

Vietnamese Americans

LESSONS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Placing the Accents

by Truong Tran

left undisturbed on the piano's mantel
ashes of incense in a cup of sand
ikebana flowers leaning towards morning
left to die on a converted shrine
a deserted home lived in only
by the presence of your portrait

lao gia — old man come sit down and drink some tea¹
I've brewed oolong your favorite
as a child I watched you unraveling
tea leaves still wet and warm
in your palm we found butterflies frogs
and elephant with two ears a trunk a tail
imagine finding an elephant
in the belly of a teapot

she left not long ago
with suitcase car keys a fold-up mattress
to act a stranger in a stranger's home
some white rice in a bowl
a few slivers of bitter melon
pickled and placed in a saucer of fish sauce
this is all that she will have
she says eating bitter is what she does best

it was the first real conversation
we had in months

hoa fuchsias của Bà
ốá chết chưa²
not yet Ma,
dying but not dead.
when are you coming ...

Shh...

she helped me write this poem
with eyeglasses tilted on this bridge of her nose
pen in hand as if holding a needle
she embroidered the accents onto this paper cloth
as you would have done with chisel hammer
your voice demanding *It's time you learn*

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FOOTNOTES TO POEM

1. As part of a traditional mourning ritual, Vietnamese families often invite their deceased ancestors home to dine and to drink tea on the anniversary of their deaths.
2. Translation: Are dad's fuchsia flowers dead yet?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe at least two possible meanings for the poem's title.
2. In what different ways does the mother assist the narrator in preserving cultural traditions?
3. Can you describe the differences in character and behavior between the mother and the deceased father? Use the images in the last stanza to help you. The pen and the needle versus the chisel and hammer as the instruments of choice for each parent suggests what about their relationships with their child?
4. How does the second stanza, together with the final stanza, offer a more complex and multi-dimensional image of the father?
5. Can you speculate about the reasons behind the mother's choice to leave and her bitterness?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Truong Tran is a graduate of the M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University, where he was selected as the 1995 Graduate Hood Recipient. He is also the recipient of the Browning Society Prize for The Dramatic Monologue, the Ina Coolbrith Prize for Poetry and the Arts Council of Santa Clara Fellowship in Poetry. His poems have been published in such journals as *The American Voice*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Crazyhorse*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Poetry East*, *ACM* (Another Chicago Magazine), *ONTHEBUS*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Bakunin* and *ZYZZYVA*, among many others. [This biography is extracted from *Watermark*.]