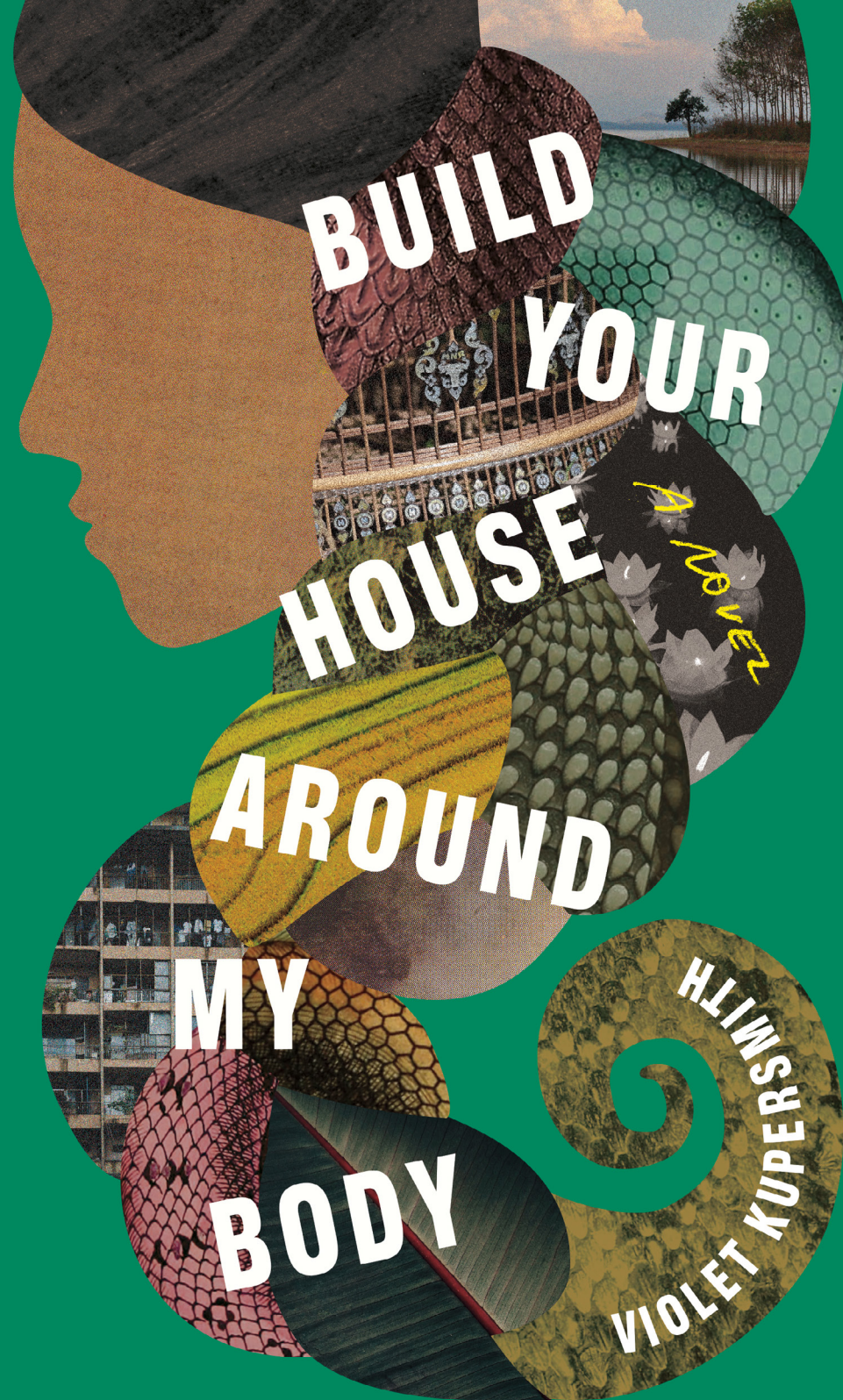


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## Q&A WITH VIOLET KUPERSMITH AND HER EDITOR, CAITLIN MCKENNA

**Caitlin McKenna:** You've described *Build Your House Around My Body* as a haunted house. What do you mean by that?

**Violet Kupersmith:** When I wrote my first book [*The Frangipani Hotel*], I tried to deliberately root the collection in tradition—taking ghost stories from my Vietnamese grandmother and then reimagining them in contemporary settings as a kind of allegory for the inherited trauma of the Vietnam War and the diaspora. But with this book, I drew from my own experiences living in Dalat and Saigon, working out on the page what it meant to me to be mixed-race, to be an American in Vietnam, to be a Vietnamese-American in Vietnam, and to be a woman everywhere. I wanted to write my own version of a haunted house story, but one where the land—where Vietnam itself—is the house. The ghosts living in its attic and in its basement are war and violence, racism and misogyny, and of course the ugly legacy of colonialism.

