

CATHY LINH CHE

War Ghazal

Elemental dawn, the singe of bullets,
the vermillion birds cry out in war.

A girl runs naked from machine gun spray—
in the papers, her blood so black and white in war.

Sex is release, and a bastard son, but hey,
I didn't ask for no wife in war.

Went to Bangkok and smoked some dope,
you know, a little R & R time in war.

Back in the states, their questioning glares,
dare these gunmetal eyes in war?

Say mother, say country, say love, say God,
for whom must we fight in war?

The sting of shrapnel and a hospital stay
kept my father from dying in war.

Dress Up

I sometimes dressed in my father's clothes,
button-down shirts, thin from wear,
his flannels with the gasoline
steeped into fiber, though
my mother soaped, rinsed,
and aired them out;

I wore the gray pants he wore to work.
They fit perfectly, my legs
machine-cut his exact dimensions.
The fabric formed tightly over
the angular blocks of my quads,
my calves' wooden curves;

But I couldn't wear his army fatigues:
what I knew of war was limited
to *GI Joe*, *Tour of Duty*, and *Apocalypse Now*,
where he worked as an extra for fifty pesos a day.
When I looked hard, I could see my father
in a white helmet, dressed as a Viet Cong;

Once, I watched him take sandpaper to his face,
strip the dark spot from his cheekbone,
on the ridge just below the eye.
Blood dotted the steel faucet.
His skin was slick
and pink underneath;

Now, I write for my father—
the man snoring on the couch,
his Z's roaring through the house.
The noise marches into my room.
The letters collapse around my pen—
I write a poem that never seems to fit him.

Daughter

When I was a child, my father kept watch
over nothing. It was my mother
who rose from bed. Her face was a flickering
fixture. She was a house with a palm-thatched roof.
She learned to never sleep. The ceiling smelled
of cinder. My father kept himself.

I am his daughter, a mirror
or a window. I reflect red,
meaning stop, blood, or danger.
I am a bull, born in May.
I am not meant to be desolate,
an evening pulled apart like smoke.

One night, I came to understand
my father was a private landscape,
a man inside grass so tall
he disappeared.
My father was a soldier.
He stayed alive for me.

I remember a Christmas Eve.
The heater fogged the windows.
Our car, an '89 Camry.
I sat on my hands, a pile of rags,
blessed mortar, fire, and kerosene.
We were driving home and we crashed.

My father was an angry red brick.
The air, a lucent sheet.
The vapor formed curlicues between us.

I disappeared into my room.
What is one supposed to say
to one's father?

I've never found an opening.
My father looked like a human
with holes punched in.
The place where he lived
smelled of gasoline
and oiled cement.

There were no closets, only a swivel chair
where he slept with his arms
crossed behind his head.
My father hardly spoke to me,
but he showed me the place
where he built his machines

and gigantic wings.

CATHY LINH CHE is the author of *Split* (Alice James, 2014), the winner of the 2012 Kundiman Poetry Prize. She received her MFA from New York University and is the recipient of fellowships from The Fine Arts Work Center at Provincetown, Hedgebrook, and Poets House. She is Program Assistant for Readings/Workshops (East) at Poets & Writers.