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FROM PASSION MAPS (2009)

“Are You Listening?”

We begin with practical things, the washing machine
that doesn’t work, my unemployment benefits,
but before I know it I’m coughing tears
telling my mother after years I can’t seem to speak
about what really scares me, as she tells me
my father worked all his life
in dangerous places for us so we could have
what we have. Saigon. Phnom Penh. Jakarta.
Countries of emerald leaves, the breadfruit trees,
fried bananas, and the sticky rice I loved to eat.
Dangerous places she repeats
and I’m inside the bullet-marked walls, inside
the back bedroom where war was not meant to reach
where my brother is asleep —
the music box in his hands, the tiny ballerina
twisting stiffly in her one dance when we find him
on the stairs cradling her faint song,
my mother unable to explain the mysterious way
he sleepwalked, a soundless sampan floating
down a mined Mekong. Are you listening?
I’m saying, You never listen to what I’m really saying.
The flooded shame, urine-soaked sheets, scared
as my father checked the streets.
The Vietcong outside, and inside my mother
irritated at having to change the bedding.
More urine-soaked sheets. And the war went on
and we left Saigon and years later my mother tells me
not to make such a fuss about a stupid machine.