

YEAR OF THE DOG

POEMS

DEBORAH PAREDEZ

A BLESSING THE BOATS SELECTION

AMERICAN POETS CONTINUUM SERIES, NO. 178

BOA EDITIONS, LTD. ♦ ROCHESTER, NY ♦ 2020

For a long time Hecuba remembered
the ancient evils she had undergone
and still continued howling mournfully
through all the fields of Thrace.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (13: 564–72), trans. Ian Johnston

. . . but from here on, I want more crazy mourning, more howl, more keening

—Adrienne Rich, “A Woman Dead in Her Forties”

We are the wrong people of
the wrong skin on the wrong continent and what
in the hell is everybody being reasonable about?

—June Jordan, “Poem about My Rights”

WIFE'S DISASTER MANUAL

When the forsaken city starts to burn,
after the men and children have fled,
stand still, silent as prey, and slowly turn

back. Behold the curse. Stay and mourn
the collapsing doorways, the unbroken bread
in the forsaken city starting to burn.

Don't flinch. Don't join in.
Resist the righteous scurry and instead
stand still, silent as prey. Slowly turn

your thoughts away from escape: the iron
gates unlatched, the responsibilities shed,
When the forsaken city starts to burn,

surrender to your calling, show concern
for those who remain. Come to a dead
standstill. Silent as prey, slowly turn

into something essential. Learn
the names of the fallen. Refuse to run ahead
when the forsaken city starts to burn.
Stand still and silent. Pray. Return.

SELF-PORTRAIT IN THE YEAR OF THE DOG

San Antonio, TX, December 1970

It's nearing the end
of the year and the woman who will be
my mother is pushing
stickpins through the eyes
of sequins and into styrofoam globes
until each coated orb ornaments
the tinsel tree. Her body
is full of the curled question
mark that will soon be
my body. The woman who will be
my grandmother is biding time
at the five and dime stockpiling
supplies to fill my mother's idle
hands. All along she's carried
me low—

 how I've known
from early on to position myself
for descent. When I enter
this world, I'll enter as Hecuba
nearing her end: purpled
and yelping griefbeast,
my mother's spangled
handiwork.

A SHOW OF HANDS

my father taught me never to show
my hand always play the hand
you're dealt don't
bite the hand that feeds you gotta
hand it to him he lived
his life hand to mouth
even before 'Nam he knew
close only counts in
horseshoes and
hand grenades go hand-
to-hand combat idle
hands are the Devil's play
into the enemy's hand it
over and out
of his hands
wringing a bird
in hand is worth two
in the bush he wasn't so good
with his hands took his life
into his own blood
on his hands on the one hand
and on the other

YEAR OF THE DOG: SYNONYMS FOR APERTURE

Kent State University, 4 May 1970

Mary Ann Vecchio is down
 on her knees. Jeffrey Miller's body is face down
 beside her. John Filo presses his finger down
 and the aperture shudders. There are four down
 when the shooting stops. Mary Ann's arms are out-
 stretched, a stripped mast. John is running out
 of film. Snowy blossoms shroud the dogwoods out-
 side the frame. *This girl came up and knelt over the body and let out*
a God-awful scream, John will say, *that made me*
click the camera. Mary Ann is a 14-year-old runaway. Later she'll say, *I*
hitchhiked my way into history. And later, *It really destroyed my*
life. There will be a song about four dead in Ohio, *O—H—I—*
O—I—OH—OH—OH— The bullet enters Jeffery's opened mouth
 and comes out the other side. Mary Ann's mouth
 is open, an obliterated star. Synonyms for aperture: mouth—
 gap—cleft—chasm—hole—rupture—perforated passage—eye.
 In Spanish images of the pietà, the Virgin often holds out one hand
 or the other. Mary Ann will get hate mail: *Mary, you*
dirty tramp. It's too bad it wasn't you
that was shot. Or another: *You hippie communist bitch! Did you*

enjoy sleeping with all those dope fiends and negroes when you were in Ohio? Mary Ann's mother will say, Can you imagine her looking at that?

