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### Essay by Tuan Phan

Winner of the 2018 Talking Writing Prize for Personal Essay



My mother remembers her hunger in Bataan: that persistent gnawing under the rib cage, the deep breaths she sucked in that never felt like enough air.

Nearly a year after we'd left the Philippines Refugee Processing Center, our second and last refugee camp—after we had already begun to adjust to our new lives in America—my mother's dreams were still permeated by the sweet, pungent smoke of caramelized pork; the warmth of bitter-melon soup stuffed with minced meat and mushroom. Her nights were filled with visions of pho fragrant with basil and cilantro, sticky gray rice pudding covered in coconut crême, taro balls and sweet mango.

She dreamt of her mother's cooking, too: French-infused Vietnamese dishes from her childhood in Da Lat. Ragù in

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heated casseroles. Flan made with condensed milk and eggs, its sugar top glazed, its smoky sweet caramel dripping onto porcelain.

Our daily rations barely lasted the day in Bataan. Each item of meat, spices, and rice was weighed and doled out in exact amounts. Every family got exactly what was allotted to them. My mother waited in lines for hours, then gave the distributor the name of our barrack, our family size: two adults, one child. Our names were checked on a list, and she'd return with a dried fish and a handful of rice. Vegetables, sometimes.

If she had leftover money or valuables to trade, my mother purchased extra indulgences —other meats—from visiting Filipino vendors. By this point, though, the gold taels we'd hidden in the sleeves of our clothing on our boat escape had run out. Fish and rice were usually on the menu.

It wasn't so different in Saigon right after 1975, when food was rationed, and a black market appeared that aided survival in the wrecked postwar economy of Vietnam. The difference this time was that my mother was eating for two. When we arrived in Bataan in 1986, she was one month into her pregnancy with my little brother.

I sometimes tell Will that, even though he was born American, the first of us to be a citizen, he's just as much a refugee as we are. He fed on the dried fish carefully meted out to his mother, which was parceled out further through the birth cord connecting them. The routes and canals of her sacrifice are traceable in pictures that show her thin self, holding him in those first few years in America. Division upon division, my mother's flesh giving him what it could spare. She never told my brother of her recurring dreams of food.

Unlike my mother, I don't remember being hungry. I was eight, and I don't remember much beyond the slowness of the days, days that didn't seem to end and held nothing new, days of missing Saigon, my first and forever home, and Galang, our first camp in Indonesia, with its white sand, blue sea—the same sea we'd traversed through eight harrowing days and nights.

I spent my days playing with insects. I used straws with droplets of Coca-Cola to transport ants from one clan to war with an enemy clan. Once the straws dropped, the ants' frenzied fighting reminded me of the cricket-fighting matches I'd been crazy about in Saigon.

Cokes in Bataan were distributed in little plastic bags held together by rubber bands. The bags were cool and wet with condensate, and each had a straw sticking out of it that you could use to sip, the bag deflating as you drank it wrinkly dry. It was the sweetest way to drink Cokes, better than from cans or cups, because the condensate cooled your fingers. On hot days, I'd rest the bag on my head like an ice pack and let it drip onto my shoulders.

But other than the luxury of Cokes in plastic bags, the thrill of transporting ants to battle, I was bored. In the mountains, there was nothing but vegetation and other refugees, all in the same state of stasis. No beaches, no sea. No river like the one that had curled around our apartment building in Saigon, the apartment I was already forgetting.

Our barrack felt barren and empty, even as it was crowded and noisy. We slept on a king-sized plank of wood. My father wasn't around—he worked in the clinic most days. My mother spent her afternoons teaching English. They had both been doctors in Vietnam. In the rainy season, torrents pelted the barrack's corrugated aluminum roof, and the soil smelled of cool showers. But on most days, the interiors turned oppressively windless and warm. I nestled under a nearby tree, playing with my military ants.

I began to realize we were never going back to our old country. From then on, home would forever be some other place: a new country, more sad barracks with corrugated roofs, new boundaries demarcating an outside land we didn't belong to. Home would neither be where we were nor what we left behind, just some other *where* that existed in the nostalgia of my parents' reminiscences. And that, too, could be forgotten.

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When we got to America, the couple who sponsored us lived in Toledo, Ohio. William—though he asked us to call him Bill—was an American World War II veteran. His wife Cathy was a German immigrant. When my mother gave birth in a

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Toledo hospital two months after we arrived, my baby brother took on the formal appellation of “sponsor” for our family.

One of our first meals in this new country was the hamburger, a food that was, we were told in the camps, invented by Americans. Cathy claimed the opposite. She would cook us the original version, she said. So, my first taste of an “American” hamburger meal was made by a German. I don’t recall much about it, only that it seemed oddly unappetizing, this minced meat on bread, eaten at a dining table set with silverware, in a room as large as our entire Saigon apartment.

The following night, my mother cooked for everyone in the house: Bill, Cathy, Dad, me, herself, the baby growing large inside her belly. She made caramelized pork chops, substituting Maggi soy marinade for fish sauce, arranging it on plates filled with full-grained American rice, not the broken rice that usually accompanied it. It didn’t matter; I gorged myself. Cathy’s spacious German-American kitchen, accoutred with hanging sausages, its fridge of Western foods and condiments, was pungent with the sweet curling smoke of caramelized onions and soy glaze dripping off the pan.

I wonder if the visions and smells of that dinner made their way into my mother’s dreams that night. They certainly invaded mine as I slept in my own spacious, silent room, on a bed too soft and comfortable for sleep. It was the first time I had ever slept apart from my parents. Lying here now, writing this, I wonder if, for that one night early in our trek to America, my mother’s dinner matched the reality of her dreams.

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### Art Information

- "[Cooking Fires Behind the Billets—PRPC 1985](#) [5]" © Gaylord Barr; used by permission.



Tuan Phan is an English Literature teacher living in Saigon (now called Ho Chi Minh City), Vietnam. He was born in Saigon, then left the country in 1986 with his family as part of an exodus of refugees. In America, he spent his childhood learning English and forgetting his mother tongue. Now, he’s back in his birth country and relearning his first language.

Tuan Phan’s memoir of his family’s departure and his return to Vietnam, titled *Remembering Water*, won the Panther Creek Book Award in nonfiction in 2018 and will soon be published by [Hidden River Press](#) [6]. Some of the events covered in this TW essay also appear in that memoir.

Here’s how he describes the essay’s genesis:

I was writing a chapter in my memoir on my family’s stay in the Bataan Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) when my mother told me about her recurring dreams of Vietnamese food and how she still had these dreams

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months after our arrival in America, months after my little brother had been born. I also wrote the piece in part to help me remember the kindness of our sponsors, Bill and Cathy, who showed us the best side of American hospitality and whimsy.

For more information, see Tuan Phan's blog [itsaphanlife](#) [7] or follow him [@tuanphan225](#) [8] on Instagram.

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