

## Langour

after a line by Carolyn Forché

Note: Peonies traditionally symbolize shame and anger; but also healing and, especially in the Orient, feminine loveliness.

1.

The langour of peonies? A universal image:  
flowers drooping over the dead of Khe Sanh  
and the mass interments near the Citadel at Hue.  
The red sun, like a peony, hangs in the skies  
of Dak To and Ban Me Thuot lighting  
endless bodies marching west  
into the *plaines des jarres* through  
fields of white ginger and jungle orchids.  
Pushing through elephant grass like sharks  
they cut through dry water. Grassy waves carry  
the dead in their wake. The moon leans down  
to kiss their rifles, finds nothing to reflect.

2.

Young women in *ao dais*, prim, proper, walk  
slowly down Le Loi Street, faces fixed on distant points,  
eyes focused straight ahead, neither left nor right.  
I do not bother them, though I smile and nod,  
whisper, "*Chao co. Manh gioi khong?*" And when  
they pass me by I mumble, "*Choi oi!*  
*Dep lam.*" How beautiful! But not for me,  
not even for themselves, a part of the scenery,  
plastic props, exotic extras to decorate the city:  
Barbies in an Oriental incarnation. And I am Ken.

I stare as they pass me by, their lips just so, frozen  
smiles, some fantasy of childhood dressed in silk,  
but hair long and black, special extra wigs  
keeping things cool in the hot, red streets.

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## Hospital Visit

*For the survivors*

I give her a puppet—an armadillo,  
fuzzy and warm, to slip over her hand  
in the dark when there is no one near  
only time to think and a dark marble of fear  
that awakens, pulses deep down in a silent

spot that no one knows but she. Her  
husband died somehow in Viet Nam  
and she has kept the pain in that same place  
for all these years, has hardly talked  
of those deep jungles where his body lay.

The doctor comes and speaks of this and that,  
cool and calm, detached: of the mastectomy  
to be deferred for chemo, the bone scan positive,  
biopsy positive, metastasis into the bone.  
Sterile words, remote from the throbbing space  
that whispers in her blood.

“Yes, it’s raining,” I say.  
“Yes, your sons are here.”

She feels the lump in her breast, a pressure, a weight.  
She says, “I don’t need it anyway. My sons are grown.”  
She says, “My husband died so long ago. I don’t need  
to talk about the war.” She strokes the puppet. “I want

