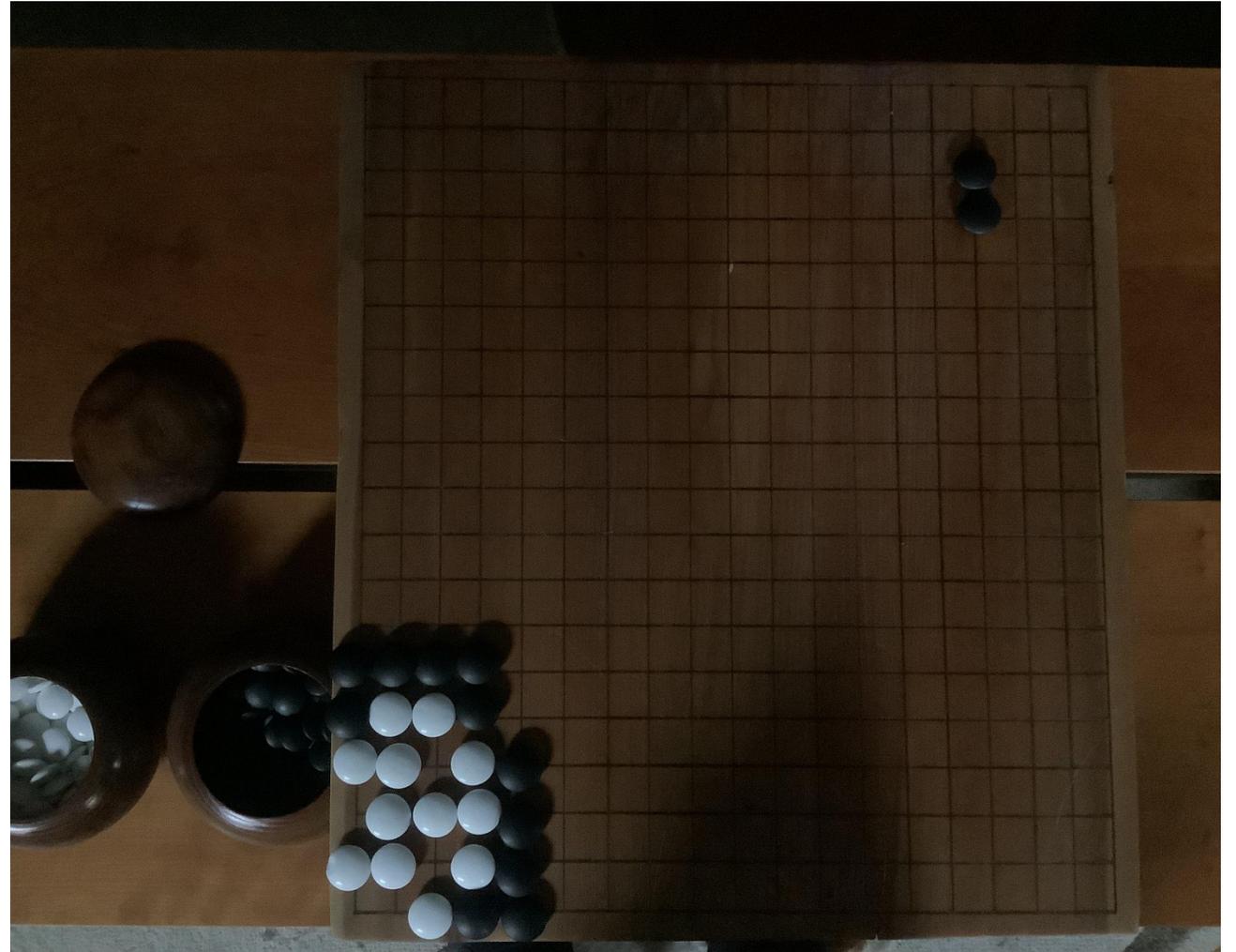


The Past, Place, and People

Thi Bui's Struggle in *The Best We Can Do*

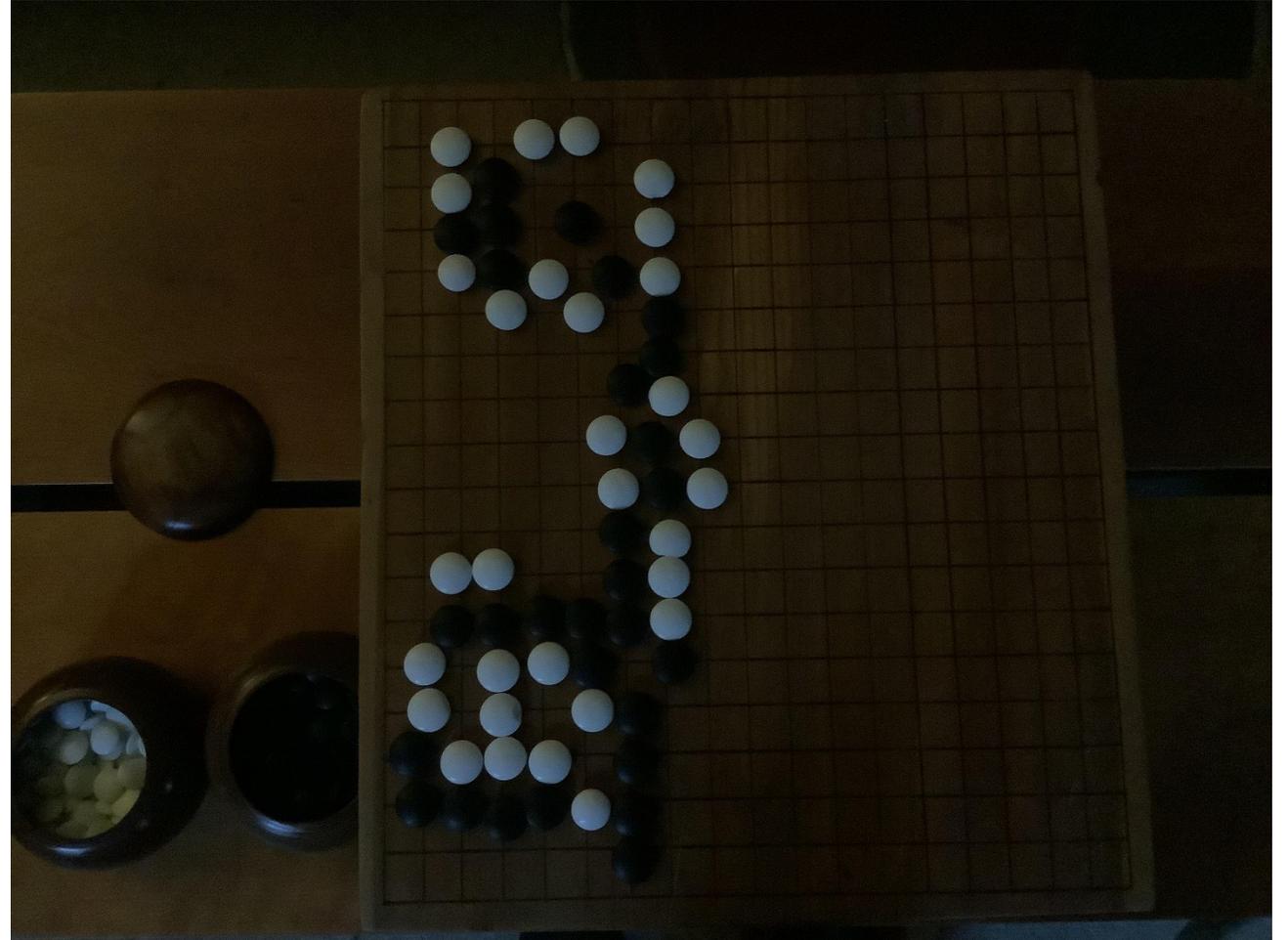
Life and Liberty

- Covers Chapters 1-3
- Labor-(NY birth of her child)
- Rewind, Reverse-(set in CA and Vietnam, births and early deaths, making an losing life)
- Home, The Holding Pen (CA, strange father, dreams of being free)
- Note p. 89



