burnt offerings

Mai-Anh Tran
Mother ran from the aftermaths
of war guerillas chemical agents politics
with her kid brother in tow
Across a sea and an ocean
I, too, never asked if she was scared
What would I do if she said yes?

No wonder she's so dismissive of
Clogged toilets and broken tables
Meanwhile I surf the internet until sunrise
Because writing papers gives me anxiety.

My father's father died in 2003
I still hadn't asked him what it was like
But I remember that the stroke turned his stride to a shuffle
Though not one that interfered with winning at ping-pong.

Father's mother published great-grandmother's poems
Twenty-three years after she died
In a language I can only mostly read

Phuong no day hoa do
(dich: Red blossoms bend the boughs of the flame trees).

Her father was a director and playwright
I've written a few dirty limericks in my time
My father asks me how I'm doing
I need three seconds not to respond in anger
Out of nothing but teenagish impatience
I should know better, but I've always taken the path of weak will.

I can barely remember my little brother
I wish they hadn't stolen those pictures from us in France.

My cousins can barely carry on a conversation
In anything but English and classroom Spanish
But they've been back once or twice
I wonder if they care?

Mother's father was a doctor too
Over here he had to manage hotels
While mother's mother helped
Were they ever threatened? or treated badly?
I vomit the traces of microwaveable cheeseburgers
Outside the main dorm entrance.
Someone who didn't love me left me.
I haven't asked my family their stories,
but there's someone I might want to ask to have dinner
— provisionally. What if he says no?

My Polish professor never spoke of his own post-war
I bought one of his books after he left
I hadn't known that's what he'd meant
But I'd scribbled pidgin rhymes in the margins of my notes
Because I thought I knew how to feel.

Great-aunt could have been married,
But was foiled at the last by a rival
She died alone and
My baby sister doesn't remember what she looked like.

I wonder why I've never been called a coward?

—Mai-Ánh Tran