



# Inside Out & Back Again

Thanhha Lai

 HarperCollins e-books



To the millions of refugees in the world,  
may you each find a home



# Contents

[Part I](#)  
[Saigon](#)

[1975: Year of the Cat](#)

[Inside Out](#)

[Kim Hà](#)

[Papaya Tree](#)

[TiTi Waves Good-bye](#)

[Missing in Action](#)

[Mother's Days](#)

[Eggs](#)

[Current News](#)

[Feel Smart](#)

[Two More Papayas](#)

[Unknown Father](#)

[TV News](#)

[Birthday](#)

[Birthday Wishes](#)

[A Day Downtown](#)

[Twisting Twisting](#)

[Closed Too Soon](#)

[Promises](#)

[Bridge to the Sea](#)

[Should We?](#)

[Sssshhhhhh](#)

[Quiet Decision](#)

[Early Monsoon](#)

[The President Resigns](#)

[Watch Over Us](#)

[Crisscrossed Packs](#)

[Choice](#)

[Left Behind](#)

[Wet and Crying](#)

[Sour Backs](#)

[One Mat Each](#)

[In the Dark](#)

[Saigon Is Gone](#)

[Part II](#)

[At Sea](#)

[Floating](#)

[S-l-o-w-l-y](#)

[Rations](#)

[Routine](#)

[Once Knew](#)

[Brother Khôi's Secret](#)

[Last Respects](#)

[One Engine](#)

[The Moon](#)

[A Kiss](#)

[Golden Fuzz](#)

[Tent City](#)

[Life in Waiting](#)

[Nước Mắm](#)

[Amethyst Ring](#)

[Choose](#)

[Another Tent City](#)

[Alabama](#)

[Our Cowboy](#)

[Part III](#)

[Alabama](#)

[Unpack and Repack](#)

[English Above All](#)

[First Rule](#)

[American Chicken](#)

[Out the Too-High Window](#)

[Second Rule](#)

[American Address](#)

[Letter Home](#)

[Third Rule](#)

[Passing Time](#)

[Neigh Not Hee](#)

[Fourth Rule](#)

[The Outside](#)

[Sadder Laugh](#)

[Rainbow](#)

[Black and White and Yellow and Red](#)

[Loud Outside](#)

[Laugh Back](#)

[Quiet Inside](#)

[Fly Kick](#)

[Chin Nod](#)

[Feel Dumb](#)

[Wishes](#)

[Hiding](#)

[Neighbors](#)

[New Word a Day](#)

[More Is Not Better](#)

[HA LE LU DA](#)

[Can't Help](#)

[Spelling Rules](#)

[Cowboy's Gifts](#)

[Someone Knows](#)

[Most Relieved Day](#)

[Smart Again](#)

[Hair](#)

[The Busy One](#)

[War and Peace](#)

[Pancake Face](#)

[Mother's Response](#)

[MiSSSiSSs WaSShington's Response](#)

[Cowboy's Response](#)

[Boo-Da, Boo-Da](#)

[Hate It](#)

[Brother Quang's Turn](#)

[Confessions](#)

[NOW!](#)

[ĐuĐu Face](#)

[Rumor](#)

[A Plan](#)

[Run](#)

[A Shift](#)

[WOW!](#)

[The Vu Lee Effect](#)

[Early Christmas](#)

[Not the Same](#)

[But Not Bad](#)

[Part IV](#)

[From Now On](#)

[Letter from the North](#)

[Gift-Exchange Day](#)

[What If](#)

[A Sign](#)

[No More](#)

[Seeds](#)

[Gone](#)

[Truly Gone](#)

[Eternal Peace](#)

[Start Over](#)

[An Engineer, a Chef, a Vet, and Not a Lawyer](#)

[1976: Year of the Dragon](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)



**Saigon**



Today is Tết,  
the first day  
of the lunar calendar.

Every Tết  
we eat sugary lotus seeds  
and glutinous rice cakes.  
We wear all new clothes,  
even underneath.

Mother warns  
how we act today  
foretells the whole year.

Everyone must smile  
no matter how we feel.

No one can sweep,  
for why sweep away hope?  
No one can splash water,  
for why splash away joy?

Today  
we all gain one year in age,  
no matter the date we were born.  
Tết, our New Year's,  
doubles as everyone's birthday.

Now I am ten, learning  
to embroider circular stitches,  
to calculate fractions into percentages,  
to nurse my papaya tree to bear many fruits.

But last night I pouted  
when Mother insisted  
one of my brothers  
must rise first  
this morning  
to bless our house  
because only male feet  
can bring luck.

An old, angry knot  
expanded in my throat.

I decided  
to wake before dawn  
and tap my big toe

to the tile floor  
first.

Not even Mother,  
sleeping beside me, knew.



Every new year Mother visits  
the I Ching Teller of Fate.  
This year he predicts  
our lives will twist inside out.

Maybe soldiers will no longer  
patrol our neighborhood,  
maybe I can jump rope  
after dark,  
maybe the whistles  
that tell Mother  
to push us under the bed  
will stop screeching.

But I heard  
on the playground  
this year's *bánh chưng*,  
eaten only during Tết,  
will be smeared in blood.

The war is coming  
closer to home.



My name is Hà.

Brother Quang remembers  
I was as red and fat  
as a baby hippopotamus  
when he first saw me,  
inspiring the name  
Hà Mã,  
River Horse.

Brother Vĩ screams, *Hà Ya*,  
and makes me jump  
every time  
he breaks wood or bricks  
in imitation of Bruce Lee.

Brother Khôi calls me  
Mother's Tail  
because I'm always  
three steps from her.

I can't make my brothers  
go live elsewhere,  
but I can  
hide their sandals.

We each have but one pair,  
much needed  
during this dry season  
when the earth stings.

Mother tells me  
to ignore my brothers.  
*We named you Kim Hà,*  
*after the Golden (Kim) River (Hà),*  
*where Father and I*  
*once strolled in the evenings.*

My parents had no idea  
what three older brothers  
can do  
to the simple name  
Hà.

Mother tells me,  
*They tease you*  
*because they adore you.*

She's wrong,  
but I still love  
being near her, even more than I love

my papaya tree.  
I will offer her  
its first fruit.



## Papaya Tree

It grew from a seed  
I flicked into  
the back garden.

A seed like  
a fish eye,  
slippery  
shiny  
black.

The tree has grown  
twice as tall  
as I stand  
on tippy toes.

Brother Khôi spotted  
the first white blossom.  
Four years older,  
he can see higher.

Brother Vĩ later found  
a baby papaya  
the size of a fist  
clinging to the trunk.

At eighteen,  
he can see that much higher.

Brother Quang is oldest,  
twenty-one and studying engineering.  
Who knows what he will notice  
before me?

I vow  
to rise first every morning  
to stare at the dew  
on the green fruit  
shaped like a lightbulb.

I will be the first  
to witness its ripening.

*Mid-February*



## TiTi Waves Good-bye

My best friend TiTi  
is crying hard,  
snotting the hem  
of her pink fluffy blouse.

Her two brothers  
also are sniffing  
inside their car  
packed to the roof  
with suitcases.

TiTi shoves into my hand  
a tin of flower seeds  
we gathered last fall.  
We hoped to plant them  
together.

She waves from the back window  
of their rabbit-shaped car.  
Her tears mix with long strands of hair,  
long hair I wish I had.

I would still be standing there  
crying and waving to nothing

if Brother Khôi hadn't come  
to take my hand.

*They're heading to Vãng Tàu,*  
he says,  
*where the rich go*  
*to flee Vietnam*  
*on cruise ships.*

I'm glad we've become poor  
so we can stay.

*Early March*



## Missing in Action

Father left home  
on a navy mission  
on this day  
nine years ago  
when I was almost one.

He was captured  
on Route 1  
an hour south of the city  
by moped.

That's all we know.

This day  
Mother prepares an altar  
to chant for his return,  
offering fruit,  
incense,  
tuberoses,  
and glutinous rice.

She displays his portrait  
taken during Tết  
the year he disappeared.

How peaceful he looks,  
smiling,  
peacock tails  
at the corners  
of his eyes.

Each of us bows  
and wishes  
and hopes  
and prays.

Everything on the altar  
remains for the day  
except the portrait.  
Mother locks it away  
as soon as her chant ends.

She cannot bear  
to look into Father's  
forever-young  
eyes.



## Mother's Days

On weekdays  
Mother's a secretary  
in a navy office,  
trusted to count out  
salaries in cash  
at the end of each month.

At night  
she stays up late  
designing and cutting  
baby clothes  
to give to seamstresses.

A few years ago  
she made enough money  
to consider  
buying a car.

On weekends  
she takes me to market stalls,  
dropping off the clothes  
and trying to collect  
on last week's goods.

*Hardly anyone buys anymore,  
she says.  
People can barely afford food.*

Still,  
she continues to try.

March 15



## Eggs

Brother Khôi  
is mad at Mother  
for taking his hen's  
eggs.

The hen gives  
one egg  
every day and a half.

We take turns  
eating them.

Brother Khôi  
refuses to eat his,  
putting each under a lamp  
in hopes of  
a chick.

I should side with  
my most tolerable brother,  
but I love a soft yolk  
to dip bread.

Mother says  
if the price of eggs

were not the price of rice,  
and the price of rice  
were not the price of gasoline,  
and the price of gasoline  
were not the price of gold,  
then of course  
Brother Khôi  
could continue hatching eggs.

She's sorry.

*March 17*



Every Friday  
in Miss Xinh's class  
we talk about  
current news.

But when we keep talking about  
how close the Communists  
have gotten to Saigon,  
how much prices have gone up  
since American soldiers left,  
how many distant bombs  
were heard the previous night,  
Miss Xinh finally says no more.

From now on  
Fridays  
will be for  
happy news.

No one has anything  
to say.



## Feel Smart

This year  
I have afternoon classes,  
plus Saturdays.  
We attend in shifts  
so everyone can fit  
into school.

Mornings free,  
Mother trusts me  
to shop at the open market.

Last September  
she would give me  
fifty **đồng**  
to buy one hundred grams of pork,  
a bushel of water spinach,  
five cubes of tofu.

But I told no one  
I was buying  
ninety-nine grams of pork,  
seven-eighths of a bushel of spinach,  
four and three-quarter cubes of tofu.  
Merchants frowned at  
Mother's strange instructions.

The money saved  
bought  
a pouch of toasted coconut,  
one sugary fried dough,  
two crunchy mung bean cookies.

Now it takes two hundred **đồng**  
to buy the same things.

I still buy less pork,  
allowing myself just the fried dough.

No one knows  
and I feel smart.

*Late March*



## Two More Papayas

I see them first.

Two green thumbs  
that will grow into  
orange-yellow delights  
smelling of summer.

Middle sweet  
between a mango and a pear.

Soft as a yam  
gliding down  
after three easy,  
thrilling chews.

*April 5*



## Unknown Father

I don't know  
any more about Father  
than the small things  
Mother lets slip.

He loved stewed eels,  
*paté chaud* pastries,  
and of course his children,  
so much that he  
grew teary  
watching us sleep.

He hated the afternoon sun,  
the color brown,  
and cold rice.

Brother Quang remembers  
Father often said  
*tuyệ́t sụ́t*,  
the Vietnamese way  
to pronounce the French phrase  
*tout de suite*  
meaning *right away*.

Mother would laugh

when Father followed her  
around the kitchen  
repeating,  
*I'm starved for stewed eel,*  
*tuyệ́t sụ́t, tuyệ́t sụ́t.*

Sometimes I whisper  
*tuyệ́t sụ́t* to myself  
to pretend  
I know him.

I would never say *tuyệ́t sụ́t*  
in front of Mother.  
None of us would want  
to make her sadder  
than she already is.

*Every day*



Brother Quang races home  
from class,  
throws down his bicycle,  
exhausted,  
no longer able to afford  
gasoline for his moped.

