

Untitled

by Mai Pho

She has a recurrent dream. Upon graduation her mother had bestowed on her a piece of calligraphy that was now framed in the living room. In the center was the character Tâm, the heart, once believed to be the center of intelligence and emotion. The character was a single brush stroke, curved into a two-chambered plum. The circle was unfinished, open. On the margin the calligrapher had scribed a verse from a Chinese poem written during the Duong dynasty, in the tenth century AD. It told a story of a man leaving his home province of Ngo during the wintertime. It is the image of his departure that the girl sees when she sleeps. She sees the tall So Mountain standing watch, sharply ridged and lush with pine. The man is leaving by boat. It drifts slowing on a lake green with the mountains reflection. He stands cloaked and silent, the day is early and there is a cold rain. She imagines his quiet sadness, tastes his humble longing. In the poem the man speaks of leaving his heart behind at the bottom of the lake, a symbol of his eternal return.

The next morning she awoke in a dark call room. Her wrists and arms were sore, why? Her thoughts rushed to the memory of the man whose heart had failed in the night, the man whose chest she crushed with her own hands. She had met him earlier that evening, remembered the charm of his mild dementia, the deference

and trust in his voice. She remembered noting but not understanding the significance of his breathing, slightly labored, even in his denial of discomfort. Later she had returned to his room to find him agonal and pulseless. What ensued was an oddly quiet affair. She had called the code but never heard the alarms. She felt the swirl of people around her but didn't hear their orders, their questions, their assumption of command. Her place was perched on the bed, elbows locked, mind blank with the bone-cracking task of resuming his heart's work. After he was intubated he regained his pulse, and when stable he was whisked away from her floor, no longer her patient. With the proper phone calls made, the appropriate family informed, she had gone to sleep.

Before morning rounds she walks down the corridor to intensive care, and stands by his bed. Out of habit she checks the chart of vitals, studies the monitor, the ventilator, notes the volume and color of the fluid in his catheter bag. At last she looks at his body, his face. His heart is beating but he does not open his eyes, speak or move to her touch. At once she feels weighed down, as if a cool stone has settled into the depth of her chest. She remembers her dream, the last verse of the poem. "Please tell our friends in Lac Duong, if they ask, a piece of icy heart is still lying quietly in that Jade Lake."