

Chuyển Giới, or Crossing Realms of Existence:
Queering the Dream of Asia-Futurism

by

Kyla-Yên Huỳnh Giffin

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FADE IN:

INT. ASTRAL PROJECTION ROOM – DAY

HUỲNH AN LINH sits in the dark, cross-legged, eyes closed, their hands in a full lotus position on their lap. They are wearing a white iridescent men's áo dài with no shoes and have their dark brown hair styled in a feathered bob.

The only light in the room seems to emit from them. Even the freckles on their face shimmer, looking like a constellation. Their rhythmic breathing and heartbeat echo all around.

A ringing fades in and grows louder and louder until all sounds stop and their eyelids fly open, revealing deep black eyes that reflect the scene in front of them.

EXT. RURAL SCHOOLHOUSE – SUNSET

LINH has become a CHILD no more than ten years old. Their hair is clipped into a ponytail with a tortoiseshell barrette and they are carrying a small brown bookbag on their back. They are wearing a school uniform—a white collared shirt over an ankle-length, pleated red skirt, and black stockings tucked into brown buckled loafers.

The darkness around them has changed so that Linh is illuminated in an orange glow, standing at the corner of a schoolhouse surrounded by farmland, watching other school children laugh and chat while walking, skipping, or running on the paths along the fields toward their homes.

Linh blinks, shakes their head slightly, and moves to walk forward when their foot kicks something with a thud. Linh looks down.

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At Linh's foot is the peeling trunk of a chopped down tree. They inhale and smile, smelling the tree's pleasant fragrance.

LINH (V.O.)
Cinnamon.

Linh squats down and begins peeling off the bark and holding it up to their nose to smell it some more. Looking absentmindedly into the distance, they put the cinnamon bark in their mouth and chew.

LINH (V.O.)
I guess I must have liked
cinnamon in this life.

Linh sits back on their heels and watches the school children and farmers in the fields.

LINH (V.O.)
Funny. I hate cinnamon.

Linh stands up, still chewing on the bark, and walks away from the schoolhouse.

Linh enters onto the path by the fields, chewing on the cinnamon bark and shielding their eyes from the sun. Children can be heard laughing far ahead on the path, as well as the sound of farmers working and chatting in the fields and wind blowing through the grass.

The scene begins to pixelate and Linh stops walking and chewing.

EXT. TEMPLE W/ LOTUS POND AND TREE

Linh stands in front of a Buddhist temple and lotus pond that sit beneath a giant tree, large nuts, broken and full, lying scattered across the ground.

They look around.

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LINH (V.O.)

I know this temple.

Linh walks toward the temple and pond.

One particularly large nut, still unbroken, sits at the edge of the pond. Linh approaches it, their footsteps quiet on the soft ground, and picks the nut up.

Linh moves it around in their hands, tracing the grooves and edges, before loudly breaking the shell open.

They pop half of the nut into their mouth, then sit down on their knees at the edge of the pond.

Linh gazes across the water and up to the top of the temple and tree. The orange-red sun shines through gaps in the branches and gaps in the temple arches and windows. Bird song and the buzzing of bugs drift through the atmosphere.

A dragonfly lands on a lotus in the middle of the pond, sits for a few seconds, and flies off.

Linh rests their chin in one hand, and with the other, pops the other half of the nut into their mouth, their jaw moving up and down in their hand as they chew.

LINH (V.O.)

Did I just eat anything I
found on the ground?

INCARNATION

(giggling)

Actually, we thought this was
the best way to know things.

LINH (V.O.)

Oh?

INCARNATION

Yeah, by tasting the world around us. We learned it from our parents, the way they interacted with the land they farmed.

LINH (V.O.)

I see.

Linh and the incarnation sit, watch, and chew in silence.

INCARNATION

Are the farms still there, in the future?

LINH (V.O.)

Yes.

INCARNATION

(excited)

Really?

LINH (V.O.)

Really. The land is flourishing like you wouldn't believe. We take good care of it. And we take good care of the people who tend to it, too.

INCARNATION

That makes me...

(grins wide)

really happy to hear.

The scene pixelates into darkness and Linh morphs back into their present form.

INT. ASTRAL PROJECTION ROOM

Linh stands up from the floor and, as they walk forward, the room pixelates once more and—

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INT. BUDDHIST SHRINE – CONTINUOUS

—turns into a Buddhist shrine room, every wall, statue, rug, and tapestry iridescent in light and color, and seeming to be rippling.

A door slides open in the wall directly in front of Linh. They walk through it into a large domed glass greenhouse.

It closes behind them.

INT. GREENHOUSE

Along the greenhouse's wall is a series of reflective sliding glass doors, including the one Linh just walked through, and throughout the interior of the greenhouse are hundreds of species of plants and bugs native to Vietnam. In the center is a wide metal column of shelf upon shelf of binder, with a metal railing spiraling around it.

Linh walks to the base of the column, where instead of shelves the column is just a glass-walled enclosure.

