Missing in Action

Father left home
on a navy mission
on this day
nine years ago
when I almost one.

He was captured
on Route I
an hour south of the city
by moped.

That’s all we know.

This day
Mother prepare in altar
to chant for this return,
offering fruits
incense,
tuberoses,
and glutinous rice.

She displays his portrait
taken during Tet
the year he disappeared.

How peaceful he looks,
smiling,
peacock tails
at the corner
of his eyes.

Each of us bows
and wishes
and hopes
and prays.

Everything in the altar
remains for the day
excepts the portrait. 
Mother locks it away 
as soon as her chant ends.

She cannot bear 
to look into Father’s 
forever young 
eyes.

Should We?

March 17

Mother calls a family meeting.

Ong Xuân has sold 
leaves of gold 
to buy twelve airplane tickets.

Ba Nam has a van 
ready to load 
twenty-five relatives 
toward the coast.

Mother asks us, 
Should we leave our home?

Brother Quang says, 
How can we scramble away 
like rats, 
without honor, without dignity, 
when everyone must help 
rebuild the country?

Brother Khoi says, 
What if Father comes home 
and finds his family gone?

Brother Vu says, 
Yes, we must go.

Everyone knows he dreams 
of touching the same ground 
where Bruce Lee walked.

Mother twists her brows. 
I’ve lived in the North.
At first, not much will happen,  
then suddenly Quang  
will be asked to leave College.  
Ha will come home  
chanting the slogans  
of Ho Ci Minh  
and Khoi will be rewarded  
for reporting to his teacher  
everything we say in the house.

Her brows twist  
so much  
we hush.

April 17

**Saigon is Gone**

I listen to  
the swish, swish  
of Mother’s handheld fan,  
the whispers among adults,  
the bomb is the ever greater distance.

The commander has ordered  
everyone below deck  
even though he has chosen  
a safe river route  
avoiding the obvious escape path  
through Vung Tau,  
where the Communists are dropping  
all the bombs they have left.

I hope TiTi got out.

Mother is sick  
with waves in her stomach  
Even though the ship  
barely creeps along.

We hear a helicopter  
circling circling  
near our ship.  
People run and scream,  
*Communists!*

Our ship dips low  
as the crowd runs to the left,  
and then to the right.
This is not helping Mother.
I wish they would stand
and hush.

The commander is talking:
Do not be frightened!
It’s a pilot for our side
who has jumped into the water,
letting his helicopter
plunge in behind him.

The pilot
appears behind deck,
wet and shaking.
He salutes he commander
and shouts,
At noon today the communists
crashed their tanks
through the gates
of the presidential palace
and planted on the roof
a flag with one huge star.

Then he adds
what no one wants to hear:

It’s over;
Saigon is gone.

April 30
Late

Afternoon.
Last Respects

After two weeks
the commander calls
all of us above deck
for a formal lowering of
our yellow flag
with three red strips.

South Vietnam no longer exist.
One woman try to throw herself overboard, screaming that without a country she cannot live. as the wrestle her down, a man stabs his heart with a toothbrush. I don’t know them so their pain seems unreal next to Brother Khoi’s whose eyes are as wild as those of his broken chick. I hold his hand: *Come with me.*

He doesn’t resist
Alone at the back of the ship I open Mother’s handkerchief. Inside lies my mouse-bitten doll, her arms wrapped around the limp fuzzy body of his chick.

I tie it all into a bundle.

Brother Khoi nods, and I smile, but I regret not having my doll as soon as the white bundle sinks into the sea.

*War and Peace*

Miss Scott shows the class photographs of a burned, naked girl running, crying down a dirt road of people climbing, screaming, desperate to get on the last helicopter.

May 14
out of Saigon

of skeletal refugees, 
crammed aboard a 
sinking fishing boat, 
reaching up to the heavens 
for help

of mounds of combat boots 
abandoned by soldiers 
of the losing side.

She’s telling the class 
where I’m from.

She should have shown 
something about 
papaya and Tet.

No one would believe me 
but at times 
I would choose 
wartime in Saigon 
over 
peacetime in Alabama.

