

# MOTHER TONGUE

Yen Linh Thai

Curated by Jasmine Mander  
Art Gallery of Burlington  
May 7 - August 6, 2022

Mother Tongue by muralist and illustrator Yen Linh Thai explores the widening gap of lost cultural knowledge between generations. Thai's family were among the first farmers on an island in the Mekong Delta, in Vietnam. They worked to develop the land from rice paddies to grow regional fruits such as guava, jackfruit, and dragon fruit. As food is an integral part of her family's history, she uses provisions such as pineapple eyes, coconuts, and fermented crab to relay important cultural teachings and knowledge.

Thai's experience of connecting to her culture through language, values and traditions has been one of exploration and play, yet there is an underlying fear that bubbles to the surface. This feeling of anxiety is reinforced with each passing family member and the realisation of an ever-widening cultural gap. She illustrates the sinking feeling of knowing that we simply cannot absorb enough before our time here passes.

Thai's interest in the formation of identity is reinforced by highlighting the moral life lessons embedded in Vietnamese folktales. These stories hold power - from how they're told to who tells them. Thai retells the tales that she has heard over and over again since childhood before they are lost to the void forever. Now Linh shares the stories that are featured in her exhibition.

This is a legend for the Morsels Paper-cut Series, which depicts the recounting of my food-specific familial narratives. The stories originate on an island in the Mekong Delta, in Vietnam:

- (1) Uncle Norman, baby of the family, cried when he was hungry. He also hugged the rice cooker, preventing anyone from cooking.
- (2) Mom protected a watermelon -a rare treat!- from an air raid during Lunar New Years.
- (3) Dad got full-body friction burns sliding down the coconut trees to escape snakes.
- (4) Now in Canada, my mom saved enough money to buy chicken nuggets for her brother. She mimed and pointed and waited for hours until she was understood.
- (5) Winter 1992, my parents splurged on the fancy restaurant they always wanted to try. This is them at Topiary's with my dad in a borrowed-but-much-too-big suit jacket to meet the dress code.
- (6) My sister and I on the island, with our nephews helping us get "fish eggs," fruits from the trees with makeshift nets.
- (7) I spent many summers chopping lục bình (water hyacinth) with dull knives, pretending to cook while my relatives prepared real meals.
- (8) My aunt surprised me with a crab when we went fishing in the ravine behind the house.
- (9) My sister and I playing with baby chicks and ducklings on the island.
- (10) We cried when finding out the chickens and ducks we played with were food.
- (11) After a decade away, I visited the island in 2018. This is the first time I explored the entirety of our family land, and saw all the plants we grow.



### *The Origin of the Three-Striped Crab*

*These are something my dad used to eat when he was a child, and his mother told him of its' origin.*

*There's a coastal province in Southern Vietnam called Cà Mau. Back in the day, life there was rough. It was a poor city, surrounded by brackish waters which made it difficult for many plants and animals to survive. One of the creatures that was plentiful was a crab called Ba Khía - named for its three-striped back. In the fall, when the tide receded, the beaches would be full of crabs and all the salt that the ocean left behind.*

*At some point, someone had collected a bunch of these crabs along with the salt and put them in a jar. A few days later, they tried to eat it and found that the crab had been pickled, and it tasted pretty good!*

*On the island where my dad lived, they would eat them throughout the wet season when food was scarce and the salt was nutritious. Over the years, Ba Khía became a delicacy, popular throughout Vietnam and beyond.*

*When I tried it for myself the first time, it was a gift someone had brought from Vietnam. My parents laughed at my reaction to the saltiness, and my dad then shared what his mother told him, which I now share with you.*



Sự Tích Trái Thơm  
The Legend of the Pineapple  
(translated from my mom's retelling)

There once was a family whose daughter was pampered since she was young. She always happily played and sang. No matter what her mother did for her, she never paid attention.

Like that, day by day, time passed until she was in her teens. And with each day, her mother got older. Until one day her mother fell really ill. She asked if her daughter could make some congee. The daughter asked her "Mom, where do you keep the pots? Where is the rice? Where is the wood? How do I cook it? How will I know it's done?" Her mother was sick, but all she could do was keep asking and asking. She never finished making the congee. That night, just before falling asleep, the mother sadly wished that her daughter had eyes to see for herself instead of asking so much.

The next day, when the mother woke up, she didn't see her daughter anywhere. She pushed herself to stand up, and searched around the house but still couldn't find her. When she reached the backyard, she heard a voice say "Mom! Mom! I'm here!" She immediately went closer, and there she found a little bush. And in that little bush, she found a fruit with many eyes. It was then that she realized that the wish she made the night before had actually come true and that this strange fruit with many eyes was actually her daughter.