The glass slides open for Linh to enter, and as it closes, the glass cylinder is filled with beams of white lasers from top to bottom, scanning Linh's body.

Linh holds out their hands in front of them, and all the beams focus onto their hands, dotting the outline of a rectangular shape. The beams construct, thread by thread, a thin metal tablet with white glowing etchings, looking almost like a large computer chip.

The beams sweep over Linh again, and their white iridescent áo dài pixelates into thin air to be replaced by a sage green áo bà ba top, white pleated culottes, and black combat boots, a black

leather trench coat draping over their shoulders and a messenger bag hanging across their body.

The glass slides back open and Linh steps out onto a metal platform which lifts them up steadily into the air with a soft hum, and floats along the railing around and up the outside of the column, until they reach a shelf midway up the column and the platform stops.

Linh pulls one of the binders off the shelf and opens it, revealing a stack of tablets like the one in their hand, but each with its own unique engravings. They place their tablet on top of the pile, shut the binder, and replace it on the shelf.

The platform floats them back down to the ground.

As they land, several glass doors throughout the greenhouse begin opening, and other people in the same uniform as Linh was wearing walk out and approach the column.

One of them, a tall WOMAN with a birthmark in the shape of a butterfly wing on her right cheek, and black hair that floats down to her waist in two long braids, waves at Linh and jogs over to them.

Linh waves back, smiling.

TIÊN

Linh! Did you already archive
your tablet? Who were you
today?

LINH

The daughter of farmers, from
the 20th century. She was
just a kid, too. Ate
everything she found on the
ground.

Linh and Tiên both laugh.

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TIÊN

I was in the 17th century
today.
(pridefully with palm on chest)
He was a hát tuồng opera
singer.

LINH

How ironic. You can't carry a
tune to save your life.

Tiên playfully punches Linh's arm.

TIÊN

Hey! And here I was going to
make you bánh bò hấp tonight.

Tiên thrusts her chin up in the air in mock
indignation and begins to walk away toward the
column.

LINH

Tiên, I take it back, I take
it back! You're such a great
singer that I definitely
don't want to rip out my
eardrums whenever I hear you
sing.

Tiên looks over her shoulder back at Linh and
laughs.

TIÊN

Okay, okay. As long as you
help me cook.

Linh smiles as Tiên lines up with the others at
the column to wait her turn to retrieve and
archive her tablet.

They walk through one of the glass sliding doors,
the tallest and widest of all of them, at the

opposite end of the greenhouse as the shrine room door they had come out of.

INT. ARCHIVAL LIBRARY

Linh enters into a grand domed library. The white floors and white staircases and curving white wall filled to the brim with books and white áo dài of workers walking around with books or electronic tablets in hand, all drenched in sunlight from the enormous skylight on the ceiling.

The white walls are only disturbed by the greenhouse windows that curve from the skylight down to the glass sliding doors that lead to the greenhouses.

A round desk with a few receptionists behind it, typing on projected screens, sits at the center of the room.

Linh walks toward a large opening in the floor in front of the desk that contains a stairwell leading down to the first floor.

As Linh approaches the opening, a tour group of people led by another worker in a red instead of white áo dài with a neon pink pixie cut come up the stairs.

GIANG

This is our historic archival library! These documents are ancient, fragile, and often one of a kind, so as such, require special care from our book conservators and historians.

Giang sees Linh, smiles, and gestures at them.

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GIANG

And here we have one of our extraordinary historians now, Huỳnh An Linh! They just came out of one of our greenhouses, which contain our astral projection shrine rooms where historians spend their workday re-experiencing past lives. Each greenhouse, by using sunlight as well as the energy from sound waves generated by the bugs and plants inside, also powers its own core column that is responsible for burning our historians' ancestral memories onto tablets and then archiving them in our system.

The tour group "oohs" and "ahs" as Linh shyly waves at them.

GIANG

Linh, do you think you could share with the group what past life you experienced today?

LINH

Well, I found myself in 20th century rural Vietnam as a young schoolgirl whose parents were farmers. I was able to see what an ancient temple and schoolhouse looked like. One cool thing about experiencing our past lives is we take on the feelings of our ancestors. Like, I hate cinnamon, both the smell and taste, but this version of me loved it, so I loved it too.

(CONT'D)

LINH (CONT'D)

I could also feel her love
for her parents, and her love
of the world around her.

(smiles to herself as they
remember the experience)
It's really a beautiful
thing.

Everyone in the group, in awed silence, including
Giang, eagerly watches and listens to Linh.

LINH

If anyone has any questions,
I can answer them.

Giang claps their hands together in delight.

GIANG

Perfect!
(turns to group)
Questions, anybody?

Several hands shoot up. Linh chuckles and rubs
the back of their head hesitantly, sharing a look
with Giang.

GIANG

(mouthing)

Please?

Linh sighs, then searches the group to see who
they should call on first. They spot a YOUNG BOY
off to the side, his arm impatiently stretched
into the air.

