is a womb a womb if it never carries child, or is it then only called a uterus?)

Truthfully this dream has sat in my chest gathering urgency since I was nineteen and woke up under a net-covered cot in a small room on a tree-shaded campus in southern Vietnam. The campus was a group home for children and adults with HIV run by Catholic nuns who were no older than I am now. In the glowing afternoons the kids would, in groups of five at a time, pile into a little plastic bench swing that was shaped like a horse or maybe a dragon, and I would rock it back and forth and narrate a story of a ship on the ocean: first it would be calm, and then a storm would come along, followed by an enormous crocodile, which in Vietnamese translates as "ugly fish." The kids—especially To-Vy and Hien, I remember—couldn't tolerate the boredom of the calm waters, but they also shrieked deafeningly whenever I transformed into the crocodile. "Change back, change back!" they would immediately cry.

It was the kids, the idea of them, that pulled me to spend my summer there, but I found myself watching the nuns as much as I watched the children. I watched the rhythm of their lives: wake before dawn, cook breakfast and ladle out portions in circular tin trays, wake the children, lead prayer or sometimes a song and dance for Jesus, teach dictation and reading in one of the two classrooms, cook lunch, sweep, tuck the children in for nap time, cook dinner, sweep, pray, sleep, repeat. They were the most majestic artisans of peace, crafting it out of unlikely materials—time, rice, rosary beads, soil, donated primers and old pencils, attention. I watched them, fixated by a kind of longing.

When August ended I became another asshole from the West who said goodbye to the kids and their caretakers so that I could go back to my liberal arts college, where I skimmed through huge scholarly tomes an hour before seminar and effortlessly offered my loud opinions in class, which were generally opinions rooted in an anti-everything tradition and which generally earned enthusiastic nods from my peers, and occasionally a few snaps.

In the daydream of my future I am sweeping the floor of a similar home, and I don't say goodbye until the kids are the ones to leave—to go to college or to the city or to whatever it is their wild, precious lives call them to do. I'm terrified to admit this is my dream, my future as I picture it. I'm scared it's silly or impossible or that I'll will myself to forget it because money, because convention. I'm scared my peers—with their outcomes-driven policy aspirations or their anti-everything activism—will point a finger at me and shout, "Savior complex!" But the truth is I've never met a kid I wanted to save, though I've met a bunch of different kids I would like to share my life with.

WHEN GUNMEN OPENED FIRE across Paris with sickening coordination, I watched as one by one my acquaintances filtered their online selves through the red, white, and blue of the French flag. The images were so uninterrupted that they induced in me the closest thing I have ever felt to a panic attack. What will my country do now, I thought, to ensure its sense of security? What will we do, now that people in Paris were made to feel the uncertainty that only people in Baghdad or Bujumbura or Baltimore are supposed to feel? I discovered a new trigger. I crawled into my bed and wished that I knew how to pray the

rosary—and also that I had a rosary.

Two weeks later when I was home with my parents and sisters for Christmas, I stole one. I took the prayer beads from the drawer in my parents' room where my mom keeps her souvenirs from retreats—hymnals, pamphlets, and candles. I stole it because I couldn't bear to face my mother's glee. I was afraid that if she caught me, her eyes would flicker back and forth between my face and the rosary in my hand with an expression that said: *I knew someday you'd come back for that*. I'm not yet ready for that look. I'm not yet ready for her to throw a party and slaughter a cow and uncork all the wine in celebration of my homecoming. After all, in this moment all I have is a storm of questions, a crocodile of doubt still looming large.

Is this what it was all leading up to, then—the ancestral toiling over barren earth in brutal winters, the urban migration of my grandfather who didn't own shoes, his flight by boat into unknown diaspora, my parents' late nights in college translating homework assignments into Vietnamese and back into English. Was it all to give me an existence so comfortable and steeped in reason that I can safely outgrow an illusion that was so vital to all who came before me? Have I worshipped so deeply in the cathedral of empiricism that I have no need for beads or whispered recitations? Do my degrees, my papers littered with footnotes, arm me with more truth than the nuns who spend their days sweeping, mothering? The body of Christ, food stamps—it's take them or leave them in my world of limitless choice and filtered democracy. How lonely it is to sustain myself on something entirely different from my forebears.

There's a literalness to the faith tradition I was born into that I still can't fully embrace, no matter how wide I open my heart; I am, as they say, "working on it." For now, I pay close attention to the absence of my anxiety, the quiet that comes when I am watching my sixth-grade student read aloud with a fluency she once thought impossible; when I am marveling at my firework of a kid sister while we fold paper stars and outdo each other's puns; when I have hiked a mountain and taken in the vastness of everything: the stretch of treetops, the pattern-less scatter of light in the sky. I offer my awe and hope that, for now, that is worship enough.

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