**Why do you think ghosts have such a grip on your creative interests?**

I think that ghost stories are universal, but spirits and haunting feel particularly ingrained in my DNA. My Vietnamese family, especially my grandmother, have always seen and felt and talked to ghosts; this is a common and accepted thing in Vietnam, as opposed to in America. Ghosts are like our mother tongue. When I started writing fiction, I wanted to write about the war and about Vietnamese immigrants, but I struggled with feeling like they weren't my stories to tell because I didn't have the firsthand experience of being a refugee. But ghosts, I knew. Ghosts, I grew up with. They became my means of entry into the story, and my way of translating Vietnamese history into my own writing. And apart from whatever ways they operate figuratively in my work, I believe in ghosts. They are absolutely real to me; I am very afraid of them, so I want to respect them in my fiction. I think it's important to write what scares you, in whatever form that may take.


**This novel operates somewhat outside of the diaspora story that we're most familiar with in Asian-American fiction.**

It was the kind of novel that I wanted to read. I wanted to see a Vietnam on the page that was more than its war with America, and to explore a different kind of Vietnamese-American narrative trajectory. I asked myself: what happens when the arc of the diaspora is bent backwards, when a Vietnamese-American goes to Vietnam? How does it affect your perception of your own identity to grow up in America being seen as Vietnamese, and then realize that in Vietnam, you're American? How is this different for full-blooded and mixed-race Vietnamese-Americans? Parts of the novel—and my own attempts at answering these questions—grew out of my own experiences living in Vietnam, first as an English teacher with the Fulbright program, and then staying on for several years just to write.

I was also interested in the idea of disobedience, and in subverting the model minority myth. Winnie, my main character, is not a good Asian-American daughter. It's ironic: the least Asian thing she does is run away to live in Asia. I'm not a good Asian-American daughter either. I was an English major. If I had become a doctor, I would have accidentally killed someone by now. So even if I didn't set out to explicitly write an Asian-American coming-of-age story and explore the pressure of our families' expectations, these familiar themes trickled in anyway.

**You and Winnie are both mixed-race. Can you talk a little bit about the different ways that mixed-ness or half-ness play out in the book?**

My mother's family came to the States from Vietnam as refugees in the '70s, and my father is a white American. At the time that my parents met, interracial marriage wasn't something that was accepted. It was seen as a terrible and mutinous thing for my mother to have a baby with my father. And when I was a child, I was always very aware that I was the half-white shame child. This is really at the heart of my novel: the idea of feeling like, rather than having two identities, you never belong anywhere. It manifests



in several kinds of mixed-ness throughout the book—characters who are mixed-race, but also characters who are more paranormal types of hybrids. There are themes of characters being mistaken for people or things they are not, characters hiding their true forms, characters wanting to shape-shift.

**There are also recurring themes—sometimes literalized—of invisibility throughout your book.**

That grew out of me wishing that I could go through my life without sticking out as either a noticeable foreigner in Vietnam, or as a noticeable brown/beige person in America. It often feels so tiring to be the custodian of this body, and I noticed myself writing about the urge to disappear in various ways. I think that was a kind of wish fulfillment for myself but also almost a warning, too. For the characters in my book who do get to vanish, or leave their bodies behind, it comes at a very high price.

**It's specifically female characters who get to disappear.**

I left Vietnam so angry about how women were treated, from the small, poisonous kinds of everyday sexism my friends and I faced to more horrible experiences of assault and abuse. But I would learn again and again that no matter where my female body and I went, Vietnam or America or anywhere else, there was no escape from variations of the same, relentless misogyny. It drains you and drains you until you want to just peel off your own skin and vanish. It's so easy to blame your own body for it. You think, "If only I didn't have this body, you couldn't stare at me on the street. You couldn't yell things at me, you couldn't grab me, you couldn't follow me home, you couldn't hurt me. If only I didn't have this body, I would be safe." I wanted this novel to be a kind of revenge story for the women I knew who had terrible things happen to them. I felt like if I could not protect them or find justice for them in real life, the least I could do was try and find a version of justice for them in my writing.