LINH

(gesturing at the boy)
How about you, kid? What do
you want to know?

The boy lowers his hand.

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YOUNG BOY

How many lives have you
lived? Does this mean you
remember all of them? Who are
you going to be tomorrow—

LINH

Whoa.

(chuckles and puts hands up
in a stop motion)
Slow down, one question at a
time. Um, I don't know how many
lifetimes I've lived, nobody
does, really. Some past lives
take days, weeks, even months
to explore, so most of us will
never make it through all our
past lives. As for remembering,
you could say all the memories
from each past life are
downloaded into my brain when I
project, although it's more
like they're being awakened.
But after projecting, only the
memories I re-experienced stay
with me. Everything else still
gets recorded on the tablets
though. And as for the last
question, I don't know who I'll
be tomorrow. No one knows until
they project.

The young boy listens carefully then nods matter-
of-factly, as if he already knew all the answers
and was simply testing Linh.

The other tour group members grow more interested
and impatient, bursting with questions.

TOUR GROUP MEMBER #1

Do you experience bodily
sensations when projecting?

TOUR GROUP MEMBER #2
Is projecting like time
travel? Can you change the
past?

TOUR GROUP MEMBER #3
Oh, what about—

GIANG
Alright everyone, that's enough
bugging Linh, they did just get
off work after all! We'll let
them go and we can continue our
tour through the library and in
the greenhouses, and there will
be plenty more people,
including me, to answer your
questions.

Some disappointed "aw"s come from the group as
Giang herds them away, giving Linh an apologetic
look over their shoulder.

Linh nods in thanks to Giang, then heads down the
stairs.

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY

The first floor resembles the second floor almost
exactly.

The library it contains is a public library
accessible to everybody, and Linh can see people
of all ages, alone, as couples, or in groups, all
browsing the shelves or talking to workers at the
reception desk, kids running across platforms and
up and down the spiral staircases.

Linh walks straight from the bottom of the stairs
in the direction of the entrance, which is a glass
revolving door under a solid white arch. As they
pass the reception desk, they wave goodbye to the
workers sitting there, who smile and wave back.

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Walking out the entryway, they shield their eyes from the evening sun.

EXT. FRONT OF LIBRARY, HO CHI MINH CITY

The skyline of the city looks like a range of hills, every building domed and curved and covered on its entire surface with gardens, fields, and even farmland.

Rivers trace the city ground instead of roads, with concrete footbridges and walkways crossing and outlining them. Water vehicles float through the rivers and pedestrians walk along them

In the sky, people whiz around on skyboards and in sky cars, buses, and trains.

Linh sits on a bench near a skyboard rack and charging port to watch the city. At the sound of footsteps, Linh looks over their shoulder to see Tiên coming from out of the library, now in a peach-and-navy-blue-colored áo tứ thân over white high-tops worn and dirty from wear, a fanny pack strapped across their back.

As Linh stands up to greet Tiên, she jumps onto them, throwing her arms around their neck, and Linh wraps their own arms around her waist.

Tiên pulls back to look down at Linh's face, kisses them, and smiles. The birthmark on her face rises up with her cheek, as if it is an actual butterfly flapping its wing.

TIÊN

Ready to go?

LINH

Mhm.

Linh puts Tiên down and grabs their skyboard from the rack nearby, placing the tip of their thumb

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on a small scanner on the edge, powering it on with a loud whir.

The skyboard floats out of their hands and hovers near the ground.

Linh steps on it, their feet suctioned onto the board with a soop sound by the skyboard's gravitational pull, then holds their hand out to Tiên to help her on. With another soop, Tiên's feet are secured to the skyboard, and it flies off into the sky.

As the two of them soar through the airway above Ho Chi Minh City, they pass by other skyboarders and sky cars, weave between the hill-like buildings, and skim the surface of the rivers.

The two of them grin widely the entire time, laughing wildly when they get splashed because they are too close to the water, or when the breeze blows them unexpectedly.

EXT. APARTMENT

They arrive in front of a large apartment complex covered from top to bottom in foliage, every apartment a colorful cubical pod, so that the complex looked as if it was made of giant linking cube toys.

The two of them fly onto the balcony of a pale green apartment, and the skyboard hovers low as the two of them step off. Almost the entire balcony floor is covered with potted plants, and plants also hang from the balcony railing and the ceiling above the balcony.

Linh picks up the skyboard and places their thumb over the scanner again to power it off, then sets the skyboard against a charging platform on the wall.

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Linh and Tiên pause at the same time, inhale deeply, then look at each other.

LINH

I guess Hải already made dinner.

TIÊN

Thank goodness, I'm so hungry.

LINH

Yeah and you need to make sure you get enough energy so we can make bánh bò hấp later.

Tiên laughs.

TIÊN

Is that all you've been thinking about?

LINH

The entire ride home.

Tiên rolls her eyes at Linh, slides open the balcony door, and walks into the apartment, followed by Linh.