*Unbelievable,*  
he screams,  
and turns on the TV.

A pilot for South Vietnam  
bombed the presidential palace  
downtown that afternoon.  
Afterward the pilot flew north  
and received a medal.

The news says the pilot  
has been a spy  
for the Communists  
for years.

The Communists  
captured Father,  
so why would

any pilot  
choose their side?

Brother Quang says,  
*One cannot justify war  
unless each side  
flaunts its own  
blind conviction.*

Since starting college,  
he shows off even more  
with tangled words.

I start to say so,  
but Mother pats my hand,  
her signal for me to calm down.



## Birthday

I, the youngest,  
get to celebrate  
my actual birthday  
even though I turned  
a year older  
like everyone else  
at Tết.

I, the only daughter,  
usually get roasted chicken,  
dried bamboo soup,  
and all-I-can-eat pudding.

This year,  
Mother manages only  
banana tapioca  
and my favorite  
black sesame candy.

She makes up for it  
by allowing  
one wish.

I dye my mouth

sugary black  
and insist on  
stories.

It's not easy  
to persuade Mother  
to tell of her girlhood  
in the North,  
where her grandmother's land  
stretched farther than  
doves could fly,  
where looking pretty  
and writing poetry  
were her only duties.

She was promised to Father  
at five.  
They married at sixteen,  
earlier than expected.  
Everyone's future changed  
upon learning the name  
HỒ Chí Minh.

Change meant  
land was taken away,  
houses now belonged

to the state,  
servants gained power  
as fighters.

The country divided in half.

Mother and Father came south,  
convinced it would be  
easier to breathe  
away from Communism.

Her father was to follow,

but he was waiting for his son,  
who was waiting for his wife,  
who was waiting to deliver a child  
in its last week  
in her belly.

The same week,  
North and South  
closed their doors.  
No more migration.  
No more letters.  
No more family.

At this point,  
Mother closes her eyes,

eyes that resemble no one else's,  
sunken and deep like Westerners'  
yet almond-shaped like ours.  
I always wish for her eyes,  
but Mother says no.  
Eyes like hers can't help  
but carry sadness;  
even as a child  
her parents were alarmed  
by the weight in her eyes.

I want to hear more,  
but nothing,  
not even my pouts,  
can make Mother open her eyes  
and tell more.



## Birthday Wishes

Wishes I keep to myself:

Wish I could do what boys do  
and let the sun darken my skin,  
and scars grid my knees.

Wish I could let my hair grow,  
but Mother says the shorter the better  
to beat Saigon's heat and lice.

Wish I could lose my chubby cheeks.

Wish I could stay calm  
no matter what  
my brothers say.

Wish Mother would stop  
chiding me to stay calm,  
which makes it worse.

Wish I had a sister  
to jump rope with  
and sew doll clothes  
and hug for warmth  
in the middle of the night.

Wish Father would come home  
so I can stop daydreaming  
that he will appear  
in my classroom  
in a white navy uniform  
and extend his hand toward me  
for all my classmates to see.

Mostly I wish  
Father would appear in our doorway  
and make Mother's lips  
curl upward,  
lifting them from  
a permanent frown  
of worries.

*April 10  
Night*



## A Day Downtown

Every spring  
President Thiệu  
holds a long long long  
ceremony to comfort  
war wives.

Mother and I go because  
after President Thiệu's  
talk talk talk—  
of winning the war,  
of democracy,  
of our fathers' bravery—  
each family gets  
five kilos of sugar,  
ten kilos of rice,  
and a small jug of  
vegetable oil.

Inside the cyclo  
Mother crosses her legs  
so I can fit beside her.  
The breeze still cool,  
we bounce across the bridge  
shaped like a crescent moon  
where I'm not to go by myself.

Mother smells of lavender  
and warmth;  
she's so beautiful  
even if  
her cheeks are too hollow,  
her mouth too dark with worries.  
Despite warnings,  
I still want her sunken eyes.

Before I see it,  
I hear downtown,  
thick with beeps,  
shouts, police whistles.  
Everywhere,  
mopeds and bicycles  
race down the wide road,  
moving out of the way  
only when a truck  
honks and mows straight down  
the middle of the lane.

We get out  
in front of an open market.  
We push our way to  
a *bánh cuốn* stand.  
I love watching

the spread of rice flour on cloth,  
stretched over a steaming pot.  
Like magic a crepe forms  
to be filled with shrimp  
and eaten with  
cucumber and bean sprouts.

It tastes even better  
than it looks.  
While my mouth is full,  
the noises of the market  
silence themselves,

letting me and my *bánh cuốn*  
float.

We squeeze ourselves  
out of the market,  
toward the presidential palace.

We stand in line;  
for even longer  
we sit on hot metal benches  
facing the podium.

My white cotton  
hat and Mother's flowery umbrella

are nothing  
against the afternoon sun,  
shooting rays into  
my short short hair.

I'm dizzy  
and thirsty;  
the fish sauce  
in the *bánh cuốn*  
was very salty.

Mother gives me a tamarind candy.  
I have never been  
so thrilled  
to drink my saliva.

Finally President Thi<sup>^</sup>u appears,  
tan and sweaty.  
*We know you have suffered.*  
*I thank you,*  
*your country thanks you.*

Then he cries actual tears,  
unwiped, facing the cameras.

Mother clicks her tongue:

*Tears of an ugly fish.*

I know that to mean  
fake tears of a crocodile.



## Twisting Twisting

Mother measures  
rice grains  
left in the bin.  
Not enough to last  
till payday  
at the end of the month.

Her brows  
twist like laundry  
being wrung dry.

*Yam and manioc  
taste lovely  
blended with rice,*  
she says, and smiles,  
as if I don't know  
how the poor  
fill their children's bellies.



A siren screams  
over Miss Xinh's voice  
in the middle of a lesson  
on smiley and bald  
President Ford.

We all know it's bad news.

School's now closed;  
everyone must go home  
a month too soon.

I'm mad and pinch the girl  
who shares my desk.  
Tram is half my size,  
so skinny and nervous.

Our mothers are friends.  
She will tell on me.  
She always tells on me.

Mother will again  
scold me to be gentle.

I need time  
to finish this riddle:  
A man usually rides his bike  
9 kilometers per hour,  
yet the wind slows him  
to 6.76 kilometers  
for 26 minutes  
and 5.55 kilometers  
for 10;  
how long until he gets home  
11.54 kilometers away?

The first to solve it  
gets the sweet potato plant  
sprouting at the window.  
I want to plant it  
beside my papaya tree,  
where vines can climb  
and shade ripening fruit.

Again I pinch Tram,  
knowing the plant  
will be awarded  
today  
to the teacher's pet,

who is always  
skinny and nervous  
and never me.



## Promises

Five papayas  
the sizes of  
my head,  
a knee,  
two elbows,  
and a thumb  
cling to the trunk.

Still green  
but promising.

*April 15*



## Bridge to the Sea

Uncle SOn,  
Father's best friend,  
visits us.

He's short, dark, and smiley,  
not tall, thin, and serious  
like Father in photographs.  
Still, when classmates  
ask about my father,  
sometimes short and smiley  
come to mind  
before I can stop it.

Uncle SOn goes straight  
to the kitchen,  
where the back door opens into  
an alley.  
*Unbelievable luck!*  
*This door bypasses the navy checkpoint  
and leads straight to the port.*

*I will not risk  
fleeing with my children  
on a rickety boat.*

*Would a navy ship  
meet your approval?*

*As if the navy  
would abandon its country?*

*There won't be a South Vietnam  
left to abandon.*

*You really believe  
we can leave?*

*When the time comes,  
this house  
is our bridge  
to the sea.*



## Should We?

Mother calls a family meeting.

*Ông Xuân has sold  
leaves of gold  
to buy twelve airplane tickets.*

*Bà Nam has a van  
ready to load  
twenty-five relatives  
toward the coast.*

Mother asks us,  
*Should we leave our home?*

Brother Quang says,  
*How can we scramble away  
like rats,  
without honor, without dignity,  
when everyone must help  
rebuild the country?*

Brother Khôi says,  
*What if Father comes home  
and finds his family gone?*

Brother Vĩ says,  
*Yes, we must go.*

Everyone knows he dreams  
of touching the same ground  
where Bruce Lee walked.

Mother twists her brows.  
*I've lived in the North.  
At first, not much will happen,  
then suddenly Quang  
will be asked to leave college.  
Hà will come home  
chanting the slogans  
of Hồ Chí Minh,  
and Khôi will be rewarded  
for reporting to his teacher  
everything we say in the house.*

Her brows twist  
so much  
we hush.



Brother Khôi shakes me  
before dawn.

I follow him  
to the back garden.  
In his palm chirps  
a downy yellow fuzz,  
just hatched.

He presses his palm  
against my squeal.

*No matter what Mother decides,  
we are not to leave.  
I must protect my chick  
and you your papayas.*

He holds out his pinky  
and stares  
stares  
stares  
until I extend mine  
and we hook.



## Quiet Decision

Dinnertime  
I help Mother  
peel sweet potatoes  
to stretch the rice.

I start to chop off  
a potato's end  
as wide as  
a thumbnail,  
then decide  
to slice off  
only a sliver.

I am proud  
of my ability  
to save  
until I see  
tears  
in Mother's  
deep eyes.

*You deserve to grow up  
where you don't worry about  
saving half a bite  
of sweet potato.*



## Early Monsoon

We pretend  
the monsoon  
has come early.

In the distance  
bombs  
explode like thunder,  
slashes  
lighten the sky,  
gunfire  
falls like rain.

Distant  
yet within ears,  
within eyes.

Not that far away  
after all.

*April 20*



## The President Resigns

On TV President Thu  
looks sad and yellow;  
what has happened to his tan?

His eyes brim with tears;  
this time they look real.  
*I can no longer be your president  
but I will never leave my people  
or our country.*

Mother lifts one brow,  
what she does  
when she thinks  
I'm lying.

April 21



## Watch Over Us

Uncle SON returns  
and tells us  
to be ready to leave  
any day.

*Don't tell anyone,  
or all of Saigon  
will storm the port.  
Only navy families  
can board the ships.*

Uncle SON and Father  
graduated in the same navy class.  
It was mere luck  
that Uncle SON  
didn't go on the mission  
where Father was captured.

Mother pulls me close  
and pats my head.  
*Father watches over us  
even if he's not here.*

Mother tells me  
she and Father have a pact.

If war should separate them,  
they know to find each other  
through Father's ancestral home  
in the North.

April 24



Pedal, pedal  
Mother's feet  
push the sewing machine.  
The faster she pedals  
the faster stitches appear  
on heavy brown cloth.

Two rectangles  
make a pack.  
A long strip  
makes a handle  
to be strapped across  
the wearer's chest.

Hours later  
the stitches appear  
in slow motion,  
the needle a worm  
laying tiny eggs  
that sink into brown cloth.  
The tired worm  
reproduces much more slowly  
at the end of the day  
than at the beginning  
when Mother started

the first of five bags.

Brother Khôi says too loudly,  
Make only three.

Mother goes  
to a high shelf,  
bringing back Father's portrait.

*Come with us  
or we'll all stay.  
Think, my son;  
your action will determine  
our future.*

Mother knows this son  
cannot stand to hurt  
anyone,  
anything.

*Look at Father.  
Come with us  
so Father  
will be proud  
you obeyed your mother  
while he's not here.*

I look at my toes,  
feeling Brother Khôi's eyes  
burn into my scalp.

I also feel him slowly nodding.

Who can go against  
a mother  
who has become gaunt like bark  
from raising four children alone?





## Choice

Into each pack:  
one pair of pants,  
one pair of shorts,  
three pairs of underwear,  
two shirts,  
sandals,  
toothbrush and paste,  
soap,  
ten palms of rice grains,  
three clumps of cooked rice,  
one choice.

