

***Inside Out & Back Again***

**By Thanhha Lai**

*The Outside*

Starting tomorrow

everyone must

leave the house.

Mother starts sewing

at a factory;

Brother Quang begins

repairing cars.

The rest of us

must go to school,

repeating the last grade,

left unfinished.

Brother Vĩ wants

to be a cook

or teach martial arts,

not waste a year

as the oldest senior.

Mother says

one word:

College.

Brother Khôi gets an old bicycle to ride,  
but Mother says  
I'm too young for one  
even though I'm  
a ten-year-old  
in the fourth grade,  
when everyone else  
is nine.

Mother says,  
Worry instead  
about getting sleep  
because from now on  
no more naps.

You will eat lunch  
at school  
with friends.

What friends?

You'll make some.

What if I can't?

You will.

What will I eat? What your friends eat.

But what will I eat?

Be surprised.

I hate surprises.

Be agreeable.  
Not without knowing  
what I'm agreeing to.  
Mother sighs,  
walking away.

September 1

### *Sadder Laugh*

School!  
I wake up with  
dragonflies  
zipping through  
my gut.  
I eat nothing.  
Mother shakes her head.  
I take each step toward school evenly,  
trying to hold my stomach  
steady.  
It helps that  
the morning air glides cool  
like a constant washcloth  
against my face.  
Deep breaths.

I'm the first student in class.

My new teacher has brown curls looped tight to her scalp

like circles in a beehive.

She points to her chest:

MiSSS SScott,

saying it three times,

each louder

with ever more spit.

I repeat, MiSSS SScott,

careful to hiss every s.

She doesn't seem impressed.

I tap my own chest:

Hà.

She must have heard

ha,

as in funny ha-ha-ha.

She fakes a laugh.

I repeat, Hà,

and wish I knew

enough English

to tell her to listen for

the diacritical mark,

this one directing

the tone

downward.

My new teacher tilts  
her head back,  
fakes  
an even sadder laugh.

September 2 Morning

### *Rainbow*

I face the class.  
MiSSS SScott speaks.  
Each classmate says something.  
I don't understand,  
but I see.  
Fire hair on skin dotted with spots.  
Fuzzy dark hair on skin shiny as lacquer.  
Hair the color of root on milky skin.  
Lots of braids on milk chocolate.  
White hair on a pink boy.  
Honey hair with orange ribbons on see-through skin.  
Hair with barrettes in all colors on bronze bread.  
I'm the only  
straight black hair  
on olive skin.

September 2 Midmorning

*Black and White and Yellow and Red*

The bell rings.

Everyone stands. I stand.

They line up;

so do I.

Down a hall.

Turn left.

Take a tray.

Receive food.

Sit.

On one side

of the bright, noisy room,

light skin.

Other side,

dark skin.

Both laughing, chewing,

as if it never occurred

to them

someone medium

would show up.

I don't know where to sit

any more than

I know how to eat

the pink sausage snuggled inside bread

shaped like a corncob,  
smeared with sauces  
yellow and red.

I think

they are making fun  
of the Vietnamese flag  
until I remember  
no one here likely knows  
that flag's colors.

I put down the tray  
and wait  
in the hallway.

September 2 11:30 a.m.