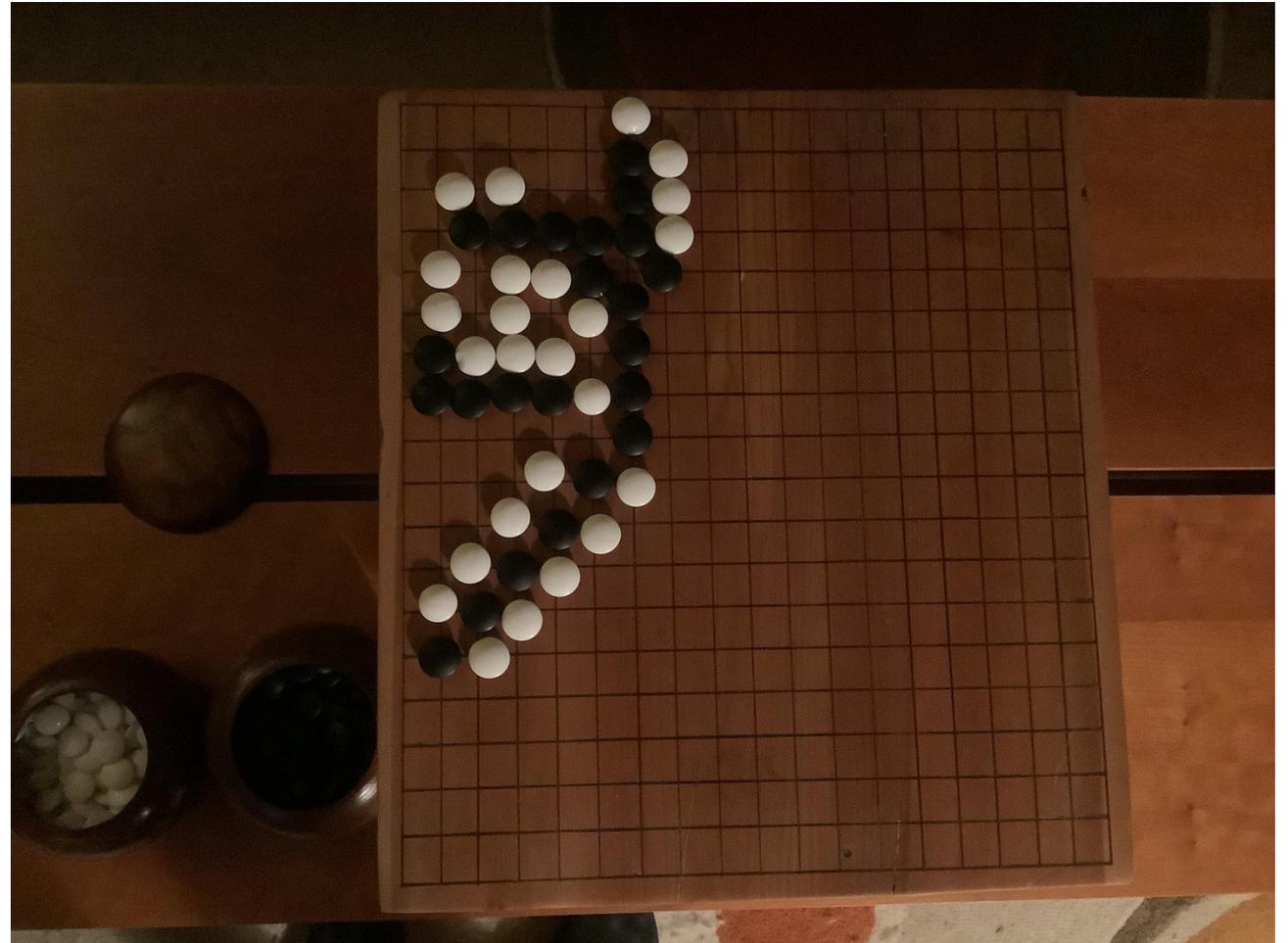
The Process of Losing Life and Liberty

- Covers Chapters 4-6
- Blood and Rice (History-French attempt to reassert control)
- Either, Or (History-Triumph of Viet Minh and Division of the Country)
- The Chessboard (Place-Saigon neighborhood, American War begins, Thi Bui is born)



The Middlegame: Espiritu's "Space Between"

- Covers Chapters 7-9
- Heroes and Losers (Communist victory in 1975, escape in 1978, refugee camp)
- The Shore (Refugee camp to Indiana in US)
- Fire and Ash (San Diego, refugee reflex is to run)
- Note p. 270



The Endgame: Where the Past, Place, and People Reveal Understanding

- Chapter 10: Ebb and Flow
- Identity: is it hers or is it predestined?
- Weight of the past (place and people)
- Product of war (the past)
- Vietnam not her homeland
- Final word is free
- Note p. 329



Summary

Thi Bui struggles with the conflicts between freedom and the individual and the collective contained in family, history, and geography. This is evident in the book's title which belies the message contained in the book's beginning and end. It is this message which suggests to me that Bui is striving to put her identity above a national or transnational identity. It is an individual identity tied to the past, but set firmly on the future. It is an identity that recognizes the value of collective identities (like family and culture), but embraces the individual above all else. Thus, the book concludes where it began with the creation of a new life and the struggle for freedom and liberty. This aligns the book with the twin Go concepts of life and liberty. By ourselves we inherently have these, just as a single white and black stone do on the Go board. However, when the individual stone is confronted with the growth of the game, the past, (the location of the stones and their relationship to each other) takes on a crucial significance. This can result in the loss of place, the need to flee, or the end of life itself. But, by the end of the game, as is the story for Thi Bui, it is possible to reach a fundamental understanding about what or who we are and what really matters (see slide 5).