SELF-PORTRAIT IN FLESH AND STONE

Before the war, my father slid shoehorns between the lips of discount loafers and socked heels.

If the shoe fits, so the story goes, the true identity of the cinder-shrouded girl is known.

Persephone swallowed the seeds and her mother bent followed.

My father's mother had nine mouths to feed, ten if she counted herself.

Cronus ate his first five kids and then a stone.

The memorial is cut from polished black granite and cuts into the earth.

My father's name is not cut into the stone but still I see my reflection in its surface.

I tell you, it says in the Book of Luke, *if these remain silent, the stones would cry out.*

My father used to have a mouth on him, but now he reads the Bible and doesn't cuss.

Soldiers in the trenches passed the time sucking on cigarettes and the occasional fruitcake from home until their mouths clouded with rot and they called this trench mouth.

The 56th Dental Detachment, Phu Bai Dental Clinic, was the name of my father's unit.

A dentist once said to Gloria Anzaldúa, *We're going to have to do something about your tongue.*

I inherited my father's gutter mouth, which is not the same as trench mouth.

Soldiers dug 25,000 miles of trenches along the Western Front.

The Viet Cong required North Vietnamese villagers to dig three feet of the Cu Chi Tunnels each day, and this is where they burrowed to escape the bombs bursting in air.

I once pulled myself out of a depression by swallowing herbs and walking each day down the thin slit that cut across the winter-stripped field.

Persephone pulled the narcissus from its root and the dark mouth sucked her down.

There is a photo of my father pulling a rotten tooth from the mouth of a Vietnamese boy.

The trenches would flood and the soldiers would stand for long stretches in the muck unable to remove their wet socks and boots and their feet would soften to rot and they called this trench foot.

I put my foot in my mouth nearly everyday.

Gloria Anzaldúa asks questions that are really refusals, *How do you tame a wild tongue, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?*

In a 1969 photograph by Horst Faas, a young South Vietnamese woman covers her opened mouth as she stares into a mass grave where she fears her father's body lies.

Many mammals will eat the placenta of their newborns, but some Mexican women I know bury theirs near the hearth.

In 1967, Dang Thi Lanh sang and danced and cooked and crawled and dug with a short hoe and gave birth to her daughter in the Cu Chi Tunnels.

Cronus devoured his children and still his son came back and cast him down.

The soldiers would hump through the monsoon-soaked marsh until their feet bloomed with jungle rot.

My body and my father's body and Plath's body, *Head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing / Only the mouth-hole piped out, / Importunate cricket // In a quarry of silences.*

That time I put my foot in my mouth and asked my father what it was like over there.

My father has never eaten a pomegranate though he has spent time on the other side and its shadow darkens his return.

A mama bird will chew the worm and partially digest it before spitting it out into the mouth of her young and in this way the baby bird is fed.

My father in Phu Bai fingering the dark.

I am surprised sometimes by what comes out of my mouth, so I have to watch my tongue.

Those nights I watched my father's mouth when he dozed off in the recliner to make sure he didn't choke on his tongue during his nightly seizures.

Sometimes the rot was so far advanced they had to amputate the foot to save the man.

I try to swallow the truth but still, like Cronus, it comes out of my mouth anyway.

Yusef Komunyakaa returned from Vietnam and visited the memorial and wrote, *I'm stone. I'm flesh.*

As a defensive strategy, trenches followed a zigzag pattern and never a straight line.

Back home my father slips a hand under the lifted tongue and buffs the black leather until it shines with his reflection, and this is how he meets each week, emptied shoes laid out.

