

Vietnamese Americans

LESSONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY



Untitled

by Mong Lan

Having no money, they fed on
shriveled stars
that had fallen billions of years ago
for curtains they gathered seaweed
from the ocean so that green light
would filter through

she had made a blanket from the wool
of suicide's soul
which kept them warm beyond belief

and with the house they had built
from hair and thighs and calves and shoulders
and smooth stomachs that longed to perspire
and bleeding eyes and savant foreheads
they sprinkled interstellar
dust they found under the whale shadows
lying there on the shore, bellowing, black
exhausted shapes left for dead
where the sun hadn't touched the sand

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“Untitled” Discussion Questions

1. What do you know or what have you heard (if anything) about the experiences of the Vietnamese refugees that fled from Vietnam on small, overcrowded boats, also called the “Boat People?”
2. What do you think it was like on the boat while drifting at sea, hungry and cold, while others around you were dying or giving up?
3. Why do you think the speaker intersperses images of beauty and nature with images of hopelessness and despair?
4. How can the beached whales serve as a metaphor for the Boat People themselves? Use the descriptive images to help you.
5. Stars often symbolize life and hope. How might the “interstellar dust” be compared to the Vietnamese refugees (also sometimes referred to as the “dust of life”) as they float at sea under moonlit and starlit skies? Do the images of the stars or feelings of hope and hopelessness vacillate within this poem? Why?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mong Lan is a writer and visual artist. Her poetry is included in the anthologies *Once Upon a Dream: The Vietnamese American Experience* (Andrews and McMeel, 1995) and *Making More Waves: New Writing By Asian American Women* (Beacon Press, 1997), as well as literary journals.