

THOUNG VUONG-RIDDICK

To My Father

The red bag with Chinese characters
arrived by plane.
It contained ashes:
All that is left of your father,
my mother said.

Father, now you sleep in a cold
cemetery
in this icy country so far
from the sunny land
you never wanted to leave.

I remember you
like a warm current enveloping me.
When we were alone in the little shop
you talked and I was
your silent listener.

I got to know you—the little boy
pulled from school at twelve years old
to keep the books in a tiny grocery
store.

Your father told you to stop crying.
*Why have you chosen to be born
in my family instead of a rich family
that could pay for an education?*

You encouraged us to take advantage
of all the books we could find.
To buy them
you gave us the key
to your cash-register.

You told me I was responsible
for the rest of my family, dreamed
I would study overseas.
Soon your dreams became mine.

Looking back over these years
I see that we went from one continent
to another.
One after the other, the eight children
with our mother and A-Na.

From Hanoi to Saigon,
Saigon to Paris,
from Paris to Montpellier, then to
Montreal.

I went west, far, farther, looking
straight ahead,
not looking back until one day
I arrived in front of this ocean, the
Pacific.

I stand on the beach
and the country I left behind is there
in front of me.

You, father, died sick and alone
in that deserted and ruined land.
Now your ashes lie in peace amongst
us.

The Mad Uncle

Once, my mad uncle
came to stay in our house,
He was harmless,
Would sing when asked to.

He would sing with all his heart,
The national anthem of Red China
Though we would not dare.
He would sing eyes closed

In all my memories of Hanoi,
He would sing loud and clear
Through all the wasted land
I will hear this song
Till the end of time

“Arise, Ye who refuse to be slaved!
Arise! Arise! Arise!
Millions of hearts with one mind!
March on! March on! March on!”

Civil War

In Cholon, The Chinese town,
The sky was illuminated with fires,
Dark clouds, or bloody,
Poor men fled carrying cloth bags
Or luggage on their backs.
Bullets rained down, rained
Screams, dead in the streets.

We were caught
Between two lines of fire.
Could anybody see us?
Could anybody hear us?

Soldiers climbed the walls;
They stole—valuables and non-

valuables,
Cars,
and took the men, my two uncles.
They destroyed the gates,
No more protection
For us, women
and children.

We ran from house to house
Where to go?
Which way to be safe?

In Saigon, in Catinat Street,
elegant ladies
were strolling with their poodles.