ARMATURE

a call
 two arms
 akimbo *Arms and*
the gentlemen at arms
 length armed to
 the teeth arm candy armed
 struggle with open arms
 inspection give my
 right arm strong-arm
 bear arms babe
 in arms take up
 arms shot *In the Arms*
of an Angel up
 in arms up arms
 up arms up arm-in-
 arm twisting
 my arm *A Farewell*
to brothers
 in arms *These Arms*
of one-
 armed bandit with one
 arm tied
 behind my back the long arm of the law
 costs an arm and a leg

YEAR OF THE DOG: AFTER-MATH

Jackson State College, 14–15 May 1970

For as long as folks can
remember the campus
has been split by Lynch
Street, the four-lane thorough-
fare leading back
to town. The stoplights flashing
red at the intersection of Lynch
and any street it meets
making it so
townsfolk can idle and rev
their engines cussing the dark
students trying to cross.

It's not long before the National
Guardsmen march down, before the city
police march up, before the students
hear *We're gonna kill*
some o' you nig—before the thrum
and bleat that follows—

Some students crouch
under dorm room desks.
Some students are running away.
Some students stand still.
Some students are falling down.
Some students climb the stairs.
Some students are screaming.
Some students make no sound.
Some students stay inside.
Some students are bleeding out.

Some students are bowing their heads
over equations, finding the value

of each variable, drawing lines that intersect
in the shape of a cross or an X—

If	100	Students peaceably gathered
If	647	National Guardsmen on duty in Jackson, Mississippi
If	40	Highway Patrolmen
If	27	City Police
If	>200	Rounds fired
If	460	Buckshots fired
If	28	Seconds of gunfire
If	140	Bullet marks on Alexander Women's Dormitory
If	24	Windows into which shots are fired
If	18	Metal panels pocked with buckshot
If	1	Wine bottle dropped from a dormitory window
If	0	Shots fired from inside the dormitory
If	0	Windows left unshattered by gunfire
Then	17	Year-old James Earl Green is dead
Then	21	Year-old Phillip Lafayette Gibbs is dead
Then	12	More students hospitalized
Then	1	Photograph of the shattered façade
Then	1	Bullet-branded, knotted-twisted white curtain still hanging on
Then	2	Dark faces of the risen women looking out of the pane- emptied frame

EDGEWOOD ELEGY

The Edgewood Independent School District, located in a predominantly lower-income Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American west side neighborhood of San Antonio, suffered 54 casualties during the Vietnam War, one of the highest rates for a single school district in the country. My father grew up and attended school in this neighborhood.



Here is the entrance

I.
Arthur Adame
22 May 1970
Multiple
Frag-
men- ta/tion
few
Flaco

II.
Adolfo Aguilar, Jr.
14 March 1968
We few

Small Arms
Fire / Body

III.
Enrique Bernal
7 March 1968
La Crotcha (The Corps)

Purple Hearts
Hostile / Ground
Henry

IV.
Gilberto Caballero
6 July 1967

Artillery
we happy
Mortar

V.
Fernando Camarillo
29 May 1968
Other
Explosive

Descansa

my father's documents:
Gilberto C. Villarreal
May 1968
Certificate of Natural—
ization
April 1969
Order
To Report For Induction

VI.
Refugio José Cantú
5 March 1967
Sergeant
Body

En Paz

VII.
Daniel Cardenas

then
shall

our names

VIII.
Rudy Cardenas
26 May 1968
these

In
Country

IX.
Horacio Carranza
2 March 1968
Other

Explosive
patria
mori

X.
Louis Castillo

wounds
Horace

XI.
Ernesto F. Castro
6 August 1968
Drowned
No Suff- o -cated

I had
Airborne

XII.

Robert G. Cevallos
12 May 1969

band of
Married
brothers

XIII.

Roy Cisneros
11 September 1968
Navy
disregarding
his own
safety
Cross

XIV.

Virgil G. Cruz
28 September 1965

Semper

Other Accident

myfather'sdocuments
myfather'sdocuments
myfather'sdocuments
myfather'sdocuments
myfather'sdocuments
myfather'sdocuments
myfather'sdocuments
myfather'sdocuments

XV.

Jesus H. De Leon
14 March 1970
Frag-

Brigade
men-

XVI.

