



## THE BEST WE COULD DO

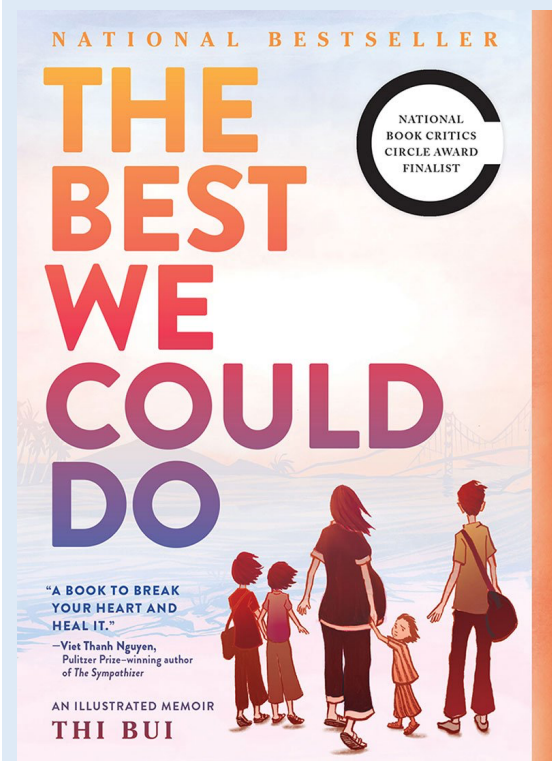
Thi Bui

This beautifully illustrated and emotional story is an evocative memoir about the search for a better future and a longing for the past. Exploring the anguish of immigration and the lasting effects that displacement has on a child and her family, Bui documents the story of her family's daring escape after the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s, and the difficulties they faced building new lives for themselves.



**Thi Bui** was born in Vietnam and came to the United States in 1978 as part of the “boat people” wave of refugees fleeing Southeast Asia at the end of the Vietnam War. Her debut graphic memoir, *The Best We Could Do* (Abrams ComicArts, 2017) has been selected for an American Book Award, a Common Book for UCLA and other colleges

and universities, an all-city read by Seattle and San Francisco public libraries, a National Book Critics Circle finalist in autobiography, and an Eisner Award finalist in reality-based comics. It made over thirty best of 2017 book lists, including Bill Gates' top five picks. She illustrated the picture book, *A Different Pond*, written by the poet Bao Phi (Capstone, 2017), for which she won a Caldecott Honor. With her son, Hien, she co-illustrated the children's book, *Chicken of the Sea* (McSweeney's, 2019), written by Pulitzer winner Viet Thanh Nguyen and his son, Ellison. Her short comics can be found online at The Nib, PEN America, and BOOM California. She is currently researching and drawing a work of graphic nonfiction about immigrant detention and deportation, to be published by One World, Random House.



### Illustrated works by Thi Bui:

- *A Different Pond*
- *Chicken of the Sea*

### Check out Thi Bui's website:

<https://www.thibui.com/>



## **Additional Resources:**

*The Best We Could Do*  
by Thi Bui





## THE VIETNAM WAR

The period known in America as the "Vietnam War" and in Việt Nam as the "American war in Việt Nam" refers to the United States military intervention in Việt Nam from 1965 to 1973. The Vietnam War arose in the aftermath of the Second World War, when anti-colonial conflicts pitted French forces against the Việt Minh, a nationalist group inspired by Chinese and Soviet Communism and opposed to the French occupation of Việt Nam. At the end of a bloody eight-year war, the Geneva Accords were signed, marking the end of French rule in Southeast Asia. The accords established a temporary border between North and South Việt Nam at the 17th parallel, partitioned until elections could be held to establish a unified government.

In the years following the withdrawal of France, a civil war erupted for control of South Việt Nam. North Việt Nam (the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam) and the National Liberation Front, commonly known as the Viet Cong, sought to unify the country under Communist rule. South Việt Nam (the Republic of Việt Nam), with its capital at Sài Gòn, struggled to remain non-Communist. Driven by Cold War concerns about the spread of Communism, the United States based their foreign policy around "domino theory:" an idea first proposed by the Truman administration in the 1940s and popularized by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, describing the idea that a Communist government in one nation would quickly lead to Communist takeovers in neighboring states—like falling dominoes. Concerned about Communist expansion, the Eisenhower administration threw military and economic aid behind the establishment of a military government in South Việt Nam, supporting the decision of its leader, Ngô Đình Diệm, to *prevent* free elections which might result in the unification of the country under the control of the Communists.