I choose my doll,  
once lent to a neighbor  
who left it outside,  
where mice bit  
her left cheek  
and right thumb.

I love her more  
for her scars.

I dress her  
in a red and white dress  
with matching hat and booties  
that Mother knitted.

*April 27*



## Left Behind

Ten gold-rimmed glasses  
Father brought back from America  
where he trained before I was born.

Brother Quang's  
report cards,  
each ranking him first in class,  
beginning in kindergarten.

Vines of bougainvillea  
fully in bloom,  
burgundy and white  
like the colors  
of our house.

Vines of jasmine  
in front of every window  
that remind Mother  
of the North.

A cowboy leather belt  
Brother Vũ sewed  
on Mother's machine

and broke her needle.  
That was when  
he adored  
Johnny Cash  
more than  
Bruce Lee.

A row of glass jars  
Brother Khôi used  
to raise fighting fish.

Two hooks  
and the hammock  
where I nap.

Photographs:  
every Tết at the zoo,  
Father in his youth,  
Mother in her youth,  
baby pictures,  
where you can't tell whose bottom  
is exposed for all the world to see.

Mother chooses ten  
and burns the rest.

We cannot leave  
evidence of Father's life  
that might hurt him.



My biggest papaya  
is light yellow,  
still flecked with green.

Brother Vū wants  
to cut it down,  
saying it's better than  
letting the Communists have it.

Mother says yellow papaya  
tastes lovely  
dipped in chili salt.  
*You children should eat  
fresh fruit  
while you can.*

Brother Vū chops;  
the head falls;  
a silver blade slices.

Black seeds spill  
like clusters of eyes,  
wet and crying.



## Sour Backs

At the port  
we find out  
there's no such thing  
as a secret  
among the Vietnamese.

Thousands  
found out  
about the navy ships  
ready to abandon the navy.

Uncle Sơn flares elbows into wings,  
lunges forward  
protecting his children.

But our family sticks together  
like wet pages.  
I see nothing but backs  
sour and sweaty.

Brother Vĩ steps up,  
placing Mother in front of him  
and lifting me  
onto his shoulders.

His palms press  
Brothers Quang and Khôi  
forward.

I promise myself  
to never again  
make fun of  
Bruce Lee.

*April 29  
Afternoon*



## One Mat Each

We climb on  
and claim a space  
of two straw mats  
under the deck,  
enough for us five  
to lie side by side.

By sunset our space  
is one straw mat,  
enough for us five  
to huddle together.

Bodies cram  
every centimeter  
below deck,  
then every centimeter  
on deck.

Everyone knows the ship  
could sink,  
unable to hold  
the piles of bodies  
that keep crawling on  
like raging ants  
from a disrupted nest.

But no one  
is heartless enough  
to say  
*stop*  
because what if  
they had been  
*stopped*  
before their turn?

*April 29*  
*Sunset*



## In the Dark

Uncle SOn visits  
and whispers to Mother.

We follow Mother  
who follows Uncle SOn  
who leads his family  
up to the deck  
and off the ship.

It has been said  
the ship next door  
has a better engine,  
more water,  
endless fuel,  
countless salty eggs.

Uncle SOn lingers  
without getting on  
the new ship;  
so do we.

Hordes pour  
by us,  
beyond us.

Above us  
bombs pierce the sky.  
Red and green flares  
explode like fireworks.

All lights are off  
so the port will not be  
a target.

In the dark  
a nudge here  
a nudge there  
and we end up  
back on the first ship  
in the same spot  
with two mats.

Without lights  
our ship glides out to sea,  
emptied of half its passengers.

*April 29  
Near midnight*



## Saigon Is Gone

I listen to  
the swish, swish  
of Mother's handheld fan,  
the whispers among adults,  
the bombs in the ever greater distance.

The commander has ordered  
everyone below deck  
even though he has chosen  
a safe river route  
to connect to the sea,  
avoiding the obvious escape path  
through Vũng Tàu,  
where the Communists are dropping  
all the bombs they have left.

I hope TiTi got out.

Mother is sick  
with waves in her stomach  
even though the ship  
barely creeps along.

We hear a helicopter  
circling circling

near our ship.

People run and scream,  
*Communists!*

Our ship dips low  
as the crowd runs to the left,  
and then to the right.

This is not helping Mother.

I wish they would stand still  
and hush.

The commander is talking:  
*Do not be frightened!*  
*It's a pilot for our side*  
*who has jumped into the water,*  
*letting his helicopter*  
*plunge in behind him.*

The pilot  
appears below deck,  
wet and shaking.

He salutes the commander  
and shouts,

*At noon today the Communists*  
*crashed their tanks*  
*through the gates*  
*of the presidential palace*  
*and planted on the roof*  
*a flag with one huge star.*

Then he adds  
what no one wants to hear:

*It's over;  
Saigon is gone.*

*April 30  
Late afternoon*



*At Sea*



Our ship creeps along  
the river route  
without lights  
without cooking  
without bathrooms.

We are told  
to sip water  
only when we must  
so our bodies  
can stop needing.

Mine won't listen.

Mother sighs.

I don't blame her,  
having a daughter  
who's either  
dying of thirst  
or demanding release.

Other girls  
must be made  
of bamboo,

bending whichever way  
they are told.

Mother tells Uncle SOn  
I need a bathroom.

We are allowed  
into the commander's cabin,  
where the bathroom is  
so white and clean,  
so worth the embarrassment.



S-l-o-w-l-y

I nibble on  
the last clump  
of cooked rice  
from my sack.

Hard and moldy,  
yet chewy and sweet  
inside.

I chew each grain  
s-l-o-w-l-y.

I hear others chew  
but have never seen  
anyone actually eating.

No one has offered  
to share  
what I smell:  
sardines, dried durian,  
salted eggs, toasted sesame.  
I lean toward  
the family  
on the next mat.

Mother firmly  
shakes her head.  
She looks so sad  
as she pats  
my hand.



## Rations

On the third day  
we join the sea  
toward Thailand.

The commander says  
it's safe enough  
for his men to cook,  
for us to go above deck,  
for all to smile a little.

He says there's enough  
rice and water  
for three weeks,  
but rescue should happen  
much earlier.

*Do not worry,  
ships from all countries  
are out looking for us.*

Morning, noon, and night  
we each get  
one clump of rice,  
small, medium, large,  
according to our height,

plus one cup of water  
no matter our size.

The first hot bite  
of freshly cooked rice,  
plump and nutty,  
makes me imagine  
the taste of ripe papaya  
although one has nothing  
to do with the other.



## Routine

Mother cannot allow  
idle children,  
hers or anyone else's.

After one week  
on the ship  
Brother Quang begins  
English lessons.

I wish he would  
keep it to:  
*How are you?*  
*This is a pen.*  
But when an adult is not there  
he says,  
*We must consider the shame  
of abandoning our own country  
and begging toward the unknown  
where we will all begin again  
at the lowest level  
on the social scale.*

It's better in the afternoons  
with Brother Vĩ,  
who just wants us

to do front kicks  
and back kicks,  
at times adding  
one-two punches.

Brother Khôi gets to monitor  
lines for the bathrooms,  
where bottoms stick out  
to the sea  
behind blankets blowing  
in the wind.

When not in class  
I have to stay  
within sight of Mother,  
like a baby.

Mother gives me  
her writing pad.  
*Write tiny,*  
*there's but one pad.*

Writing becomes  
boring,  
so I draw  
over my words.

Pouches of pan-fried shredded coconut  
Tamarind paste on banana leaf  
Steamed corn on the cob  
Rounds of fried dough  
Wedges of pineapple on a stick  
And of course  
cubes of papaya tender and shiny.

Mother smooths back my hair,  
knowing the pain  
of a girl  
who loves snacks

but is stranded  
on a ship.

May 7



## Once Knew

Water, water, water  
everywhere  
making me think  
land is just something  
I once knew  
like

napping on a hammock

bathing without salt

watching Mother write

laughing for no reason

kicking up powdery dirt

and

wearing clean nightclothes  
smelling of the sun.

May 12



## Brother Khôi's Secret

Brother Khôi stinks;  
we can't ignore it.

He stews and sweats  
in a jacket  
he won't take off.

Forced to sponge-wipe  
twice a day,  
he wraps the jacket  
around his waist.

He keeps clutching something  
in the left pocket,  
where the stench grows.

Neighbors complain,  
even the ones  
eight mats away,  
saying it's bad enough  
being trapped  
in putrid, hot air  
made from fermented bodies  
and oily sweat,  
must everybody

also endure  
something rotten?

Finally Brother Vĩ  
holds Brother Khôi down  
and forces him  
to open his hand.

A flattened chick  
lies crooked,  
neck dangling  
off his palm.

The chick had not  
a chance  
after we shoved  
for hours to board.

Brother Khôi screams,  
kicks everything off our mats.  
Brother Quang  
carries him  
above deck.

Quiet.



## Last Respects

After two weeks at sea  
the commander calls  
all of us above deck  
for a formal lowering of  
our yellow flag  
with three red stripes.

South Vietnam no longer exists.

One woman tries to throw  
herself overboard,  
screaming that without a country  
she cannot live.  
As they wrestle her down,  
a man stabs his heart  
with a toothbrush.

I don't know them,  
so their pain seems unreal  
next to Brother Khôi's,  
whose eyes are as wild  
as those of his broken chick.

I hold his hand:  
*Come with me.*

He doesn't resist.

Alone  
at the back of the ship  
I open Mother's white handkerchief.  
Inside lies my mouse-bitten doll,  
her arms wrapped around  
the limp fuzzy body of his chick.

I tie it all into a bundle.

Brother Khôi nods  
and I smile,  
but I regret  
not having my doll  
as soon as the white bundle  
sinks into the sea.



## One Engine

In the middle  
of the night  
our ship stops.

Mother hugs me,  
hearts drumming  
as one.

If the Communists  
catch us fleeing,  
it's a million times worse  
than staying at home.

After many shouts  
and much time  
the ship moves forward  
with just one engine.

Mother would not  
release me.

The commander says,  
*Thailand is much farther  
on one engine.  
It was risky to take*

*the river route.  
We escaped bombs  
but missed the rescue ships.*

The commander decides  
the ration is now  
half a clump of rice  
only at morning and night,  
and one cup of water  
all day.

*Sip,  
he says,  
and don't waste strength  
moving around  
because it's impossible  
to predict  
howmuch longer  
we will  
be floating.*



## The Moon

During the day  
the deck belongs  
to men and children.

At nightfall  
women make their way  
up.

In single files  
they sponge-bathe  
and relieve themselves  
behind blanket curtains.

I always stand in line  
with Mother.

Every night  
she points upward.  
*At least  
the moon remains  
unchanged.*

*Your father could be looking  
at the same round moon.  
He may already understand*

*we will wait for him  
across the world.*

I feel guilty,  
having not once  
thought of Father.

I can't wish for him  
to appear  
until I know where  
we'll be.



## A Kiss

The horn on our ship  
blows and blows,  
waking everyone  
from a week-long nap.

A sure answer,  
honk honk,  
seems close enough  
and real enough  
to call everyone on deck.

A gigantic ship  
with an American flag  
moves closer.  
Men in white uniform  
wave and smile.

Our commander wears  
his navy jacket and hat,  
so white and so crisp.

Now I realize  
why I like him so much.  
In uniform,  
he looks just like Father.

He boards the other ship,  
salutes and shakes hands  
with a man whose hair  
grows on his face  
not on his head  
in the color of flames.

I had not known  
such hair was possible.

We clap and clap  
as the ships draw together  
and kiss.

Boxes and boxes  
pass onto our deck.  
Oranges, apples, bananas,  
cold sweet bubbly drinks,  
chocolate drops, fruity gum.

The American ship  
tows ours  
with a steel braid  
thick as my body.