Mario O. De Leon
20 May 1967
men-

Infantry
Division

XVII.

Christopher G. Delgado
17 February 1968
TET

Lunar Year
Mortar

Monkey

XVIII.

Jose Escamilla
10 February 1966

At every
jolt, the blood

XIX.

Julian Escobedo
1 September 1969
Mission / Hel-
icopter
A Shau Valley

/body/not—

XX.

Felix Esparza, Jr.
17 May 1966

mori

XXI.

Juan Santos

this blood

XXII.

Estrada Ramon Flores
7 October 1968

Infantry
Div-
Daughter
ision

XXIII.
Rudy Garcia

XXIV.
Jose Garza, Jr.
18 May 1969

Sergeant
Operation

[Re] Member

En Paz

XXV.
Basilio Gomez
18 June 1968
I was

a year old
then

With love,

Basilio Gomez, Jr.

XXVI.
Roy Gonzales, Jr.
5 March 1966

Few

XXVII.
Santiago R. Gonzales
27 February 1967

Selective

Bronze

Star

Service

Jimmy

XXVIII.
Hilario H. Guajardo
1 May 1967

Off-

shore

Crash

at sea

not recovered

XXIX.
Jose A. Gutierrez
28 January 1966

Regular

Wish not

one man

more

XXX.
Raul C. Gutierrez
1 May 1967

SeMper

aIr loss

at seA

XXXI.
Enrique Hernandez

O

do not wish

one more

XXXII.
Heriberto Hernandez
5 December 1968

I feel

like I won't be

coming back

Surrounded by / Bronze
shipmates

XXXIII.
Raymond Hernandez
6 October 1968

my brother

Married

primo

Light In-

fan
ade

XXXIV.
Robert Litterio
 4 September 1968
 Identical
 Fragment-
 Twin
*Shadow reflection
 of my brother*

XXXV.
Joe G. Longoria
 19 April 1968
 Other
 Explosive
Shall be
 Baby brother

XXXVI.
Richard Ventura Lopez
 24 July 1967
 Other
 Explosive
*my brother
 we in it*

XXXVII.
Ricardo C. Mendiola
 31 January 1970
 Other
 Explosive
one more
 Boyfriend

XXXVIII.
Domingo F. Morado
 13 May 1969
 Mortar
 Morado / Purple
 Domingo / Sunday

XXXIX.
Robert D. Murphy, Jr.
 26 February 1968
 Shot through
 Heart
Bruthah
 Radio

[
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]
]
]
]
]

XL.
Armando Navarro
 28 August 1968
 Division
*I answered
 I am here
 Send me*

Tio Mingo

INDUCTION
*you are here—
 by ordered
 bring enough
 clean clothes
 for three days
 bring enough
 money to last*

XLI.
Gilbert Palacios
 6 May 1969
 Scout Dog
 Handler
 Walked the line
 Man's Best

XLII.
Ramiro R. Ramirez
 24 January 1968
 Died
 while missing
band of

XLIII.
Tommy Rendon
 29 March 1968
His blood
we few
brothers

XLIV.
Joe M. Riojas

dulce

XLV.
Fidencio G. Rios
6 July 1970

Other
de

XLVI.
Jesus M. Robledo, Jr.
21 August 1968
Grunt
Platoon
Hell Bro
ke

XLVII.
Raul Ruiz, Jr.

*Bro
thers
-corum*

XLVIII.
Fermin Saldaña, Jr.
23 May 1966

Letter home:
Someone
has
to do it.

NATURALIZ—
ation-ation-ation
*Intends to reside
Per man- ently
In the United
States / entitled
in all
Other respects*

XLIX.
Gregorio Valdez III
30 January 1966
*His
Pistol*

L.