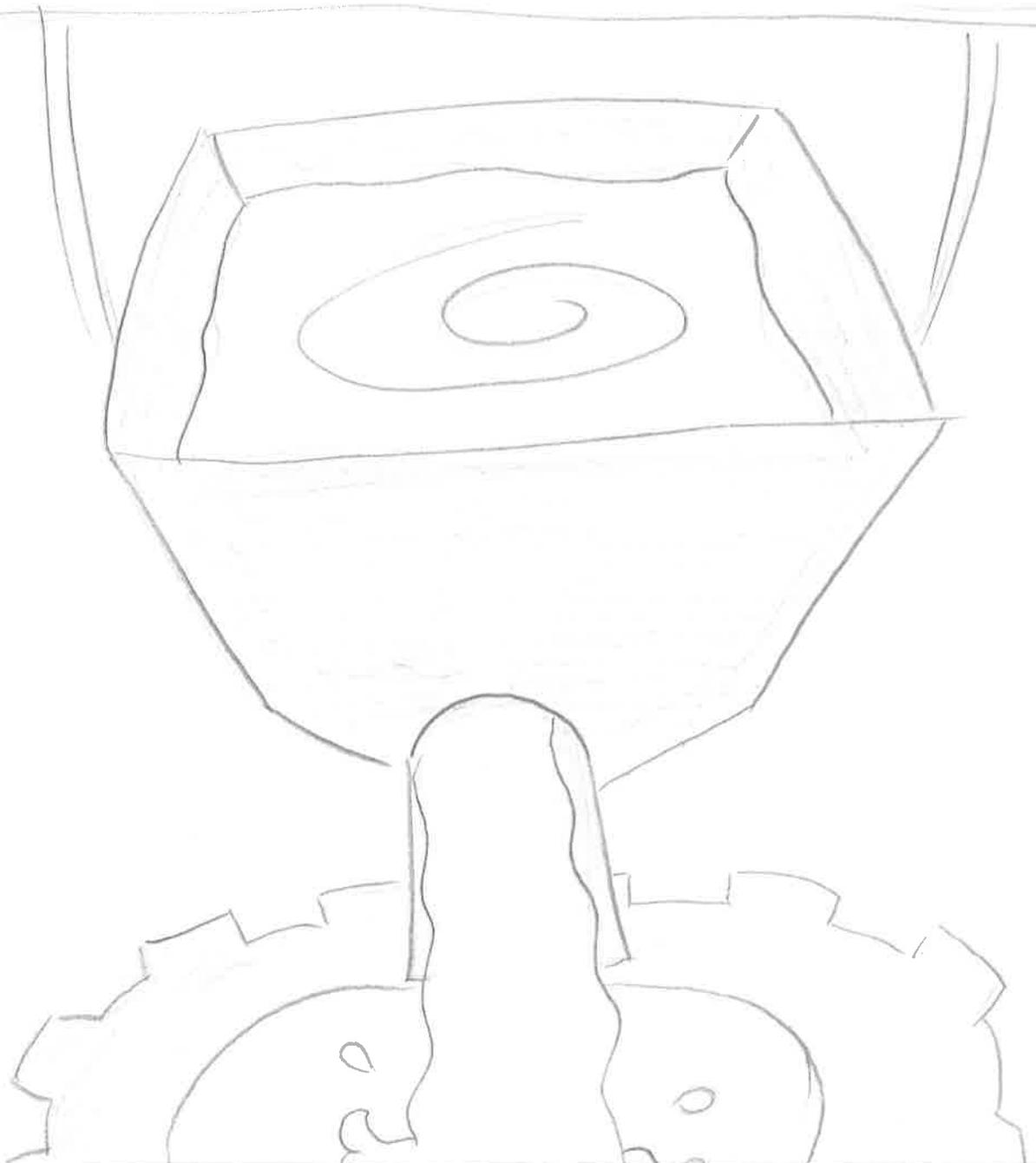
Sources

Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do*. New York: Abrams Comicart. 2018.

Espiritu, Yên Lê. “Toward a Critical Refugee Study: The Vietnamese Refugee Subject in US Scholarship.” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1–2, University of California Press, 2006, pp. 410–33, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.410>.

WHITE MELTING POT

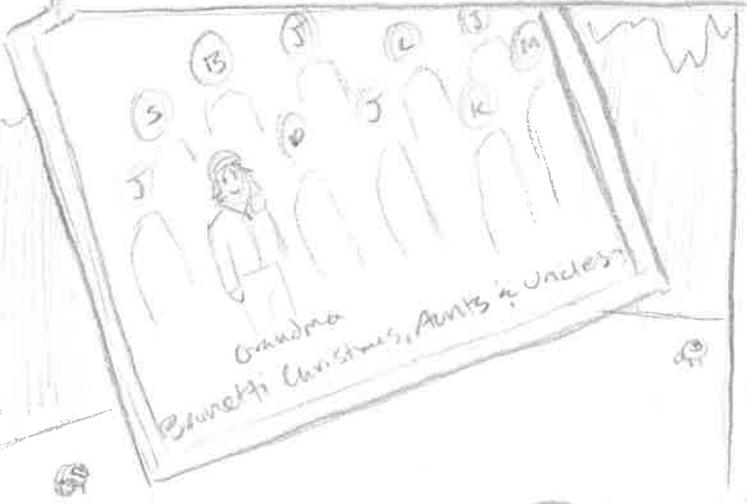
By Katie Bates



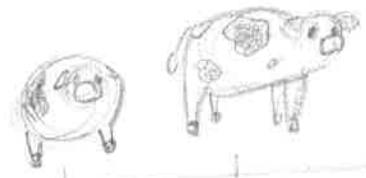


My grandmother, Jeanette Brunetti, was born Jeanette Leger in Sept. on a farm in New Brunswick Canada. She has always been a quiet and reserved woman, at least as long as I've known her. Most of what I've learned about growing up has been from other family members.

Although her mind is slowly fading, she hasn't forgotten her family...

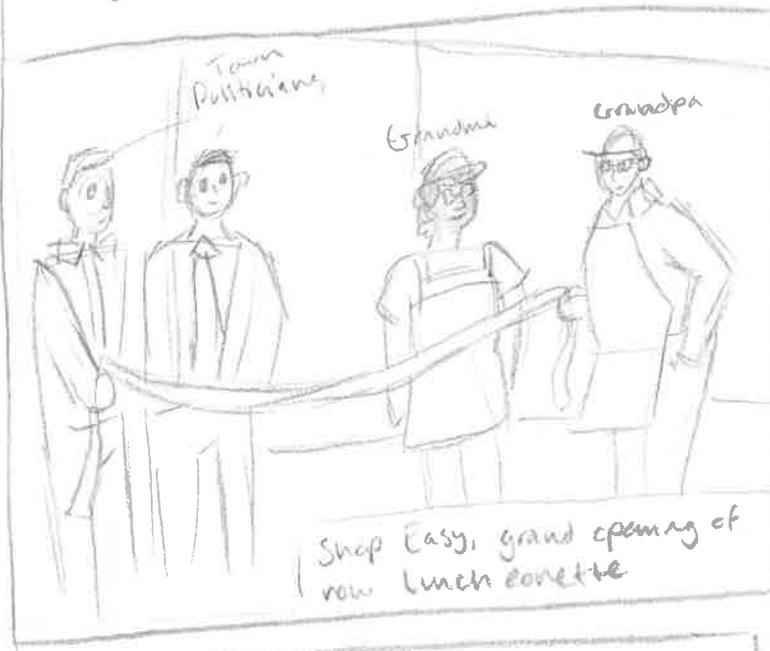


...and she hasn't forgotten her home.



Smells like Canada!

