

Twelve Poems
by Thomas Nguyen

Childhood Fragments

Hands on handlebars
no training wheels you

are seven and I
am two years younger.

Cushion grips with
bright streamers you

picking freckled violets
from the ground.

Lull of summer just
us two some days

when mom lets us we
go out as far as the park.

Holding onto your hand
blood-warm there is

dirt around the scabs we
get from falling.

So many miles
away almost two

decades later this
is what I can remember.

Brain-dead

Again the pages turn, fingers against the
pulp, oil residues brushing black-rimmed
edges, back and forth, back
and forth, for hours now, and the head
tilts from falling in and out of sleep, in
and out. Then the color-coded figures, anatomical
measurements, equations of conductance and voltage,
labels for every square centimeter of the brain, all
of it, come alive. And how they dance for you.

*The prefrontal cortex doesn't store actual memories,
but reminds the individual that he has something to remember.*

For the first time, you see it. Neurons
stained a fluorescent crimson like sunlight
crackling in blood solution. All untamed electricity,
all of it. So much potential, charge and
whiplash, the way the brain communicates,
all frenzy and speed, with brave leaps
over empty void.

Forest Green Journal

The tree shades all creatures
below, silhouettes of nature's backdrop. Some
branches jag outward, ironed out,
thinned at the tips, flattened
like matted twine. You look at the ones that droop,
hang, sway with a muffled sigh
by the wind's discretion. They are the thorns
on the side of a crown you wear,
folded spines, lost grit, pointed inward. Everywhere
leaves like autumn rust burn
under September sun. And the mud below,
there is so much of it. How you
wish you could crawl into it, the cool,
damp nothingness, again and again.

The Greenhouse Effect

Texas summer and the AC is set
to eighty-two. Home is a greenhouse
that captures light and turns it to heat.
Sister complains. Argues with mom

that they shouldn't have to live
like this to save money.
Home lets nothing out. It is glass
and shield. Brother thinks

more than he should.
No cracks of crude air in the greenhouse.
Mom comes home from work.
Wishes sister was more like brother

and remembers to tell her
that every day. Rows and rows
of crops grow orderly under
strict supervision in the greenhouse.

Brother wonders what it would be
like to move into another life.
Says nothing. Watches moisture
boil to steam.

Vanderbilt Condominiums

I'll leave my eyes within
the rocky craters of the moon
just outside my apartment,
dig my memories into the welcome
mat in front, let them soak in the
fibers, grow from the dirt
caught from the bottoms of shoes.

The place will be stained from the
inside out with our breaths, bumps and ridges
of the drywall greyed from touch,
dollhouse wallpaper peeled even
more by accident, the sigh of the washer,
heave of the dryer whispering our
secrets all through the night.

And I will forget it all one day,
move on from the one stovetop
that actually worked burning crimson,
coils glowing hot, vapor
scaling the surface of the cabinets, creating
shadows that always danced for us.
And how beautiful they were.

threads

miles above earth
concrete slabs

swell into clouds
and the tips

of thinly
strung kites

stay tethered
by sunlight.

you can see
where birds turn

back in thirds,
doubtful of

which sky is
theirs, so they fly

to you, swarm
over the ocean

salt, dipping and
diving under

bullets, rain,
exoskeleton

fabric of the kites
breaking the whole

world open.

Like Father like Son

Consider that you will never
be able to run fast enough
to forget. Accept that your father

is more alive in your dreams than
in the texts he sends you every year.
Hi son, BỐ will be in Houston

this weekend. Hope to see you soon.
Lose your Vietnamese heritage
over and over again, and realize

the only word you will never struggle
to translate is *father*. Remember his
footsteps, the way they pressed

down on carpet, hollow with
weight. Wake up each day to the
sound of his voice, tires scraping

loose gravel, telling you to get up
and start the morning with a run.
It's good for you, son. It's good

for you. Rub your eyes the
way you did twelve years ago
when you woke up, tangled

in bed sheets, and see how the
world gets a little dimmer as it
becomes clearer. Keep running.

Asylum

A patient from unit two
is screaming, threatening
to choke herself, but you can't hear
anything, just see veins pulse
around her neck, branches
bare like elms in wintertime.
Silence still like sunrise
over Lake Vermilion.
You tell her to write down her words,
it helps with the processing.
Five minutes later she
hands you *I hate being here*
the food that I was eating was ok,
says it's yours now.
Activity coordinator
gets a new job shortly after,
tells you he'll never come back
to this place. *And you want*
to work with the crazies?
Moss everywhere.
Straightjackets on display
in the main building
behind bullet-proof glass cases.
A smell like human
disinfectant you can never
get off your clothes
when you leave.
So much scrubbing.
Scuff marks and age. Walls alive
that whisper the night.

genealogies

follow, you tell me.
you're teaching me how to
draw a bluebird, mother,
plumage roughed against
brushstrokes of wind,
quivering arcs of wire.
hand in hand you
reposition my fingers every few
minutes when I start to hold the
pencil too close to its tip.
I can feel
the pulse of your fingers,
warm blood current
swirling around the
creases and grooves
of your palm—
you always told me they were lifelines.
now almost two decades
later there is only stiffness.
fingers that cannot bend,
skin dulled softly
over joints that lock in place.
the doctor tells you it's
age, rust along the edges
and so many pills later—
I hold onto your hand
and remember
the body
always wanes.

in case time runs away

again we go over your spelling, baby sister. words you
can't get right. practicing for weekly fourth grade
spelling tests. those ie and ei words. receive and believe.
your hand on lined page. fingers curled over creases that
haven't formed yet. grip strength. taut like drum skin.
you tracing letters one by one. shadows dancing
along. black hair catching light from the May sun.
recess.

no more spelling tests. because you're in middle
school now. I don't believe you. remember reading
word lists for you until I was angry. and I realize
I've been gone. busy. watching you grow up in snapshots
from afar. each time I come home I notice differences.
the way you dress. waking up at five am to straighten
your hair. makeup age. boys. the way you treat
mom. wondering who created the stars you use
to find your way.

Mind Control

In a process called synaptic pruning, the brain will shed weaker connections in order to strengthen stronger ones.

In the brain the mind
is a fractured
hourglass with sand
seeping from the cracks.

I imagine it must be wildfire.
Neurons like thread
flimsy in wind
tangle as electric currents
zip down the perimeter in
a flurry of crimson. Neurotransmitters
flowing between junctions
between cells in a pinball
machine. Everything moving eighty
miles per hour
against a backdrop of black void
and the mechanical
whir of the brain.

And then,
the hush.
Sparks at the tips of nerve endings
that signal the end. Tentacles
that flail fold in
on each other recoil
like plant roots under arid sun.
Look
how they wither.

Sài Gòn, 1985

“The Vietnam War ended on April 30, 1975 with the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese Army, and the evacuation of more than 130,000 Vietnamese closely associated with the United States or the South Vietnamese regime began.”

The boat is made from salvaged
wood, withered nails, rusted
sunlight. People are stacked in rows,
cargo, single-file. Your brother is
crouched next to you, yet there
is only the rustle of wind over empty
sea, hollow tides of the body. Cracks
in the hull let water seep in, the water
a murky brown, tinged with blood.
You spread it around the soles
of your feet to wash the dirt away.
Everywhere the ropes have knots.
What does the sky look like, mother?
Always raining very blue, you say,
in your broken English, and I think
I see it.