**Were there writers that particularly inspired you as you worked on this book?**

I was absolutely inspired by David Mitchell's grand narrative structures, the interconnected spiderweb of characters in books like Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from The Goon Squad* and Tommy Orange's *There There*, and the dreamy weirdness of Haruki Murakami, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Angela Carter. I feel like I'm a braver writer now than I was when I started. If I could go back in time, I wouldn't want to tell the Violet of five years ago what the plot of the novel she was working on was going to evolve into because I think she would have just quit. At that point, I had never written anything longer than thirty-nine pages. I had no idea how to balance something this big, and I had to rewire my brain to write without getting hung up on every single word. It was like transitioning from embroidering a handkerchief to weaving a rug.

**Who do you picture when you imagine your ideal reader?**

I very sneakily set out to write something that wasn't within a single genre, so that there could not be a single, ideal reader. I hope I can steal as many kinds of readers as possible! There is something in the novel for a lot of different palates: There's horror but it's not really a horror novel. There's a mystery, but it's not really a mystery novel. Parts of it are set in different eras, but it's not really a historical novel either. I don't want to pin down my reader, and I don't want them to be able to pin my book down either.

**What do you do when you're not writing?**

I love cooking and eating. I love traveling on a shoestring budget. I love to go on bicycle rides with my dog in a little trailer attached to the back. And what I love most in the world is spending time with my grandmother in Houston, picking pomelos in her backyard while she yells at me about not falling out of the tree. We actually bond more over fruit than ghosts.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Winnie admires and resents Dao, the other Vietnamese-American teacher who she's often mistaken for. Discuss her complicated feelings about Dao and where they might stem from.
2. Many of the characters go by two names: Winnie's real name is Ngoan; Binh is affectionately called Bé lì; Long and Tan's grandmother is given the name "Odile" by her cruel employer. What do their different names mean to each of them? Do you think Winnie would be a different person if she went by Ngoan at all times?
3. Discuss what each of the main characters wants in life. Does anyone get what they wish for?
4. How are the characters from the countryside different from those in the city?
5. Winnie says that because her older siblings were so successful, "There weren't any American expectations left over for me." What does she mean by this, and how does it affect her?
6. How do different characters, from Winnie to Jean-François, react to having mixed heritage? How does it influence the way they're treated? How does it influence the way they see themselves?
7. Discuss the differences and similarities between Tan and Long.
8. Tan and Long's grandmother can "travel" using only her eyes, but it has come at great cost to her body. If you had the same power, would you use it? Why or why not?
9. What do the snakes represent?
10. Why do you think the snake bit Binh? How culpable is Tan in her death?
11. Who do you think is more cruel in the novel: The people or the ghosts? What motivates the ghosts? What motivates the people?
12. The rubber forest is haunted—but, in so many ways, the people in the book are haunted too. Which is scarier to you? Why?
13. Different cultures have their own folklore and ghost stories. What ghost stories did you grow up with?
14. By the end of the novel, did you feel like the three women had gotten justice?



## RECIPES

### Vietnamese Coffee

From *Vietnamese Food Any Day* by Andrea Nguyen

For a quick daily cup, I employ the AeroPress, which some people compare to a French press, but I see it as a high-tech cousin of the phin filter. This recipe makes a single serving to be combined with condensed milk in one of the drink recipes that follow. For the milk, full-fat Eagle Brand and Carnation are great substitutes for the Longevity (Old Man) brand sold at Viet markets; or try coconut-sweetened condensed milk if you are vegan. No matter how it's made, Viet coffee is a delicious heart-thumper. Drink slowly.

#### Ingredients

- 3 tablespoons ground medium-dark or dark roast coffee, such as Café Du Monde, or French, Italian, or Spanish roast
- About  $\frac{2}{3}$ -cup hot water
- 1–2 tablespoons sweetened condensed milk

#### Instructions

- Assemble the AeroPress with a metal or paper filter in place and set over a coffee cup. Add the ground coffee, then shake the chamber to distribute. Pour in 3 tablespoons of the hot water to moisten and bloom the coffee. After the water passes through, about 30 seconds, add the remaining  $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup hot water. Stir five times, then wait for the water to pass through until half of the original volume remains, 30 to 90 seconds. Slowly plunge to express the remaining coffee before serving.

#### Hot coffee with condensed milk

- Add 1 tablespoon sweetened condensed milk to  $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup hot coffee. Stir well to create a caramel-colored drink. Taste and, if it's too intense, splash in hot water to dilute.

#### Iced coffee with condensed milk

- Stir together  $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup coffee with 2 tablespoons sweetened condensed milk. Put 4 or 5 ice cubes in a tall glass. Pour the coffee over the ice and stir with a long spoon or chopstick to chill and slightly dilute.



