

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.