Our rescue now certain,  
the party blossoms  
as food suddenly  
comes up from below.  
Ramen noodles, beef jerky,  
dried shrimp, butter biscuits,  
tamarind pods, canned fish,  
and drums and drums of real water.

Mother says,  
*People share  
when they know  
they have escaped hunger.*

*Shouldn't people share  
because there is hunger?*

That night I stand behind  
blowing blankets  
and pour fresh water  
all over my skin.

How sweet water tastes  
even when mixed with soap.

*May 24*



Water, water  
still everywhere  
but in the distance  
appears a black dot.

We are told  
to pack  
our crisscrossed packs  
and line up in a single file.

Twenty at a time  
board a motorboat  
heading toward the dot.

An arm extends  
to help us board,  
an arm hairy with fuzz.

I touch it,  
so real and long,  
not knowing if I will  
have another chance  
to touch golden fuzz.

I pluck one hair.

Mother slaps my hand.  
Brother Quang speaks quickly  
in the language I must learn.

The fuzzy man laughs.

I'm grateful the boat  
starts to rock,  
so Mother hasn't  
the composure  
to scold me,  
not just yet.

I roll my fuzzy souvenir  
between my thumb and finger  
and can't help  
but smile.



We have landed  
on an island  
called Guam,  
which no one can pronounce  
except Brother Quang,  
who becomes  
translator for all.

Many others arrived  
before us  
and are living  
in green tents  
and sleeping on cots.

We eat inside a huge tent  
where Brother Vū  
becomes head chef,  
heating up cans of  
beef and potatoes  
tasting like salty vomit.

We eat only  
canned fruit  
in thick syrup,

and everyone wants extras  
but we get only a cup.

Brother Vū somehow  
brings home  
a huge can,  
pumping it to work out  
his arm muscles.

We eat  
straight from the can  
as I search for  
cherries and grapes.



## Life in Waiting

A routine starts  
as soon as we settle  
into our tent.

Camp workers  
teach us English  
mornings and afternoons.

Evenings we have to ourselves.

We watch movies outdoors  
with images projected  
onto a white sheet.  
Brother Quang translates  
into a microphone,  
his voice sad and slow.

If it's a young cowboy  
like Clint Eastwood,  
everyone cheers.  
If it's an old cowboy,  
like John Wayne,  
most of us boo  
and go swimming.

The Disney cartoons  
lure out the girls,  
who always surround  
Brother Vũ,  
begging him to break  
yet another piece of wood.

I can still hear them begging  
when I go sit with Brother Khôi,  
who rarely speaks anymore  
but I'm happy to be near him.

*June to early July*



## Nước Mắm

Someone  
should be kissed  
for having the heart  
to send cases of fish sauce  
to Guam.

Everything is  
more edible  
with *nước mắm*.

Brother Vĩ  
sautés the beef-and-potato goo  
with onions  
and sprinkles on the magic sauce  
before serving the mess with rice.

Lines extend to the beach.

Someone catches  
a sea creature  
puffy and watery  
like a cucumber.

Brother Vĩ slices it  
into slippery strips

and stews it with  
seaweed  
and the magic sauce.

So many appetites  
wake up  
that Brother Vĩ  
just has time  
to cook rice  
and serve it with  
plain fish sauce.

People begin to cook  
as long as they  
can get a cup  
of *nước mắm*.

Brother Khôi hands it out  
in the same white cups  
as tea.

Both dark brown,  
so of course  
I drink a gulp of the  
most salty,  
most bitter,  
most fishy

tea  
ever.

My head whirls  
and my breath stinks  
for days.

I do not mind.





## Amethyst Ring

Mother wants to sell  
the amethyst ring  
Father brought back  
from America,  
where he trained  
in the navy  
before I was born.

She wants to buy  
needles and thread,  
fabric and sandals  
from the camp's  
black market.

I have never seen her  
without this purple rock.  
I can't fall asleep  
unless I twist the ring  
and count circles.

Brother Quang says,  
*NO!*  
*What's the point of*  
*newshirts and sandals*

*if you lose the last*  
*tangible remnant of love?*

I don't understand  
what he said  
but I agree.



## Choose

Some choose to go to France  
because many Vietnamese  
moved there  
when North and South  
divided years ago.

Uncle Son says  
come with his family  
to Canada,  
where his sister lives  
and can help watch over us  
until Father returns.

Mother knows his wife  
would mind.  
She tells him  
Canada is too cold.

We stand in line  
to fill out papers.  
Every family must decide  
by tonight,  
when fireworks will explode  
in honor of America's birth.

Mother starts to write  
"Paris,"  
home of a cousin  
she has never met.

The man behind us whispers,  
*Choose America,  
more opportunities there,  
especially for a family  
with boys ready to work.*

Mother whispers back,  
*My sons  
must first go to college.*

*If they're smart  
America will give them  
scholarships.*

Mother chooses.



## Another Tent City

We are flown  
to another tent city  
in humid, hot Florida,  
where alligators are shown  
as entertainment.

The people in charge  
bring in Saigon-famous singers  
to raise refugee spirits,  
but faces keep twisting with worries.

For a family to leave,  
an American must come to camp  
and sponsor a family.

We wait and wait,  
but Mother says a possible widow,  
three boys, and a pouty girl  
make too huge a family  
by American standards.

A family of three  
in the tent to our left  
gets sponsored to Georgia;

the couple to our right  
goes to South Carolina.

Newcomers leave before us.  
Mother can barely eat,  
while Brother Quang  
picks the skin at his elbows.

I don't mind being here.  
My hair is growing  
as I've become dark and strong  
from running and swimming.

Then by chance Mother learns  
sponsors prefer those  
whose applications say "Christians."

Just like that  
Mother amends our faith,  
saying all beliefs  
are pretty much the same.

*July to early August*



A man comes  
who owns a store  
that sells cars  
and wants to train  
one young man  
to be a mechanic.

He keeps holding up  
*one* finger  
before picking Brother Quang,  
whose studies in engineering  
impress him.

Mother doesn't care  
what the man  
came looking for.

By the time  
she is done  
staring, blinking,  
wiping away tears,  
all without speaking English,

our entire family  
has a sponsor  
to Alabama.



## Our Cowboy

Our sponsor  
looks just like  
an American should.

Tall and pig-bellied,  
black cowboy hat,  
tan cowboy boots,  
cigar smoking,  
teeth shining,  
red in face,  
golden in hair.

I love him  
immediately  
and imagine him  
to be good-hearted and loud  
and the owner of a horse.

*August 8*



*Alabama*



## Unpack and Repack

We're giddy  
when we  
get off the airplane.

Our cowboy,  
who never takes off  
his tall, tall hat,  
delivers us  
to his huge house,  
where grass  
spreads out so green  
it looks painted.

*Stay until you feel ready.*

We smile  
and unpack  
the two outfits  
we each own.

One look at  
our cowboy's wife,  
arms, lips, eyes  
contorted into knots,  
and we repack.

August 15



We sit and sleep in the lowest level  
of our cowboy's house,  
where we never see  
the wife.

I must stand on a chair  
that stands on a tea table  
to see  
the sun and the moon  
out a too-high window.

The wife insists  
we keep out of  
her neighbors' eyes.

Mother shrugs.  
*More room here  
than two mats on a ship.*

I wish she wouldn't try  
to make something bad  
better.

She calls a family meeting.

*Until you children  
master English,  
you must think, do, wish  
for nothing else.  
Not your father,  
not our old home,  
not your old friends,  
not our future.*

She tries to mean it  
about Father,  
but I know at times  
words are just words.



## First Rule

Brother Quang says  
add an s to nouns  
to mean more than one  
even if there's  
already an s  
sitting there.

*Glass*  
*Glass-es*

All day  
I practice  
squeezing hisses  
through my teeth.

Whoever invented  
English  
must have loved  
snakes.

August 17



## American Chicken

Most food  
our cowboy brings  
is wrapped in plastic  
or pushed into cans,  
while chicken and beef  
are chopped and frozen.

We live on  
rice, soy sauce,  
canned corn.

Today our cowboy brings  
a paper bucket of chicken,  
skin crispy and golden,  
smelling of perfection.

Brother Khôi recoils,  
vowing to never eat  
anything with wings.

Our cowboy bites on a leg,  
grins to show teeth and gums.

I wonder if he's so friendly  
because his wife is so mean.

We bite.

The skin tastes as promised,  
crunchy and salty,  
hot and spicy.

But  
Mother wipes  
the corners of her mouth  
before passing her piece  
into her napkin.

Brother Vĩ gags.

Our cowboy scrunches  
his brows,  
surely thinking,  
why are his refugees  
so picky?

Brother Quang forces  
a swallow  
before explaining  
we are used to  
fresh-killed chicken  
that roamed the yard

snacking on  
grains and worms.

Such meat grows  
tight in texture,  
smelling of meadows  
and tasting sweet.

I bite down on a thigh;  
might as well bite down on

bread soaked in water.

Still,  
I force yum-yum sounds.

I hope to ride  
the horse our cowboy  
surely has.

*August 20*



## Out the Too-High Window

Green mats of grass  
in front of every house.

Vast windows  
in front of sealed curtains.

Cement lanes where  
no one walks.

Big cars  
pass not often.

Not a noise.

Clean, quiet  
loneliness.

*August 21*



## Second Rule

Add an s to verbs  
acted by one person  
in the present tense,  
even if there's  
already an s sound  
nearby.

*She choose-s*  
*He refuse-s*

I'm getting better  
at hissing,  
no longer spitting  
on my forearms.

August 22



## American Address

Our cowboy  
in an even taller hat  
finds us a house  
on Princess Anne Road,  
pays rent ahead  
three months.

Mother could not believe  
his generosity  
until Brother Quang says  
the American government  
gives sponsors money.

Mother is even more amazed  
by the generosity  
of the American government  
until Brother Quang says  
it's to ease the guilt  
of losing the war.

Mother's face crinkles  
like paper on fire.  
She tells Brother Quang  
to clamp shut his mouth.

*People living on  
others' goodwill  
cannot afford  
political opinions.*

I inspect our house.

Two bedrooms,  
one for my brothers,  
one for Mother and me.

A washing machine,  
because no one here  
will scrub laundry  
in exchange for  
a bowl of rice.

The stove spews out  
clean blue flames,  
unlike the ashy coals  
back home.

What I love best:  
the lotus-pod shower,  
where heavy drops

will massage my scalp  
as if I were standing  
in a monsoon.

What I don't love:  
pink sofas, green chairs,  
plastic cover on a table,  
stained mattresses,  
old clothes,  
unmatched dishes.

All from friends  
of our cowboy.

Even at our poorest  
we always had  
beautiful furniture  
and matching dishes.

Mother says be grateful.

I'm trying.

*August 24*



## Letter Home

As soon as we have an address  
Mother writes  
all the way to the North  
where Father's brother  
anchors down the family line  
in their ancestral home.

It's the first time  
Mother has been allowed  
to contact anyone in the North  
since the country divided.

It'll be the first time  
Father's brother  
learns of his disappearance.

Unless,  
Father has sent word  
that he's safe  
after all.

I shiver  
with hope.

*August 25*



### Third Rule

Always an exception.

Do *not* add an s  
to certain nouns.

*One deer,*  
*two deer.*

Why no s for two deer,  
but an s for two monkeys?

Brother Quang says  
no one knows.

So much for rules!

Whoever invented English  
should be bitten  
by a snake.

August 26



## Passing Time

I study the dictionary  
because grass and trees  
do not grow faster  
just because  
I stare.

I look up

*Jane*: not listed

*sees*: to eyeball something

*Spot*: a stain

*run*: to move really fast

Meaning: \_\_\_\_\_ *eyeballs stain move*.

I throw the dictionary down  
and ask Brother Quang.

*Jane* is a name,  
not in the dictionary.

*Spot* is a common name  
for a dog.

*(Girl named) Jane sees (dog named) Spot run.*

I can't read  
a baby book.

