

Nguyen Thi Kim Nhung is my aunty on my mother's side.

She attempted to flee Vietnam by boat on five occasions and failed every time.

Coming from the highlands, she could neither swim nor navigate the coast, but like countless others, she would try again and again to escape.

On one occasion, she left with her younger brother. After a few days journeying they quietly arrived in the homes of some fishing villagers. They were immediately led into the mangroves. They were told to hide and wait in the trees for small fishing rafts to pick them up and ferry them at high tide to a larger boat.

Hiding in the mangroves until sunrise, no rafts came.

People called out that they had been busted! thinking she would not get caught if she headed away from all the others, my aunty found herself in a little clearing taking deeper and deeper steps. Realising too late she had stepped into a sinking mudpit.

At the risk of being caught, some of her fellow escapees ran back with sticks and branches. Laying these down in a crisscross pattern. An older man whose name she no longer remembers, managed to crawl out and grab a hold of her. It must have taken at least half an hour, but he and the others managed to slowly pull her out.

It then dawned on my aunty that having runaway at night, she was wearing elastic waist pyjamas. So she tried her hardest to hold onto her pants as she was being pulled out, but the elastic gave way and her pants were left behind.

In her moment of exhaustion, embarrassment, and humiliation, her younger brother threw her his shirt. Tying it around her waist, the group clambered out of the mangroves and were quickly rounded up by the patrol guards.

Nine months later, she was released. Every now and then when she runs into people who were in prison with her, they would still call her Eva, having crawled out of the garden half-naked.



Eva, performance poetry and choreography by Nguyen Thị Kim Nhung, Nguyen Thị Kim Dung, Nguyen Ngọc Cu and James Nguyen, 2016 - 2020. In process photography by James Nguyen.

(Image 1 : four white plastic chairs are grouped together in a bushland reserve).

(Image 2 : a man in white stands atop two of the chairs, facing a woman in white, also on two chairs against a bush landscape).