Many years have passed since then. Today, that strange fruit is now known as the pineapple.



I've asked my parents to each share a recipe we often eat at home. These are traditional Vietnamese dishes. One day, I hope to have a collection of all of their recipes and this is one small step towards that. Happy eating!

### Gỏi Xoài Tôm | Dad's recipe Mango Salad with Tiger Shrimp

#### Ingredients:

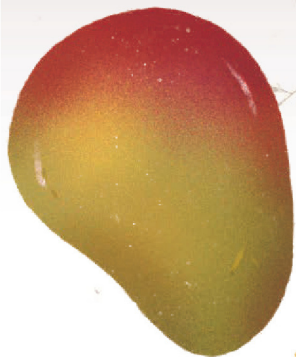
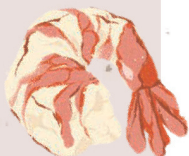
- 1 green mango (crispy, a little sour, just before it's ripe)
- 1 tsp brown sugar
- 2 tsp fish sauce
- 1 handful of roughly chopped mint
- 1 chopped red chili (optional)

- > Slice your mango into ~3/8" width strips, like thin french fries
- > In a bowl mix together the brown sugar, fish sauce and (optional) chili until well combined
- > Toss the mango in the sauce to combine and leave it in the fridge to cool for 20-30 mins while you make the shrimp

#### For the Tiger Shrimp you'll need:

- 1 dozen peeled tiger shrimp
- 1 pinch sea salt
- 1 pinch black pepper
- 1 tbsp sesame seeds
- 1 tbsp butter

- > Add butter to a pan set on medium heat
- > Once the butter has melted, add the sesame seeds and get them toasted
- > Add your shrimp to the pan and fry, toss in the salt and pepper
- > Once the shrimp are pink throughout, take it off the stove and add it to your cooled mango mixture.
- > Toss on the fresh mint before serving. It tastes best when the salad is cold and crispy and the shrimp is hot. The shrimp can be substituted for other proteins you like. Enjoy!



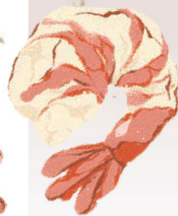
### Thịt Kho Tiêu | Mom's recipe Carmelized Black Pepper Pork

#### Ingredients:

- 2 strips of pork tenderloin, cubed
- 2 tbsp brown sugar
- 3 tbsp fish sauce
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 pinch black pepper
- 2 tbsp water

Note: If you have one, cook this in a clay pot. If not a pan will do!

- > With your pan on low heat, add water and brown sugar
- > Stir occasionally and wait until it has carmelized
- > Add fish sauce and mix well to combine
- > Add olive oil and mix well
- > When everything has carmelized, turn up to high heat, stir in the meat and put a lid over it for about 5-10 minutes
- > Turn the heat back to medium and remove the lid, at this point water will have seeped out
- > Stir occasionally until the water has evaporated or has been reabsorbed
- > The sauce should be thick and carmelized, but not dry
- > Add a pinch of black pepper
- > This dish is usually served in the clay pot it was cooked in (be careful, it's hot!), but you can transfer contents of the pan to a dish to serve
- > Enjoy with white rice



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Cover Image Credit: Yen Linh Thai, Morsels Paper-cut Series, 2022. Paper, 11.5" x 8". Courtesy of the artist.

Yen Linh Thai is a multidisciplinary artist, muralist and illustrator based in Mississauga. Her work explores personal narratives, incorporates the whimsical and exists on the cusp between two and three dimensional. She loves to experiment and over the past few years has expanded her practice to public art projects. She has participated in several residencies, including Michael Lin's exhibition Archipelago at Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto. She has brought to life numerous murals, most recently for the Eglinton Way BIA, Arts Etobicoke, and Street Art Toronto. In 2021, she was awarded the MARTY (Mississauga Arts Award) in the Visual Arts - Emerging category. She holds a Bachelors of Science in Animal Biology & Studio Art from the University of Guelph. This year, she is also participating in the Art Gallery of Ontario's Inner Space: Studio Tour Web Series.

We acknowledge that the land where we are located is part of the ancient Dish With One Spoon Treaty and also the Brant Tract Purchase, Treaty No. 3 3/4 of 1795, 1797 and 2010, and we are grateful to the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and the Six Nations of the Grand River for sharing this territory with us.