My grandmother's story of coming to America is vastly different than the

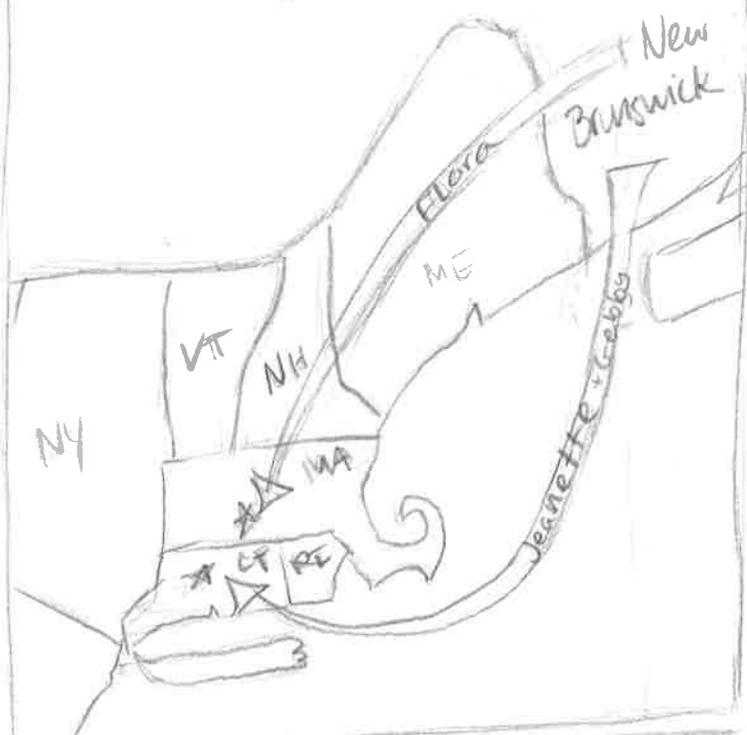


My great grandparents could afford to send all of her 9 siblings to college to become doctors, nurses, and engineers. After graduating, my grandmother moved to Connecticut where she met my grandfather. He was a first-gen Italian immigrant, although I never met

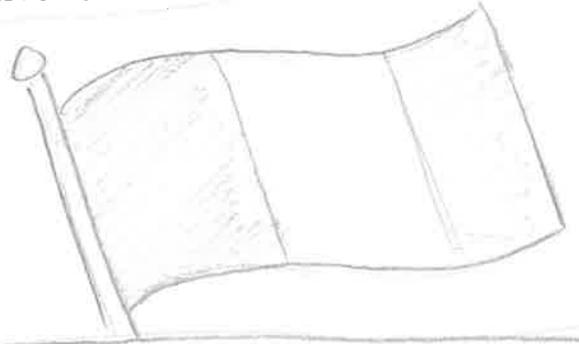


Most of her siblings stayed in Canada. Her sister, Flora, moved to the United States, and she moved with her father (Cecily).

CANADA



Her sister, Robette, moved to Montreal. She always maintained a deep connection to her French roots.



By the time my mom had me, she had forgotten most of her native language. She was slowly losing connection with her culture.

Her disconnection almost cost her a relationship to her own sides, or at the very least made it harder to maintain.



For a long time, Robette would only speak to her in French, but as the years went on, she needed interpreters for the letters. Even her children only learned English.



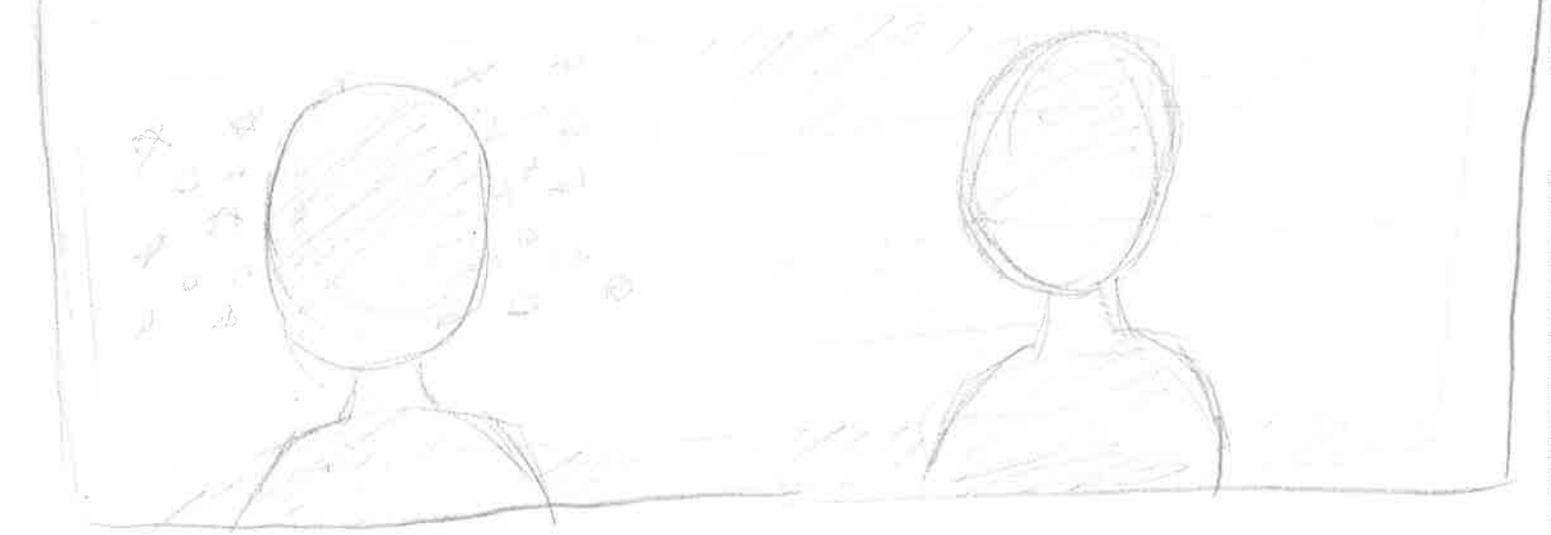
My connection to French Canadian culture is much weaker than the 130's to Viet



Although my grandmother and the 130's culture are much more different...



