



Julie Wan
Bo

Winner of THE JOURNAL'S Annual
William Allen Creative Nonfiction Prize

Judge Sue William Silverman
has this to say about “Bo”:

This author has an amazing eye for detail, starting with the central image of the essay, the “small tin metal box barely larger than a pencil case,” in which her father stores his acupuncture needles. Equally strong details ripple through the entire second section where the author reconstructs the world of Chinese expatriates living in Saigon before she was even born. In addition to fine details, this writing has great humanity. From her parents’ unselfish love for each other to the elderly doctor the author’s father cures, the sensibility is one of hard-won kindness. The cross-cultural struggle with language is equally fascinating and fully realized. The concept of “Bo” is almost untranslatable even in the language that spawned the term. The struggle is to understand the place of something that is mercurial within her own life, family, culture, and world. That she can undertake such a large topic—and do so almost invisibly within the narrative—is a testament to this writer’s skill.

I came across the box every time I cleaned out the kitchen cabinets, a small tin metal box barely larger than a pencil case. It sat in the far back corner of the shelf, next to the rubbing alcohol and cotton balls.

Cleaning out the cabinets was one of my chores as a child. Standing on a kitchen chair with a rag and a tub of soapy water to rinse the shelves, I pulled down all the bottles from the medicine cabinet and sorted through the pills and creams and ointments, spreading them out on the kitchen countertops and floor below me.

I created a mess of names and colors. After I set aside the Tylenol and Sudafed and Neosporin, I could no longer read the labels. There was the bottle of yellow pills I took for mild colds, the menthol my dad dripped into water and had me drink when I felt nauseated, the small vials of tiny, bead-like pills we dissolved into a soup spoon for my little sister because she was still too young to swallow them whole.

The tin box had no label or color. The only way to know its contents was to slide off the lid, which I did again and again, peering inside at the thin and wiry needles, fine as threads of hair.

The Chinese don't take medicine. We eat it. Our cupboards are filled with dried leaves, beans, roots, seeds of all kinds—medicinal herbs that often find their way into our daily meals. The rock sugar that my parents dissolve into our baths for relieving skin irritations also goes into our sweet, soupy desserts. We eat watermelon to prevent acne and rub our faces in the rind for good measure.

When we were growing up in Toronto, my sister and I would go shopping with our parents in Chinatown. We could always smell the dried herbs from afar, old and musty, the smell of antiquity lingering in the air. And the overwhelming scent would call us in, my parents remembering some ingredient they'd run out of at home.

Inside the shop, my sister and I would wander around, looking at the barrels of dried scallops and duck gizzards, chrysanthemum flowers in bulging packages, and bags of lotus seeds, ivory and round, like large pearls. In the glass counters are the dried seahorses, sliced deer antlers, birds' nests made of swallows' saliva. Up on the wall, an oversized shark fin acts as centerpiece, looming over us like a moose head over a fireplace. The fin is as authentic as everything else here: once filled with life, but now dry and firm, a delicacy for soup or an ancient remedy for ailment.

I watch as the herb seller measures each customer's purchases on his scale—a little metal pan held up by a thin stick. He taps

the sliding notch lightly to find the weight, then tips the contents of the pan onto a sheet of newsprint and folds this up into a package.

My parents make their selection, stocking up on *buk kei, wai san, dong gwuy, gei tze*. Sometimes they make more expensive purchases, a box of fine ginseng or a package of dried Chinese mushrooms, which they will give as gifts to friends. At the check-out stand, the cashier resets his abacus, lining up all the wooden beads at the bottom of the two frames. Tallying our items one by one, his fingers move back and forth on the instrument, tapping the beads against each other in quick beats.

At home, we infuse the herbs in water. The smells fill the house—pungent and bittersweet. I can see the water through the glass pot turn from clear to murky. Sometimes the mixture is sweet and dark, so I can't see the *gei tze* and *yoon yok* until I drink to the bottom of my bowl. Sometimes it is brown and salty, and we drink it like soup at dinnertime. Other times, it really does taste like medicine, black and syrupy, bitter and tart.

We drink the medicines even when we aren't sick. They are *bo*.

