

[*Music*]

Andréa Spearman: Dancers' Group is experimenting with new ways to unify, strengthen, and amplify voices in the Bay Area. We're excited to share a variety of ideas and stories.

[*music*]

Andréa: Hi, my name is Andréa Spearman, Artist Resource Manager at Dancers' Group. And today you will hear from Hien Huynh as he shares his latest artistic practice, a poem-narrative about his relationship with his mother and their family journey from Vietnam.

[*music*]

Andréa: Hello, Hien. How are you?

Hien Huynh: Good, how are you?

Andréa: Good! Wonderful. We're so glad to have you as part of our *In Dance* audio series.

So, just to start out, can you give the audience just a peek into your background?

Hien: Yes! Well first, thanks to *In Dance* and you all for having me come aboard and share. Very grateful and thankful to be here, to be able to speak with you, and to share with our community here.

My name is Hien and my family and I, we migrated from Vietnam back in 1994 when I was three years old. We arrived to Oakland. I picked up some dancing in middle school; some folks from my high school now came and shared breakdancing with me. I lied to my parents and said I was taking math courses after class and I forged their signature behind their backs [*Andréa: Uh oh.*] and started breakdancing.

[*both laugh*]

Eventually it caught up to me. I continued dancing through college and decided it was something I wanted to pursue. At that time, I still didn't have my parents' support and belief and it wasn't until I was able to learn their stories and learn of their experiences through a class assignment that it all came together when I made a dance about their journey from Vietnam to here.

And so fast-forward to today, I'm a teaching artist and hope to share back with the youth. I was inspired heavily when I was in middle school and younger, so I hope to continue that and do the same. And I'm a performer in the Bay Area, for a couple years now.

Yeah! That's a little bit of my background.

Andréa: That's wonderful — coming from one stage of movement to the other and making this journey about telling stories about your family and your cultural journey and history and travel journey.

Has the written word been a part of your artistic journey? And if not, why now?

Hien: Hmm, I think similar to dance, when I was younger too, I loved writing speeches and public speaking. That was the first thing I pursued. And then when I came to pursue dance, I sort of left the words behind but it wasn't until a couple years back that I started to notice how much they contribute to inspiring me — words, hearing words, feeling words, imagining words. I've come to acknowledge now how much it feeds my being, how much words and words within stories and just walking around San Francisco and then seeing different everyday events, words just come to my mind and I just get so excited to write them down, jot them. And it's something I'm still exploring, but I know it speaks to me and I'm excited to explore it further alongside dance.

Andréa: Yes! And you know, you've created movement pieces and performed with your mother before, how has that influenced this particular poem-narrative?

Hien: When I got to spend a week creating dance with my mother, I learned from her; we got to cook and live together for a very condensed amount of time. Just through hearing her experiences, it gave me so much more connection to her and more rootedness in myself. And so the more I understand her, the more I feel connected to my own body. And dancing and moving with her story now in my body and her experiences now in my body, embodied, I began to wonder about the words, too, with her stories. In this poem, this narrative, I very much feel like I'm dancing but in a more written form.

Andréa: So lastly, what do you hope that the audience will gain after listening?

Hien: I think my mom has so much love and warmth and a lot of indirect layers of care and I just hope to share that — that mother love, or motherly figure love. She asks for nothing in return and I just want to share that experience of how we receive love in such a way and bring some warmth from this experience.

Andréa: Well thank you, Hien, so much for giving us a little context to what we're about to hear and background about yourself.

Hien: Thank you, thank you.

[*music*]

Hien: The poem is titled *Ăn gì chưa?*

“did you eat yet?”
ma would ask
“did you eat yet?”
ma would ask
“Ăn gì chưa?”

sunset, at a busy intersection, swollen ankles, working infinite, ma freezes time, and asks.
passing by her, separate paths, ma bends gravity, and asks
even sitting, already eating at the dinner table, she'd ask

as if she did not need to know if it rained
if it poured
if the world was ending
she would say
“did you eat yet?”

and i eating, eating at her words
eating at her sustained, uninterrupted, unrelenting, perpetual, persistent, ceaselessness effort
taking for granted the ten thousand times she had asked
pouring her every ounce of love, into soft beds of turmeric noodles, ‘Mì Quảng’ cuddled with shy
crescent intimate shrimp, ‘Bún bò Huế’ hot spas of lemongrass beef but preferred chicken soup,
angry roasted bell pepper jalapeno dated salmon shouting over saucy-sauteed-selflessness
grains of bountiful brown rice ‘Cơm tấm’

and she asks and asks and asks
and i eat and eat and eat

until full to my throat, too full, pushing words and courage to my throat
i ask
“would you
dance
with me?”

cooling peanut sauce, spring rolls
the dishes lined up,
the stove went to sleep,
the oven djoyed

and so we began,
crushing pepper below our feet,
with savory swaying hands
‘bò lúc lắc’ - shaking beef

sizzling and slicing through the space
between butter, bread, and bodies
a different sense of taste
we began, peeling
peeling onions into the past

she began, sharing, “there was a time”
when
rainwater, visited through the roof
leaking a routine of empty bellies
bombs from the sky, sprinkling over the horizon
screams and cries, nourished by sweet sweet lullabies
cold rice, metal on skin, guns and chopsticks and daydreaming stomachs
she waited and weighted
waiting, and weighing
the pounds of loss lives
fleeing, floating, following
hiding, hoping, swimming, rowing, running, flying, farther and farther and father and father
and daughter and daughter
and water and water
and she, she, with a little water in her eyes
crystallizes tears, and shelves away memories, transforming into recipes
she arrives, turning watery eyes into mouth watery flavors

she arrives, and arrives,
finally, back to here,
here, holding i
and i,
hearing,
dancing with ma
looking to my eyes
she asks,
“did you eat yet?”
“Ăn gì chưa?”

[*music*]

Andréa: Thanks so much for joining us for this audio experience. For additional content that reflects our dynamic dance community, visit our *In Dance* article archive at dancersgroup.org.