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burnt offerings

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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 teenageish 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-Anh Tran



Jeff Bardsley *Flower Drops*