In spring 1961, Eisenhower's successor, President John F. Kennedy, expanded U.S. involvement in South Việt Nam, including the expansion of military assistance and authorization of the use of napalm, herbicides, and defoliants. A few years later, the U.S. Congress would authorize President Lyndon B. Johnson to take steps "to prevent further aggression" and keep the South Vietnamese government from collapsing. Johnson would dramatically escalate U.S. involvement in the conflict, deploying hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers and authorizing bombing campaigns that were unprecedented in scale. By the end of 1966, the U.S. had nearly 400,000 troops fighting in Vietnam; by the start of 1969, the draft was in full force and that number had increased to 540,000.

The rising conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s also had devastating effects on civilian life: not only in Việt Nam, but in neighboring nations. While officially neutral, Laos and Cambodia experienced the escalation of American bombing campaigns and the aggressive use of defoliants. The North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong soldiers established bases of operations in both countries, and U.S. military personnel used Laotian and Cambodian borders as staging grounds for attacks at the border of South Vietnam.

The Vietnam War would become one of the longest military conflicts in U.S. history, claiming the lives of more than 58,000 Americans and wounding more than 300,000. Estimates place the number of killed or wounded North and South Vietnamese at roughly four million soldiers and



civilians—roughly ten percent of the population. In January 1973, the United States and the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam signed a peace settlement enabling the United States to begin withdrawing from Việt Nam. The war, however, continued. Having rebuilt their forces and upgraded their logistics system, North Vietnamese forces triggered a major offensive in the Central Highlands in March 1975. On April 30, 1975, Sài Gòn, the capital of South Việt Nam, fell to North Vietnamese forces, effectively ending the war.





## 1980 REFUGEE ACT

Large-scale immigration from Vietnam to the United States began at the end of the U.S. war in Southeast Asia, when the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975 led to the U.S.-sponsored evacuation of an estimated 125,000 Vietnamese refugees. Laws at the time restricted refugee admissions, and as the humanitarian crisis and displacement of people in the Indochina region (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) intensified in 1975-1979, more than 300,000 refugees and their families were admitted to the United States through presidential action. The U.S. Refugee Act was aimed towards establishing a more regular system of immigration and resettlement and was passed unanimously by the Senate in late 1979 and signed into law by President Jimmy Carter in 1980, when modern waves of refugees arriving in the U.S. reached their peak.

The law amended the earlier Immigration and Nationality Act and the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, raising overall refugee quotas and providing a provision to deal with special humanitarian concerns. It changed the definition of “refugee” to align with a standard established by United Nations conventions and protocols, adjusting it to a person with a “well-founded fear of persecution;” established a new Office of U.S. Coordinator for Refugee Affairs and an Office of Refugee Resettlement; and built on existing public-private partnerships aimed towards helping refugees settle and adjust to life in the United States. The act was a landmark piece of legislation, establishing the contemporary U.S. refugee resettlement program and asylum system that we know today.



## THE GRAPHIC NOVEL FORM

At first glance, comics may seem like a natural steppingstone between children's picture books and the dense walls of text of most novels and nonfiction. This reputation is, in fact, the origin of descriptors like "graphic novel" or, in the case of *The Best We Could Do*, "illustrated memoir." People who make them know that comics are entirely capable of telling complicated, thoughtful, and emotional stories just as well as (and sometimes even better than) their un-illustrated shelf mates. Specific labels set expectations, distinguishing between deliberate attempts at literary storytelling and the easy-to-digest, serialized works that many people associate with the word "comics"—the kind that show up in newspapers or that feature spandexed heroes testing their various powers (though even many of those are more involved than a first impression suggests!).

Still: if you sniff out the Graphic Novel section of your local bookstore and open the high-brow books there, you'll probably recognize the *form*.

Graphic novels, illustrated memoirs, and superhero comics all tell their stories with a synthesis of words and images laid out in a series of panels. Characters will speak, whisper, or shout—or sometimes think to themselves—in speech bubbles of different shapes, while blocks of text are home to narration and exposition. The balance of words and images in each panel can contain an immense depth of information and nuance while still allowing readers to stretch and flex their imaginations in the way that great art encourages. But though panels contain almost all the content of a comic, the magic happens in the borders *between* panels.