Juan Vallin

*In His / Small
Arms / Hand / Fire
jolt*

LI.
Gregory J. Van de Walle
14 May 1967
then

Purple
Body
*let him
let him*

LII.
Edward Vela, Jr.

our names

-No-

LIII.
Jimmy Lee Woolfolk
19 December 1967
Air / Loss

4 December 1967

Crash / Land

LIV.
Armando M. Zepeda
22 May 1971

depart

HEARTS AND MINDS

So, we must be ready to fight in Vietnam, but the ultimate victory will depend upon the hearts and minds of the people who actually live out there.

—Lyndon Johnson, 1965

don't lose []
bear in []

cross your [] hope
to die / a legend

in your own [] / bleeding []
presence of [] / your absence made

[] grow fonder
change your [] / strike

fear in the [] / call
to [] / hand over

your [] / peace
of [] / home

is where the []
is / stuck in

your [] / your [] not
in it / nothing could be

further from
your []

MOTHER TONGUE

*If I could, I'd grow tongues in my arms and hands
and hair, in the soles of my feet—a thousand tongues
all talking, all crying together . . .*

—Hecuba in Euripides' *Hecuba*

If I could bite my tongue
and have it split into two
whole daughters that split
again in endless fission-
ing, splitting the very thing
keeping their whole line
going—If I could I would
watch my tongue and its
tongue-set wagging
their tails, some silver-
tongued, some wicked—
I'd hold my tongue
out like an offering or
a battalion, a thousand
tongues talking in their
native tongue, a forked-
tongue language, all
of them speaking
in tongues and tongue-
lashing like Medusa's head
or the tentacles of a giant
squid—I'd stick out
all of my tongues—I'd let
my tongues loose
and lassoing my
prey—some slither-
whipped, some wick-
snuffed—I'd leave them
all—*wild tongues can't be
tongue- tamed they can
only be—tied—cut—*

YEAR OF THE DOG: A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

45

Alcatraz Island & Petaluma, CA, Summer 1970

STATION v. 1. To assign a post, position, or place to a person: As when my father is stationed at an infirmary in Petaluma the year before he's stationed at the 56th Dental Detachment in Phu Bai, Vietnam. **2.** To position oneself, take up one's (preferred) place: As when the Indians of All Tribes station themselves at Alcatraz Island for 19 months from November 1969 until June 1971.

STATION n. 1. A place or position to which a person is assigned, esp. for duty: As when the first protesters swam ashore and the island's caretaker abandoned his station, crying out over the radio: *Mayday! Mayday! The Indians have landed!* **2.** The place or position occupied by a person or thing: It isn't long after the Indians occupy Alcatraz and proclaim *We hold the Rock!* that my father arrives at the Army Security Agency Field Station in Two Rock Valley, named after a paved-over Indian Trail. This isn't long after the government had closed the prison and the light station on the island and had declared Alcatraz *surplus federal property* in 1963. **3.** A place where a particular kind of business or service is carried out; a base or center equipped for a particular purpose. Frequently with modifying word: Back in 1913, a local newspaper giddily (and erroneously) proclaimed, *Alcatraz Island is to be abandoned as a military prison and converted into the most modern immigration station in America. . . . Those detained would not have to be watched, as there can be no escape from Alcatraz.* **4.** A person's position in life as determined by external circumstances or conditions: Every Indian's station in life is marked by broken treaties like the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868, which proclaimed all abandoned federal land

should be returned to the Indians who once occupied it. 5. A band of frequencies used by a particular broadcasting company; a channel: Weekends my father crosses the bridge spanning the bay and tunes the radio to a station playing Joplin's scratchy version of Gershwin's promise, *One of these mornings / You're gonna rise, rise up singing*. Sometimes he sings along, and sometimes he keeps rolling the dial down past the static to a pirated station where Buffy Sainte-Marie is singing *the treaties are broken again and again* and John Trudell is welcoming listeners to *Radio Free Alcatraz from Indian Land Alcatraz Island*. 6. A place in which a person chooses to position herself; a place or position taken up as a viewpoint: As when LaNada Means takes up her station as a leader in the occupation, staying on for the duration and managing the finances and meeting with lawyers and handling reporters and looking after her children and drafting a grant proposal for a park and an Indian cultural center and school on the island—though it's hard to know all this with the men getting all the credit. 7. The place in which a thing stands or is positioned; a thing's (proper) location: Graffiti stationed at the island's entrance: *INDIANS WELCOME. UNITED STATES INDIAN PROPERTY*. Cf. **LOCATION**.

