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FROM PASSION MAPS (2009)

“Are You Listening?”

We begin with practical things, the washing machine that doesn't work, my unemployment benefits, but before I know it I'm coughing tears telling my mother after years I can't seem to speak about what really scares me, as she tells me my father worked all his life in dangerous places *for us* so we could have what we have. Saigon. Phnom Penh. Jakarta. Countries of emerald leaves, the breadfruit trees, fried bananas, and the sticky rice I loved to eat. *Dangerous places* she repeats and I'm inside the bullet-marked walls, inside the back bedroom where war was not meant to reach where my brother is asleep — the music box in his hands, the tiny ballerina twisting stiffly in her one dance when we find him on the stairs cradling her faint song, my mother unable to explain the mysterious way he sleepwalked, a soundless sampan floating down a mined Mekong. *Are you listening?* I'm saying, *You never listen to what I'm really saying.* The flooded shame, urine-soaked sheets, scared as my father checked the streets. The Vietcong outside, and inside my mother irritated at having to change the bedding. More urine-soaked sheets. And the war went on and we left Saigon and years later my mother tells me not to make such a fuss about a stupid machine.