

Jenny Brantley

Love and the Galaxy

The 64 Galaxy Ford with a 406 engine had
red interior, black outside and a four barrel
to kick ass. My sister and I
pushed that car too fast
into curves, pumping the brakes,
and only God and Lynard Skynard blasting on the radio
held it into the curve, the swamps of Gin Branch
a breath away, those breathless nights.
We were always late on those summer nights-
Lynn's face mottled red with kisses,
our breaths cloved against Schlitz
Malt Liquor Bull.
We were bad, young, immortal, bad mufflers
announcing our arrival miles down the road,
breathless
pulling into the driveway, mama and daddy,
billowing in Shadowline gown and shorts-respectively-
on the front porch, give me the keys, go inside, stay
home for two weeks, mumbo-jumbo, bad ass
cartoons we were
hitting the highways into the Gallberry the very next night
where all the bad boys were, the boys with daddys in jail,
mamas in bars
and these were the secrets of our youth.
Now sister is single again, two little girls,
one perched on the edge of teen kingdom,
and I wonder what she will learn
of love and galaxies
and secrets of the universe.

Translations in Sound (Teaching Refugees from Laos in Louisiana)

I learn not to scream when cockroaches crawl on my legs as I pull the VOO sound across my
bottom lip so many times it bleeds.
When I push my mouth together for the WOO sound, then let it go to catch its airy end, I almost
can't stop the sound that might send my legs running, my hands slapping roaches, but the
Laotians are quiet and kind and fix me water in a blue cup. I wet my lips but cannot make myself
drink as they watch and practice, and I smooth my skirt as I sit on the woven mat reserved for
teacher.

When the lesson is over, after two hours, of What will you buy at the grocery store? I will buy
celery. I will buy chicken, they want to show me pictures of Laos, home, and I see pictures of
toothless women, men without arms standing on a dirt path, watching over shoulders. These are
happy pictures, mixed with weddings, yet some pictures they cover gently with their hands, as if
hushing a sleepy and irritated child. I wonder what they protect me from, wonder what they have
decided is too much for teacher?

What are the images they hush? Are they more than I remember from my own childhood when I watched the nightly news, eating all my vegetables between clips of napalmed children and soldiers with young eyes looking home.

Their pictures are of home but their lives are here and now.

They once were teachers too, but now clean shrimp, cut sugar cane, sew cloth for 8-10 hours a day, then sit with me for 2, trying to find the WOO and VOO sounds, the SSHH and CCHH sounds in mouths more used to bird sounds, lilted up and down, strange and lovely, the meaning not in the mouth but in the throat and pitch. As we rest, they bring me Coke and apples, laugh when I try to find their words, apple flying away because my throat is wrong.

For six months, I teach them the language of buying stamps, cashing cheques, ordering burgers at McDonalds, and when I must move, on my last night, they sit a doll before me as a gift, dressed in silk and bright colours, wind her up and she turns and plays a folk song from Laos, as sad and sweet as memories of the Mekong River without war.

They sit in a quiet circle as I watch her slowly spin
and play a music beyond the sharp pull of teeth on lips.
They watch me listen, listen themselves, perhaps hoping
I will hear their song, their language, a song deeper and
truer than the language of stamps and McDonalds,
a song that covers the scurry of cockroaches, the smell
of old shrimp, the needle punctures in their hands,
and I hear it, at least I think I do,
and the hard words and world of English
are made a little smaller, a little less important
in the spinning, silken tassels
of a doll who speaks in music.