LOCATION *n.* 1. An area or region in which something takes place or is situated; a setting. Frequently with qualifying adjective: Back during World War II, the military base in Petaluma was called Two Rock Station and was an ideal location for intercepting enemy radio communications. By the time my father arrived, they'd changed the name and their tactics and had transformed a corner of the

compound into a Vietnamese village for training the troops on-location. 2. The particular place or position occupied by a person or thing: John Trudell's voice breaks the airwaves: *The question has been asked why did we choose to occupy an abandoned prison rather than a more desirable land location. The answers are many and to we, Indian people, they are obvious. Alcatraz Island is a symbol of what we Indian people have today. It bears a remarkable resemblance to reservation life as neither have enough water, there are no natural resources, and the government cannot find any use for it.* 3. *Computing.* A position or address in memory: Trudell signals his location over the radio: *Even the rocks which seem to lie dumb as they swelter in the sun thrill with memories of past events connected with the fate of my people.* 4. An area of land occupied by a particular population group, esp. one set aside for the use of indigenous peoples; a reserve. Now *historical*. Cf. **RELOCATION**

RELOCATION *n.* The act of reallocating something; the action of moving to a new location: Back in 1953, Congress established a policy of *Termination* toward Indians which sounds redundant but which actually meant the end of government support for Indian tribes and protected status for Indian lands and which led to the *Indian Relocation Act of 1956*, which offered Indians a one-way bus ticket from their tribal lands to cities like San Francisco, places where they often found themselves unsettled and unemployed and suffering from a sense of cultural and financial dislocation. Cf. **DISLOCATION**

DISLOCATION *n.* **1.** Displacement of a bone from its natural position in the joint: As when my father drives the ambulance from Petaluma across the bridge to the Letterman Army Hospital at the Presidio while the guy in the gurney cries out from the split center of his body, from what the medic calls a posterior dislocation of the hip. **2.** Removal from its proper (or former) place or location: Low on the dial, John Trudell describes the dislocation of his people who *are few and resemble the scattering trees of the storm-swept plain*. **3. fig.** The state of being “out of joint” or thrown into confusion or disorder; disarrangement: As when my father arrives at the emergency room and the doctor on duty tells him and the medic to take hold of the guy on the gurney and then proceeds with considerable force to pop the hip back in place, and later, when the guy is up and walking again and he tells my father how he’s still got this lingering feeling of dislocation, how once something’s out of joint there’s no putting it back the way it was before. As in the year to come, when my father and LaNada Means and John Trudell and all the others are forced out, as when relocation orders, as when one-way, as when static on the station, as when years later my father and LaNada and John come home but still feel that lingering sense of dislocation, as when thrown stones sink and settle onto the storm-swept bay floor even as the ripples they’ve made shirr the surface and reach for shore.

YEAR OF THE DOG: SOLEDAD

53

*New York Women's House of Detention, December 1970
for Angela Davis*

though you are their sole suspect

though they capture you on Columbus Day

though their conqueror's pallor dulls the night's obsidian pulse

though they smash the whorled tips of your fingers against the ink

though they single you out beyond a doubt

though they lock you away from the others

though inside these walls *book* is a shackled verb and not a shared noun

though they hand your beaten body over to another state authority

though they make you move through their thicket of rifles

though your cuffed wrists won't let you raise your fists

though your shoulders shiver in your jailhouse shift

though your teeth break the chilled silence with drumroll chatter

though your feet turn snowmelt

though the white drifts will bury others

you will not be kept
solitary for long

you will turn salt-pillar steady
elusive moonpool

you will circulate
your smuggled copy of *Soledad Brother* to your sisters

you will refuse
to shuffle or stumble on your shackled walk

you will say the names of the ones still inside
Helen and Harriet and Vernell and Laura and Amy and Pat and Minnie and Joann

