

KARTIKA REVIEW

CHA TÔI NGỦ: MY FATHER SLEEPS

VUONG QUOC VU

My father sleeps
early now. By the first hours
of evening, when twilight is ash
settling into the garden,
he is already sweetly in slumber.
He sleep-talks in whispers.

The year my father turned
seventy-five, he began to cry
in his sleep, murmuring—
Đừng đùa tôi về! Đừng đùa tôi về!

My mother shook
him awake. He lay rolled up
like a child, flushed and warm,
sweat on his skin like dew.

He kept having the same dream:
a young boy leads him
by the hand down the dirt
path towards his village. He begs
the child to not take him home—
Đừng đùa tôi về!

Yet the child drags him
through rice fields overgrown
like giant reeds. The child drags him
into the village, its thatch houses
as he remembers them, simple
as woven baskets, as nests.

As my father comes closer
to his childhood home,
on the banks of a river,
he wrestles
his hand from the child's grip—

Đình đưa tôi về!

The child looks up at him
and the face my father sees
is his very own, haggard
and gray, so knowing and sad
he wakes up in tears.

Cha tôi ngủ. My father sleeps
peacefully now. He knows
every furrow of his face,
but for me, it is in the gray
of twilight that I see
how old my father is—
the droop of his eyes, shadows
deepening every wrinkle,
and I worry, but my father has begun
to smile in his sleep. His breathing
rumbles like distant thunder.



Born in Saigon, Vietnam, **Vuong Quoc Vu** grew up in San Jose, CA. He is glad his parents made him speak Vietnamese at home. In his thirties now, he is still fluent in Vietnamese enough to know that when spelled with incorrect diacritic marks, *Cha Tôi Ngủ*, can mean "my father is stupid." This is his second poem in Kartika Review.