Bo is what we say when we patch up a hole in a shirt. *Bo* is what we say when we compensate, make up for a missing date, forget to get a gift for my mom's birthday. *Bo* is what my parents say when my sister and I have to drink the dark potions that have bubbled all day long in our glass cauldron. *Bo* is the catch-all word to make us eat whatever they set before us, soup of black chicken and ginger, skin of donkey or tortoise shell ground and boiled down to a black elixir.

When I ask my dad what *bo* even means, he resorts to English to explain. "It means it's *good for you*."

But it's not a translation that I want. Is the medicine repairing health that has been lost, in the way we mend a shirt? The way we compensate for lost time? Is it making up for lost energy or breath or blood?

"Maybe," he says. "I guess you could look at it that way."

Then, I wonder, shouldn't we eat *bo* things as a cure? Why am I not allowed to drink *bo* medicine when I am sick?

“You can’t drink it when you have a cold,” he says. “Because then the air needs to be let out, and *bo* medicine will only trap it in, making your cold last even longer.”

Air. This is another word I don’t understand. *Hei*. It is the same word we use when we talk about the weather, when we are out of breath, when we complain about my grandpa’s long-windedness.

My mom tells me I am hot air when my throat feels scratchy from eating hot foods like French fries or lychee. I am hot air when I have spent a day outside in the sun, after which she always steeps some kind of grass in a big pot of water and fills pitchers with this black infusion she calls *leung cha*, cool tea. “Don’t drink water,” she tells me sternly, not wanting her efforts to go to waste, “until you drink all of this.”

I picture the heat from the sun, tiny spheres of light along a beam, floating down and seeping into my body through my pores. I imagine this herbal mixture, cool and sweet, flushing out all the sunlight that has wrung me dry and parched.

On cold days, she worries that the air will make me sick. She tells me tales of rubbing oil onto someone’s back and scraping it with a coin until the skin is red all over. She calls it *kuy fong*, chasing the wind away, releasing the cold air trapped in the body. “Wear thick sweaters and tight shirts inside,” she tells me in the winter. “And zip up your jacket so the wind doesn’t get in.”

I imagine the wind sweeping into my jacket, or down through the neck opening, penetrating my skin and becoming trapped inside. Is this how it works?

In stories and textbooks I find similar discussions on the force of *qi*—“kee” like *keep*, I assume—describing it as an untranslatable word, which is why it is not translated, why it exists only as *qi*. I wonder if it is *qi* that is fabled to give swordsmen the ability to fly over rooftops and run up stalks of bamboo to battle from the leafy tops, swaying back and forth as they balance on the wilting shoots. On television, I hear the kung fu master talk about *chi* while going over a breathing exercise, expounding on the concept like it is the Chinese equivalent of the Star Wars Force.

When I finally realize that *qi* is pronounced “chi” like cheese, and that this Mandarin character is what my Cantonese parents pronounce as *hei*, the air that makes me sick, I think perhaps I have stumbled at last on the answer to my confusion. Only then, I remember it is this very *air* that I don’t understand in the first place.

Whenever I am with Asian friends, thoughts like these become too awkward to voice aloud.

“It has something to do with hot or cold air, I think,” a Chinese friend of mine offers in a conversation to explain another friend’s sickness.

We can’t understand each other’s home dialects, so English is our common tongue. But the words sound strange to us in English, making the idea seem even more absurd.

“What do you mean hot and cold air?” another friend asks. “As in temperature?”

I don’t tell them that I have already asked my parents this question. I don’t explain how my mother says that people’s bodies are basically hot or cold, which means they frequently need the opposite to balance out the body’s natural tendency.

All of this sounds even more ridiculous in an English conversation. So I merely listen, and when someone finally suggests that this might have something to do with the yin and yang, we are all left with the unspoken but mutual understanding that this is either too folkloric or too new agey for further discussion.

On my own again, I turn to English books. I read about the Chinese medicine that writers call traditional and alternative, holistic and preventative. Somewhere among these words, I think, there must be a translation for *bo* and *hei*, for *leung cha* and *kuy fong*. But I only find more questions in these Western explanations—the English words more foreign to me than the Chinese characters that fill our books at home, the ones I cannot read.

