

The Woman Who Sharpened Her Grief

Text featured in the installation by Leang Hu, part of the exhibition *The Woman who Sharpened Her Grief*.

This piece traces lineage, survival, and inheritance through the story of the artist's grandmother—a woman who turned grief into endurance, and endurance into love.

Adapted from the earlier drafts of Leang Hu's work-in-progress memoir, "Charred Roots: What the Fire Did Not Take (working title).

I've always known my grandmother as a hard woman. Sharp. Blunt. Not easy to love, but impossible to ignore. In our family, she was both a myth and a warning. People spoke of her with equal parts reverence and resentment. Some blamed her for wounds they never forgave. Others quietly leaned on her strength. I grew up inside those contradictions, breathing them in before I even understood their weight.

She gave birth to seven children. Most of them died under the Khmer Rouge. Only my mother survived. Family stories—whispered, retold, half-believed—still questioned: *Could she have done more to save her children? Should she have chosen them over her siblings?*

But how do you measure a mother's love in a time ruled by death? How do you measure survival when every path was a dead end?

She was the third of twelve children. One of her younger sisters once told her, *You can have more children. You can remarry. But you only have one set of siblings.* I do not know how much that shaped my grandmother's choices. But I know she carried the weights of those words—and the consequence—for the rest of her life.

I do not know everything she lived through. I do not know what impossible choices she faced. I only know this: she was the one who stole food when no one else dared. She once said, *I'd rather be full and dead than starved and alive.* She laid next to the bodies of her parents, pretending they were still breathing—just to collect their half-spoon of rice. And it wasn't just her parents. It was her siblings. Her children.

One by one, she lay beside them all—not only to mourn, but to survive.

We were sitting on the couch watching *Maury*—one of those reunion episodes. A mother was about to be reunited with a long-lost child. My grandmother stared at the screen, then turned to me. I began interpreting. As soon as I signed that the mother and child had found each other and were embracing, something shifted in her. Her eyes welled up. Her face flushed. Slowly, she curled into herself...her body folding inward, knees drawn close, one hand gripping the edge of her sarong.

She crouched into a half-fetal position, her shoulders trembling. Then, with a face full of anguish, she signed:

"I wish I could be with my babies."

Her voice cracked open. So did something in me. I had never seen her like that. Not when we talked about the war. Not even when relatives died.

In that moment, I ached for her—not only for the loss of her children, but for the way survival had demanded she bury her tenderness just to keep living. I saw it then—the way war had stolen her chance to love without urgency, to grieve without strategy, to be gentle without consequence.

She did love me. She had always loved me.

But her love had been shaped by what was left after the fire. And it could never fully blossom into something soft, something easy, because the world had never given her a safe place to let it. War had taken not only her children, but the space for her love to grow in the open.

And still—it was there.

People remember her strength. But I remember her grief.

The ash we inhale did not only come from the world that burned around us...it came from her, too. From her silence. Her fear. Her toughness. Her heartbreak, buried so deep it hardened into habit. She didn't pass it down in stories. She didn't flinch when a spoon clattered to the floor. She showed no fear. If anything, she made sure I knew how to fight.

Once, I got into a fight at my grandmother's apartment complex—most of the residents were Khmer diaspora. A group of boys had been picking on me. Maybe because I was Deaf. I'll never know. But one day, I'd had enough. I fought back. Three boys against me. My brother and his friend tried to step in, but they couldn't. Then one of the boys' fathers came and broke it up.

My grandmother heard the chaos and came running. She marched straight toward me, scolded me in front of everyone, then dragged me back into her apartment and yelled at me. Then she paused. Looked me over hard.

"Did you win at least?"

People feared her—not just for her emotional strength, but for her physical power, too. In some ways, I think she passed that on to me. Not just to survive—but to endure. To fight back. To protect myself in a world that didn't always protect girls like me.

This, too, is inheritance.

I did not always understand her. I mistook her silence for distance. Her sharpness for something I'd done. Sometimes I wondered if my grandfather's presence might have softened her edges—if his steadiness, had it been nearer, might have given her something to lean against. But that wasn't the version of her I grew up with. He was mostly gone. And she carried it all.

