

What Keeps Us Up at Night

The house hums at night as it hems
the humid pavement of Norton Drive.
Water gurgles through the pipes.
The air conditioner vibrates.
Persistent mosquitoes buzz in my ear
while the mattress moans
underneath my weight.

Noise resounding like radio static,
impossible for my fatigue to tune out.
I consider stuffing cotton in my ears
to escape the cacophonous symphony,
until I recall the story of a university professor
who removed from his ear a cockroach
that had nested in the fibers.

The hour hand of the ticking clock on the nightstand
hovers perpetually over the number three. Rising
from bed after failed attempts to fall asleep,
carpet scratches my feet as I wander toward the kitchen.
Stepping onto the icy tiles,
I spot my grandfather seated at the table,
fingers fumbling with a tattered tablecloth
while the kettle cries on the range.

I settle down on the chair across from him,
trying to ignore his slippers tapping against the floor.
My grandfather appears unfazed by the sounds splitting the night.
He switches on the television, exhaling softly as the cadence
of Vietnamese news channels ricochet through the house.
I study the tense expression on his face, asking
why he is having trouble sleeping.

The silence keeps me awake.

Uneasy due to the eerie quiet,
like the calm before the storm.
The garage resembles a bunker

with four fully-stocked refrigerators,
even though he lives in an era of excess.
My grandfather doubting
that global amity will last.
I recall my mother saying,

All of his life he knew nothing but war.

His father suffered a lifetime of war, and
my grandfather was born to follow the path of a soldier.
He journeyed across the Pacific away from the bloodshed –
there was never time for nightmares,
memories of bullets never haunted him,
but he had spent so many years running
that when the city slumbers, he is without respite.
The serene neighborhood ignites his insomnia –
lacking the chopping repetition of Hueys swooping overhead,
the stealthy steady movement of troops at night and
explosions that would suddenly set the jungle ablaze
like a sunrise.

After leaving his homeland –
to which he gave dedicated service,
and devoting decades deployed
to a new life an ocean away –
working through both sunlit and moonlit hours,
retirement has rendered him restless –
committing himself to morning hikes and garden-work.

He offers me a cup of Oolong tea,
to ease my nerves as well as his.
The sipping becomes another instrument
accompanying the nocturnal orchestra.
As we sit beside one another
my lids grow heavy and I inhale,
grateful to have grown up during peace
and never having to resent the quiet.