



2021

Three Poems: Tasting the Country that Could Have Been Mine; Too Blind to See Giants; We, the Hmong People

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Recommended Citation

Lyfoung, Pacyinz (2021) "Three Poems: Tasting the Country that Could Have Been Mine; Too Blind to See Giants; We, the Hmong People," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1226

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Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Vol. 16 Iss. 1 (2021)

www.JSAAEA.org

Creative and Literacy Works

Three Poems

Pacyinz Lyfoung

Tasting the Country That Could Have Been Mine, 2017

A palm tree was cut and carved, sundered into concave mortar and peninsular pestle, but it throbs whole again, every time white garlic root rocks against red pepper shredded under a shower of crystal salt and sugar confettis, pounding like lovers ever hungering for each other

to emerge languid and fragrant, dilated to shapeless smoothness, ready to swallow the fine green strands of hair assiduously shaved to the last caress skinning a papaya peel and licking

close to the core where family jewels dangle frail and inflamed and yet discarded

amidst a sprinkle of tamarind flesh boiled to brown honey, a gentle rain of squeezed slices of lime, and let's not forget

the essence of Lao cooking, a spoonful of fish lovingly rotted to retain all the savors of a tropical river simmering in suffocating heat, all the while, churned over and over, with cloying slapping sounds

in the last tremors of this mystical concoction, peanuts drop to marinate in the potent inferno of sinful flavors and soak to softness,

bits of amber crumbling under the slightest grazing of teeth into buttery bones

girls who grew up in the shadow of the Kingdom of the Million Elephants crave its bittersweetness:

it stings, it zings, it zips, it bursts
through the whole palate
in an explosion of all the senses,
leaving one numb and high,



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Journal of Southeast Asian American Education & Advancement, Vol. 16, Iss. 1, (2021) ISSN: 2153-8999

never full and
always wanting more.

In my Western-born mouth, this taste of the home I never knew
burns and cries, like my mouth is on fire and my eyes will weep a
deluge; but for the Eastern-born women, who have swum the river,
their mouths are on fire and they roar like water dragons
swallowing earth and sky, deliciously coming home.

Too Blind to See Giants, 2016

*(A Tribute to Toulia and Lytou Lyfoung, and all the unsung
Hmong Tassengs, Caitongs, Naibans and other Hmong wisemen)*

An old man shuffles softly in hard shell shoes shielding how he clings with all the might
of his toes and heels, so strong before, they could waltz through a gilded palace and steal the
heart of a golden princess... Now wrapped in a shapeless coat of winter gray, his song spirals up
in wisps of muted notes tenderly wrenched wordlessly from a throat and lungs, so strong before,
they could argue and win after a hundred years the legal right to citizenship for a whole People...

But today no powers can stop the flight of the younger man, my father can no longer bear
to stand on this patch of earth they had believed would save them from the communist killing
rage, but now it holds his brother in inconceivable sleep...

Unable to latch onto his dearly departed brother, my father leaps across an ocean, his
uncle can only latch onto the naked pavement and wail silently in empty cold air, sundered in
this terrible moment...

Reforged hardy like a Minnesotan white and pink lady slipper, toddling a sword of justice
back to my roots, I shuffle along another elder wandering among exotic animals; watching the
gibbons swinging from a branch, with the expertise of a master road builder for a new Kingdom
and the wisdom of the man looking into a mirror, he says, they're his favorite, almost like
humans, but their bones can make good medicine or an alabastrine weapon...

In my foolish youth and Western-born arrogance, I passed the great lights of my great-uncles,
oblivious those strange and sad old men used to be giants in the Kingdom of The Million
Elephants, two among the many Hmong Chaomuangs, Naikongs, Tassengs, Phutongs, Naibans
and other men of Courage who once upon a time made Hmong dreams come true.

We, The Hmong People,
In Honor of General Vang Pao's 80th Birthday,
2009

This is Your Story. This is Our Story.

In the beginning, You were just a boy,
a seed rolling softly over land that was home, and yet,
did not know that You were her son;
while We were a hilltribe, floating among the clouds,
wisps of unspoken wishes looking for a home,
skirting the edges of what would become our country.

Hovering between heaven and earth, holding the mountains,
between East and West: We were the path to freedom,
so they all came to us.

First, the Kingdom of the Million Elephants,
a new nation promising we would be One People.
You became their faithful son, their brave soldier, their watchful sentry;
while We descended from the clouds and rained ruby red jewels
from our veins, water for the ground, to birth our country.

Those were the happiest of times; You grew strong in the Royal Army;
while We learned the rights of being citizens in a democracy,
the pride of gaining a Hmong voice at the National Assembly,
the honor of a place on the King's Council: Phagna Touby.

We could make laws and shape our country.
Our children sat in classrooms, polished as gems effervescing into
heliographs of our bright futures.

Then, came the gloriest of times. Against communism, You emerged
as a formidable General, while We learned guns, tanks and planes.

Deployed as Our country's defense Shield, we were pure steel:
Undeclared. Given impossible missions, We worked like angels set
against evil; We performed miracles, evading enemy lines,
bearing the bread of life, or delivering fallen pilots.

We fought so hard, stars wept from the sky, while our enemies
Cursed our names.

In the end, We saw the darkest of times, hunted by enemies,
enraged by our unbreakable courage. We drowned in the river
leading to a safe shore. We languished in refugee camps.
But once again, You safeguarded us, always Our good Father,
reminding our American friends to welcome us home,

like brothers.
Faithfully, we entered our new country and joined
The Great American Family.

Sometimes, We carry the heavy weight of our dead left behind,
the burn of our old wounds, the nightmare of neverending battles.
Sometimes, we are too busy and it is not easy, building new lives
in this new country. But You come and remind us
We are Hmong People,
Sturdy as mountains, and
We are Americans,
Resilient like Liberty.
So we know Peace and its worth:
Our children dancing, in the light, free.

About the Author



Pacyinz Lyfoung is a French-born, Minnesota-grown, Hmong/Asian American woman poet. She made her first foray into Asian American poetry through the Inroad for Asian Pacific Islanders program at the Loft Literary Center taught by Sherry Quan Lee. In more recent years, she sought to hone her poetry craft through several community programs such as Voices of Our Nation (VONA), Winter Tangerine, Split this Rock, the Jenny McKean Moore Poetry Workshop, and during the pandemic of 2020 through the weekly BIPOC Writing workshops. She was pleased to lead a few poetry workshops focusing on Asian American poetry for Split this Rock and for the BIPOC Writing Workshop. In the summer of 2021, she is thrilled to teach her first writing workshop on the topic of Southeast Asian American poetry, the class that she wished she could have taken, at the Loft, where she first formed as a Southeast Asian American poet. Her poems have been published in several journals—the *Asian American Renaissance Journal*, *Paj Ntaub Voice*, the *Journal of Southeast Asian Education and Advancement*, the *Stonecoast Review*, *Split this Rock's The Quarry*, and *Another Chicago Magazine*), and in several anthologies—*Bamboo Among the Oaks*, *To Sing Along the Way: Minnesota Women Poets from Pre-Territorial Days to the Present*, and the upcoming *They Rise like a Wave: An Anthology of Asian American Women Poets*. She currently resides in Washington, DC. She is still working on her first poetry manuscript. The poems contributed to this 45th Anniversary of the Vietnam War edition come from that manuscript and from the Seven Day Memorial for General Vang Pao, the Hmong military legend of the Secret War in Laos, her maternal grandfather.



Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

Vol.16 Iss.1 (2021)

www.JSAAEA.org

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