INT. APARTMENT

Colorful rugs and velvety cushions all surround a short table on the floor, flowers and succulents lining almost every inch of the cream-colored walls, vine plants and air plants hanging from the ceiling, potted trees of every shape and size squeezed into every corner and edge available.

Against the wall to the left, partially obscured by all the plants, is a small, charming kitchen, where HẢI, a young man with long hair, jet black

save for his purple highlights, drawn into a ponytail, stands wearing a white apron over a maroon linen áo dài tunic and black lounge shorts. He stands over a stove, holding a frying pan that sizzles from the heat.

He looks up at Linh and Tiên.

HẢI

Oh, you're home! I'm just cooking some shredded chicken and then our bánh mì will be ready.

LINH

Yum!

TIÊN

I'll get the plates. Are the others joining us?

Hải clicks his teeth.

HẢI

Oh, I knew there was something I was forgetting.

TIÊN

You mean you didn't make enough?

HẢI

No, no, that's the thing, I did make enough. I just forgot to ask everyone.

Hải laughs and rubs the back of his neck.

LINH

No worries, I've got it.

Linh walks to the front of the apartment, taking off their leather trench coat as they do so.

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When they reach the front door, they hang their coat on a hook, then slide open the door. Looking down the quiet hall of closed apartment doors, they cup their hands around their mouth.

LINH

(shouting)

Hey everyone! Hải made bánh mì!

Through the hall, feet shuffle and voices in the apartments as doors open and their neighbors step out into the hall.

NEIGHBOR #1

How did he know I was craving bánh mì?

NEIGHBOR #2

Oh good, I'm too exhausted to make dinner tonight.

NEIGHBOR #3

Hải, we'll all make you a feast next week, but I can't promise it'll be anywhere near as good as your food.

NEIGHBOR #4

Wait, let me bring over some of the bánh tét I made earlier.

NEIGHBOR #5

Oh yeah, I have some chả giò left over.

NEIGHBOR #6

I'll bring—

LINH

(shouting)

But did anyone happen to make bánh bò hấp?

Fifteen of their neighbors file into the plant-filled apartment, dressed in their comfiest clothes for lounging around and carrying various dishes, chatting and laughing with each other.

Hải carries a tray of bánh mì over from the kitchen and places it in the center of the table, Linh helps everyone set up their dishes, and Tiên passes out plates and utensils.

Everyone settles onto the cushions, thanks each other for the food and thanks Linh, Tiên, and Hải for hosting them, then piles food onto their plates and eats, gossiping about their days and teasing one another all the while.

Linh scarfs down their food and bolts up from the floor and into the kitchen.

They open a cabinet door above their head, trying to reach one of the top shelves.

Tiên, mid-bite and listening to one of their neighbors tell a story about their daughter, sees Linh struggling out of the corner of her eye.

TIÊN

Linh, what are you doing?

LINH

(straining)

I'm...trying to reach...the
tapioca flour.

TIÊN

For bánh bò hấp?

LINH

(still straining)

Yes.

A couple of the people sitting next to Tiên watch Linh with her.

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Linh's fingertips graze the side of a bag of white powder on the shelf, but can't quite grasp it.

Tiên sets her plate down and stands up.

TIÊN

You're too short, babe. Here,
let me hel-

Linh pushes the bottom of the bag too hard and it falls over on the shelf, top unrolled, spilling tapioca flour all over Linh's head and shoulders, a white cloud suspended in the air and slowly falling onto the counters and floor.

Tiên gasps and bursts out laughing as everyone else looks over to see what the commotion is all about.

Linh turns around and looks at them with a mildly shocked look on their white-coated face, and blows out to clear some of the flour off their lips.

Everyone else joins in laughing with Tiên, and Linh's shocked look turns to mild annoyance as they start to shake and brush the flour out of their hair.

Tiên walks over to them, still laughing, and tiptoeing around the flour on the floor so as not to track it throughout the apartment.

TIÊN

You should have just waited
for me to get it down for
you.

Tiên grabs a towel off the oven handle and, holding Linh's chin with one hand, wipes down their face with the other.

LINH

(muffled behind the towel)
I was eager to get started.

TIÊN

(laughs)

Well, now we don't have any
tapioca flour to make bánh bò
hấp with.

NEIGHBOR #7

Actually, I have a bag I
haven't even opened yet that
we can use!

Linh's eyes light up, and they go to run out of
the kitchen when Tiên's arm catches them.

TIÊN

Wait, you're covered in
flour! You're going to track
it all over the place.

Linh gives Tiên a menacing smirk.

Tiên lets go of them and backs away, hands held
out defensively in front of her.

TIÊN

Oh no, don't you dare, don't
even think about it, Linh.
Linh...

Tiên runs out of the kitchen and Linh chases after
her, laughing along with everyone else.

Linh jumps onto her back, and Tiên shrieks
playfully as they rub their flour-covered face on
her face, shaking the flour off their hair onto
Tiên's as well.

