

**Thousand Star Hotel**  
**by Bao Phi**  
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*Review by Wendell Smith*

Thousand Star Hotel is an unusual memoir of some 62 poems in 105 pages with a one page lyrical introduction. It tells of a life of escapes, from Saigon, as a three month old, in a C-5 transport while his father looked "over his shoulder once/to see shells dropping where we once stood," and, as a teenager and adult, from the fate of many in his neighborhood who "At a prison reading ... [have] come to listen to the art that kept me out of this place."

It is a memoir that chronicles a bigotry he can't escape:

*It's not a majority white school. In seventh grade, the tall blonde tomboy asks you to dance. You have no idea all the boys have a crush on her; you've been busy with comic books, and the only romance you know are tragedies from Greek mythology and Arthurian legends. She's your best friend and you've laughed together every day, so of course you say yes. ... Suddenly you notice three white boys looking at you, two snickering. They come right up to both of you, and whisper in her ear. Loud enough for you to hear. Everyone can see you dancing with that gook, they laugh. She responds by flicking them off, pulling you closer. Years later you'll wonder how she created her armor.*

And it is a memoir of a single parent wondering what do I do "When My Daughter Asks Me to Check and Make Sure Racists Can't Come In and Kill Us."

It has powerful prose written in the short lines of verse:

*The worst powerlessness  
is when wicked men and boys  
come for your family  
and you can do nothing.*

And lyrical language in prose, "That a raindrop can weep inside of itself so hard it drowns and, looking at it, you would never know."

The reality described in the poetry of Thousand Star Hotel, is discomfoting; most of the time we avoid looking at it, but, as Bao Phi presents it, you can't. Flip to any page and you will find lines like these from "Shell":

*Brown people getting bombed –  
how can you  
even think  
about*

*love?*

*But you do.*

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

That accusatory “you” implies, if they were white people getting bombed, our response might be different and, reluctantly, you have to admit, “He’s right.” However, that “But you do” is also a colloquial equivalent for the formal “But one does” so that Bao Phi is asking of himself the same question he asks of us. The fact that, in the face of the daily bombing of brown people, both he and we “even think//about//love,” creates the possibility, if we are willing to tolerate our discomfort, for a shared humanity.

But this poem and these poems are not going to let us off easily with the question, “What else is more important to think about in the face of horror than ‘Love?’” Later in “Shell” Bao makes the impersonality of contemporary war, the consequence of bombing, and our passive witness more explicit:

*The news crackles  
drones drop  
blossoms  
empty  
the heads of children  
no science fiction  
to save them.*

To the extent that, as we watch the news we are passive witnesses to bombings, we are complicit in them and our agency becomes remote; children get their brains blown out by explosions that look like blossoms from our distant vantage; and we are helpless.

Many of the raw images of these poems are the traumas of his life and the lives of his family; traumas such as the one he would have witnessed at three months old, and to which he alludes in the poem, “To Combust”:

*When his oldest son comes home from the corner gas station  
beaten for no reason  
we can venture to guess Dad sees blood and thinks  
how he risked his life to get us all on that plane,  
jumping in, last minute,  
prayer and opportunity,  
looking over his shoulder once  
to see shells dropping where we once stood  
before becoming an alien to his homeland for ever.*

Later, during the narration of a trauma in the poem, “Cookies,” he introduces another thematic question of his memoir: how should he share this history with his daughter?

For the holidays, our Lutheran sponsors used to give us a blue cookie tin. ... For Christmas my sister gave my daughter a box of shortbread cookies. ... She wanted to share them with me, and they tasted so much like those cookies from our childhood I had to close my eyes and look away. Her five-year-old eyes track some commercial in which white men are playing at battle and she asks me about war. I want to tell her that her grandpa once told me how one of his friends in the front lines got hit in the side with the rocket while crawling out of a foxhole, and he had to

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

pick up the smoking pieces of him and put them in a cookie tin to send the remains home to his family.

Because of the eloquence of its expression, the pain of these poems is tolerable. In "Say What?" a short poem that introduces the collection, Boa Phi reveals one source of that eloquence by parsing the variations in Vietnamese for "ma," where it has six different meanings depending upon the tone of expression [Ma-ghost, Mả-but, Mả-tomb or grave, Mã-horse, Má-momma and Mả-to plate]." The poem concludes:

*Vietnamese people have always been spoken word poets.  
How you say it  
is as important to the life of the word  
as the word itself.*

In the Minneapolis of their exile English replaced the music of Boa Phi's parental Vietnamese, yet he has managed, with this adopted English, to create a music, which, though it must often be a dissonant music, is worthy of our attention.

These poems are difficult, but not in an academic way, nothing to puzzle out, no obscurities to excuse by calling them "experimentation", just a clarity of vision that is hard to take but impossible to ignore. Thousand Star Hotel is evidence that our War in Vietnam won't be over until all of its wounds have healed. We encounter some of those wounds in the faces of homeless veterans on our corners holding out cups for alms. These poems are evidence of other wounds, which have an importance we have yet to acknowledge. What are these injuries, caused by being torn from home, if not "wounds"?

The value of these poems is that they erode the denials that interfere with our healing and in doing so encourage us, give us the heart we will need to persist in our own repair. These 14 lines at the beginning of "It Was Flame" describe as succinctly as anything I have ever read the history, which we must cease denying if we are to heal:

*Slavery  
indentured servitude  
migrant labor  
genocide to clear land for theft  
minimum wage so low  
we can see the ceiling:  
America has been in business.*

*Shackled to sow.  
Smallpox to blanket.  
Guns bristled the border.  
Lighter kisses hooch,  
and how many times would you burn down Chinatown,  
or what ever enclave we have been forced into,  
to manifest your destiny.*

This collection is worth owning if only to have those 14 lines close at hand as a reminder of the history, which we must acknowledge, if we would heal.