

## **The Bomb Shelter**

When bombs are exploding outside,  
it means that there are implosions.

Vibrations travel through air and liquid.

My amniotic fluid is imprinted with airplanes  
dropping bombs and screams and fire.

In the bomb shelter in Saigon,  
my father teaches my two-year-old  
brother French. "*Je m'appelle Chuc Nai Dat.*"

*"Je m'appelle...."*

## **Not Worth a Bullet**

A bullet is made of  
copper or lead.  
Gunpowder is  
poured into the case.  
The firing pin hits the  
primer at the back of  
the bullet which starts  
the explosion. Altogether,  
the bullet and the case are  
typically about two inches in length  
and weigh a few ounces.

My father said that  
the Vietcongs  
told him and the other  
prisoners while in  
“re-education” camp  
that they were not worth a bullet.  
They would work for the Vietcongs  
and then die.

A bamboo tree is smooth, long  
with roots that hold the earth  
with the strong grip of green  
knuckles and fingers.  
They are used to build houses,  
fences, etc.  
A bamboo tree can weigh sixty pounds  
or more and be twenty feet tall.

The prisoners were forced to  
walk barefoot up the mountains  
and carry bamboo back to the camp.

Due to the weight of the bamboo,  
they were only able to carry one  
at a time.

## **Immigration**

It is October, when the winds of Autumn blow strong in the Pacific.

There are over two thousand of us, sardines, barely human and starving. We sleep on the floor and wash ourselves with seawater. People are sick.

When someone dies from sickness, s/he is wrapped in a blanket and tossed overboard during a Buddhist chant.

I was only two years old and cannot recollect the dying next to me, nor can I recollect my constant coughing nor can I recall seeing my mother's worried countenance as she contemplated our future, how my constant crying made her want to jump overboard.

## Cockroaches

A proposal by someone to my mom  
after the Vietnam War: *Why don't  
you sell your baby, you don't have  
anything to eat?*

A response by my four-year-old brother:  
*No, don't sell my sister! There are lots  
of cockroaches for us to eat!*

When I returned to the country  
eighteen years later, I saw them—  
large, brown shiny tanks on the wall,

evidence of my brother's love for me.

## Agent Orange

It's difficult to be alone, without  
a mother's touch, in a crib like a  
baby except one is not.

A son taught to live with a thirst  
for a mother who loves her child though  
one of his legs is too short, the other too long.

He sits, arms bent and limp, but do not  
avoid him; he wants to interact. His swollen eyes  
and misshapen head leans back. In a dream  
Mother holds him close, as if by her embrace alone,  
she will somehow right the wrong.

The chemical traveled through her placenta,  
to the womb where small limbs that needed  
to form couldn't, where the tiny body,  
the size of a fist, no longer knew what to do.

It was named for the orange band  
around each fifty-five gallon drum.

Orange as a sunrise that permeates one's soul,  
how its rays cover the sky  
and the earth with a deep orange,

rising as those bodies also rise.

## **Photosynthesis**

*for my son—*

How can I convince you  
that you do have chlorophyll,  
that you can take the sun's  
energy and turn it into sugar?  
Produce something sweet inside of you.  
Take the waste people breathe out  
and make it into something that  
will keep you alive, that will keep  
those around you alive, create oxygen.

Why do you say that this metaphor  
doesn't work, that you don't have  
the powers of a plant, that nature  
didn't intend you that way?

Look, how you twist and turn  
towards the light.

## **accents**

today, I decided to write  
with brush and ink  
my name in Vietnamese  
Chúc Mỹ Tuệ  
the one on my birth certificate  
with all of its beautiful accents

lightning above the “u”  
ocean wave above the “y”  
mountain top above  
and reflection of moon  
below the “e”

today, I made four small  
marks and took back  
my native language.

## **Agent Blue**

To kill correctly  
takes calculation.

Down to a science.  
Arsenic  
cacodylic acid.

Know water and rice  
on a cellular level.

Make sure  
no surviving  
seed can be  
collected  
and planted.

Because even  
a small seed  
assures  
survival.

Because  
mortars,  
grenades  
and bombs  
can not destroy  
a grain.

Because our  
heart is made  
of seeds.

Know what it  
takes to kill  
the seeds.

Know what it  
takes to deprive  
the plant of water,  
to dehydrate it.

To be surrounded  
by love but unable  
to absorb it.

## **Quan Âm on a Dragon**

Mother shows me a lacquered painting on a plaque  
of Quan Âm, bodhisattva of compassion, riding a dragon.

It is misty around the bodhisattva and the dragon.  
The picture looks so real, almost like a photo.

A sacred vase in one hand and a willow branch  
in the other to bless devotees with the divine nectar of life.

Mother says that she and other boat refugees saw Quan Âm as we were  
fleeing Vietnam after the war in a freight boat with 2,450 refugees.

When she looked up towards Heaven, in the clouds, she saw  
the bodhisattva in her white, flowing robe riding a dragon.

Mother says that the goddess was there to guide and save us  
from the strong waves of the South China Sea. I should know

better than to believe her though she swears it's true.  
I ask again and she nods, says really, I saw Quan Âm in the clouds

as we were escaping. I should know better than to believe her.  
But, a part of me wants to believe in a bodhisattva, in compassion

riding on a mythical creature, to believe that somehow something  
more than just our mere human selves wanted us to live.

## Names

I am tired of having five different names;  
Having to change them when I enter

A new country or take on a new life. My  
First name is my truest, I suppose, but I

Never use it and nobody calls me by this Vietnamese  
Name though it is on my birth certificate –

Tue My Chuc. It makes the sound of a twang of a  
String pulled. My parents tell me my name in Cantonese

is Chuc Mei Wai. Three soft bird chirps and they call  
me Ah Wai. Shortly after I moved to the U.S., I became

Teresa My Chuc, then Teresa Mei Chuc. “Teresa” is the sound  
Water makes when one is washing one’s hands. After my first

Marriage, my name was Teresa Chuc Prokopiev. After my second  
Marriage, my name was Teresa Chuc Dowell. Now I am back

To Teresa Mei Chuc, but I want to go way back . Reclaim that name once  
given and lost so quickly in its attempt to become someone that would

fit in. Who is Tue My Chuc? I don’t really know. I was never really her  
and her birthday on March 16, I never celebrate because it’s not

my real birthday though it is on my birth certificate. My birthday is on  
January 26, really, but I have to pretend that it’s on March 16 because my

Mother was late registering me after the war. Or it’s in December, the date  
Changing every year according to the lunar calendar – this is the one my

Parents celebrate because it’s my Chinese birthday.

All these names and birthdays make me dizzy. Sometimes I just don’t feel like a

Teresa anymore; Tue (pronounced Twe) isn’t so embarrassing. A fruit learns to  
Love its juice. Anyways, I’d like to be string...resonating. Pulled back tensely like a bow

Then reverberate in the arrow’s release straight for the heart.