## RECIPES

### Bánh Chuối, or Banana-Coconut Bread-Pudding Cake

From *Vietnamese Food Any Day* by Andrea Nguyen

Tons of bananas grow in Vietnam, which is why they appear in savorys as well as sweets. This moist, fragrant, pudding-like cake is a great way to use overripe fruit or, in my case, a good reason to buy a big bunch at a good price and let some turn unattractively dark and deliciously perfect for this treat.

There are many ways that Viet cooks make bánh chuối, but for this easy rendition, you need a slightly squishy, inexpensive bread. Supermarket sandwich bread or baguette is fine. Avoid fancy, rustic, or dense whole-grain breads because their sturdiness will dull the other flavors in this cake. Coconut goodness highlights the tropical nature of Viet cuisine. Instead of dark rum, my favorite spirit for this cake, you may try bourbon or brandy.

#### Ingredients

- 1½ lb. overripe bananas
- ¼ cup dark rum
- About ½ cup sugar
- ¼ tsp. fine sea salt
- One 13 ½-oz. can full-fat unsweetened coconut milk
- 2 tbsp. virgin coconut oil
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 egg
- Generous 8 oz. white or wheat sandwich bread, or supermarket French baguette, cut or torn into 1-inch pieces, crust intact

#### Instructions

1. Peel and thinly slice the bananas, reserving 3 to 4 inches of one to decorate the top of the cake (choose the least blemished section!). In a medium bowl, gently combine the remaining bananas with the rum and 1½ tablespoons of the sugar and stir to mix. Set aside.
2. In a small saucepan, combine ⅓-cup of the sugar, the salt, coconut milk, coconut oil, and vanilla. Set over medium heat and cook, stirring or whisking, for 1 to 2 minutes to melt the oil and dissolve the sugar. In a mixing bowl, beat the egg and then whisk in the coconut milk mixture. Add the bread and stir to combine well. Set aside for 20 minutes to soften.
3. Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 375°F. Oil a 9-inch round cake pan with 2-inch sides, and line the bottom with parchment paper. (Or, use an 8-inch square pan.) Set aside.
4. When the bread is done soaking, use a potato masher to break up the chunks and create a thick, oatmeal-like mixture. Add the banana and its fragrant liquid and stir and fold to combine well. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and shimmy the pan to level the top. Decorate with the reserved banana slices and sprinkle 1 teaspoon of sugar all over the top.
5. Bake for 1¼ to 1½ hours, until puffed up and richly browned. The top should feel dry to the touch and a toothpick or skewer inserted in the center should come out clean. Let cool on a wire rack for 1 hour (expect quick deflation), then run a blunt knife around the pan edge, and unmold onto the rack. Remove the paper and reinvert onto a plate to showcase the attractive decorated side.
6. Enjoy the cake warm or let cool completely to firm up, and eat at room temperature.



## RECIPES

### Nem Nuông (Vietnamese Sausage)

#### Ingredients

- 1 tbsp. plus 1 tsp. jasmine rice
- 1 tbsp. sugar
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- ½ tsp. Diamond Crystal kosher salt or ¼ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ½ tsp. baking powder
- 2 tbsp. fish sauce
- 2 tsp. pounded or very finely grated garlic
- 1 lb. ground pork
- Canola, grapeseed, or other neutral-tasting oil

#### Instructions

1. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper; set aside.
2. Set a cast-iron pan over medium heat and add rice. Cook, swirling and stirring constantly, until rice turns a deep golden color, 5 to 8 minutes. Remove from heat, pour into a small heatproof bowl, and allow to cool. Use a spice or coffee grinder to grind cooled rice into a fine powder.
3. Place rice powder, sugar, pepper, salt, baking powder, fish sauce, and garlic in a large bowl, and stir to combine.
4. Add pork to the bowl, and using your hands, mix thoroughly for 1 full minute.
5. Heat a cast-iron pan over medium heat. Use a heaping tablespoon of pork mixture to make a small, thin sausage patty. Add a teaspoon or so of oil and cook the patty for 2 to 3 minutes on each side. Taste, and if needed, add salt or any other seasonings to the uncooked sausage mixture, and mix to combine.
6. Divide and roll the remaining sausage into 8 3-inch logs, skewering lengthwise and placing on the prepared baking sheet as you go. Cover, and refrigerate for 30 minutes to allow flavors to come together. (Sausages can be made ahead and covered and refrigerated or frozen at this point until ready to use.)
7. To cook, wipe out cast-iron pan, and return to medium heat. Add 1 tablespoon of oil. When it shimmers, add sausages in a single layer, leaving space between them. Cook, rotating every 2 minutes, until browned on the surface and just cooked through, 6 to 8 minutes total.
8. Drain sausages on paper towels and serve hot.