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EXT. APARTMENT

The sun is low on the horizon behind the buildings that look like hills, but there is still enough of it to make the plants on the apartment balcony glow.

The rivers, reflecting gold, flow toward the sun like veins leading to a heart. The laughter from inside the apartment blends into the whirring of skyboards and sky vehicles and evening bird song.

INT. ASTRAL PROJECTION ROOM

Linh is once again sitting, cross-legged and eyes closed, in the dark astral projection shrine room, wearing their white work áo dài.

They pixelate into a YOUNG TEENAGER with sleek brown hair falling over the shoulders of their denim jacket, a bird pinned to the chest pocket.

Around them, the room pixelates into a dim sum restaurant, and they open their eyes.

INT. DIM SUM RESTAURANT

The restaurant is loud and bustling, every round table covered with a white tablecloth and surrounded by wooden chairs full of people, squished together as close as possible, only leaving enough room for servers to walk through with their carts.

Linh sits at one such table, and in the middle is a spinning wooden platform. The platform is filled to the brim with steamers and plates of various dumplings, buns, noodles, meats, and vegetables, a large bowl of cháo at the center, a stack of smaller bowls and soup spoons next to it.

Around the table sit people that, with the memories of this past life, they recognize as their AUNTIES, COUSINS, GRANDMOTHER, and MOTHER.

Their grandmother, mother, and aunties gossip a bit in Vietnamese to one another, but the cousins talk entirely in English, and the younger aunties speak a great deal in English, which Linh is surprised to find that this incarnation of themselves understands, since their present self does not.

LINH (V.O.)

Is this English? Where am I?

INCARNATION

San Jose, California.

LINH (V.O.)

America?

(groans)

Of all the places—

INCARNATION

Don't worry.

(smiles)

We're safe here. See?

Linh and the incarnation scan their surroundings.

Everyone in the restaurant is Asian, not a single white face in sight. And while some are speaking English, most are speaking Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai, Korean, and more.

All of Linh's relatives are smiling and laughing, eating to their hearts' content, speaking as loudly as they want to each other, the youngest cousins even chasing one another around the table.

The same can be said for the rest of the parties of people in the restaurant. Not only is it

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obvious that they all feel safe, but it's obvious that they all feel joyous, as well.

LINH (V.O.)

(looking around)

You're right. Everyone does feel safe here. And there's no white people here. That's nice to see. I'm glad you had this.

INCARNATION

You still have this, right?

LINH (V.O.)

Oh yes. In fact, it's even greater. We're back in Vietnam. All across the "Third World," we've freed ourselves from the colonizers. We even destroyed capitalism in the West. And we brought our people home. And we've built such a wonderful, much better world. The land is happy, we are happy. We're healing. Thriving, really.

INCARNATION

It feels almost...impossible to imagine.

LINH (V.O.)

I promise you. It's not.

Linh and the restaurant pixelate again, and Linh becomes a YOUNG ADULT, their brown hair short and hidden under a beanie, barely reaching their ears where paper birds hang from their lobes. They are dressed in a mint green knit sweater over white wide-legged pants. Their long coat is a deep forest green, the same color as their beanie.

INT. ASIAN GROCERY STORE

Linh is standing in the snack aisle of an Asian grocery store, holding a red basket in one hand, where a couple packages of ramen, a bag of rice crackers, a few cups of Yan Yan, and a bag of tapioca flour are piled into.

Linh sees the flour and smiles.

LINH (V.O.)

That reminds me—I need to buy more tapioca flour.

INCARNATION

You do? Why?

LINH (V.O.)

I kind of spilled an entire bag on myself.

The incarnation laughs.

INCARNATION

Sounds like me.

LINH (V.O.)

What are you buying it for?

INCARNATION

To cook bánh bò hấp.

LINH (V.O.)

No way, that's what I was trying to cook, too. Well, that's what I was trying to help my girlfriend cook at least.

INCARNATION

I've...never made it before.

LINH (V.O.)

So why now?

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INCARNATION

At this point, I'm attending
a very white college, away
from my family, and I feel
them, I feel myself, slipping
through my fingers. So I'm
teaching myself Vietnamese,
learning Vietnamese history
and folklore, and

(holds up the shopping
basket)

trying to cook foods I've
never cooked before, let
alone even eaten.

They walk down the aisle.

LINH (V.O.)

That sounds hard. How old are
you here?

INCARNATION

Nineteen.

They stop walking.

LINH (V.O.)

Do you feel alone?

INCARNATION

Yes.

They continue walking.

INCARNATION

How old are you, anyway?

LINH (V.O.)

Twenty-five.

INCARNATION

Not much older than I am
here.

LINH (V.O.)

A six-year difference sounds
like a lot to me.

INCARNATION

That's because you're still
young.

LINH (V.O.)

(laughing)

Coming from the nineteen-
year-old.