you will know there is nothing singular
about you

you will know you are a compound
word like *everybody* or *underground* or *elsewhere* or *blackbird* or *railroad*—

in the place where I'm from *Soledad* is
a word and a sentence

Soledad is the name a woman is given

Soledad is a sentence a woman must serve
for the rest of her life

Soledad is the gavel and the holding pen

Soledad is the person and the state
of being she lives out

Soledad is the letter sent from a locked cell

Soledad is the name we sometimes call
our most holy *Virgen*

Soledad insists on service to it

Soledad is the sentence
you will spend your life writing

On the morning of June 8, 1972, Phan Thi Kim Phúc fled with her family from the Cao Dai Temple near Tráng Bàng during a misdirected napalm attack by South Vietnamese forces. The napalm burned through her clothes, leaving third degree burns on her back and arms. Nick Ut, a South Vietnamese photographer for the AP, photographed her running with others down Route 1 before accompanying her to the hospital. The photograph ran the next morning in papers across the world and is thought to be largely responsible for hastening the end of U.S. involvement in the war. In the years since, Kim Phúc has often been referred to simply as the "Napalm Girl."

KIM PHÚC IN THE TEMPLE OF CAO DAI

Tráng Bàng, June 8, 1972

No place
safe left
save the village
temple or so
you've all been
told: two handfuls
of soldiers, nearly a score
of neighbors killing
time in the lull.

Now the third day
in, the sky flame-
rouged, you are running
after the younger
children: Cousin Danh still
unsteady in his steps
toddling toward the black
bird—flight-awry—now
shuttered indoors now
shuddering now stilled
by the boy's grasp now
the grownups shouting—
No! An omen!—now
the wing-thrashed
release now the ascent.

You reach out
but Danh has fallen
in a fit at the loss
of what he once
held, no matter what
you do, he won't
be consoled.

There she was



in her

the child

birdgrief



childreftgravecry

the bird

in her

howling

and

cursing

KIM PHÚC IN THE BLAST

Route 1, Tráng Bàng, June 8, 1972

Phosphorus smoke slithering into the temple garden

target marking the falling

Hard bombs drop heavily to the ground, but

Then I saw the fire everywhere around me

the lighter napalm canisters tumble end over

falling face

down

Actually, I was in the middle

of that

end, making forward progress *I was running*

as they head earthward

running, running away

—huh huh huh huh huh huh huh huh huhhuhhuhhuhhuhhuhhuuu—

I tore off

unwritten

my burning

rule of engagement:

clothes jellied sleeve of flame

no fire directed at unarmed

But the burning

Vietnamese unless they were

didn't

running runningrunningburning

stop

Anyone running

could be assumed *I was alone*

blackened back neck	brurningbreakneck	ponytorchtail	to be fleeing Viet
<i>with that terrible</i>	<i>Nóng quá</i>		Cong
<i>Má</i>	<i>nóng quá</i>		and therefore fair
		<i>heat</i>	game

KIM PHÚC IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

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Route 1, Tráng Bàng, June 8, 1972

Frame 1: Nick Ut / Horst Faas

After the black smoke I saw

first, one woman

I keep shooting and shooting

then I saw

the girl

her arm

just running

open big

mouth

It's

a picture

that

doesn't

rest

Frame 2: Eye to Eye

by the time the body's caught
in the camera's eye
the subject turns object—
arms are winged black-
bird's eye view of the
strikes what strikes
the eye is the body
flayed naked the naked
eye can't see the eyes
in back of the back no
skin off the back straw
breaking the camel's eye
of the need the blind
eye of just the scales
falling from the eyes
opened on the opened
morning papers