Who will believe  
I was reading  
Nhat Linh?

But then,  
who here knows  
who he is?

August 27



## Neigh Not Hee

Brother Quang  
is tired of translating.  
Our sponsor takes me  
to register for school alone.

As my personal cowboy  
for the day,  
he will surely  
let me ride his horse.

I start to climb  
into his too-tall truck  
but his two fingers  
walk in the air.

This means  
I'm to walk to school.

Turn right where flowers  
big as dinner plates  
grow strangely *blue*.

Turn left where  
purple fluffy wands

arch on tall bushes  
inviting butterflies.

Sweat beads plump up  
on my cowboy's upper lip.  
My armpits embarrass me.  
I must remember  
to not raise the reins high.

We walk and walk  
on a road  
where the horizon  
keeps extending.

Finally,  
we stop at  
a fat, red  
brick building.

Paperwork, paperwork  
with a woman who  
pats my head  
while shaking her own.

I step back,  
hating pity,

having learned  
from Mother that  
the pity giver  
feels better,  
never the pity receiver.

On the walk home  
I take a deep breath,  
forcing myself to say,  
*You, hor-ssssse?*  
*Hee, hee, hee.*

*I go, go.*

My personal cowboy  
shakes his head.

I repeat myself  
and gallop.

He scrunches his face.

I say, *Hor-sssssse*  
and *Hee, hee, hee,*  
until my throat hurts.

We get home.

Brother Quang  
has to translate,  
after all.

*No, Mr. Johnston*  
*doesn't have a horse,*  
*nor has he ever ridden one.*

What kind of a cowboy is he?

To make it worse,  
the cowboy explains  
horses here go  
*neigh, neigh, neigh,*  
not *hee, hee, hee.*

No they don't.

Where am I?

*August 29*



## Fourth Rule

Some verbs  
switch all over  
just because.

*I am*  
*She is*  
*They are*  
*He was*  
*They were*

Would be simpler  
if English  
and life  
were logical.

August 30



## The Outside

Starting tomorrow  
everyone must  
leave the house.

Mother starts sewing  
at a factory;  
Brother Quang begins  
repairing cars.

The rest of us  
must go to school,  
repeating the last grade,  
left unfinished.

Brother Vĩ wants  
to be a cook  
or teach martial arts,  
not waste a year  
as the oldest senior.

Mother says  
one word:  
*College.*

Brother Khôi  
gets an old bicycle to ride,  
but Mother says  
I'm too young for one  
even though I'm  
a ten-year-old  
in the fourth grade,  
when everyone else  
is nine.

Mother says,  
*Worry instead  
about getting sleep  
because from now on  
no more naps.  
You will eat lunch  
at school  
with friends.*

*What friends?*

*You'll make some.*

*What if I can't?*

*You will.*

*What will I eat?*

*What your friends eat.*

*But what will I eat?*

*Be surprised.*

*I hate surprises.*

*Be agreeable.*

*Not without knowing  
what I'm agreeing to.*

Mother sighs,  
walking away.

*September 1*



School!

I wake up with  
dragonflies  
zipping through  
my gut.

I eat nothing.

I take each step toward school evenly,  
trying to hold my stomach  
steady.

It helps that  
the morning air glides cool  
like a constant washcloth  
against my face.

Deep breaths.

I'm the first student in class.

My new teacher has brown curls  
looped tight to her scalp  
like circles in a beehive.

She points to her chest:  
*MiSSS SScott*,  
saying it three times,  
each louder  
with ever more spit.

I repeat, *MiSSS SScott*,  
careful to hiss every s.

She doesn't seem impressed.

I tap my own chest:  
*Hà*.

She must have heard  
*ha*,  
as in funny *ha-ha-ha*.

She fakes a laugh.

I repeat, *Hà*,  
and wish I knew  
enough English  
to tell her  
to listen for  
the diacritical mark,

this one directing  
the tone  
downward.

My new teacher tilts  
her head back,  
fakes  
an even sadder laugh.





## Rainbow

I face the class.  
MiSSS SScott speaks.  
Each classmate says something.

I don't understand,  
but I see.

Fire hair on skin dotted with spots.  
Fuzzy dark hair on skin shiny as lacquer.  
Hair the color of root on milky skin.  
Lots of braids on milk chocolate.  
White hair on a pink boy.  
Honey hair with orange ribbons on see-through skin.  
Hair with barrettes in all colors on bronze bread.

I'm the only  
straight black hair  
on olive skin.

*September 2  
Midmorning*



Black and White and Yellow and Red

The bell rings.  
Everyone stands.  
I stand.

They line up;  
so do I.

Down a hall.  
Turn left.  
Take a tray.  
Receive food.  
Sit.

On one side  
of the bright, noisy room,  
light skin.  
Other side,  
dark skin.

Both laughing, chewing,  
as if it never occurred  
to them  
someone medium  
would show up.

I don't know where to sit  
any more than  
I know how to eat  
the pink sausage  
snuggled inside bread  
shaped like a corn cob,  
smeared with sauces  
yellow and red.

I think  
they are making fun  
of the Vietnamese flag  
until I remember  
no one here likely knows  
that flag's colors.

I put down the tray  
and wait  
in the hallway.

September 2  
11:30 a.m.



## Loud Outside

Another bell,  
another line,  
this time outside.

Every part  
of the rainbow  
surrounds me,  
shouting, pushing.

A pink boy with white hair  
on his head  
and white eyebrows and  
white eyelashes  
pulls my arm hair.

Laughter.

It's true my arm hair  
grows so long and black.

Maybe he is curious  
about my long, black arm hair  
like I was curious  
about the golden fuzz

on the arm  
of the rescue-ship sailor.

He pokes my cheek.

Howls from everyone.

He pokes my chest.

I see nothing but  
squeezed eyes,  
twisted mouths.

No,  
they're not curious.

I want to pluck out every white hair  
to see if the boy's scalp  
matches the pink of his face.

I wish this  
but walk away.

*September 2  
Afternoon*



## Laugh Back

The pink boy and two loud friends  
follow me home.

I count each step  
to walk faster.

I won't let them  
see me run.

I count in English,  
forcing it  
to the front  
of my mind.

I can't help but  
glance back.

The pink boy shouts,  
showing a black hole  
where sharp teeth glow.

I walk faster,  
count faster  
in English.

Not that I care  
to understand  
what Pink Boy says,  
but I have to  
if I'm to laugh back  
at him  
one day.

*September 2  
After school*



## Quiet Inside

Brother Khôi is home,  
not talking.

We sit together  
shelling peanuts.  
I keep my day inside.

Mother comes home  
with two fingers  
wrapped in white.  
The electric machine  
sews so fast.

Brother Quang comes home,  
throws down his uniform shirt,  
goes to the bathroom.  
At dinner  
his fingernails are still  
rimmed in black oil.

Brother Vĩ comes in  
*whistling*.

He eats

two, three, four  
pork chops.

I eat  
one, two chops.

I have a feeling  
having muscles  
makes whistling  
possible.

*September 2  
Evening*



## Fly Kick

I sneak into  
my brothers' room.

The full moon shines on  
the bulkiest lump.

I shake it awake.  
*Outside!*

Brother Vū swats my hand  
but follows me.

Moonlight turns us silver.

*They pulled my arm hair.  
They threw rocks at me.  
They promised to stomp on my chest.*

Brother Vū yawns.

*A boy did pull my arm hair!*

Brother Vū pats my head.  
*Ignore him.*

*It's not like I follow him around.  
Why were you whistling?*

*Someone called me Ching Chong.*

*Is that good?*

*Didn't sound good.  
Then he tripped me,  
so I flew up and  
almost scissor-kicked him  
in the face.*

*You missed?*

*I wanted him to stop,  
not hurt him.  
I didn't even like  
seeing him scared.*

*I would have kicked him.  
Teach me to fly-kick, please.*

*Not with your temper.*

I shout, I'm so mad.  
*I shouldn't have to run away.*

Tears come.

Brother Vū  
has always been afraid  
of my tears.  
*I'll teach you defense.*

*How will that help me?*

He smiles huge,  
so certain of himself.  
*You'll see.*

*September 2*  
*Late*



## Chin Nod

Next morning  
halfway down the block,  
away from Mother's eyes,  
I hear the *clink clank*  
of Brother Khôi's bicycle.

He stops and pats  
the upper bar  
of the triangle frame.

I sit sidesaddle,  
holding on to the handlebar.  
The edges of our hands  
touch.

As we glide away  
I ask,  
*Every day?*

I feel his chin  
nod into  
the top of my head.

*After school too?*

Another chin nod.

We glide  
and I feel as if  
I'm floating.

September 3



## Feel Dumb

MISS Scott  
points to me,  
then to the letters  
of the English alphabet.

I say  
A B C and so on.

She tells the class  
to clap.

I frown.

MISS Scott  
points to the numbers  
along the wall.

I count up to twenty.

The class claps  
on its own.

I'm furious,  
unable to explain  
I already learned

fractions  
and how to purify  
river water.

So this is  
what dumb  
feels like.

I hate, hate, hate it.

September 10



## Wishes

I wish

Brother Khôi wouldn't  
keep inside  
how he endures  
the hours in school,

that Mother wouldn't  
hide her bleeding fingers,

that Brother Quang wouldn't  
be so angry after work.

I wish

our cowboy could be persuaded  
to buy a horse,

that I could be invisible  
until I can talk back,

that English could be learned  
without so many rules.

I wish

Father would appear  
in my class  
speaking beautiful English  
as he does French and Chinese  
and hold out his hand  
for mine.

Mostly  
I wish  
I were  
still  
smart.

*September 11*



## Hiding

Brother Vū  
now makes everyone  
call him  
Vu Lee,  
a name I must say  
without giggling  
to get defense lessons.

I need the lessons.

I'm hiding in class  
by staring at my shoes.

I'm hiding during lunch  
in the bathroom,  
eating hard rolls  
saved from dinner.

I'm hiding during outside time  
in the same bathroom.

I'm hiding after school  
until Brother Khôi  
rides up to  
our secret corner.

With Vu Lee  
I squat in  
*đứng vững*,  
weight on legs,  
back straight,  
arms at my sides,  
fingers relaxed,  
eyes everywhere at once.

I'm practicing  
to be seen.

September 13



## Neighbors

Eggs explode  
like smears of snot  
on our front door.

*Just dumb kids,*  
says our cowboy.

Bathroom paper hangs  
like ghosts  
from our willow.

*More dumb kids,*  
says our cowboy.

A brick  
shatters the front window,  
landing on our dinner table  
along with a note.

Brother Quang  
refuses to translate.

Mother shakes her head  
when Vu Lee pops his muscles.

Our cowboy  
calls the police,  
who tell us  
to stay inside.

*Hogwash,*  
our cowboy says,  
then spits a brown blob  
of tobacco.

I repeat, *Hogwash,*  
puckering for the ending of  
*ssssshhhhhh.*

Mother decides  
we must meet  
our neighbors.

Our cowboy leads,  
giving us each a cowboy hat  
to be tilted  
while saying,  
*Good mornin'.*

Only I wear the hat.

In the house

to our right  
a bald man  
closes his door.

Next to him  
a woman  
with yellow hair  
slams hers.

Next to her  
shouts reach us  
behind a door unopened.

Redness crawls across  
my brothers' faces.  
Mother pats their backs.

Our cowboy leads us  
to the house on our left.

An older woman  
throws up her arms  
and hugs us.

We're so startled  
we stand like trees.

She points to her chest:  
*MiSSSiSSs WaSShington.*

She hugs our cowboy  
and kisses him.

I thought only  
husbands and wives  
do that when alone.

We find out  
MiSSSiSSs WaSShington  
is a widow and retired teacher.  
She has no children  
but has a dog named Lassie  
and a garden that takes up  
her backyard.

She volunteers  
to tutor us all.

