

Sơn Mài

Walking through the West End markets, I see a Sơn
Mài lacquer painting of a paddy, its polish rushed
and industrial. Glossy as a shallow pond doing its best
to depict sunset. And the bamboo shoots cast no shadows,
keeping their distances.

In my parent's house, panels glow under many layers
of cây sơn sập, from northern mountains shining
like past lives. Leaves flow golden as a bright ribbon
of river in the dream of a crane stepping out his dominion.
Beside mother-of-pearl temples, two streams join hands

as if in a chanting ceremony. Pagoda-shaped hats
shade lotus flowers, deities blossoming their minds,
set upon a higher place, among waters muddy.

I see my ancestors washing their shadows, pursuing
the days until the days are done. Bamboo stalks, tall

as a memory of rebirth, reaching into light. At the West
End markets, the painting wore a hurried gloss.

I remember the first time I drew water from a well.

My face peered down into ancient spirits: green and deep
like sermons of moss. It required work to draw water.