Our minds assume that adjacent images occur in sequence. From one still image to the next, our brains create the motion of people, boats, rockets, pens, frowns, and everything else. Depending on the comic, this can make for a lot of imaginative exercise! Some authors will even take advantage of our minds' assumption that images in adjacent panels are related to suggest comparisons, similes, or even visual puns.

The borders between panels also contract and dilate time. Whether by manipulating the layout of their panels or by changing the amount of time that passes between panels, an author can speed the years past with a montage effect or slow a moment to bullet-time intensity. Because of this, comics require significant attention—did a half-second pass in that one-centimeter border, or was it half a century? — and significant imagination.

For Bui, who is telling a story that takes place across three time periods (her parents' lives, her childhood, and her adult life), this is especially useful: she can snap her readers between past and present like we're bungee jumping through time. After establishing a "normal" rhythm of panels, Bui has the opportunity to disrupt and subvert our expectations, engaging us and infusing the experience of *The Best We Could Do* with vitality.

The layout of a comic page can change a reader's perception of time in much the same way that it affects time in the story. Many small, kinetic panels send our eyes zooming across the page as frenetic action builds, while a *splash page*—with one image taking up an entire page (or two, called a *spread*)—forces us to slow down and process the emotion and import of a single moment.



It's worth paying close attention to how variation on form helps *The Best We Could Do* “work.” Bui is a master at representing both physical disorientation and emotional malaise in her art, but there are subtler tools at work, too. See how loud noises—babies crying, explosives—disrupt a steady march of images? Or how smoke winds its way between panels, sometimes crossing borders entirely? What effect does it have when Bui turns a speech bubble into a placid pond—or does away with panel borders entirely?

“I know that if I do my work well, it will read seamlessly and quickly, so the danger is that a reader might breeze through it and take for granted much of what is there,” says Bui. “But if my book took you less than two hours to finish, please read it again and let yourself notice different elements the second time—maybe the feeling of a two-page spread, or the cultural details in the backgrounds, or the structure of the narrative” (*Reading Women*). Though we’ve only just started investigating their inner workings—the *how* behind the impact of works like Bui’s—it should be clear that comics are as deserving of our serious attention as any other art form.



## RELATED READING

The National Endowment for the Arts offers this list as a courtesy resource for those interested in furthering their knowledge. By inclusion on this list, the National Endowment for the Arts does not fund or endorse any of the listed works or any perspectives or opinions contained therein.

*The Best We Could Do* defies a single category or definition, spanning myriad storytelling traditions and genres: from oral history to illustration, memoir to ephemera, nation and homeland to family and the ties that bind. This reading list touches on just a few of the many books related to those themes, as well as other works from Thi Bui. For space and clarity, books will only appear once on the list. Many titles, however, bridge genres and themes, and we encourage readers to consider the categories listed here as flexible and open to many possibilities. Lastly, this list is not comprehensive, or even complete. Much like the process of reading, this list is intended to provide readers with opportunities for exploration, connection, and interpretation. These are just a few paths to new adventures: we hope they inspire you to pave your own.

<b>Other works from Thi Bui:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Chicken of the Sea</i> by Viet Thanh Nguyen, illus. by Thi Bui</li> <li>● <i>A Different Pond</i> by Bao Phi, illus. by Thi Bui</li> </ul>	<b>Books that influenced Thi Bui:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Persepolis</i> by Marjane Satrapi</li> <li>● <i>Maus</i> by Art Spiegelman</li> <li>● <i>Blankets</i> by Craig Thompson</li> </ul>
<b>Books for children (illustrated):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Most Beautiful Thing</i> by Kao Kalia Yang, illus. by Khoa Le</li> <li>● <i>Ocean Meets Sky</i> by Eric Fan and Terry Fan</li> <li>● <i>Grandfather's Journey</i> by Allen Say</li> </ul>	<b>Books for young adults (illustrated):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Almost American Girl</i> by Robin Ha</li> <li>● <i>In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson</i> by Bette Bao Lord, illus. by Marc Simont</li> <li>● <i>The Magic Fish</i> by Trung Le Nguyen</li> <li>● <i>American Born Chinese</i> by Gene Luen Yang</li> </ul>
<b>Other books for young adults:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Bestiary</i> by K-Ming Chang</li> <li>● <i>The Last Story of Mina Lee</i> by Nancy Jooyoun Kim</li> <li>● <i>Free Food for Millionaires</i> by Min Jin Lee ● <i>The Astonishing Color of After</i> by Emily X.R. Pan</li> </ul>	<b>Books for adults (illustrated):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Good Talk</i> by Mira Jacob</li> <li>● <i>The Arrival</i> by Shaun Tan</li> <li>● <i>Such a Lovely Little War</i> by Marcelino Truong, trans. by David Homel</li> <li>● <i>Year of the Rabbit</i> by Tian Veasna</li> </ul>
<b>Other books for adults:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>The Sympathizer</i> by Viet Thanh Nguyen</li> <li>● <i>Catfish and Mandala</i> by Andrew X. Pham</li> <li>● <i>On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous</i> by Ocean Vuong</li> <li>● <i>Interior Chinatown</i> by Charles Yu</li> </ul>	<b>Poetry:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities</i> by Chen Chen</li> <li>● <i>Deaf Republic</i> by Ilya Kaminsky</li> <li>● <i>Ghost Of</i> by Diana Khoi Nguyen</li> <li>● <i>Oculus</i> by Sally Wen Mao</li> <li>● <i>Eye Level</i> by Jenny Xie</li> </ul>