It wasn't until that day on the couch, watching *Maury*, when she broke down and wailed for her lost children...that I began to connect the pieces. Maybe she loved us so much, she had to protect herself from it. Because she knew what it meant to love someone—and then lose them. To lay beside their body. To pretend they were still breathing because no one else could bear the task, and someone had to do it.

She wasn't made to carry all that. But she did anyway. And maybe no one ever asked her what it cost.

Because the ash we inhale isn't just what was lost. It's what was left behind. It's what smolders in silence. And it's what quietly settles in the bones of those who came after.

That inheritance lives in our habits. In how we parent. In how we love.

My grandmother couldn't tolerate what she perceived as laziness. If I sat still too long or looked idle, she'd scold me into motion—into being useful to the family. Maybe it was about productivity. Maybe it was about survival. Maybe she feared that stillness would invite danger—that idleness, to her, was a kind of death.

During the Pol Pot regime, being tired, sick, or simply unable to work often meant execution. To stop moving was to risk everything. So she moved. And she made sure we moved too. In her world, movement was life. Stillness was a threat. And I moved—because I wanted to make her proud, and because I was still learning what love looked like in her hands. Like many in Asian families, she rarely signed *I love you*—but she would ask if I was hungry, or silently peel fruit and place it in front of me.

When I got pregnant in my early twenties, I was afraid to tell her. I hadn't finished college. I was the oldest daughter, and the expectations already felt heavy—excel in school, care for the family, work at the donut shop. Many Cambodian families in California owned donut shops back then—it's even documented in the film *The Donut King*. She wasn't the first person I told. I waited, bracing for disappointment. But when I finally did, she surprised me. She didn't react with anger—only concern for my future. She promised to support me.

With each child I gave birth to, she showed up. Every time. She stayed with me for a month after each birth, keeping to tradition. She made sure I rested. Brewed ginger tea from raw root every day. Made porridge rice with ginger chicken to help me heal and soothe the pain of my uterus contracting back to size. She placed hot stones on my belly. Made sure I didn't shower.

Kept me wrapped from head to toe. Took care of the baby. Did all the house chores. Only woke me to nurse.

It was her way of saying: *You are loved. And this is how we love.*

Impossible decisions had once split our family apart. During the Pol Pot regime, grief didn't just steal lives—it fractured relationships. It left wounds that lingered in silence. Even in the years that followed, the aftermath rippled through us. Some choices couldn't be spoken of. Some forgiveness never arrived. My mother and grandmother were shaped by those same fires, but they emerged differently—one carrying softness, the other, steel.

And yet, in the quiet days after I gave birth, something in them aligned. For a brief time, they set aside the weight of what had once divided them. They welded their fragments together—binding strength with tenderness—to nurture my roots, to water the sapling of the mother I was becoming.

My grandmother brought fire—the ginger root steeped in boiling water, the wrapped warmth, the strict rhythms of postpartum recovery. **My mother brought water**—gentle reminders that I didn't have to do it all, soft touches in the middle of the night, silent presence when I needed rest.

Together, they created the care they might have once dreamed of receiving—not just for the baby, but for me. Their grief had shaped them in different ways. But in those moments, they met in harmony.

Held by two women who had survived the unthinkable.
Held by hands that had once clung to rice and ghosts.
Held so that I could blossom in the way they were never allowed to.

My mom insisted on keeping those customs, too. She told me she had skipped that care when she gave birth—because in the U.S., there was no maternity leave. It was something she would have had in Cambodia. So when it was my turn, they gave me what they couldn't have.

Sometimes, I think my body remembered even before I did. In Cambodia, I felt that same quiet knowing—how the hands of women who came before me still lived in the way I brewed ginger tea, in the way I wrapped myself in warmth, in the way I mothered through silence.

That, too, is inheritance.

Not the stories she never told—but the way she peeled fruit without a word. Not the tears she never showed—but the month she stayed after each birth.

A woman who sharpened her strength like a blade. She wasn't cruel. She was calculating.
A woman who turned her grief into the blade she carried—and handed to me.

**The knife.
The fire.
The grief that never knew where to go—
so it settled in her silence.
so it found a place in me.**

The Woman Who Sharpened Her Grief is a love letter to children of refugees and a witness to intergenerational survival. Through a granddaughter's memory of her Khmer grandmother, the text traces how grief hardens into habit—and how tenderness, carried forward in hands and rituals, becomes a new kind of inheritance.