

Mother II

tswb

I was again, on a weeknight the drunkest, in the room. I kept losing in “Screw the Dealer.” I sat in a circle with five Hmong students, a small carving of home on a white campus. Two friends outside of the circle were exchanging experiences of depression and expressing sadness over their elders’ failure to understand mental health. I wanted to pick a fight, so I interrupted their conversation. The conversation turned into a debate. I was shouting to win; too tired to form a solid argument, but not drunk enough to yield. I wanted to understand why we always measure ourselves against whiteness. When did the lack of words come to mean a lack of belief, an absence of empathy? My friends were not impressed. I would continue to think about this conversation years later when I came to face my own depression; and my friends were right—there was no word for depression in Hmong.

My first understanding of depression came from my mother’s stories of uncle Npawg. When I was younger, my mother used to tell us stories about Npawg, her only sibling. She was fond of him. They only had each other. In many ways, he raised her despite being only a few years older.

During the war, my mother and Npawg lived and worked for an aunt and

uncle while Grandpa and Grandma were helping the Americans. For reasons I can't recall, or my mother never told us, Npawg did not get along with Auntie and her husband. He was often beaten.

One day, Auntie caught Npawg lamenting about his living condition: he would rather die than work and get beaten. When Auntie told her husband, he became furious. Uncle beat Npawg. This time, Uncle wanted to teach Npawg a lesson, so he dragged the boy by his ear to the outskirts of the village, where they stopped at a burial ground. "If you want to die so badly, then stay with the dead." Uncle left Npawg. Uncle's good-faith plan to scare Npawg ended up with a dead boy. No one knew what happened that night. My mother only remember that Npawg could not find his way back home.

I imagined a handsome young man whose body is older than his face crunching on a mound of dirt. The sky dark, empty of clouds. There are no crickets out, the only sound: Npawg's weeping. The night is his only company. Although we do not know how Npawg died, I believed he died because Auntie and Uncle did not love him. Npawg was heartbroken. His spirit yearned for a home, and it found belonging on the other side.

The closest words I have found to describe depression in Hmong is *tu siab*. *Siab* speaks to the heart, the spirit, the base of life. *Tu* means to cut. *Tu siab* is to cut a life short by breaking the heart or cutting the spirit. I learned this word from my mother. I also learned this feeling from her.

I was depressed throughout college. I have been depressed since I ran away from home at eighteen. I only accepted it after college when I was living alone. I had failed to get a job with my college degree, and I failed to get into graduate school. A year after I graduated from college, my mother called me.

"*Did I break your heart?*" my mother asked. I listened to her breathe on the other side of the phone. Her breath was a hand holding my heart hostage. She waited for an answer. I waited for her to speak again. I held my breath and looked out the window. It was dusk out, and the sun was sitting on the horizon. Naked trees reaching with hands toward the last light. In Minneapolis, the sky was brightest in the winter.

My mother had used my sister's phone to call me. I had not returned her past five missed calls. I didn't tell my mother that I had listened to all her voicemails. I just never returned her calls. Most days I don't have the time, at least that's how I justify it. I sat in the dark for hours because I wanted to feel how my mother felt. I thought in loneliness; in the dark, I could feel for her,

and be closer to her. There is great comfort in lying to yourself. I could never understand how it is to live in the world as a blind elder woman. My mother and I lived five miles apart, yet I could not bring myself to visit her.

When I picked up the call, I was happy to hear her voice, an awkward relief. My mother asked me how I was doing. I told her my plants were dying. My mother did not understand why I was talking about plants. Growing up, my mother often spoke to us in riddles. It was one joke she had over her children. Hmong is a language full of riddles and expressions, most of which I can't begin to understand. Though as an adult, I felt as if I was the one speaking in riddles to my mother; at least my behavior was a mystery. We never had indoor plants in our house. It was an American concept.

My plants were dying, and I was too. Red begonias, pink orchids, and white kalanchoe all browned and dried up. They sat pretty on my windowsill. I kept them to remind myself that dead things can be beautiful. Or maybe my behavior was a symptom of depression. Some days I woke up feeling like I could run through every wall man has built. Though most days, I wanted to crawl into a hole, in the ground, and start over in the spring. I thought life would be simpler as a plant. I could be dead and dry in someone else's window.

I had been crying very much, uncontrollably, in the shower, on the airplane, on the bus, in a dimly lit restaurant, in a museum on a date. Whenever I listened to my mother's voicemail, I would cry; like a child, a pink thumb in his mouth, a hand clasped in between his thighs, weeping and calling for his mother. Every time I talked to my mother, I wanted to cry. And when I would go too long without her voice, I wanted to cry too.

I used to joke to my mother that if she gave me a quarter of the love she gives my brothers, I would die happy. My mother never liked my jokes—she didn't understand them. She believed she loved all her children equally.

There are many ways to break a heart in Hmong. Though Npawg's and my story are not the same, and my mother did not cause my depression - there is no singular cause of depression- in many ways, my mother broke my heart as Auntie broke Npawg's heart. While there are no words for depression in Hmong, my mother would understand me when I tell her that my spirit is heartbroken. I am trying to find words to carry my spirit home to my mother. I'm trying to find language for heartbreak so I can explain to my mother. I want to ask my mother someday if she thinks America had stolen her children from her.

