

The poems in *Red Thread* by Teresa Mei Chuc are lyrical in nature infused with intense emotion, vivid imagery and metaphor. Teresa uses alliteration, consonance, assonance, and internal rhyme to create the music and mood in her poems. Many of her poems draw on science and mathematics, invoking botany (“Photosynthesis,” “Intimacy”), weights and measures (“Not Worth a Bullet”), physics (“Newton's First Law of Motion” and “Grandma (A Hologram)”), geometry (“Vietnamese Globe” and “Story of Mother and Daughter”), and quantum mechanics.

Writing prompt:

Write poems about a war or the effects of a war while taking on a personal perspective. Focus on specificity. Be concrete.

Examples from *Red Thread*:

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.

Vietnam Ghost Stories

Ghost-like beings roam,
carrying the bones of the dead,
their steps heavy with the weight
of fields and fields.

And the dead too –
stories Mother tells
of the ghost with a long tongue
that licks dishes at night.

When I First Saw Daddy

When I first saw daddy,
he was like an Egyptian cat;
skinny, foraging, and stern,
just released from a Vietcong prison.
He told us he hated the color red.
Sixteen years later,
he wears a red sweatshirt and smiles.
The pin tip opening in his heart enough
to let in a dribble of red.

Playground

“Happiness is a ball after which we run wherever it rolls, and we push it with our feet when it stops.” – Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The tank was the color of desert sand,
it rolled by like a slow-moving beetle
and dropped a glove gently to the ground.
The glove was a baseball glove.
A few boys huddled around
and one of them picked it up.
Inside the glove was a metal ball. A glove and a ball.
Another boy suggested taking the ball apart
and selling the metal pieces.
The boys began to hammer it.
One of the boys held the ball in his hand
and threw it against the wall.
The ball bounced back and exploded in his abdomen.
The dead boy was brought to the morgue.
Women gathered to identify the mutilated body.
The boys who survived walked around with furrowed brows
and a deep silence that only such shock could induce
surrounded by wails - a room full of people without furniture,
drowning in a sea of sand, sand they had believed held water.

Writing prompt:

Write poems on the topic of immigration. Use personal experience or write from a personal perspective.

Example from *Red Thread*:

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.

Writing prompt:

Write poems drawing on science and mathematics to convey a variety of themes, including family.

Examples from *Red Thread*:

(the following two poems draw from botany)

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.

Intimacy

The sky is the color of hydrangea;
blanched clouds and shades of purple-blue,
a touch of pink-flushed petals here and there.
Hydrangea in morning sun and afternoon shade
where thoughts like winged insects alight
on a cluster of forty-three blossoms.
Blossoms that color according to the aluminum
or lack of the metal in the soil.

Example from *Red Thread*:
(the following poem draws from weights and measures)

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.

Examples from *Red Thread*:
(the following poems draw from physics)

Newton's First Law of Motion

An object is in a state of inertia, that is, a kind of constant motion, until another force interferes with its course, like when my state of mind is rattled. Sometimes the force appears as a person, an object or feeling. Sometimes it comes flying from a distance — a firebird. Winged creature, Feng Huang, of luck and happiness with the tail of a fish, the head of a cock, the back of a swallow, and the neck of a snake, that plunges into fire and turns into ashes — strange, mythical bird that never dies. It is because you die and die and return each time, it is because in order to be reborn, you must die. And so people wear jeweled phoenixes of jade and gemstone around their necks and wrists and embroider the fire bird into a piece of art to place on the wall. They play the five notes of your song, the notes of the pentatonic scale, because of its magical powers. I want to be you, Ho-o, and cast myself into the fire again and again. Keep my heart open and burning, allow something to fly in and a new bird to soar from my chest.

Grandma (A Hologram)

In your physical absence,
the hologram of me
still contains you
like a cut leaf -
you are part of the light
scattered from me so that even
a tiny fragment, an eyelash,
still contains the whole of you.

Examples from *Red Thread*:
(the following poems draw from geometry)

Vietnamese Globe

In Vietnamese, the word “to live”
is a circle. A question mark rests
at the top and a comma to the right
of the question. Except, the question
mark has no dot at the bottom,
so the curve is like the curve of a cane
where the hand grips

or a squiggle of hair from the head.
It is a beautiful word--a
painting. Round as a ball
and at the summit of this *living*,
one wonders and pauses.

The earth is shaped like this word, circling.
Cycling – carbon, phosphorous, nitrogen,
water, sediments.
A bird with a worm wiggling from its
beak will eventually become Origin.

My mouth opens wide and spherical
to sound this Vietnamese globe -

“Eoehh”

A Story of Mother and Daughter

She holds the baby cradled in her arms,
perpendicular to her body.
At that point of intersection –
two hearts are one.

The girl’s body grows - no longer able
to stay horizontal in her mother’s arms.
The bodies – vertical and parallel,
never really touching, yet yearning towards each other.

Example from *Red Thread*:
(the following poem draws from quantum mechanics)

Quantum Equation

I watch my mother as she puts two cups
of rice into a small pot,
pouring water in and out, washing.
Moving rice around with fingers
until murkiness of water is gone
and the rice is clean.

She places her hand, palm down, on jasmine.
If water covers the fingers and knuckles
and not the back of the hand,
then there is enough to cook the rice to a nice
consistency.

In the future, I will cook rice this way.

My grandma bangs a gong as she prays.
The gong is round as a rice bowl,
its emptiness holds the world.
I run my fingers round and round the edge
until it sounds and I feel energy between fingers
and metal, a ring that makes my body tremble.

A rice bowl is round as haircuts.

The wetness creates a transparency for measurement.

I raise the rice bowl to my lips, absent-mindedly
pressing its bottom to my face as I wait for the food to be done.