On various occasions throughout my childhood, my father brought the tin box with him when he visited certain members

of his church congregation. This was unusual, though the visits were regular. I'd never known him as a doctor, only as a minister, and he made these visitation trips every Saturday while I was growing up.

My sister and I didn't have a babysitter in elementary school, so we followed my parents on these weekend trips to visit their church members. Sometimes, when we came to the home of an ill person, my father would bring the tin box with him, along with his bottle of rubbing alcohol and a handful of cotton balls.

The sick were always grateful to see my father. "Ah, Pastor," an elderly man said, meeting us at the door, "I have been in so much pain these days." His kitchen cupboards were full of medicinal herbs too. I smelled them on my way in. And before we had taken off our shoes by the mat at the door, the man was already describing his symptoms, arthritic pain or a stiff joint here and there. By the time we sat down, he was rolling up his sleeves and the cuffs of his pants.

I had memorized my father's procedure by observing him with occasional patients over the years. He first took the rubbing alcohol and tipped the bottle over slightly to wet a cotton ball. Then he wiped away at the patient's skin. He selected a needle from the tin box and held it carefully between his thumb and forefinger, the shimmering metal fine and delicate against his calloused skin. He nudged at the patient's flesh with a free finger, locating a pressure point in the body. Then he slid the needle in.

There was motion involved. Holding the needle, he brought it up and down, sometimes turning it, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. All the while his hand trembled in a steady, controlled pulse, the needle bobbing up and down in swift motion. The patient sat quietly, eyes staring off into the distance, a calm and focused look spreading over the face.

In my mind, I imagined my father this way in Vietnam, years before I was born, crouched on the floor next to his seated patient, examining a knee joint or a twitching nerve somewhere in the body. I envisioned the tin box traveling with him to the

clinics he served in daily and to the homes he visited as a wandering doctor and minister.

Not until I grew older, old enough to wonder what the world was like before I existed, did I finally begin to understand that there is a greater story behind these mysteries—behind the tin box, the medicines we drank each day, the language we used to talk about our lives. Then I came to realize that understanding all this would only come from a different kind of knowing—a knowing that grows from an older child’s impulse to pull back the lid of a box and peer inside, finally seeing beyond the thin and wiry needles and into the lives that have given them meaning.

My mother sat on her bed in the upper room of the church building where my parents lived and worked. It was the summer of 1975. The church was located in Cholon, the Chinese district of Saigon.

In the folds of her palm, my mother held a diamond ring. She had never been one to wear jewelry, but this ring, just over a year old, was already a family heirloom.

She was a diamond girl, so the Chinese liked to say, a prized gift. Her father had never actually said the words, but she understood his intent when he gave her the ring. “Diamond” was the name of their family-owned restaurant. While growing up, she had been the only child to help her parents with the family business. The second of eight children, she watched as her older brother was drafted to fight in the civil war, and staying behind, she helped watch over the business and over her six younger siblings.

Her father watched too—and remembered. And because love was too deep to be spoken, all he did was remember. He remembered until she was twenty-three and engaged, and before she left home, he had given her this diamond ring.

But the ring had stayed in its case, and the case had stayed buried in her clothes, deep in a drawer. A woman wearing a diamond ring on the streets of Saigon was only asking to be

mugged. Now, over a year since her wedding, she thought she might never pass the ring on to a daughter after all. They had no children; she had remained barren. And what use was a ring at such a time?

The summer of 1975 was a time of change in Vietnam. Only a few months earlier, Saigon had fallen to the communist forces of the North. My father, a new graduate of a Christian Bible College, had not even received his diploma in time. The Bible College had closed before April. The new government did not recognize Christian ministry as a vocation. In a communist state, only laborers did valuable work, only laborers made wages. And though my father could still preach and live at the church, he was not allowed to earn a salary there.

My father decided he needed to find more stable work, something the government wouldn't frown upon, something that earned wages yet still allowed him to focus on his ministry. He wanted to try medicine. Caring for bodies seemed a natural complement to caring for souls.

But before he could pursue this, he agreed to start a farm with his brother and a few friends. Medical training took time, and he needed to make money now in order to live.