In both cases, there was the expectation to assimilate.



The cards "Melting Pot" might conjure an image of a chef mixing many different ingredients and flavors to make a more interesting and delicious soup, all the different cultures blending together in harmony.

... But the reality for immigrants is much more sinister, and even violent.

Uncle Sam →



It's much more like iron working

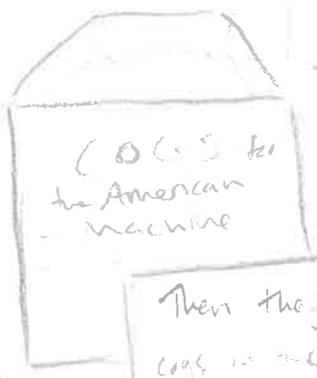


First, their identities are blown apart like mountains, like how the Bai's father mistook his expertise anymore.

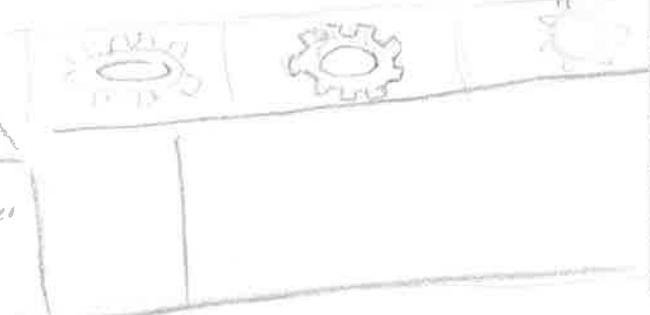
Then, the more "useful" parts of them are extracted for profit.



Next, they're melted down to further extract the less desirable "impurities".

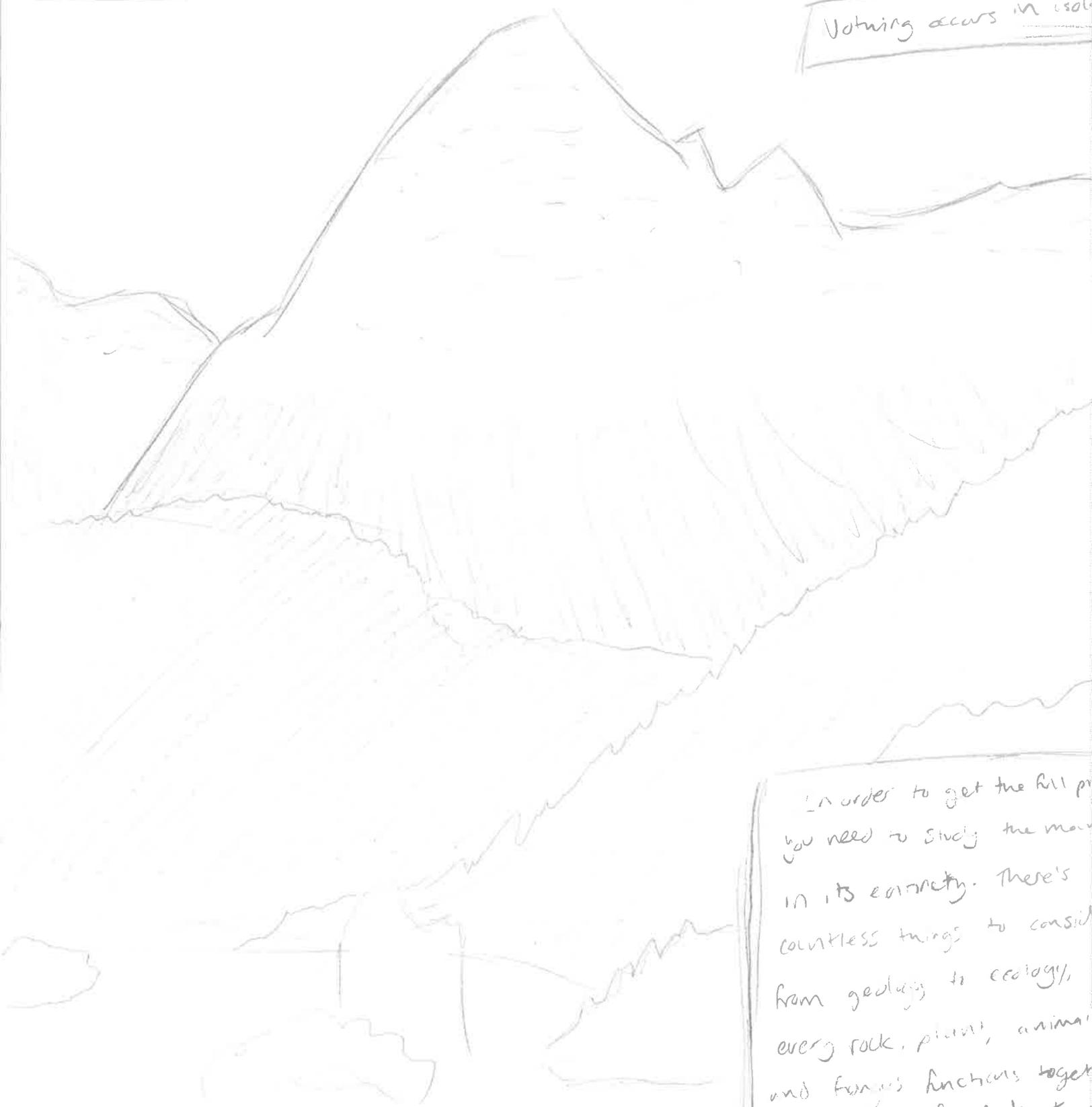


Then they're forced into a mold, only to become cogs in the capitalist machine.