## **MULTI- GENRE AUTHORS**



## VIET THANH NGUYEN

**Viet Thanh Nguyen** was born in Vietnam and raised in America. He is the author of *The Committed*, which continues the story of *The Sympathizer*, awarded the 2016 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, alongside seven other prizes. He is also the author of the short story collection *The Refugees*; the nonfiction book *Nothing Ever Dies*, a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award; the children's book *Chicken of the Sea*, with his son Ellison and with Thi Bui and Hien Bui-Stafford; and is the editor of an anthology of refugee writing, *The Displaced*. He is a University Professor and the Aerol Arnold Professor of English and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California and a recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim and MacArthur foundations. He lives in Los Angeles.

Latest works:

***Chicken of the Sea*** (Children's Literature): A band of intrepid chickens leave behind the boredom of farm life, joining the crew of the pirate ship *Pitiless* to seek fortune and glory on the high seas. Led by a grizzled captain into the territory of the Dog Knights, they soon learn what it means to be courageous, merciful, and not seasick *quite* so much of the time.

***The Displaced*** (Anthology): These essays reveal moments of uncertainty, resilience in the face of trauma, and a reimagining of identity, forming a compelling look at what it means to be forced to leave home and find a place of refuge. *The Displaced* is also a commitment: ABRAMS will donate 10 percent of the cover price of this book, a minimum of \$25,000 annually, to the International Rescue Committee, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing humanitarian aid, relief, and resettlement to refugees and other victims of oppression or violent conflict. Viet Nguyen, called "one of our great chroniclers of displacement" (Joyce Carol Oates, *The New Yorker*), brings together writers originally from Mexico, Bosnia, Iran, Afghanistan, Soviet Ukraine, Hungary, Chile, Ethiopia, and others to make their stories heard.



Find out more about Viet Thanh Nguyen here:

<https://vietnguyen.info/home>

**Short Story Collection:** *The Refugees*

**Novels:** *The Sympathizer*; *The Committed*

**Childrens Literature:** *Chicken of the Sea*

**Nonfiction:** *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*; *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*

**Anthologies:** *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*; *The Displaced*





## OCEAN VUONG

**Ocean Vuong** is the author of poetry collection, *Time is a Mother*, out from Penguin Press (2022), and the *The New York Times* bestselling novel, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (Penguin Press 2019), which has been translated into 34 languages. A recipient of a 2019 MacArthur "Genius" Grant, he is also the author of the critically acclaimed poetry collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, a *New York Times* Top 10 Book of 2016, winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize, the Whiting Award, the Thom Gunn Award, and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. A Ruth Lilly fellow from the Poetry Foundation, his honors include fellowships from the Lannan Foundation, the Civitella Ranieri Foundation, The Elizabeth George Foundation, The Academy of American Poets, and the Pushcart Prize. Selected by *Foreign Policy* magazine as a 2016 100 Leading Global Thinker, Ocean was also named by BuzzFeed Books as one of "32 Essential Asian American Writers" and has been profiled on NPR's "All Things Considered," PBS NewsHour, *Teen Vogue*, *Interview*, *Poets & Writers*, and *The New Yorker*. Born in Saigon, Vietnam and raised in Hartford, Connecticut in a working-class family of nail salon and factory laborers, he was educated at nearby Manchester Community College before transferring to Pace University to study International Marketing. Without completing his first term, he dropped out of Business school and enrolled at Brooklyn College, where he graduated with a BA in Nineteenth Century American Literature. He subsequently received his MFA in Poetry from NYU. He currently lives in Northampton, Massachusetts where he serves as an Associate Professor in the MFA Program for Poets and Writers at UMass-Amherst.