Frame 3: William Westmoreland

WESTMORELAND SAYS

I said

HIBACHI

it was told to me

NOT NAPALM

that she was

*burned*BURNED

by a hi—

GIRL

Frame 4: Kim Phúc / Nhất Chi Mai

<i>The first time I look</i>	<i>I wish</i>
<i>at that picture</i>	<i>to use my body</i>
<i>I say, Oh</i>	<i>as a torch</i>
<i>my goodness!</i>	<i>to dissipate</i>
<i>Why he took</i>	<i>the darkness</i>
<i>that picture?</i>	<i>to awaken love</i>
<i>But later on, I</i>	<i>among people</i>
<i>have to accept that—</i>	<i>and bring</i>
<i>that picture</i>	<i>peace to Vietnam.</i>

KIM PHÚC IN THE BARSKY BURN UNIT

Saigon, June-November 1972

Nights when the nurses turn back to their stations your father acts as if he's observing visiting hours as if he's on his way out when really what he's doing is preparing the body smoothing every fray of himself until he is reed or blade or thread enough to slip underneath the bed where you lie unconscious face down he fears you will not make it back from this he cannot leave you he will lie in wait for your spirit to loosen its springs who else will know to take you back to be buried with the ancestors who else will know the moment you're gone you must be taken back to lie among the others so you will not come back to haunt the family as a restless ghost he's flat on his back blinking against the bed's underside the patchwork of coils unsprung you make it to morning and he's back at it fighting back tears as he hears your shattered cries your high whine your low moan in the burn bath the nurses peeling back the skin that hasn't fastened or sloughing the grafts swelling with infection your wails the wails of flayed prey you've left language behind deadened tissues snipped all along your back dabbed and dressed the days patched and bound into weeks then three months in he sees your shuttered eyes alive in moth-flicker he knows you're making your way back to him bowing toward you he whispers *Phúc do you know your father?* he keeps asking *Phúc do you know your father?* until you answer back one word—*Know*—the word a hammer strike or a snake's the moment he knows you've come back he knows you will live *Phúc has come back to herself* he will tell your mother and he will bring back a split spiny-skinned soursop and together you will eat the fruit and know there's no turning back now

KIM PHÚC IN THE SPECIAL PERIOD

Havana, Cuba, Spring 1992

The cane fields, leave-
wisped with their green
secrets. Stalk thickets stay
uncut. The mill machines stilled.

There's no fuel so no
one's going anywhere soon
though many know how
tires not only spin but float.

The sugar can't be processed
by your body is what the doctors
say and prescribe you special
dietary instructions.

You're not alone with your special
needs. Everyone here knows
where there's blood there's sugar
that must be controlled.

You've come to grow used
to *special*. You've come through
enemy fire, your scarred arms
rising now like coppiced cane.

In the countryside, smoke-
stacks loom billowless.
In the city, people wait
in line under a billowless sky.

You've given up
on medicine. Now you're learning
the enemy's language. Nothing
special. Just the everyday

conjugations of your body's verbs:

I burn, I live, I leave,

I burned, I lived, I left,

I will burn, I will live, I will leave

KIM PHÚC IN THE TEMPLE OF THE SUN

Teotihuacán, Mexico, 25 July 1992

Here you are
in the shadows of another
temple, this time the holy place
where my ancestors once
made their offerings,
burning their girl-effigies.

Today's the day
when the sun's supposed
to shine directly over the top
of the pyramid at noon—
a position designed
for perfect alignment.

The pyramids are divided
by what the Aztecs called
Miccaotl, by the passageway
now called *Calzada de los Muertos*—
the dead you cannot help
but cross.

You've come this far
hoping to keep crossing
past the stacked stones
of the vanquished. But your
minders won't let you
out of their sight.

Today's not the day.
There are eyes everywhere
like the scalded milk-wash of the sun.
There's no hiding, so you pose
for a photo against the steps leading nowhere
but closer to the sun's noonday glare.

How are you captured
in this shot? Looking back? Off
in the distance beyond the temple
gates? The sun at your back,
a yoke tethering the body
to the earth it must break.