INCARNATION

It's only in this particular
instance that I'm nineteen.
My memories and my spirit are
not.

They reach the cash register at the front of the store. The incarnation empties the basket onto the black conveyor belt, the cashier scanning and bagging the items as they pass in front of her.

LINH (V.O.)

How old did you live to be?

INCARNATION

(smiling)

Maybe you'll get to see for
yourself.

The incarnation reaches into their pocket and pulls out a wallet. They open the wallet, take out a debit card inside, and insert it into the card reader of the sale terminal.

After a few seconds and a beep from the machine, they take it back out, tuck it into their wallet, and replace the wallet in their pocket.

The incarnation grabs the bag the cashier is holding out to them with a smile.

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INCARNATION

Thank you, have a good one!

They exit the store through the sliding doors at the front.

EXT. BOSTON CHINATOWN

Linh and the incarnation find themselves on the sidewalk of a mostly empty, dark narrow street.

As they round the corner, they find more narrow streets, these ones full of murals, and crowded colorful shops, restaurants, and bakeries, most with signs written in Chinese.

People fill up the streets and sidewalks. At the end of this street, sits a tall paifang topped with a green roof, bright against the gray cloudy sky.

They walk toward the paifang.

LINH (V.O.)

Is this Chinatown? What city are we in?

INCARNATION

Boston, Massachusetts. Coming here makes me feel a little more at home.

LINH (V.O.)

That makes sense. By the way, I've been meaning to ask, do you like green? I notice you're wearing a lot of it here.

INCARNATION

Yes. It's my favorite color.

LINH (V.O.)

It's mine, too.

INCARNATION

(smiling)

I think that is the exact
kind of thing that would have
helped me feel less alone.

As they approach the paifang, a patio comes into view under a mural where old Chinese men play xiangqi. On the other side of the paifang, two fu dogs flank the arch, protecting it.

As they walk forward, Linh and the scene pixelate again, but the location does not change.

The people casually walking and hanging around morph into a large crowd gathered in front of the paifang, carrying flowers, banners and cardboard signs, and cameras.

Linh's hair is now longer, at their chin, and they are wearing overalls over a green short sleeve t-shirt. Tattoos are scattered across their arms, including the head of a chim lạc on their shoulder peeking out of their sleeve. At the corners of their eyes they have drawn on winged eyeliner.

They are still wearing the paper bird earrings.

From the center of the crowd, a voice booms.

VOICE

We are here today, together, to
not only fight against this
country's legacy of colonial
and white supremacist violence,
but also to honor the lives
lost to this violence, and
especially, to celebrate one
another.

Linh and their incarnation weave through the crowd, and find that the voice is coming from a young woman, with brown-black hair and sharp,

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watery black eyes, her fingers white as they grip the microphone she is half shouting, half crying into. At her feet is a makeshift altar, fruits, flowers, candles, and incense laid out in front of picture frames of Asian women.

The crowd listens intently, and the atmosphere is thick with their anger, grief, and hope.

LINH (V.O.)

Is this...?

INCARNATION

A protest.

Throughout the crowd, some people have tears welling in their eyes, some are holding each other's hands, and some are praying.

INCARNATION

This here is our community.
This is home when home is too far away. We find it in each other, in strangers, because our spirits cry out to each other, command us to radically love one another.

Linh rubs tears from their eyes. They watch as people emerge from the crowd to kneel at the altar and light incense.

LINH (V.O.)

Can we go pray?

INCARNATION

Of course.

They walk up to the altar and kneel on the ground in front of one of the picture frames and a bowl of rice, incense, and ash.

They pick up a stick of incense and hold its tip to a candle flame until it catches on fire. They

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wave the incense stick gently, and the flame goes out, leaving a stream of smoke swirling into the open air.

They clasp the stick between their palms, bow their head, and close their eyes, moving their lips in prayer.

After a minute, they bow three times, open their eyes, and place the incense in the bowl, then bow once more before standing up and dissolving back into the crowd.

INCARNATION

What did you pray for?

LINH (V.O.)

That home won't be so far
away anymore.

As they walk through the crowd, the scene pixelates once more.

INT. NGOÀI'S HOUSE

Linh is sitting on a brown linen couch in the living room of a small house. They are wearing a green silk áo dài, embellished with designs of cranes, their hair still chin-length, but their face more mature.

There is a bowl of prawn crackers and a bầu cua tôm cá game sitting on the coffee table in front of them, and a TV on the other side of the table, the Super Bowl playing on its screen.

At the right-hand side of the couch is a cherrywood altar with a statue of Quan Thế Âm, a vase of yellow flowers, a bowl of fruit, small water offering bowls on a plate, a couple candles on each side of the altar, and an incense holder.

The house is crowded with the incarnation's family.

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Aunties walk around with lì xì peeking out of their pockets and purses, sneaking them into their nephews' and nieces' hands and saying not to tell their moms.