Latest work:

***Time is a Mother*:** In this deeply intimate second poetry collection, Ocean Vuong searches for life among the aftershocks of his mother's death, embodying the paradox of sitting within grief while being determined to survive beyond it. At once vivid, brave, and propulsive, Vuong's poems circle fragmented lives to find both restoration as well as the epicenter of the break.



### Works by Ocean Vuong:

- *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (novel)
- *Time is a Mother* (poems)
- *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (poems)

Find out more about Ocean Vuong here:

[oceanvuong.com/](https://oceanvuong.com/)



## **CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**



## IN A VILLAGE BY THE SEA

Muon Thi Văn and April Chu

Written in a spare, lyrical style using fresh, evocative imagery, *Village by the Sea* tells the story of longing for the comforts of home. A perfect book for teaching about diverse cultures and lifestyles through rich pictures and words, moving from the wide world to the snugness of home and back out again.

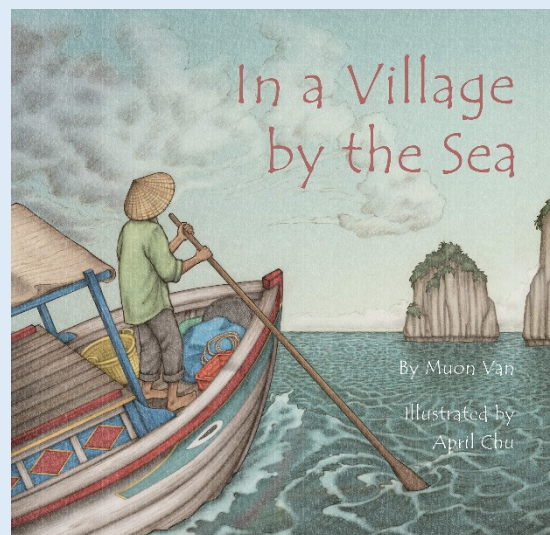


**Muon Thi Văn** loves to read books of all shapes and sizes. She first began reading yellow-spined hardbacks about a certain girl detective before graduating to longer novels and then picture books (it's true, she doesn't remember reading picture books as

a young child). So few books reflected her formative experiences, though, that she desired to bring new and different stories into the world.

**April Chu** began her career as an architect with a degree from the University of California, Berkeley, but decided to return to her true passion of illustrating and storytelling. She remembers coming home from school every day, spending

hours drawing whimsical characters in her notebook, and creating outlandish stories while watching cartoons, and she hasn't stopped drawing and creating stories since. April lives and works in Oakland, California.



**AGE RANGE:** 5 – 9 years

### Other works by Muon Thi Văn:

- *Wishes*
- *I Love You Because I Love You*
- *If You Were Night*
- *One Is a Lot*
- *Clever Little Witch*
- *The Most Terrible of All*
- *The Little Tree*

Find out more about Muon Thi Văn here:

<http://www.muonthivan.com/>

### Other works by April Chu:

- *Down by the River*
- *Kate Warne, Pinkerton Detective*
- *Ada Byron Lovelace and the Thinking Machine*
- *Summoning the Phoenix: Poems and Prose about Chinese Musical Instruments*

Find out more about April Chu:

<http://www.aprilchu.com/>



## A DIFFERENT POND

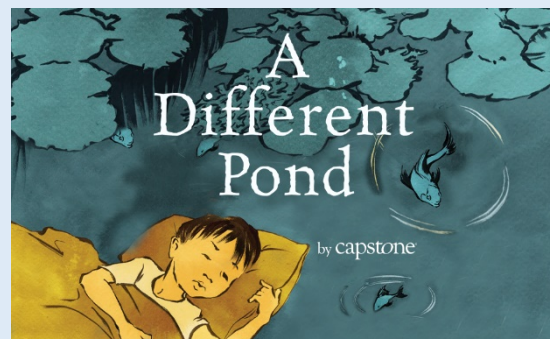
Bao Phi and Thi Bui

Acclaimed poet Bao Phi delivers a powerful, honest glimpse into a relationship between father and son—and between cultures, old and new. *A Different Pond* is an unforgettable story about a simple event—a long-ago fishing trip. As a young boy, Bao Phi awoke early, hours before his father's long workday began, to fish on the shores of a small pond in Minneapolis. Unlike many other anglers, Bao and his father fished for food, not recreation. A successful catch meant a fed family. Between hope-filled casts, Bao's father told him about a different pond in their homeland of Vietnam. The New York Times has said that Bao Phi's poetry "rhymes with the truth." Together with graphic novelist Thi Bui's striking, evocative art, Phi's expertly crafted prose reflects an immigrant family making its way in a new home while honoring its bonds to the past.