My time with her  
will be right after school.

I'm afraid to tell her  
how much help I'll need.

*September 14*



MiSSSiSSs WaSShington  
has her own rules.

She makes me memorize  
one new word a day  
and practice it  
ten times in conversation.

For every new word  
that sticks to my brain  
she gives me  
fruit in bite sizes, drowning in sweet, white fluff;  
cookies with drops of chocolate small as rain;  
flat, round, pan-fried cakes floating in syrup.

My vocabulary grows!

She makes me learn rules  
I've never noticed,  
like *a*, *an*, and *the*,  
which act as little megaphones  
to tell the world  
whose English  
is still secondhand.

*The house is red.*  
But:  
*We live in a house.*

*A*, *an*, and *the*  
do not exist in Vietnamese  
and we understand  
each other just fine.

I pout,  
but MiSSSiSSs WaSShington says  
every language has annoyances and illogical rules,  
as well as sensible beauty.

She has an answer for everything,  
just like Mother.



I now understand

when they make fun of my name,  
yelling *ha-ha-ha* down the hall

when they ask if I eat dog meat,  
barking and chewing and falling down laughing

when they wonder if I lived in the jungle with tigers,  
growling and stalking on all fours.

I understand  
because Brother Khôi  
nodded into my head  
on the bike ride home  
when I asked if kids  
said the same things  
at his school.

I understand  
and wish  
I could go back  
to not understanding.

*September 19*



## HA LE LU DA

Our cowboy says  
our neighbors  
would be more like neighbors  
if we agree to something  
at the Del Ray Southern Baptist Church.

I've seen the church name  
on a sign  
where blaring yellow sun rays  
spell GOD.

Our cowboy and his wife  
wait for us  
in the very first row.  
He's smiling;  
she's not.

A plump man  
runs onto the stage  
SHOUTING.

Everyone except us  
greet him,  
*HA LE LU DA.*

The more he SHOUTS,  
the more everyone sings  
*HA LE LU DA.*

Later a woman  
smelling of honeysuckle  
signals for all of us to follow.

Mother and I are told  
to change into  
shapeless white gowns.

We line up in a hallway  
too bright and too bare,  
where my brothers await us  
frowning,  
all wearing the same  
shapeless white gowns.

I giggle.  
Mother pinches me  
then steps forward first.

The plump man  
waits for her  
in a tiny pool.  
One hand holds her nose,

another hand on her back,  
pushing her *under*.

I start to jump into the pool,  
but Mother is standing again,  
coughing,  
hair matted to her face,  
eyes narrowing  
at me.

Each of my brothers  
gets dipped.

My turn comes,  
no matter how  
I laser-eye Mother  
to stop it.

And yet  
it's not over.

We must get dressed  
and line up onstage  
next to the plump man,  
our cowboy,  
and his smiling wife.  
Her lips curl up even more

as people line up  
to kiss our cheeks.

Drops from wet hair  
drip down my back.

Bumps enlarge on  
my chilled skin  
as I realize  
we will be coming back  
every Sunday.

*September 21*



## Can't Help

Mother taps her nails  
on the dining table,  
her signal for solitude  
to chant.

I shuffle off to our room  
but am still with her  
through my ears.

She chants,  
*Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật*  
*Nam Mô Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát*

Such quiet tones  
after a day of  
shouts and HA LE LU DAs.

*Clang clang clang,*  
a spoon chimes  
against a glass bowl.

Nothing like  
clear-stream bell echoes  
from a brass gong.

Instead of jasmine incense,  
Mother burns dried orange peels.  
Ashy bitter citrus  
invades our room.

Nothing like  
the floral wafts  
that once calmed me.

I try  
but can't fall sleep,  
needing amethyst-ring twirls  
and her lavender scent.

I'm not as good as Mother  
at making do.

Finally she comes in  
and turns from me,  
her signal for more  
time alone.

I lie frozen,  
sniffing for  
traces of lavender.

Too faint  
yet I dare not roll closer.

She sighs,  
extends it  
into a sniffle.

*Where are you?*  
*Should we keep hoping?*

She thinks

I am asleep.

More sniffles,  
so gentle  
I would miss them  
by inhaling too deeply.

*Come home,  
come home and see how  
our children have grown.*

All my life  
I've wondered  
what it's like  
to know someone

for forever  
then *poof*  
he's gone.

Another sigh.

*It's more difficult here  
than I imagined.*

I thought so,  
despite her own rule  
Mother can't help  
yearning for Father  
any more than I can help  
tasting ripe papaya  
in my sleep.

*September 21  
Late*



## Spelling Rules

Sometimes  
the spelling changes  
when adding an s.

*Knife* becomes *knives*.

Sometimes  
a c is used  
instead of a k,  
even if  
it makes more sense  
for *cat* to be spelled *kat*.

Sometimes  
a y is used  
instead of an e,  
even if  
it makes more sense  
for  *moldy* to be spelled *molde*.

Whoever invented English  
should have learned  
to spell.

*September 30*



## Cowboy's Gifts

Our cowboy likes  
to bring us gifts.

The breathing catfish  
was Mother's favorite.

I couldn't watch Vu Lee  
kill and clean it,  
but it tasted so good.

After getting us dipped at church,  
our cowboy brought gifts  
even more often.

Vu Lee always asks for beef jerky,  
pointing to his muscles.

I prefer really fat grapes.

Today our cowboy brings  
chips and chocolate.

My brothers and I  
finish the chips  
in a flash.

Later Mother  
throws away  
what's left of the candy.

After she falls asleep,  
I retrieve the bars.

They'll be better  
than hard rolls  
for lunch.



My word for today  
is *delicious*,  
*dī lit-si-ishss*.

MiSSSiSSs WaSShington asks,  
*Was your lunch delicious?*

Before speaking,  
I have to translate  
in my head.

She waits.

*I eat candy in toilet.*

MiSSSiSSs WaSShington  
looks panicked.  
*WHAT?*

I realize my mistake.  
*Oh, the toilet.*

She doesn't look  
any happier.

I add,  
*Not candy all time.*

*But you always eat in the bathroom?*

I nod.

*Why?*

How can I explain  
dragonflies do somersaults  
in my stomach  
whenever I think of  
the noisy room  
full of mouths  
chewing and laughing?

I'm still translating  
when her eyes get red.

*I'll pack you a lunch  
and you can eat at your desk.*

*No eat in class.*

*I'll fix that.*

*Things will get better,  
just you wait.*

I don't believe her  
but it feels good  
that someone knows.



## Most Relieved Day

At lunch the next day  
I stay in class.

MiSSS SScott nods.

Can it be this easy?

Inside my first  
brown paper bag:  
a white meat sandwich,  
an apple,  
crunchy curly things  
sprinkled with salt, and  
a cookie dotted  
with chocolate raindrops.

Something salty,  
something sweet,  
perfect.

I hear pounding footsteps  
in the long hall.

I stop chewing.

Two students  
run into class,  
giggling.

I firm my muscles,  
ready for the giggles  
to explode into laughter  
thrown at me.

But smiles appear instead.

The girl has  
red hair swaying to her bottom,  
a skirt falling to her calves.

She says, *Pam*. I hear *Pem*.

The boy of coconut-shell skin  
is dressed better than for church,  
a purple bow tie,  
a white white shirt  
that wouldn't wrinkle  
even if he rolled down a hill.

His shaved head

is so shiny and perfect  
I want to touch it.

He speaks slowly and loudly,  
but I don't mind  
because he's still smiling.

He says, *Steven*.  
I hear *SSsi-Ti-Vân*.

I have not  
seen them in class.  
But then, I mostly  
stare at my shoes.

I will write in my journal  
October 14 is  
Most Relieved Day,  
as I have noted  
April 30 was  
Saigon Is Gone Day  
and September 2 was  
Longest Day *Ever*.

Though I was saving  
Most Relieved Day

for Father's return,  
he can have the title:  
My Life's Best Day.

*October 14*



## Smart Again

Pink Boy  
stands at the board.

He can't multiply  
18 by 42.

I go to the board,  
chalk the answer  
in five moves.

My cheekbones lift  
to the ceiling  
until I see horror  
on the faces  
of Pem and SSSI-Ti-Vân.

Pink Boy is glowing red  
against white hair,  
white eyebrows,  
and white eyelashes.

MiSSS SScott  
nudges me toward my seat.

Pem reaches for my hand,  
hers trembling.

I know  
Pink Boy will get me,  
but right now  
I feel smart.

*October 20*



## Hair

One day  
the honey-hair girl  
takes her pink ribbons  
and knots pigtails in my hair.

She stares,  
shakes her head,  
yanks back her ribbons.  
*Pink don't look good on you.*

Then three girls  
of bronze-bread skin  
remove colorful barrettes  
from their hair  
and twist onto my head  
so many braids.

The girls' hair holds  
the shape of braids  
even without barrettes.

Pem and SSsi-Ti-Vân nod,  
so I keep still.

Walking home,  
my shadow shows  
eels dancing on my head  
with tails in shapes of  
bows, stars, hearts.

Mother and Brothers  
notice,  
pause,  
then go on with their day.

It isn't easy  
to sleep on a pile of  
plastic barrettes.

The next morning  
when the girls  
slip off the barrettes,  
my hair falls back  
to being straight.

The girls  
yank my flat strands,  
walk away.

I've spent my life  
wishing for long hair  
and this is what I get.



## The Busy One

Vu Lee no longer  
has time for just me.

At sunrise  
he throws newspapers  
onto porches.

After school  
he flips perfect circles  
of beef.

At sunset  
he teaches Bruce Lee moves  
in our front yard.

We line up in five rows,  
squatting and shifting,  
the only moves  
he has taught us.

I make sure to get  
in the front row.

First came  
the eager boys.

Next came  
the giggly girls.  
Then came  
our neighbors who  
couldn't help their curiosity.

They wave back now,  
at times bringing  
jiggly, colorful food  
we don't eat.

Everyone in Vu Lee's class  
wears yellow.  
Some even bought suits  
exactly like Bruce Lee's.

Brothers Quang and Khôi join too.

Once I saw Mother  
behind the curtains,  
smiling.

I squatted low and sturdy then.



## War and Peace

Miss Scott  
shows the class  
photographs

of a burned, naked girl  
running, crying  
down a dirt road

of people climbing, screaming,  
desperate to get on  
the last helicopter  
out of Saigon

of skeletal refugees,  
crammed aboard a  
sinking fishing boat,  
reaching up to the heavens  
for help

of mounds of combat boots  
abandoned by soldiers  
of the losing side.

She's telling the class  
where I'm from.

She should have shown  
something about  
papayas and Tết.

No one would believe me  
but at times  
I would choose  
wartime in Saigon  
over  
peacetime in Alabama.

October 29



## Pancake Face

Pem is dressed  
in a skirt to the floor  
like the pioneers  
in our textbook.

SSsi-Ti-Vân  
wears a beard  
like President Lincoln.

I didn't know  
today is pretend day.

Pink Boy keeps asking,  
*What are you?*

By the end of school  
he yells an answer:  
*She should be a pancake.*  
*She has a pancake face.*

It doesn't make sense  
until  
it does.

I run,  
hearing laughter  
*loud loud loud,*  
which still echoes when Mother comes home.

I can't keep the day inside anymore.

Mother asks,  
*What's a pancake?*

Tears gush  
because I can't  
make myself explain  
a pancake  
is  
very  
very  
flat.



## Mother's Response

Mother strokes my head.

*Chant, my child,  
Breathe in, peaceful mind.  
Breathe out, peaceful smile.*

She strokes my back.

*Chant, my daughter;  
your whispers will bloom  
and shelter you  
from words  
you need not hear.*

*Chant  
Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật  
Nam Mô Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát.*

She strokes my arm.

I chant,  
wanting the gentle strokes  
to continue forever.

I chant,  
wanting Mother's calmness  
to sink into me.

