



The Land South of the Clouds

Genaro Ky Ly Smith

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This sharp, chromatic elegy for childhood offers an insightful look at the complexities of inherited grief.

The Land South of the Clouds, by Genaro K. Ly Smith, charts a lost son's turbulent course from an immigrant neighborhood in Los Angeles a few years after the Vietnam War, to Vietnam in 1997 and back. With immense talent for drawing absence and longing, Smith presents a searing novel about a family torn by history.

Long-Vanh, a half-black, half-Vietnamese ten-year-old, lives in fear of his mother's departure. Tortured by the knowledge that her father is imprisoned in a Vietnamese reeducation camp, she threatens to leave home to join his side, with a Samsonite suitcase that represents the weight of her sorrow. When the long-foretold abandonment takes place, Long-Vanh is forced to revise the truth in order to survive. This heartbreaking premise dramatically crescendos in a moment of misguided nationalism that puts an entire community at risk.

Amid the story of the problems of being raised as an Amerasian child, the author's ability to overlay a volatile atmosphere with silence, action with stasis, and despair with fruitless hope stands out. Days are punctuated by the wait for mail from Vietnam. News of Long-Vanh's grandfather—overheard and translated—haunts Long-Vanh's dreams and adds to his mother's isolation in America. As Long-Vanh experiences bullying, witnesses his parents' strife, discovers his father's secrets, and fights to find a place in a city where he seems to remind everyone of his in-betweenness, the snare of his mother's survivor's guilt begins to fray.

Strong characters such as Long-Vanh's cousin Phung and Uncle Ngô bring necessary light to the emotional material. Phung especially—despite her own family's tragedies—grows into a lifeline for the troubled protagonist.

With an eye for the multiple faces that people reveal under pressure, the novel offers an insightful look at the complexities of inherited grief. This sharp, chromatic elegy for childhood blooms into a story of finding a way back from pain.

KAREN RIGBY (Winter 2017)

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