Their farm site was on the grounds of the old church senior center. In the yard behind the house, they dug a pond for farming fish. They purchased chickens, pigs, and rabbits for breeding. The pigs occupied a lot of room on the small farm, but their investment was strategic: a single pig would never fatten on its own; instead, the more there were, the greedier they became and, with others to compete with, would then consume more food.

When work at the farm stabilized, my father resumed his pursuit of medicine. He knew of a doctor in traditional Chinese medicine, someone named Dr. Lam, who practiced both acupuncture and herbal treatment. But the tuition was expensive.

It was my mother who suggested the ring. It only sat hidden away in her drawer, she reasoned.

My father knew the ring's meaning. She was a diamond girl, he insisted, cherished by her father. He wanted to say he couldn't

take away something he hadn't given her, but he couldn't find the right words.

She appreciated his sentiment, but remained realistic about their predicament. They'd heard stories of people sent to labor camps where they were forced to learn the virtues of the peasant life by planting sweet potatoes all day long. This happened to people without vocations to secure their place in society. She feared this might happen to them

They both realized this was an opportune moment. The new Vietnamese government had been encouraging the practice of acupuncture, extolling it for its efficient use of resources, requiring only needles and limited training. A few years earlier, communist China had promoted the widespread use of acupuncture in order to provide its impoverished rural population with medical care. Based on their commitment to serving the people, young revolutionaries had been chosen to receive basic medical training and were then sent to small towns and villages. After only a few years, over a million trained laypeople were roaming China's countryside, offering their medical services to the peasants. They were called "barefoot doctors," because they often stayed to live and serve among the villagers. Sometimes too poor to afford shoes, they worked barefoot out in the fields. And now, the Vietnamese government wanted to encourage the same.

My mother thought it over and decided that if a diamond could bring them a way to help care for people, if it added a skill they could put to use in their ministry, then its value would only multiply if she parted with it.

So on a summer day in 1975, she took her ring and set it back in its case, and then slipped this into her bag.

Downstairs, my father was waiting for her on his bicycle. She joined him, sitting sideways on the seat behind him as he pedaled down the road to the pawnshop.

Every other day of the week, my father rode his bicycle across town to Dr. Lam's clinic. There he spent the entire morning watching the acupuncturist treat patients. His apprenticeship had begun.

The doctor began each session by asking for the patient's symptoms. In severe cases that called for extreme treatments, the doctor asked how old the patient was, and if it was a woman, whether she was married and had children. Certain acupuncture treatments could cause a person never to have children again, the doctor explained.

Each acupuncturist had a different philosophy and approach, and Dr. Lam's was to minimize treatment by maximizing stimulation. Instead of focusing on the hundreds of acupoints throughout the body, Dr. Lam used only a hundred of them regularly. Less is more, he reasoned. Acupuncture was a way to stimulate the acupoints, he explained, reviving weakened or inactive nerves, returning them to normal functions and allowing the body to heal itself.

My father borrowed books to read from the doctor, and he devoted himself to study and training. He began with breathing and developing focus. Like any untrained person, when he was not concentrating, breathing was a mindless reflex. Without thinking he raised his diaphragm and sucked in his stomach to fill his lungs with air. But now he had to reverse this tendency. The air had to fill his stomach and his sides, and then extend beyond to flow into the rest of his body. The stomach should expand when air was taken in, and deflate when air was released. The body's life force was contained in respiration, in the beating of the heart, in the rhythm of the pulse.

My father practiced until this became second nature to him, the way he talked, the way he breathed. Lying in bed at night, he counted to himself in the dark, trying to make his breathing even. Inhaling, he counted to three, paused for the same length of time, then exhaled slowly, making sure to match the time it took him to inhale. Week by week, he extended the count. If he concentrated on where the air passed inside him he could train himself to synchronize his mind with his body. With this control, exerting force would become simply a matter of focus. Strength could be recalled by the will of the mind.

At the same time, he began training his hands and fingers by crushing peanuts every day. Taking them by the handful, he

squeezed the pods till their shells cracked open, crumbles of hull and flakes of peanut skin falling from his tight fists. When his hands grew familiar with the coarse texture of the peanut shells, he moved on to dried beans, red and black and black-eyed, smaller and firmer than peanuts. And when he had polished the beans smooth through this exercise, he turned to finer grains, clenching fistfuls of rice, and then, finally, sand.

