

## Susan Crean / HALF A MOON

Namu Amitabul   NAmu Amitabul   NAMU AMITABUL  
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The words become song as we chant them over and over together, our voices rising and falling in spontaneous rhythm, lilting cadences which slice through the brittle winter air. Like poetry where words dissolve into pure feeling, transparent as they float between this world and the next. Trancing.

NAMU AMITABUL   Namu Amitabul   . . . . .

Homage to the Buddha of the West. Honour to the Buddha of the Great Western Heaven who is the sunset, who is compassion; red, purple, russett.

Namu Amitabul   . . .

The words become solid now. Handgrips on an icy surface to hold on to as we hold on to each other standing together beside Tien for the last time. Our single voice deepens, strengthens to a crescendo, breaks and slips back into a gentle refrain just as the clear, febrile voice of Sunim the Monk arcs out over ours in searing lament. And so we continue. For hours, or maybe minutes, or maybe hours. Sunim in his long Korean robes, with shaven head and soft eyes rings the bell and recites the Prayer for the Dead. Go into the light Little Sister. We will accompany you on your journey across, for forty nine days we will be there. We will be there.

Overnight the first snow has quietly transformed the city and our early morning drive up Parliament Street to the necropolis was startling. Yesterday's bleak leafless trees, which so suited our mood of dim resignation, have been edged with silver and sit

softly against a landscape of pale blue snow. Like a child's remembered fairyland. But, for the first time in three days something external penetrates my vision, breaking through the despair which has engulfed us all since the news on Friday.



There was no explanation. Feeling strange on Wednesday afternoon, Tien went to the doctor who dispatched her at once to the hospital. The heart, pulsating wildly paid no heed to the drugs or the pacemaker and within hours, barely a day and a half, she was gone. A freak physical storm suddenly and violently shook the life from her small body. As Jacques sat beside her she left, clutching the small jade turtle Paul had bought for her in Chinatown.

The doctors wanted an autopsy, but knowing it would tell us nothing we refused, and instead dressed her in the ribbon-work dress she made and always wore on celebratory occasions, placed two brilliant parrot feathers across her chest and laid her in a plain gray coffin.



Her name is heaven in Chinese. Tien. Quê, her middle name, means fairy of the moon. And perhaps it was a fairy gift, something the little people of Celtic legend would know about that made her a wanderer. Born in South Vietnam in 1950, she determined at the age of thirteen that she would go to high school in the United States. But it wasn't the America of Disneyland, astronauts and double-dating she sought. So she cast off on a greater voyage which took her to Central and South America and eventually Canada. Here she settled, made friends, and became a mother. Then, in 1980, when she went off to Guatemala with baby Mai strapped to her back, she met a young Frenchman who followed her back north. She never did return to Vietnam though she talked of it, and at one point just before her parents emigrated, excitedly planned to go back with a friend who would film

her native's return after twenty years and that long and terrible war.



At the funeral parlour on the first day we file in in numb silence. Apalled at the trappings of middle class normalcy — rugs, lamps and paintings the quality of Muzak nailed to the walls — I wonder if the nondescript men in black suits who sidle noiselessly through the halls really believe that WE believe that this is just another cocktail party. But Paul has been here earlier and transformed the room into a ritual place. Out went the lamps, the occasional chairs and the paintings, all but one. “She wouldn’t have insisted on perfection,” he sighs with a smile. At one end of the room, the body dressed in its gay panoply; at the other end, a shrine where each place a memento, something reminiscent of her. Mine a sake bottle bound about the neck with a silken cord on which hangs a silver pendant shaped like a butterfly or sacred ank. Filled with dry flowers of the autumn forest, bittersweet and sage, it joins the photographs and beadwork, the brass bell and braided sweetgrass.

Incense fills the air and Tibetan bells chime softly from a cassette recorder. In the middle of the room, two candles sit on a long narrow table winking at each other. Thus we begin to take our leave of the earthly Tien, to see her instead with our mind’s eye, to sense her in our souls. And to hear her in her own words.

If you can retrace your past  
you can see  
    every step  
        has been a stone  
        one foot  
    leads to  
the other  
    until they meet  
  
    Standing still

And standing there, standing there so still as to halt time and eradicate history, Jacques, the image of abject grief. His tall body hunches over itself, sinking, sinking, and, one by one, we walk over to hold him for a while. Trying to pour physical strength into him to quell the pain. Quietly we weep with him, with each other, and quietly we watch as seven-year-old Mai arrives with her father to begin the terrible process of confronting her mother's death.



The next day the blackness returns with the dawn. We congregate again, this time with Sunim and Paul leading the ceremony; a curious crossover of the Ancient and the New, of Vietnamese and English. This day is for the Cao family as yesterday was for Jacques. We chant, we listen to poetry written by a friend of Tien's father, a white-haired woman who reads such precise and beautiful words I believe I understand them. We talk then about Tien and how we knew her, while the children, over their initial fright at the silent sounds of death, play on the floor among us. Mai consumed in turn by sorrow and curiosity hurls herself into Jan's lap to cry, then trots away to show off her mother's shrine to friends. When it's time to approach the coffin for a last, formal farewell, she hovers protectively, watching. "Goodbye, dear friend. Go well," I say, caressing Tien's shoulder. "Touch her here," whispers Mai, eyes dancing with amazement, placing my hand on her mother's forehead. "She's very cold."



So now, unbelievably, it's Monday, and there is no denying that life goes on, that work continues and that Christmas with all its public merriment will arrive in two weeks. For the time being, though, we can huddle together in the nave of this Christian chapel, with our Korean Buddhist monk and his chanting. For a time we can hold this experience to our hearts. Vivid and splendid like the snow outside. No longer the people we were on Friday, we have come to know Tien in a way we didn't before.

Weaver, mystic, artist and friend, we know now she was also a poet. And when she died, she left these words she had written in 1975.

half a moon

half a life time

a handful of shells  
a trail of blazing stars

and now i've forsaken  
all the best

and even this moment  
full of bliss

full of uncertainty

Signed with a single name. Tien. Heaven.

Namu Amitabul.

Tien Quê Cao died on December 6th, 1985, in Toronto. Her poems are reproduced here with the permission of Jacques Oulé.