October 31  
Night



I'm quiet  
during my lesson  
with MiSSSiSS WaSShington.

For a long time  
I stare at the floral wallpaper  
and shelves full of books,  
then I notice  
a framed photograph  
of a boy in uniform.

I had not known of her son Tom  
or of his death as a  
twenty-year-old soldier  
in the very place  
where I was born.

I never thought  
the name of my country  
could sound so sad.

I'm afraid to look  
at MiSSSiSS WaSShington.  
*You hate me?*

*Child, child.*

She comes close  
and hugs me.

Right then I tell her  
about the pancake.

She hugs me tighter,  
then pulls out a book.

A book of photographs:  
a dragon dance at Tết,  
schoolgirls in white áo dài,  
a temple built on a tree trunk.

Tom had sent home  
these photographs  
of a hot, green country  
that he loved and hated  
just the same.

I suck in breath:  
a photograph of  
a papaya tree  
swaying broad,  
fanlike leaves

in the full sun,  
showing off a bundle  
of fat orange piglets.

Excited, I yell,  
*Đu đù!*  
I'm stabbing at the image.  
*Best food.*

*Papaya?*

*Your favorite food is papaya?*

By the time I teach her  
*đu đu*  
and she teaches me  
*doo-doo*  
we're laughing so hard  
we're hungry for pancakes.

She tells me  
to take  
the book home.

*November 3*



## Cowboy's Response

Before school  
our cowboy shows up.  
MiSSSiSSs WaSShington told him  
about the pancake.

He whispers to Mother and Brother Quang.  
All will escort me to school  
with MiSSSiSSs WaSShington.

I do not feel good.

In the principal's office  
sit Pink Boy and his mother.

It's very hot in here.

Lots of strained voices  
holding in anger.

Finally all eyes  
are on Pink Boy,  
who wrestles out, *Sorry.*

I feel like throwing up.

Mother rescues him:  
*We know you're from a proper family  
and did not realize  
the damage of your insult.*

While Brother Quang translates,  
Pink Boy's eyes let me know  
he hates me even more.

November 5



## Boo-Da, Boo-Da

MiSSS SScott  
shows photographs  
of the S shape  
of Vietnam,  
of green mountains and long beaches,  
of a statue of the Buddha reclining.

She asks me,  
*Would you like to say anything?*

*I know Buddha.*

I hear laughter  
and a murmur building:  
*Boo-Da, Boo-Da.*

MiSSS SScott hushes them.

All day I hear whispers:  
*Boo-Da, Boo-Da.*

I watch the clock,  
listen for the final bell,  
and dash.

Pink Boy and friends follow,  
releasing shouts of  
*Boo-Da, Boo-Da*  
as I put one leg  
in front of the other  
faster  
faster  
but not fast enough  
to not hear them  
scream  
*Boo-Da, Boo-Da.*

I turn down  
the wrong street,  
away from the corner  
where Brother Khôi would be.

I have no choice  
but to *run*.

I turn right where purple flowers  
curve like baby moons  
over butterfly bushes.

Footsteps pound  
right behind me.

Turn left where flowers grow *blue*.

I wish I could control it,  
but the plates of flowers  
are now blue smears  
from my near tears.

*Boo-Da, Boo-Da*  
breathes into the back  
of my neck.

Faster, faster.  
My legs try,  
but the shouts are upon me.

Someone pulls my hair,  
forcing me to turn  
and see  
a black hole in a pink face:  
*Boo-Da, Boo-Da Girl.*

My palms cover my eyes.

I run.

All the while  
surging from my gut:

*fire*  
*sourness*  
*weight*  
*anger*  
*loneliness*  
*confusion*  
*embarrassment*  
*shame.*

*November 7*



## Hate It

I don't make it inside the house,  
but sit  
under the willow tree,  
dig a hole  
and into it  
scream scream scream

***I hate everyone!!!!***

A lion's paw rips up my throat,  
still I scream

***I hate everyone!!!!***

Hands grip my shoulders.

MiSSSiSSs WaSShington  
is on her knees.

*Child, child, come with me.*

***I hate everyone!!!!***

She hoists me up  
by my armpits

and drags me across  
the yard.

*You poor child,  
tell me, tell me.*

It hurts too much  
to keep screaming,  
but it feels good  
to thrash about  
like a captured lizard.

Inside her house,  
MiSSSiSSs WaSShington throws  
her body on mine.

*Hush, hush,  
hush, hush.*

She says it over and over  
like a chant,  
slowly.  
Slowly  
the screams that never stopped  
inside my head  
cool to a real whisper.

***I hate everyone!***

*Even your mama?*

She crosses her eyes,  
puckers her lips.

I stop myself from laughing.

She pats my hand.

That one gesture  
dissolves the last  
of my hate spell.

*November 7  
After school*



## Brother Quang's Turn

Brother Quang comes home  
with happy shouts.

He did it,  
repairing a car  
no one else could.

From now on  
he's to work  
only on engines.

Mother smiles so hard  
she cries.

I pout.

When is it going to be  
my turn?

*November 12*



## Confessions

It's time to tell Mother  
why misery  
keeps pouncing on me.

*I used to buy less pork  
so I could buy fried dough.*

*I know.*

*You do?*

*What else?*

*I used to like making the girl  
who shared my desk cry.*

She tilts her head.

*I know, Mother, I know, very bad.*

She nods.

*Now they make me cry.  
Will I be punished forever?*

*Forever is quite long.*

*There's more;  
it's really bad.*

She lifts an eyebrow.

*At dawn on Tet  
I tapped my big toe  
to the tile floor  
first.*

She widens her eyes.

***I hate being told I can't do something because I'm a girl!***

She doesn't scold me,  
just nods.

*Did I ruin the luck  
of the whole family?  
Is that why we're here?*

*My child,  
how you shoulder the world!*

*I was superstitious,  
that's all.  
If anything,  
you gave us luck  
because we got out  
and we're here.*

*Lucky  
to be here?*

*Just wait,  
you'll see.*

*I don't want to wait.  
It's awful now.*

*Is it really so unbearable?*

*They chase me.  
They yell "Boo-Da, Boo-Da" at me.  
They pull my arm hair.  
They call me Pancake Face.  
They clap at me in class.  
And you want me to wait?  
Can I hit them?*

*Oh, my daughter,  
at times you have to fight,  
but preferably  
not with your fists.*

*November 14*



Brother Quang takes us  
to the grocery store.  
Mother buys everything  
to make egg rolls  
for a coming holiday  
when Americans eat a turkey  
the size of a baby.

She has me ask the butcher,  
*Please grind our pork.*

I'm sure I said it right,  
but the butcher  
sharpens his face,  
slams down our meat,  
and motions us away.

Mother wrinkles her brows,  
thinking, pausing,  
then rings the buzzer again.

*Please, she says.*  
It comes out, *Peezzz.*

The butcher turns away  
without a word.

Mother presses the buzzer  
for a long time.

When the butcher returns,  
he hears a lot of Vietnamese  
in a voice stern and steady,  
from eyes even more so.

Mother ends with a clear, *NOW!*

The butcher stares  
then takes our meat  
to the grinder.



## *Đu Đủ Face*

Again they're yelling,  
*Boo-Da, Boo-Da,*  
but I know to run  
toward Brother Khôi  
two corners away.

Enough time  
for them to repeat  
hundreds of *Boo-Das*.

Enough time  
for me to turn and yell,  
*Gee-sus, Gee-sus.*

I love how they stop,  
mouths open.

My heart lifting,  
I run and shout,  
*Bully!*  
*Coward!*  
*Pink Snot Face!*

Words I learned from them  
on the playground.

I turn to see  
Pink Boy coming  
close to me.

No longer pink,  
he's red,  
blood-orange red  
like a ripe papaya.

*Đu Đủ Face!*

It's not my fault  
if his friends hear  
*Doo-doo Face*  
and are laughing  
right at him.

Brother Khôi is waiting.  
I jump on.



Friday

SSsi-Ti-Vân heard it from Pem  
who heard it from the honey-hair girl  
who heard it from the dot-on-face girl  
who heard it from the white-hair boy  
who heard it from all three girls in braids

that

Pink Boy

has gotten his sixth-grade cousin,  
a girl two heads taller than the tallest of us,  
with arm muscles that run up and down like mice,

to agree

to beat me up

when we come back

Monday.



## A Plan

I don't have to tell Brother Khôi,  
who heard in the halls  
of *his* school  
that my face  
is to be flattened  
flatter  
tomorrow.

*You don't have a flat face,*  
he says.  
*Besides, I have a plan.*

*December 7*



## Run

Five minutes  
till the last bell  
I lean toward the door,  
legs bouncing,  
books left on the floor.

*Rriiinnggg*

I run,  
Pem and SSsi-Ti-Vân  
close behind.

Outside  
Pem and I exchange  
coats with hoods.

Pem heads down  
my usual path.  
I zip to the left.

SSsi-Ti-Vân  
stays to block the door.

Running so fast,  
I fly above the sidewalk.

Alone.

They must all be with Pem.

I stop at the new corner  
where Brother Khôi said to wait.

Where is he?

Footsteps explode  
from the street  
that smacks into mine.

Pink Boy!

*December 8  
3:36 p.m.*



## A Shift

Pink Boy plows  
toward me.

I squat in *đúng tần*,  
facing him.

His right arm extends  
in a fist.

When he's close enough  
for me to see  
the white arm hair,  
I shift my upper body  
to the left,  
legs sturdy,  
eyes on the blur  
that flies past me.

*A thud.*

Pink Boy writhes on the pavement.

I thought I would love  
seeing him in pain.

But  
he looks  
more defeated than weak,  
more helpless than scared,  
liked a caged puppy.

He's getting up.

If I were to kick him,  
it must be  
now.

*December 8  
3:38 p.m.*



WOW!

A roar.

Pink Boy and I  
turn.

A gigantic motorcycle.

The rider in all black  
stops.

The helmet comes off.

VU LEE!

WOW!

Pink Boy disappears.

Brother Khôi runs up,  
out of breath,  
pushing a bicycle  
with a flat.

Vu Lee flicks his head.

I climb on first,  
wrap my arms around a waist  
tight as rope.  
Brother Khôi climbs on next,  
one hand holding  
the handlebar of his bike.

We fly home.

*December 8  
3:43 p.m.*



## The Vu Lee Effect

Vu Lee  
now picks me up  
after school.

So  
someone is always  
saving lunch seats  
for me, Pem, and SSSI-Ti-Vân;

someone is always  
inviting us  
to a party;

someone is always  
hoping Vu Lee  
will offer her a ride,  
as he did the huge cousin,  
who now not only smiles  
but waves at us.

Pink Boy  
avoids us,  
and we're glad.

*December 16*



## Early Christmas

Mother invites our cowboy  
and MiSSSiSSs WaSShington  
for egg rolls.

They brought gifts,  
not saying  
*Early Christmas*,  
not wanting  
to embarrass us  
for not having anything  
to exchange.

From our cowboy  
to Mother: two just-caught catfish  
to Brother Quang: tuition for night college  
to Vu Lee: jerky in ten flavors  
to Brother Khôi: two fighting fish in separate jars  
to me: a new coat

We laugh and say,  
*Perfect!*

From MiSSSiSSs WaSShington  
to Mother: a gong and jasmine incense  
to Brother Quang: an engineering textbook

to Vu Lee: jerky in ten flavors  
to Brother Khôi: a hamster  
to me: three packages of something orange and dried

My family claps and says,  
*Perfect!*

I frown.

*December 20*



**Not the Same**

Three pouches of  
dried papaya

Chewy  
Sugary  
Waxy  
Sticky

Not the same  
at all.

So mad,  
I throw all in the trash.

*December 20  
Night*



## *But Not Bad*

Mother slaps my hand.  
*Learn to compromise.*

I refuse to retrieve the pouches,  
pout  
go to bed,  
stare at the photograph of a real papaya tree,  
wonder if I'll ever taste sweet, tender, orange flesh  
again.