From Dr. Lam, he received books on the theoretical components of acupuncture. He memorized the twelve primary channels of the human body connecting each part to a series of other parts. The channels navigated through the body like lines of longitude and latitude, their intersections marking some of the main points of stimulation. Six of the channels belonged to the group classified as shade, *yin*, and six belonged to the group classified as light, *yang*. The two groups were complementary, each integral to the other, in the same way that the presence of shade exists only in the absence of light. Pathologies would emerge from an imbalance between the two.

Throughout this period of training, all my father did on his visits to the clinic was sit and watch, sometimes asking questions. After six months had passed, he dared to ask the doctor if he could learn the skill of needling.

The doctor told him he had to treat himself before learning to treat others. He must understand what his patients would experience. So my father bought his own acupuncture needles. They came in various lengths—short as sewing needles for delicate hands, long as sticks of incense for the occasional thickset thigh, but always—at every length—fine as threads.

Some students first practice on apples and melons, but my father went straight to practicing on himself. Inserting a needle into his own skin, he began to discover how his body responded to touch, to movement, to pain. He memorized the range of sensations that differed depending on the place and depth of insertion, and the kind of movement following insertion. After a light pinch of the needle puncturing the surface of his skin, he felt nothing until the needle touched an acupoint. Then, the tin-

gling began. He knew he had missed a point if there was no tingling, and then he learned to lift the needle gently, careful not to draw it out completely, and slanted it slightly until he found the point.

It wasn't until a year after he had first begun his apprenticeship that an opportunity finally arose. The Vietnamese government, eager to spread the use of acupuncture, opened a medical clinic and asked Dr. Lam to volunteer during the clinic's trial period. Dr. Lam agreed and brought my father with him.

For the first time, my father treated actual patients. Two or three days a week, he was at the clinic, where the sick came without break. The job demanded intense concentration. All day long he directed his focus to his fingers, to the passing of energy through the point of stimulation. The skills he had learned—the control, the focus of the mind, the exertion of force, the nimbleness of the fingers—all came together at the point of a hair-thin needle. His fingers trembled gently but swiftly, as though playing a vibrato, steady and graceful. And in those moments, the world around him blurred down to the glimmer of the needle, dipping and rising, dipping and rising.

He had his own patients now. He was a practicing doctor. At a stationery store one day, he found a tin metal box, the size of a large pencil case, and in it he placed his own set of acupuncture needles.

The rabbits on the farm are growing. They are breeding, but when no one watches, they feed on their young. The catfish, too, outwit their farmers. They tunnel through the sides of the pond, their noses digging into the mud. They swim their way into neighboring ponds and disappear.

The farm, a project my father has relied on to support his medical studies, begins to fail.

It has now been nearly three years since the fall of Saigon, and people are trying to learn English in desperation, hoping for an opportunity to leave the country. My mother, who studied English in college, starts to teach the language in informal settings—

at people's homes—which the government overlooks. My father does some tutoring in Chinese. But the money from this is scarce.

For dinner some nights, my parents buy chicken livers, hearts, and gizzards from the market and stir-fry them with leafy greens. As a second dish they boil a salted duck egg, cut it in half, and spoon the two sides out of the shell. When the egg has been preserved for long enough, the yolk is powdery, round and dark, bleeding a rich orange oil out the sides. The dishes are purposely made overly salty, so with their chopsticks they lap in more rice for each little mouthful of egg or chicken. They don't eat to feel full, just to not feel hunger.

In the fall, when my father is still working at the government-run clinic, my mother conceives. Shortly after Christmas, she starts to bleed. She sees a doctor, who tells her to rest. But a day or two later, blood rushes out of her like water. She is in pain.

My father takes her to an emergency room. He sends her and her mother on their way in pedicab, and because there isn't enough room, he follows behind on his bicycle.

At the hospital, my mother enters a small room with a single bed.

The process is quick. The doctor reaches in and pulls out the dead fetus. Immediately, the pain is gone.

She lets out a breath, feeling both relief and disappointment.

She thinks she can go home and rest now. But instead, the nurses take her to a back room. No visitors are allowed, and my father is forced to leave.