In the kitchen, their mother, some of the aunties, and some of the older cousins chat in Vietnamese at the kitchen table, where several large, still steaming dishes, as well as red decorations and snacks packaged in red, are laid out.

LINH (V.O.)

So, where are we now?

INCARNATION

Ngoại's house. For Tết.

Their grandmother, with her black permed hair and tattooed eyebrows, dressed in a floral cardigan over a pale green shirt and white silk pants, approaches them where they sit. She holds out a lì xì.

NGOẠI

Chúc mừng năm mới.

INCARNATION

Cảm ơn, Ngoại, chúc mừng năm mới!

Their grandmother leans in and, giving them a sniffing kiss on the cheek, hugs them, then walks back into the kitchen.

A tiny hand slaps Linh's shoulder from their left.

YOUNGER COUSIN #1

Tag, you're it!

Turning, Linh sees that a child, who can't be more than eight years old, with black hair tied

up into a ponytail with a pink scrunchie, and wearing a pink áo dài to match, is smiling up at them with one of her small hands on Linh's shoulder.

INCARNATION

This is one of your youngest cousins. You have fifteen total. They've been like siblings to you your whole life.

LINH

(smiling)

I know.

They jump up off the couch.

INCARNATION

I'm going to get you!

Their cousin shrieks in glee and mock terror and runs away.

Soon all of the younger cousins are stampeding away from Linh as their mothers yell at them to stop running.

Linh sees their mother gesture to them from the kitchen table. They hesitantly make their way over to her.

Their mother is dressed in a black blazer and blue jeans, her black hair, with its purplish shine, curled into gentle waves, her casual smile lipsticked, her eyes, one a slightly lighter shade of brown than the other, glimmering with the reflection of the yellow light bulbs on the ceiling.

She leans across the table and, reaching into a plastic bag with Chinese writing on it, picks up a handful of small red cardboard boxes and hands them to Linh.

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MOTHER

Here, hand out some poppers
to your cousins. They can
play with them before the
firecracker goes off.

INCARNATION

Okay, sure.
(shouting to cousins)
Hey guys, I've got some
poppers for you!

Linh walks back into the living room, and their
younger cousins run over, grabbing the boxes out
of their hands.

INCARNATION

You all want to go outside
and play with them?

YOUNGER COUSINS

(in unison)

Yeah!

The younger cousins run out the back door,
ripping open their boxes and bouncing around the
patio, throwing the tiny exploding poppers on the
ground.

Next to them, the uncles prepare to light the
firecracker, hanging it from a corner of the
patio roof, before heading back inside.

Linh stands inside the back door, watching. From
behind them, two of their cousins, each a few
years their junior, come to join Linh at the door.

One of them, slightly taller than Linh, is
wearing a purple velvet áo dài, her curly brown
hair resting on her shoulders. The other, a head
shorter than Linh, has her straight black hair
tied halfway up, the front sections of it dyed
lilac, and is wearing a red silk áo dài.

INCARNATION

(to cousins)

Remember when we used to love
playing with these?

COUSIN #1

Yeah, I used to throw them at
your feet.

COUSIN #2

We bought them every time we
went to Grand Century. It was
a lot of fun.

INCARNATION

What's stopping us from
enjoying the fun now?

The three of them grin at each other. Each grab a box of poppers from the bag on the kitchen table and step out onto the patio to join their younger cousins in tossing poppers at the ground and each other's feet, laughing and shrieking all the while.

One of the aunties stands up from the kitchen table and leans against the doorway.

AUNTIE #1

Okay kids, time for the
firecrackers! Come on inside
so your uncles can light it.

The younger cousins, still shrieking, hop inside the house, followed by Linh and the older cousins, while one of the uncles goes back onto the patio with a torch in hand.

In the kitchen, Linh, along with all of their cousins, aunties, uncles, mother, and grandmother, crowd against the glass door, watching.

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The uncle flicks on the torch, holds the flame to the fuse at the bottom, then, as it sparks, jogs inside the house to watch with everyone else.

Within a few seconds, the firecrackers begin bursting, sounding and looking like gunfire with the sparks and the smoke, the red paper shells flying off in shreds.

The air also looks like the mouth of a dragon, flaming and smoking. Against the backdrop of the night sky, the little fires look like stars being born.

LINH (V.O.)

I've always thought
firecrackers are one of the
most beautiful things.

INCARNATION

I agree. And you know what's
so beautiful about it?

LINH (V.O.)

What?

INCARNATION

They're so bright, and loud,
and hot and smoky, that you
can't help but have to notice
them and experience them.
It's the way they take up
space, and show how we insist
on taking up space as well.
Look at us.

Linh looks at their family.

INCARNATION

On Tết, nothing else matters
but family and home, not even
the world we're in not
wanting us to exist. We come
together anyway, in numbers,

INCARNATION (CONT'D)
in color, making noise and
fire. We celebrate. We make
it known that we're here, and
with us, our joy.

The last firecracker explodes, and the smoke rises and disappears silently. The entire family explodes, too, into cheers.

