

THERESA Q. TRAN

Things Once Hidden

Among the early arrivals the island Pulau Bidong before us uninhabited
archipelago night float downriver spilling into a sea storm
in the overheated engine an explosion a sweat-smooth shield
salt spray over gunnel the intricate latticework of gauze
foamy across the mechanic's blistering chest our heavy
fishing boat bobbing like a lump in the throat

Braided rope around my waist the four of us bound tossed
together momentary relief then a flag-flapping boat
throttles nearer and the men jump kick punch smash
a hole in the hull sanctuary for the unseaworthy for children destined
to drown towed instead carried on the shoulders of a swimmer
over the reef where tiny fish dart hiding from our shadows

Blowing to cool a tin can of warmed milk through the steam my sister
smiling black and white photo chalk-written caption our name
birth date of arrival a dappled hillside clearing makeshift
kitchen we rinse spoiled rice in rationed water down at the beach
my architect dad rolls giant boulders linking limbs a chain
to engineer a jetty he whistles through the jungle to us later alone
beyond breakers he waves an arc of light a human analog signal

It's like this every day my mom asking for word of her sister
newcomers old friends some of them famous
musicians composers writers escaping with notebooks and instruments
instead of coats they come to warm around our fire
no bedtime she has us offering around tea or improvised
desserts dark tattered voices singing remnants of anthems

Humid mornings swollen with bugbites games drawn in dirt below us camp
 thickened a black market dealing dominoes fish sauce news
all the while we braided little rag dolls she brushed our baby
 teeth with cloth around her finger and when those fell out
she tucked each pearly root deep in the fraying hem of mended pockets