

Snippets from the dark years

Trang Ngan Tran

For three nights, we, children, huddled side by side on the cool tiled floor in the relentless heat of April, alongside bodies of our parents, relatives, and neighbors. We squeezed into the small area underneath the staircase, hoping this solid concrete structure would protect us from straying rockets. The sound of explosions and the adults’ whispering about locations of impact made the thumping in our little hearts heavier. In the overwhelming darkness, I waited for the hit and wondered what death would feel like.

In the mass of moss green tops, black pants and slippers that dulled even the brightest days, I stood out like a polished tumb in my oudated school uniform: white top, hugging blue pinafore and white canvas shoes. Thrilled by the lingering look of passers-by trawling for remnants of a past, I held on to my quiet resistance until my parents were called in for a warning.

We stopped learning about the world. Our books were full of unknown heroes of our own age conducting acts of sabotaging, shooting and self-mutilation. Our language was littered with words of hatred and convoluted political rhetoric, which were important to demonstrate how patriot we were but added nothing to our rumbling, hungry stomach.

My class shrank week by week. Students left and never returned. Overnight their houses were raided, posession sealed, building confiscated, owners trucked out of the city. We were told to report any suspicious activities from home. Progressive students guided official raiders to their own houses. One parent jumped off a four-story balcony during a raid. I wondered what happened to these students.

In times of darkness, music remained our saviour. On old violins and battered guitars we played the aching and nostalgic melodies of forbidden love songs, without lyrics. We learned to self-censure, to keep a poker face, to blend in with the mass, to sweet talk, to bribe, and to bluff, if sweet talk failed. I looked at the clear eyes of my little sister and brother and calculated the level of cloudiness I should smudge onto the clean slates of their minds.

Trang Ngan Tran is a poet and writer based in Melbourne, Australia. Trang has a background in music performance and translation. She completes a diploma in writing and editing at Victoria University. Trang has an interest in exploring refugees’ multifaceted integration into the host society. Her works have appeared in *Platform* and *Hyde* magazines, and the anthology *Painted Words 2019*. She is currently working on her collection of short stories.