This room is much larger, with rows of beds and curtains in between, separating the patients. The process is not over. This is where they will finish cleaning her out.

She doesn't realize that she can bribe the nurses and doctors for anesthetic, so no one offers her any when they come to her. There are no fancy tools.

She cries out in pain.

The doctor barks back. *Do you want this done or not?*

She keeps silent, listening to the echoes of women scream-

ing in labor down the hall. She doesn't know, but she can also bribe them for permission to cry.

They scrape and clean, and when it is over, the nurses take her to a third room where she will stay for a day or two. There are not enough beds, so the nurses tell her she will have to share one with another woman. For the next few days, she and the other woman lie side by side, heads on opposite ends of the bed, until she is well enough to leave.

But even after coming home from the hospital, she has not fully recovered. She is even weaker than before. She needs medicine and better nourishment.

My parents begin to scrounge around their home in the church building where they are still living to see what they have left. The last valuable item they own is my father's violin, a gift from his first teacher, brought back from China. It is not worth as much as the ring, but they pawn it to buy medicine and vitamins. At the market, they get chicken bones and ginger for soup. The combination is *bo* and will restore her to health.

After volunteering at the government clinic for two years, my father and a friend decide to set up their own clinic in the city. This clinic is housed on the ground level of the friend's home, a short distance away from the church where my father still works. Since they are certified doctors and take only voluntary donations, the government allows them to practice.

All kinds of people come to the clinic. There is a man who has had asthma for fifty years. He will require several years of treatment before the condition can come under control. Another man cannot stop hiccupping. He has already had acupuncture treatment for three years, but in some uncanny way, he becomes completely healed after one visit to my father's clinic.

During this time, my father joins a doctor's association, and one day a colleague asks him for a favor. The colleague's father has suffered from a stroke and is now paralyzed on one side of the body. This colleague only practices herbal treatment and requests my father's acupuncture services.

When my father visits, he finds that the elderly man cannot move half his body. His face twists every time he tries to speak, one side of the face moving while the other stays frozen. His phrases are mumbles and groans, unintelligible.

My father rides his bicycle over to the elderly man's home every other day, bringing my mother along. She sits sideways behind him, her feet dangling next to the spokes of the back wheel, and her long, straight hair swaying with the motion of the bicycle.

My parents visit regularly for a month. With the frequent acupuncture treatment, the elderly man begins to heal. His joints and muscles start to loosen. His mutterings become more comprehensible. Before long, he can speak.

This is what he says. *The minister's wife is very pale. Every time she comes she looks the same, so weak and frail.*

Like his son, the elderly man, it turns out, is a doctor too, and he asks to examine my mother. He takes her pulse. She sits, arm on the table, palm facing up, the doctor holding his fingers to her wrist.

You have a weak liver, he tells her. He instructs her on the kind of medicine she should eat, prescribing combinations of different herbs, offering substitutions for the more expensive ingredients. He tells her this will regulate her monthly cycle, which she tells him has been completely unpredictable.

Another month passes. Nothing has changed. She is still waiting, unpredictable, uncured, now unbelieving. She has taken herbal medicine practically her whole life, but she is doubtful of this doctor she does not know. She wants to stop making these herbal mixtures. The medicine is expensive. More expensive than food.

But she is wrong. She is not uncured. She is pregnant.

When the elderly man, the doctor, finds out, he is full of new advice. *Don't eat greens and don't eat fruit*, he instructs. *Especially not bananas or watermelon. That is too cool. You need to be eating medicine and food that is bo. This will fortify you.*

Seven months later, she craves the forbidden foods. Bananas and watermelon she's been taught are not for pregnant women. But greens, she has never heard of.

She ignores the doctor's orders, eats greens, and starts bleeding.

I am on the brink of nonexistence.

For a week she lies in bed. She is given *bo* medicine and told to keep strictly to her diet.

She is thirty this year, he thirty-one. It is their sixth year of marriage. It is his fifth year as an acupuncturist.

But I know none of this when I am born.

Honorable mention for THE JOURNAL's Annual William Allen Creative Nonfiction Contest goes to Tessa Dratt for her essay "Love at High Altitude."