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January 1, 2003

Thi Diem Th?y L?

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Le's first novel is a bracing, unvarnished, elliptical account of a Vietnamese refugee family, in America but not yet of it, hobbled by an unfamiliar environment and their own troubled relationships. It's narrated by the family's young daughter, newly arrived in San Diego with her father after being sponsored by a well-meaning but condescending American family. Her mother soon joins them, and the family endures an itinerant existence of low-wage jobs and cheap rental apartments. Other Vietnamese wander namelessly through the book, sharing space with the family but providing little of the warmth of community. Nearly plotless, the novel is organized into vignettes that each feature one piercing image: a drunken parent, a shattered display cabinet, a drowned boy. As the narrator makes her halting adjustment to America, she also tries to discover what the family has left behind in Vietnam. Her father's mysterious past caused him to be rejected by his in-laws; these grandparents are now known to the girl only through a worn photograph. Then there is her brother, whose fate is mentioned only in whispers. Le allows no sentimentality to creep into this work-indeed, she hints only subtly at the narrator's emotional state ("there is no trace of blood anywhere except here, in my throat, where I am telling you all of this"), as though any explicit show of feeling were too frivolous for the subject at hand. This is a stark and significant work that will challenge readers. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

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