Thi Nguyen Poetry

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Recommended Citation
Nguyen, Thi (2024) "Thi Nguyen Poetry," Ellipsis: A Journal of Art, Ideas, and Literature: Vol. 49, Article 15. Available at: https://scholarworks.uno.edu/ellipsis/vol49/iss1/15

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Climate Change in California

Jacaranda trees pour
their purple petals down
streets, draping blankets
across drainage grates,
filling pools with rainwater
perfect for splashing. Perched above
a mourning dove escapes
being swept, balanced on top
the buzzing electrical
wire, eyeing the spinning,
drowned and dead June
Bugs below. Against my window,
balding branches clap
keeping time to the wind’s whipped
screams. Up on higher ground,
flip flops leave no trace, no
prints flung on yellow grass
so dry, it whines for just a flicker
of a flame. Dogs sniff ashy
smoke burning the red horizon
where the sun throbs. Nature
beckons us, but we cover our
ears, stubbornly ignoring her,
consumed instead
by light pixels and
computer-generated
screens with dings
ringing. Our trash mounts
like snow, one red leaf
clinging
to candy wrappers: bright
designs that catch my eye
leaving me plateaued.
The Fall of My Sister

As a signal to Americans in Saigon that the evacuation had begun, Armed Forces Radio started to play “White Christmas” on repeat.
—The National Museum of Diplomacy

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT
where her door opens only to be slammed shut, over and over

BEGIN FLASHBACK: EXT. ALLEYWAY - NIGHT
where bullets hit, knock just like the ones my parents used to know

END FLASHBACK

EXT. ASPHALT - NIGHT
where blue and red light mix with black crushed stones

EXT. DOORWAY - CONTINUOUS
where children listen to heavy boots pounding across the old front porch

INT. BEDROOM - SAME TIME
where her body presses against the white Christmas wooden door
too thin, it jumps with each approaching step

INT. HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS / INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS- INTERCUT
the thin bolt of the lock splinters the cheap frame
her bedroom light spills across a polished hardwood floor
her pupils rattle like bells in the snow.

HER
I’m fine. May your days be merry and bright.

ME
(a white lie)
I’ll send you a Christmas card.

HER
Where am I going?

BEGIN DREAM SEQUENCE: INT. DOCTOR’S OFFICE - LATE NIGHT
white coats carrying her across

INT. THRESHOLD/HOSPITAL ROOM - CONTINUOUS
bleached blank walls
starched stretched bedsheets

There she rises to look out the window at the *treetops glistening*
There she awakens pure as *snow*

END DREAM SEQUENCE

EXT. INTERIOR - HINDSIGHT
two opposing sides of a shut door
are the faces of a sister *I used to know*
A Calaveras of an Assistant

TO: All School Personnel
RE: The Passing of our Office Assistant

PS-540 memorializes the now vacant office, adjacent to the Girls’ Restroom, while we mourn the multiple “Take Attendance” reminders and Google calendar invitations of the late Ms. Thi Nguyen, pronouns she/her/hers.

Her 100% attendance record reflected her deep commitment to our school, always available to cover classes of those with an emergency Monday or Friday allergy. Impossible to replace, none can substitute for our best substitute teacher, substitute coordinator, and substitute crosswalk guard.

A true presence, she always made a perky entrance with our mail and beloved coffee, punctually at 7:57am each morning on a tray she balanced perfectly. Organized and thoughtful, never once did she get anyone’s coffee order wrong, as all Admin take their coffee black, no lattes, no cappuccinos.

Forever making copies and stapling teaching pedagogy handouts, Ms. Nguyen passed away on a dreary Wednesday at 2:13pm, doing what she loved most, spending hours in the mailroom, snuggled between Amazon boxes and the luscious heat of freshly printed paper. We would have never known of the toxic fumes from the recalled ink, if Ms. Nguyen had not valiantly sacrificed herself for our one team, one family.

She is survived by her direct supervisor, the Director of Secondary School, Deputy Vice Principal, and Math Department Advisor of PS-540, Dr. Ryan Andrews III, he/him/his - as he tries not to drown from grief in a sea of emails, rendering him helpless,
his executive functioning skills, now, alas, atrophied after Ms. Nguyen’s three years on the job.

In her beloved memory of her efficiency and low cost, we plan to dedicate a vending machine full of blueberry fig bars and granola bars as she was such an advocate for the prevention of childhood obesity. All sales collected will contribute toward timely and relevant R&D, as we plan to devote our best efforts in remembrance of her fine work to automate Ms. Nguyen’s valuable position.

Best wishes,

warm regards,

our hearts and prayers go out to Ms. Nguyen’s surviving dog, Lola,
sincerely,

HR, they/them/their.
Dreaming in the Time of Tuberculosis

When I fell into a volcano,  
my only way out was to squeeze  
through her sticky, narrow throat. I kept slipping back  
down, so I serrated my fingernails against my jeans  
until their edges looked like the teeth of a  
rabid rodent. Yet as I jammed  
my hands into her fleshy walls,  
I lost my footing, my legs  
folding into my chest,  
till I dove deep into  
her breathing  
abyss—  

only to be stopped  
when the muscles  
of her esophagus  
contracted, holding  
me still, hard, like a rock  
lodged midway through a glass tube.  
There, my host started shaking, a heavy  
beating ringing at the base, boiling  
the lava to shoot up from beneath  
me, pushing me up, up, up  
and out. And free. I  
became nothing but  
blood, spewing forth  
from the volcano’s  
gaping hot mouth.

Cupped hands  
caught my fall,  
and I recognized the creases  
that ran across those palms.  
Looking down at my own hands,  
to confirm, I found instead, shards  
of glass for fingers, feet, thighs and knees,  
even body. I couldn’t stop staring at  
myself. How could some-  
thing so beautiful  
be so deadly?
A Flood in Venice, Italy

The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.
—Genesis 6:6

High tourist season in Venice, runs a strong current:

A river of feet,
mobile phones like nets catching
best pics of the day

Plastic drink bottles,
paper wrappers, soiled napkins —
littered waste and trash

Above me the man
pollutes the air with his breath —
smell of sour coffee

My mother keeps asking, “When will I be a grandparent?”

My foot gets caught in
stale pasta leftovers and
empty ice cream cups

My friends remind me — “Don’t you want to be a mother just like us?”

Old deodorant
mixed with sticky sweat compresses
my lungs tight, can’t breathe

My heartbeat reproaches me, “Why let this opportunity slip past?”

Stuck in the deluge,
hands wave desperately, calling
for an SOS,

but a scrawny arm
in a sea of bodies is
as tiny as
the eight billion
parasites crawling upon
God’s forsaken earth.