Just like the process of thinking...
any subject from many different angles.

Nothing occurs in isolation.



In order to get the full picture
you need to study the mountain
in its entirety. There's
countless things to consider
from geology to ecology,
every rock, plant, animal,
and fungus functions together
as do outside forces that can
throw the ecosystem out of
balance.

Not only that, but if any of those dimensions are left out, you risk misunderstanding
how the system works and how it came to be.

Jeanette Brunetti, my grandmother, was born Jeanette Leger in September of 1925, on a farm in New Brunswick, Canada. She has always been a quiet and reserved woman, at least as long as I can remember. Most of the time, she was content to sit and watch her grandkids play, which continues to be the case today. As she began to lose her hearing in her eighties, around the time I was born, she started talking less and less. It became increasingly hard to have conversations or even small talk until she finally gave in and got hearing aids. Most of what I learned about her growing up, I learned through my mom and my other family members. Every time we would pass a dairy farm, without fail she would say, "Smells like Canada!" Although her mind is slowly fading, she hasn't forgotten her family, and she hasn't forgotten her home.

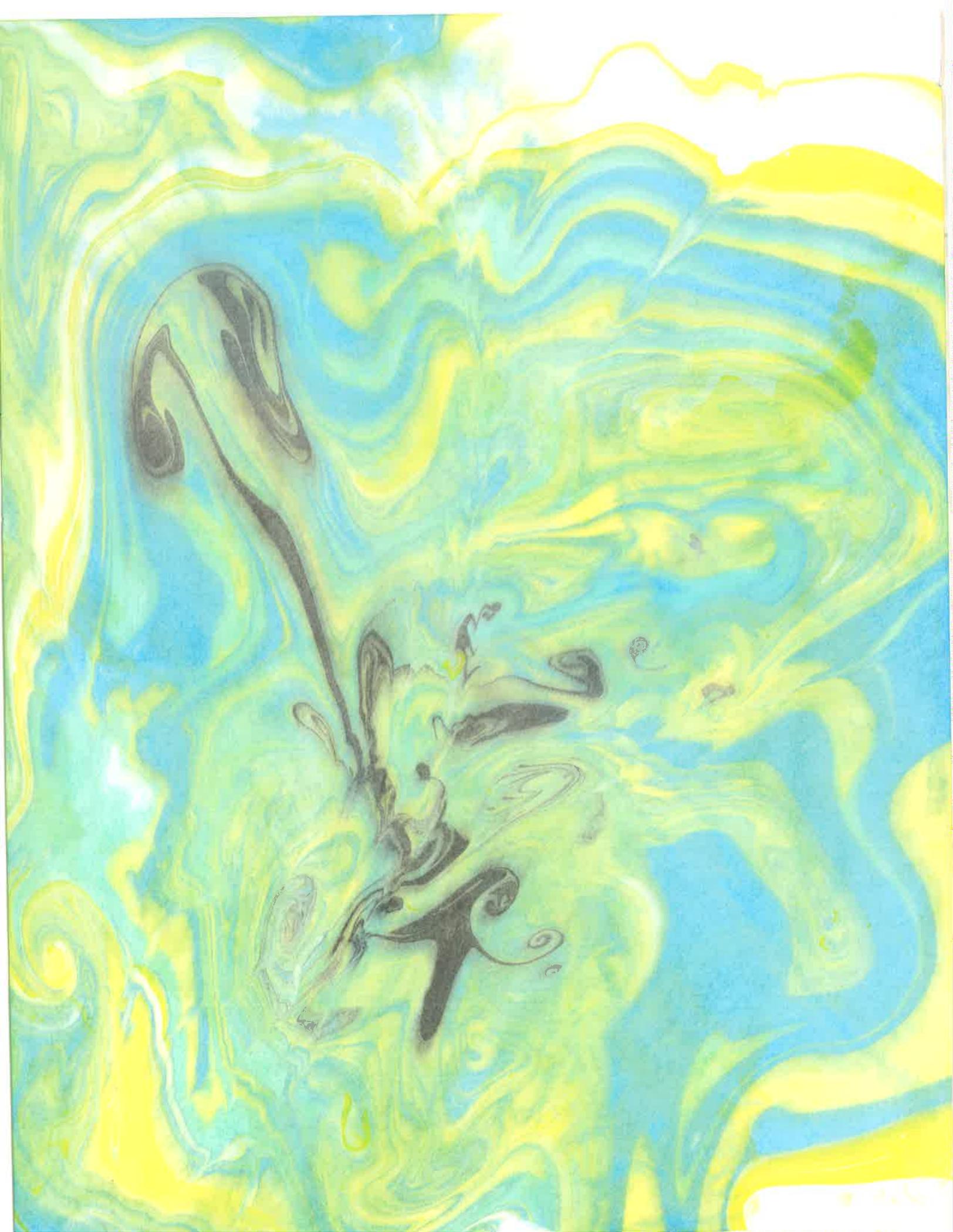
My grandmother's story of coming to America is vastly different than Thi Bui. Although her childhood was spent during the Great Depression, her family remained fairly well-off selling fox pelts. They were lucky; her parents could afford to send most of her 9 siblings to college to become doctors and nurses. After graduating, my grandmother moved to Connecticut, where she met my grandfather. He was a first-generation Italian American, although I never got to meet him. He passed away years before I was born. His family is still in Italy, but as far as I know my grandparents rarely if ever visited them.