*GOOONNNNGGGG*  
rings out;  
how soothing a real gong sounds.

Swirls of incense  
reach me,  
hovering like a blanket,  
tugging me in.

I wake up at faint light,  
guilt heavy on my chest.

I head toward the trash can.

Yet  
on the dining table  
on a plate  
sit strips of papaya  
gooey and damp,  
having been soaked in hot water.

The sugar has melted off  
leaving  
plump  
moist  
chewy  
bites.

Hummm...

Not the same,  
but not bad  
at all.

*December 20–21*



***From Now On***



Letter from the North

Eight months ago,  
    war ended.  
Four months ago,  
    Mother sent our letter.  
Today,  
    Father's brother answers.

Still, we know nothing more.

Our uncle even went south  
to talk with our old neighbors,  
to find Father's old friends.

He consulted,  
left word,  
waited  
until it became obvious  
he would know nothing more.

His letter  
doesn't tell us  
what to do  
from now on.

We look to Mother.

She doesn't tell us either.

Ours is a silent  
Christmas Eve.

*December 24*



## Gift-Exchange Day

Pem comes over  
on gift-exchange day  
with a doll  
to replace  
the mouse-bitten one  
I told her about.

I almost scream  
because the doll  
with long black hair  
is so beautiful.

But I whisper,  
*Thank you.*

My high emotions  
are squished beneath  
the embarrassment  
of not having a gift  
for her.

*December 25*



## What If

Brother Quang asks  
what if  
Father escaped to Cambodia  
and is building an army  
to go back and change history?

Vu Lee asks  
what if  
Father escaped to France  
but can't remember his own history,  
so he builds a new family  
and is happy?

Brother Khôi asks  
what if  
Father escaped to Tibet  
after shaving his head  
and joining a monastery?

I can't think of anything  
but can't let my brothers best me,  
so I blurt out,  
*What if*  
*Father is really gone?*

From the sad look  
on their faces  
I know  
despite their brave guesses  
they have begun to accept  
what I said on a whim.

December 29



## A Sign

Mother says nothing  
about Father

but

she chants every night,

long chants  
where her voice  
wavers between  
hope and acceptance.

She's waiting  
for a sign.

I'll decide  
what she decides.

*December 30*



## No More

First day back  
after Christmas break,  
I know I'm supposed  
to wear everything new.

I don't have  
anything new  
except for the coat,  
and a hand-me-down dress  
still wrapped in plastic.

It's beige with blue flowers  
made from a fabric fuzzy and thick,  
perfect for this cold day.

Best of all  
it's past my knees,  
perfect for a cold bike ride.

Pem is wearing a new skirt  
falling to her calves, as always.

SSsi-Ti-Vân's new white shirt  
looks stiff as a wall.

As soon as I remove my coat,  
everyone stops talking.

A girl in red velvet  
comes over to me.  
*Don't ya know flannel  
is for nightgowns and sheets?*

I panic.

Pem shrugs.  
*I can't wear pants  
or cut my hair  
or wear skirts above my calves;  
what do I care what you wear?*

SSsi-Ti-Vân says,  
*It looks like a dress to me.*

The red-velvet girl  
points to the middle  
of my chest.  
*See this flower?  
They only put that  
on nightgowns.*

I look down  
at the tiny blue flower  
barely stitched on.

I rip it off.  
*Nightgown no more.*



## Seeds

I wear the same dress  
to sleep,  
telling Mother why.

*I pretended not to care,  
then no one cared,  
so I really didn't care.*

Mother laughs.

I tell her  
a much worse embarrassment  
is not having  
a gift for Pem.

Mother nods, thinks,  
goes to her top drawer.

*I was saving this for you  
for Tē<sup>h</sup>t,  
but why wait?*

In her palm lies  
the tin of flower seeds  
I had gathered with TiTi.

Perfect for Pem!

Mother always  
thinks of everything.

January 5  
Night



Mother runs in after work,  
hands clenched into white balls,  
words chopped into grunts,  
face of ash.

We stare at her left hand.

The amethyst stone is gone!

Brother Quang drives us back  
to the sewing factory  
in his car made of mismatched parts.

We search where Mother sat,  
then retrace her steps  
to the cafeteria  
to the bathroom  
to the parking lot.

We repeat so often we lose count,  
propelled by Mother's  
wild eyes and  
pressed mouth,  
frightened of what

her expression would be  
if...

At dusk,  
the guards shoo us out.

We're afraid to look at Mother.



## Truly Gone

When home,  
Mother  
retreats to our room,  
misses dinner,  
remains soundless.

At bedtime  
we hear  
the gong,  
then chanting.

The chant is long,  
the voice  
low and sure.

Finally  
she appears,  
looks at each of us.

*Your father is  
truly gone.*

*January 14  
Late*



## Eternal Peace

Mother wears  
her brown áo dài  
brought from home.

Each of my brothers  
wears a suit,  
too small or too big.

I wear a pink dress  
of ruffles and lace,  
which I hate,  
but at least  
it's definitely a dress.

Each of us faces the altar,  
holding a lit incense stick  
between palms in prayer.

Father's portrait  
stares back.

This is as old  
as we'll ever know him.

That thought  
turns my eyes  
red.

Mother says,  
*We'll chant  
for Father's safe passage  
toward eternal peace,  
where his parents await him.*

She pauses,  
voice choked.

*Father won't leave  
if we hold on to him.  
If you feel like crying,  
think  
at least now  
we know.*

*At least  
we no longer live  
in waiting.*



## Start Over

I'm trying to tell  
MiSSSiSSs WaSShington  
about our ceremony for Father.

But it takes time to  
match every noun and verb,  
sort all the tenses,  
remember all the articles,  
set the tone for every s.

MiSSSiSSs WaSShington says  
if every learner waits  
to speak perfectly,  
no one would learn  
a new language.

*Being stubborn  
won't make you fluent.  
Practicing will!  
The more mistakes you make,  
the more you'll learn not to.*

*They laugh.*

*Shame on them!  
Challenge them to say  
something in Vietnamese  
and laugh right back.*

I tell her  
Father is at peace.

I tell her  
I'd like to plant  
flowers from  
Vietnam  
in her backyard.

I tell her  
Tết is coming  
and luck starts over  
every new year.



Brother Quang  
has started night school  
to restudy engineering  
to become what  
he was meant to be.

Mother smiles.

Vu Lee  
refuses to apply to a real college,  
instead will go to a cooking school  
in San-fran-cis-co,  
where his idol once walked.

Mother sighs,  
twists her brows  
to no effect.

Brother Khôi  
announces he will become a doctor  
of animals.

Mother starts to say something,  
then nods.

Mother has always wanted  
an engineer, a real doctor, a poet,  
and a lawyer.

She turns to me.  
*You love to argue, right?*

*No I don't.*

She brightens.

I vow to become  
much more agreeable.



This Tết  
there's no I Ching Teller of Fate,  
so Mother predicts our year.

Our lives  
will twist and twist,  
intermingling the old and the new  
until it doesn't matter  
which is which.

This Tết  
there's no *bánh chưng*  
in the shape of a square,  
made of pork,  
glutinous rice,  
and mung beans,  
wrapped in banana leaves.

Mother makes her own  
in the shape of a log,  
made of pork,  
regular rice,  
and black beans,  
wrapped in cloth.

Not the same,  
but not bad.

As with every Tết  
we are expected to

smile until it hurts  
all three first days  
of the year,

wear all new clothes  
especially underneath,

not sweep,  
not splash water,  
not talk back,  
not pout.

Mother thinks of everything.

She even asked Brother Quang  
to bless the house  
right after midnight,  
so I couldn't beat him to it  
by touching my big toe  
to the carpet before dawn.

Mother has set up  
an altar  
on the highest bookshelf.

The same, forever-young  
portrait of Father.

I have to look away.

We each hold an incense stick  
and wait for the gong.

I pray for  
Father to find warmth in his new home,  
Mother to keep smiling more,  
Brother Quang to enjoy his studies,  
Vu Lee to drive me from and to school,  
Brother Khôi to hatch an American chick.

I open my eyes.  
The others are still praying.

What could they be asking for?

I think and think  
then close my eyes again.  
This year I hope

I truly learn  
to fly-kick,  
not to kick anyone  
so much as  
to fly.

January 31  
Tết



## Author's Note

Dear Reader:

Much of what happened to Hà, the main character in *Inside Out & Back Again*, also happened to me.

At age ten, I, too, witnessed the end of the Vietnam War and fled to Alabama with my family. I, too, had a father who was missing in action. I also had to learn English and even had my arm hair pulled the first day of school. The fourth graders wanted to make sure I was real, not an image they had seen on TV. So many details in this story were inspired by my own memories.

Aside from remembering facts, I worked hard to capture Hà's emotional life. What was it like to live where bombs exploded every night yet where sweet snacks popped up at every corner? What was it like to sit on a ship heading toward hope? What was it like to go from knowing you're smart to feeling dumb all the time?

The emotional aspect is important because of something I noticed in my nieces and nephews. They may know in general where their parents came from, but they can't really imagine the noises and smells of Vietnam, the daily challenges of starting over in a strange land. I extend this idea to all: How much do we know about those around us?

I hope you enjoy reading about Hà as much as I have enjoyed remembering the pivotal year in my life. I also hope after you finish this book that you sit close to someone you love and implore that person to tell and tell and tell their story.

*Thanhha Lai*



## [Acknowledgments](#)

Much thanks to Angie Wojak, Joe Hosking, Sarah Sevier, Tara Weikum, Rosemary Stimola, and of course my family (M<sup>o</sup>, Ch<sup>i</sup> Mai, Anh Anh, Anh Tuấn, Anh Nam, Anh Z<sup>u</sup>ng, Anh Ti<sup>e</sup>n, Anh S<sup>o</sup>n, Ch<sup>i</sup> H<sup>u</sup>o<sup>o</sup>ng), with whom I shared April 30, 1975, and weeks on a ship, events that decades later led me to Henri and An.



## [About the Author](#)

**THANHHA LAI** was born in Vietnam and moved to Alabama at the end of the war. She lives in New York City with her family.

Visit [www.AuthorTracker.com](http://www.AuthorTracker.com) for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.



## [Credits](#)

Jacket art © 2011 by Zdenko Bašić and Manuel Šumberac  
Jacket design by Ray Shappell



INSIDE OUT & BACK AGAIN. Copyright © 2011 by Thanhha Lai. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lai, Thanhha.

Inside out and back again / Thanhha Lai.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Through a series of poems, a young girl chronicles the life-changing year of 1975, when she, her mother, and her brothers leave Vietnam and resettle in Alabama.

ISBN 978-0-06-196278-3

[1. Novels in verse. 2. Vietnamese Americans—Fiction. 3. Emigration and immigration—Fiction. 4. Immigrants—Fiction. 5. Vietnam—History—1971–1980—Fiction. 6. Alabama—History—1951—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.5.L35ln 2011

2010007855

[Fic]—dc22

CIP

AC

FIRST EDITION

EPub Edition © January 2011 ISBN: 978-0-06-206972-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



## [About the Publisher](#)

### **Australia**

HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.  
25 Ryde Road (PO Box 321)  
Pymble, NSW 2073, Australia  
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com.au>

### **Canada**

HarperCollins Canada  
2 Bloor Street East - 20th Floor  
Toronto, ON, M4W, 1A8, Canada  
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.ca>

### **New Zealand**

HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited  
P.O. Box 1  
Auckland, New Zealand  
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.nz>

### **United Kingdom**

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.  
77-85 Fulham Palace Road  
London, W6 8JB, UK  
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.co.uk>

### **United States**

HarperCollins Publishers Inc.  
10 East 53rd Street  
New York, NY 10022  
<http://www.harpercollinsebooks.com>