The uncles and younger cousins go back onto the patio, the uncles to clean up the red paper, the younger cousins to continue tossing poppers.

A hand rests on Linh's arm, and they look to see their mother, who hugs them, her chin over their shoulder.

MOTHER
Chúc mừng năm mới, honey. I'm
glad you came home for the
new year.

Linh hugs their mother back tightly, squeezing their eyes shut as tears well up in them.

LINH (V.O.) INCARNATION (V.O.)
Me too. Me too.

In the background, the sounds of Vietnamese chatter, laughter, and children shrieking fade out, and the scene pixelates into black, the incarnation's mother in their arms being the last to disappear.

Linh pixelates, too, back into their present body and uniform, sitting in the dark room.

INT. ASTRAL PROJECTION ROOM

They open their eyes as the room turns back into the rippling, iridescent shrine room.

Linh does not move for several long seconds.

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They stand up slowly and make their way out of the room, their footsteps echoing.

INT. GREENHOUSE

As Linh enters the greenhouse, they see Tiên, already back in her own clothes, a loose, flowy, peach-colored áo dài today, pacing back and forth in front of the core column.

Tiên, upon spotting Linh exiting the astral projection room, runs over.

TIÊN

Linh! There you are. I was a little worried, it's been half an hour since the rest of us archived our tablets and no one had seen you come out yet. How come your projection took so long?

Linh looks at Tiên somewhat absentmindedly.

Tiên tilts their head and raises an eyebrow.

TIÊN

What's wrong?

Without a word or movement, Linh starts crying, tears pooling up in their eyes and then streaming down their face as they sniffle.

Tiên's eyes go wide.

TIÊN

Oh my— what happened, babe?
What's the matter? Are you okay? Linh?

Linh's tears and sniffles grow into soft sobs, their face crumpling.

TIÊN

Linh! What is it? Come here,
baby.

Tiên pulls Linh into a hug, gently rubbing their back with one hand and stroking their hair with the other as Linh cries into their shoulder, arms wrapped around her waist.

TIÊN

It's okay, we don't have to
talk about it right now, you
can just cry. Cry however
much you need. We'll just
stay here like this for as
long as you need.

Linh takes ragged breaths between their sobs.

EXT. FRONT OF LIBRARY, HO CHI MINH CITY

Tiên and Linh exit the library, TiÊN's arm around Linh's shoulders and Linh rubbing their eyes and blowing their nose into a tissue.

TIÊN

Are you still good to guide
the skyboard?

LINH

(sniffling)

Yeah, I'll be fine.

TIÊN

If you say so. Take your
time, we can just sit here
for a bit first if you'd
like.

Linh peers out onto the city, the scene just like the evening before, and looks up in the sky at the other skyboarders.

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LINH

No, actually, I think being
in the air will help me feel
refreshed.

TIÊN

Okay, ready to go home then?

LINH

Yeah.

Linh walks over to the skyboard rack, picks up their skyboard, and powers it on. It hovers over the ground, and as soon as Linh and Tiên have both stepped on, their feet suctioned to the board, it takes off into the sky.

In the air, Linh closes their eyes and inhales deeply. They stretch their arms outward like wings.

Tiên gives them a questioning look before smiling softly, knowingly, and doing the same thing.

LINH

(whispering)

I hope they know...

TIÊN

Hmm? What did you say?

LINH

(louder)

I hope they know...that my
prayer for them came true.

TIÊN

Who?

LINH

My incarnation.

TIÊN

Well, of course they do.

LINH

What do you mean?

TIÊN

They are you, babe. Different body, different time, different place, sure. But it's been your same soul all this time. That's why you're feeling...whatever it is you're feeling after your projection, too. Whatever memories you experienced today, they're your memories, too.

LINH

Yeah. Yeah, you're right.

(smiles)

That makes me happy.

TIÊN

Good, I'm glad.

Tiên takes her outstretched arms and wraps them around Linh's waist, both of their eyes still closed, smiles on their faces, tears at the corners of Linh's eyes.

Linh opens their eyes to the pink, orange, and purple sky, the hill-like buildings, the shimmering rivers, and the birds that fly alongside them and sing into the evening.

Linh laughs, and whistles along with them, arms still outstretched, as they fly forward together, the birds, Tiên, and Linh.

Linh lets out a big sigh.

LINH (V.O.)
We're home.

INCARNATION (V.O.)
We're home.

FADE OUT:

KYLA-YẾN HUỶNH GIFFIN (they/them) is a queer and trans Vietnamese American diaspora writer whose work revolves around themes of dreaming, fantasizing, and futurizing. Although originally from the Bay Area, CA, they are now based in Cambridge, MA. They hold a B.A. in Anthropology from Brandeis University and are currently the Administrative Assistant to the Executive Director at True Costs Initiative. Kyla-Yến's work has appeared in *GASHER Journal* and is also forthcoming in *Beyond Queer Words*.