**Bao Phi** has been a performance poet since 1991. A two-time Minnesota Grand Slam champion and a National Poetry Slam finalist, he has performed as a featured artist all over the United States, has appeared on HBO Presents Russell Simmons Def Poetry, and a

poem of his appeared in the 2006 Best American Poetry anthology. He is currently Program Director at the Loft Literary Center, where he started as a receptionist 15 years ago. His first collection of poems, *Song I Sing*, was published by Coffee House Press in 2011. His second collection of poems, *Thousand Star Hotel*, will be published in summer of 2017, also by Coffee House, for which he was selected by Minnesota Monthly as Author of the Year. His first children's book, to be illustrated by Thi Bui and will be published by Capstone Press in the fall of 2017.



**AGE RANGE:** 6 – 8 years

### Other works by Bao Phi:

- *My Footprints*
- *Song I Sing*
- *Thousand Star Hotel*

Find out more about Bao Phi here:

<http://baophi.com/>





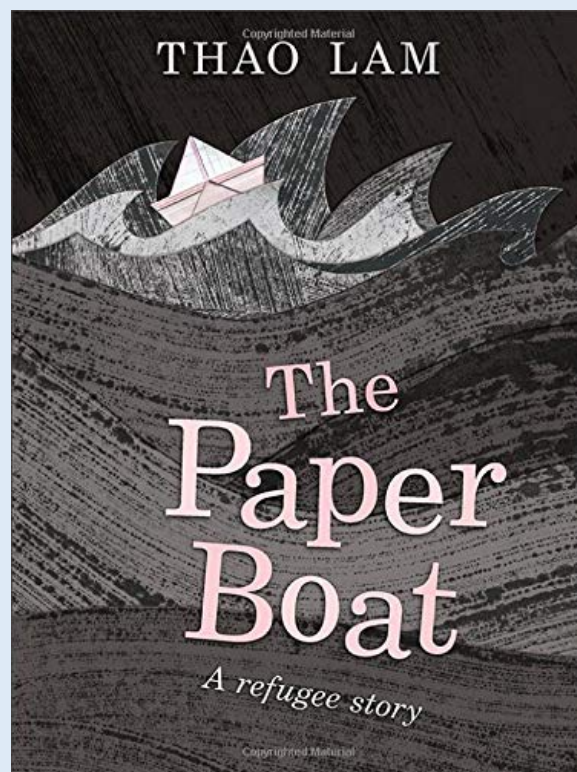
## THE PAPER BOAT: A REFUGEE STORY

Thao Lam

In *The Paper Boat*, Thao's signature collage art tells the wordless story of one family's escape from Vietnam—a journey intertwined with an ant colony's parallel narrative. At her home in Vietnam, a girl rescues ants from the sugar water set out to trap them. Later, when the girl's family flees war-torn Vietnam, ants lead them through the moonlit jungle to the boat that will take them to safety. Before boarding, the girl folds a paper boat from a bun wrapper and drops it into the water, and the ants climb on. Their perilous journey, besieged by punishing weather, predatory birds, and dehydration, before reaching a new beginning, mirrors the family's own. Impressionistic collages and a moving, Own Voices narrative make this a one-of-a-kind tale of courage, resilience, and hope.



**Thao Lam** fled from Vietnam to Canada with her family as a child. Learning English was difficult, and it was picture books that helped her understand this new world and ignited her passion for visual storytelling. She has an insatiable love for colored and textured papers, which she uses to create her exuberant collages.



**AGE RANGE:** 6 – 9 years

### Other works by Thao Lam:

- *THAO: A Picture Book*
- *Wallpaper*
- *Skunk on a String*
- *My Cat Looks Like My Dad*

Find out more about Thao Lam here:

<https://thaolam.com/>



## **YOUNG ADULT**





## A PHỞ LOVE STORY

Loan Le

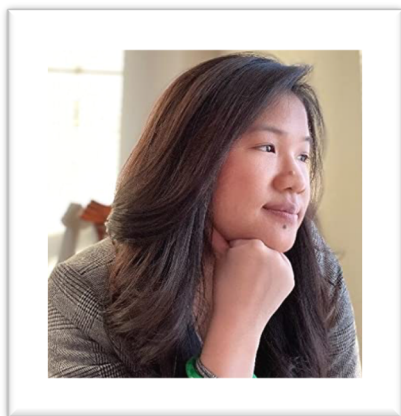
If Bao Nguyen had to describe himself, he'd say he was a rock. Steady and strong, but not particularly interesting. His grades are average, his social status unremarkable. He works at his parents' pho restaurant, and even there, he is his parents' fifth favorite employee. Not ideal.

