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Two Poems: Stop Time Before; Forsaken Ones

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Creative and Literary Works

Two Poems

Ánh-Hoa Thị Nguyễn
St. Catherine University

Stop. Time. Before.

For Tommy Le & His Family¹

Stop.

Time. Before. The bullet.

You. Were time. Before. Stop.

Time. Seconds. Before. You were.

Before. The bullet. Stop.

Time.

I.

Your life was stolen before you were born.

An invisible chain of labor pulled you from the womb.

Our ancestors' blood burned

streams of lava searing constellations

scarring the map of our histories.



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The sweetness of your eyes have roots in the ashy soil of Hawaii,
the cruel cane of Cuba,
the smoked earth of Louisiana.²

Bodies so brown they were black, too.

This was time before.

Before you were born.

Their history is never our history.

II.

Before time your youth was tapped like rubber from a tree.

Starved of the rice from your own seeds.

For centuries

you were not the owner

of your life.

This chain your mother gave you

the gold of sacrifice

hanging around her neck.

This is your worth

bought back

now buried.

Their truth is never our truth.

III.

It has never been a fair fight.

You with a pen in hand.³

The Western hero with the gun.

What were they so afraid of?

With their Atomic Bombs
 Dumb Bombs
 Guided Bombs
 Cluster Bomblets
 Fuel Air Explosives
 Fuel Air Bombs
 Hand Combat Weapons
 Pistols and Revolvers
 Infantry Rifles
 Sniper/Marksman Rifles
 Submachine Guns
 Shotguns
 Machine Guns
 Grenades and Mines
 Agent Orange

Torture

Before your time.

You were in the line of fire a line so long it seems infinite.

Your life annihilated another line of lines

in the paper in the streets in the lies in the crimes in the fields in the shrines.

IV.

I will light incense for you.

I will pick up your pen.

I will use it as my weapon.

I will carve your memory in my skin.

I will sow the seeds of your story.

Savor your smile like sugar.

Forsaken Ones

For Vietnamese spirits lost at sea

Sun searing salt on lips.

Tongues betray captive in mouths.

No words to will no will to speak.

Souls float an illusive fog

In hulls of skin.

Ribs like reeds fragile as fingers cupping water.

For weeks.

For weeks.

You are still. You are silent. You are breath upon breath.

Bones bowing bodies bifurcating.

You is a collective stench a collective stifling.

You long for the smoke of incense broil of charcoal exhaust of motorbikes.

Strands of hair scented with sand.

Remember the smell of safety.

You beg for rain.

Please.

Please.

Please.

You pray. You promise. You plead.

The hunger tightening all you crave.

Food.

Family.

Freedom.

Clawing you inside.

So loud this siren of sacrifice. Suffering.
So loud it makes you want.

To swim.

Notes

1. Vietnamese American, 20-year-old Tommy Le, was unarmed and shot in the back by King County, Washington police on June 14, 2017.
2. Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: a history* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2015), 15-56.
3. Jaweed Kaleem, "He was 20 and unarmed. A police shooting brings Seattle's Vietnamese Americans into the world of activism," *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-tommy-le-police-vietnamese-20171005-htmlstory.html>.

About the Author



Ánh-Hoa Thi Nguyễn, is a refugee, writer, community artist, activist, and educator. Ánh-Hoa holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Mills College in Oakland, California where she was awarded the Mary Merrit Henry Prize in Poetry and the Ardella Mills Literary Composition Prize in Creative Non-Fiction. Some of her publications include "Asian Pacific American Journal," the Vietnamese Artists Collective anthology "AS IS: A Collection of Visual and Literary Works by Vietnamese American Artists," the Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA)

anthology "Cheers to Muses: Contemporary Works by Asian American Women," "Troubling Borders, An Anthology of Art and Literature by Southeast Asian Women in the Diaspora" and diaCRITICS, a project of the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network (DVAN). She has also performed her work at numerous venues in the Bay Area and Twin Cities. Ánh-Hoa is the founder of Pomelo Press, and creates self-published and hand bound artists books. She has been an Artist-in-Residence at the de Young Museum and Writer-in-Residence at Hedgebrook and Djerassi Resident Artist Program. Ánh-Hoa is a Voices of Our Nation Arts Foundation (VONA) alumna, Elizabeth George Foundation Fellow, and a Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grant winner. In the summer of 2018, she was the artist-in-residence for The Floating Library with her project "Waves Enfolding: A Paper Memorial" that honored the lives lost during the Vietnamese refugee waves of 1954 and after The War in Vietnam and South East Asia, 1975-1992. She is currently a Lecturer at St. Catherine University and a member of She Who Has No Master(s), a collective of women and gender-nonconforming writers of the Vietnamese diaspora.



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