Most of my grandmother's siblings remained in Canada. Her sister Flora and brother Gebby moved to America as well. Their sister Robette, who moved to Montreal, maintained a deep connection with her French roots. By the time my own mother had me, my grandmother forgot most of her native tongue. For a long time, Robette would tease her for not talking with her in French and she only wrote letters in French. She still maintained a decent relationship with her, but the disconnect with her culture could've cost a relationship with her sister.

My connection to French culture is much weaker than Thi Bui's to Vietnam. I am a second- or third-generation immigrant, whereas Thi Bui was born in Vietnam. I barely know a word in French, let alone about the culture in Canada. Her family lived through a vastly different experience with immigrating to this country than my grandmother for a multitude of reasons. But of course, in both instances there is the expectation that they'll assimilate into American culture and become part of the "melting pot", which really just means forgetting the past and everything they came from in order to become a non-threatening face in the crowd.

When I think of the "Melting Pot", it used to conjure an image of a chef taking a symphony of different spices and flavors and mixing them together to make an even more delicious soup. However, the reality for most immigrants is much grimmer, and sometimes even violent. Immigration to the United States is much more like ironworking. First, they are extracted from their original context and stripped of anything "unnecessary". Then, they're melted down farther to weed out even more "impurities", until they're poured into a mold and become little more than a cog in the American imperialist machine. It's important to study both the mountain and the iron working process in order to understand the experiences of immigrants in the United States.

When looking to create an art project in response to *The Best We Could Do*, I wanted to highlight the importance of water, as multiple times throughout the book water is present whenever freedom is mentioned. As such I made an art piece using the art style Suminagashi, which is when you float ink on water and lay a sheet of paper on top of it which then creates the image on the paper. As you can see there are three pieces of paper here, two of these have a focus of black, red, and orange while the other has a focus of blue, yellow, and black. The two orange, red, and black pieces were made to represent the stories I've come to learn about the transnational experience of those coming from Vietnam to the U.S., and I tried to mirror the colors present within *The Best We Could Do* for these. The stories I've come to learn about the Vietnamese transnational experience are fraught with negative emotions, sadness and anger seem to be deeply imbedded within these experiences. As such I felt that the colors within *The Best We Could Do* would be perfect to represent these feelings, there was a reason these were used within the book. I then decided to make one about the transnational experience of my family and their history, this being the blue and yellow piece. My family has a much more positive memory of how we came to be in the U.S., similar to the common immigrant story you might hear of someone's great grandpa coming to the U.S. with nothing but twenty dollars in his pocket and making his dream life with that. However, even with these idealistic and positive stories within my family, you will notice the black streak spreading from the middle of the piece. This black streak is something that I felt was necessary to put in this piece, as my family history, similar to most families who immigrate to the U.S., isn't entirely positive. My family came to the U.S. to flee the Sicilian mafia, as this was something they didn't want to be involved with anymore. The use of black in all three piece I made was to show that all immigration stories, no matter how positive or negative, has some dark piece of history that defines this transnational journey.









Watch Sean Clarke's presentation here

lỗ đen

Funny thing an echo is/ leaving you.
Denying any place, it might call home
Bouncing like checks left for birthdays that were never real
Fading in an esoteric nostalgia
Dying as it enters the future
Shouting into the past
It was fun while it lasted

Deep into the echoes of the stars
Aren't they funny too?
Looking like they are standing still
While they streak across the sky
Millions of years per second,
Like fastballs my mind can't catch/
They burn out leaving you behind,
Molten in a wake of all they once where and more/
all at stake, all in the epicenter of the happiness that once existed/
All in the nebulas that created them/ all in that incredulous time where you were
happy? Where their smile was all that mattered/
When everything they said flattered
When space didn't exist because this light shown so bright, that it bent all that
mattered. Like a neutron star.

However, aren't black holes better?

The way they sit like a petal of darkness in a flower of both freedom and uncertainty? /
The way it stands at the crossroads of wanting and needing. / Boasting violence without
raising its voice/ Being strong in times of Peral/ protecting all that fall unwittingly
beneath its gaze/

Seeing and conquering itself and others. /

But most fabulous of it all/ knowing one day it will destroy all around it before dying
itself. Knowing it will always be the villain of other's story but continuing to exist. /

To be like this would mean to burn away a fake past/ if decided to follow this path

To be REAL.

This poem is about Thi bui's perspective but in a metaphor about black holes. The poem is split into three sections. The first is about how her childhood and the childhood of many others in her position have been forever changed by the Vietnamese war and subsequent issues, this may have led to missed birthdays and other events that felt almost dreamlike. The second details her experiences growing up away from the problems of her parent's past and how it took a portion of their smiles and how like an echo it moved past events into the future. The final section expounds about the effects of the Vietnam war on the Vietnamese people how it colored them the villains of a story they had little control over. In the end I meditate on how this highlights the power and strength of her people, how they survived this and continue to tell their own stories, their Real stories.

-Sean Clarke, CCSU Anthropology Major