If Linh Mai had to describe herself, she'd say she was a firecracker. Stable when unlit, but full of potential for joy and fire. She loves art and dreams pursuing a career in it. The only problem? Her parents rely on her in ways they're not willing to admit, including working practically full-time at her family's pho restaurant.

For years, the Mais and the Nguyens have been at odds, having owned competing, neighboring pho restaurants. Bao and Linh, who've avoided each other for most of their lives, both suspect that the feud stems from feelings much deeper than friendly competition.

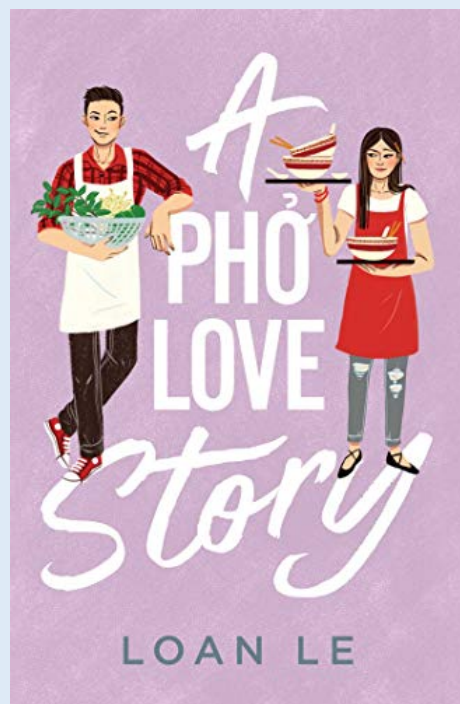
But then a chance encounter brings Linh and Bao in the same vicinity despite their best efforts and sparks fly, leading them both to wonder what took so long for them to connect. But then, of course, they immediately remember.

Can Linh and Bao find love in the midst of feuding families and complicated histories?



**Loan Le** is the youngest child of two Vietnamese immigrants hailing from Nha Trang. A Pushcart Prize-nominated writer, her short stories have appeared in CRAFT Literary, Mud Season Review, and Angel City Review. Loan is an editor at Simon and

Schuster's Atria Books imprint and lives in Manhattan. *A Pho Love Story* is her first novel. Find her on Twitter @loanloan.



**AGE RANGE:** 12+ years

**Other works by Loan Le:**

- *Solving for the Unknown*
- *Firsts and Lasts*

Find out more about Loan Le here:

<https://writerloanle.me/>



## THE MAGIC FISH

Trung Le Nguyen

Tien and his mother may come from different cultures—she’s an immigrant from Vietnam still struggling with English; he’s been raised in America—but through the fairy tales he checks out from the local library, those differences are erased.

But as much as Tien’s mother’s English continues to improve as he reads her tales of love, loss, and travel across distant shores, there’s one conversation that still eludes him—how to come out to her and his father. Is there even a way to explain what he’s going through in Vietnamese? And without a way to reveal his hidden self, how will his parents ever accept him?

This beautifully illustrated graphic novel speaks to the complexity of family and how stories can bring us together even when we don’t know the words.



**Trung Le Nguyen**, also known as Trungles, is a Vietnamese American comic book artist and storyteller from Minnesota. He was born in a refugee camp somewhere in the Philippine province of Palawan. Trung has contributed work for Oni Press, Boom! Studios, and Image Comics,

largely in the romance genre. *The Magic Fish* is his first graphic novel. It won two Harvey Awards. Trung currently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He raises three very spoiled hens.



**AGE RANGE:** 12-17 years

Find out more about Trung Le Nguyen here:

<https://www.trungles.com/>



## NOT HERE TO BE LIKED

Michelle Quach

Eliza Quan is the perfect candidate for editor in chief of her school paper. That is, until ex-jock Len DiMartile decides on a whim to run against her. Suddenly her vast qualifications mean squat because inexperienced Len—who is tall, handsome, and male—*just seems more like a leader*.