October 13
Thanhha’s real name is Trường Thị Minh Ha’, although she uses Thanh Ha’ professionally for its meaning "Gio’ng So^ng Xanh" or Teal River. She was born on March 18 1965 in Da Nang. She is the youngest of nine siblings. At the Fall of Saigon April 30, 1975, her soldier father was Missing in Action (and remains missing). Mother and children fled to the United States and moved to Montgomery, Alabama, because one man there was willing to sponsor all ten of them. Thanhha spoke nearly any English and was "the first Asian" in her school” along with one of her brothers grade.

Before high school, the family had moved to Fort Worth, Texas. Lai graduated from University of Texas, Austin with a degree in journalism and from 1988 worked about two years for the Orange County, California newspaper The Register, covering Little Saigon, the local Vietnamese community. She earned
a Master of Fine Arts from New York University and settled in New York City, where she teaches at Parsons The New School for Design (on leave this year).

Lai’s tortuous journey from Saigon to Montgomery, Alabama would forever shape Lai’s outlook on life. Upon arriving in Alabama, Lai was forced to acclimate herself to a life unknown. Customs that were natural in Alabama were completely foreign to Lai and her family. Lai faced immense prejudice from her fellow classmates. It would be ten years before Lai learned to speak English in a way that satisfied her.

Lai pushed through, though, and graduated from the University of Texas. Shortly after graduating, Lai worked for the Orange County, California newspaper The Register, where she covered news surrounding the small Vietnamese communities of Little Saigon in Garden Grove and Westminster, CA for two years.

Thanhha Lai has written exactly one novel, Inside Out & Back Again, so to fill up this bio space she is retyping her name to include its diacritical marks: Thanhhà Lạì. Such a change has no meaning for English readers but it does thrill her mother because a Lạì mustn’t ever be mistaken for a Lai. These tiny pesky marks, not to be confused with accent marks, will be a main feature in Lạì’s next novel, Listen, Slowly. She just submitted the first draft after typing 80 pages in two weeks, so excuse her if this bio lacks focus. Lạì can often be heard muttering to herself, “la révision est toute.”

The novel sprung Lai to literary stardom as she went on to win the 2011 National Book Award for Young People’s Literature and was runner-up for
a Newbery Honor. The novel told in verse is semi-autobiographical and thus holds a special place in Thanhha Lai’s heart. The novel mirrors her experiences as a young Vietnamese girl living in a mostly white America. Lai hopes to teach children and their parents that different isn’t bad, and she urges her own five-year-old daughter to “go stand next to [that person] and observe. That person just brought another world to your door without you having to travel” (Wolff 17). Thanhha has done exactly that for readers with her book, *Inside Out and Back Again*.

Thanhha Lai’s novel for young people, *Inside Out & Back Again*, conveys the wonders of being rescued in 1975 during an operation led by the USS Kirk. Last year, NPR shared other tales of that operation from refugees and U.S. sailors.

During her time at *The Orange County Register*, Lai stated that she “got this insane idea that [she] should quit and write fiction” (*HarperCollins* 5). She did just that. Before beginning her debut novel *Inside Out and Back Again*, Lai began writing a novel that she describes as being “whiplashed by hundreds of overly dramatic, showy sentences” (Wolff 9). Lai had been writing that novel for fifteen years before she switched gears and decided to get “inside the mind of a 10-year-old girl who feels as much as any adult but can’t express the emotions yet” (Wolff 14). In doing so, Lai focused on simple imagery in a process she likens to “boiling down sap to make syrup” (Wolff 13). What came from this process of getting to the core of her characters was her first novel *Inside Out and Back Again*, published in 2011 by *HarperCollins*. 

Universitas Sumatera Utara
Lai currently resides in New York City with her husband Henri Omer and their five-year-old daughter. She teaches writing at Parsons: The New School for Design and hopes to one day own urban chickens.

In 1991, during a beauty contest in a refugee camp in the Philippines, she sang for the first time in front of an audience as part of the talent competition. She won a $150 prize and discovered to her surprise that many people liked her voice. That same year, she resettled in Utica New York, but soon found that there are more opportunities in the West Coast so she moved to Southern California where she still resides today.