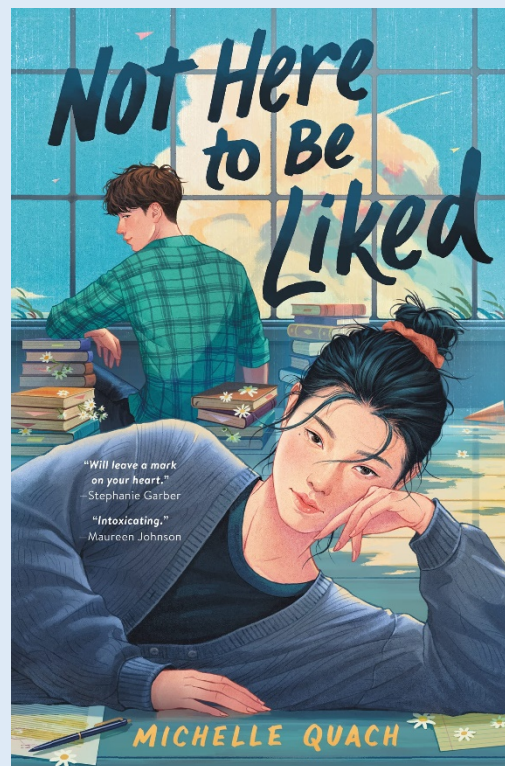
When Eliza's frustration spills out in a viral essay, she finds herself inspiring a feminist movement she never meant to start, caught between those who believe she's a gender equality champion and others who think she's simply crying misogyny.

Amid this growing tension, the school asks Eliza and Len to work side by side to demonstrate civility. But as they get to know one another, Eliza feels increasingly trapped by a horrifying realization—she just might be falling for the face of the patriarchy himself.



**Michelle Quach**, is a graphic designer and writer living in Los Angeles. She's Chinese-Vietnamese-American and a graduate of Harvard University, where she studied history and literature. She loves rom-coms, characters who don't always do

the right thing, and any dog that kind of looks like her dog. *Not Here to Be Liked* is her first novel.



**AGE RANGE:** 13-17 years

Find out more about Michelle Quach here:

<https://www.michellequach.com/>



## POETRY





## SPLIT

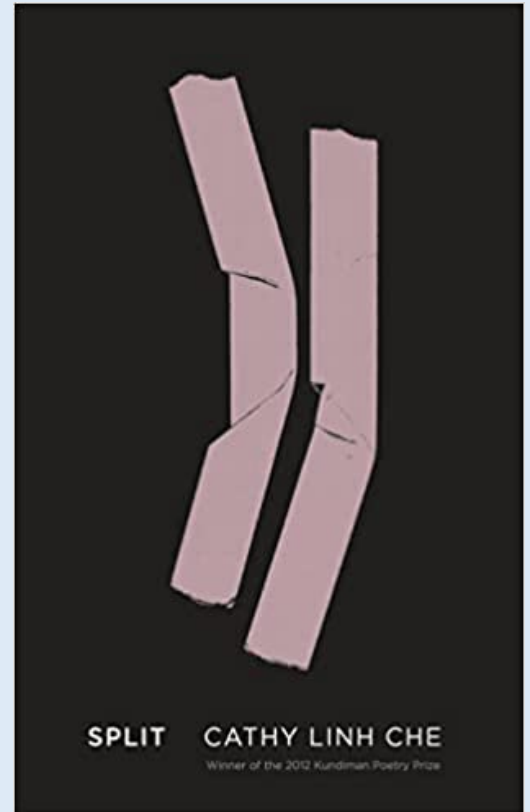
Cathy Linh Che

"*Split* crosses borders, exposing truths and dreams, violations of body and mind, aligning them until the deep push-pull of silence and song become a bridge. And here we cross over into a landscape where beauty interrogates, and we encounter a voice that refuses to let us off the hook."—Yusef Komunyakaa

"Perhaps the writer's most difficult task is to render the catastrophic linked non-stories that comprise transgenerational trauma. Cathy Linh Che's collection *Split* accomplishes this nearly impossible challenge with uncommon grace and power. Each poem unwinds the cataclysm of personal wounding by making itself irresistibly beautiful." —LA Review

In this stunning debut, we follow one woman's profoundly personal account of sexual violence against the backdrop of cultural conflict deftly illustrated through her parents' experiences of the Vietnam War, immigration, and its aftermath. By looking closely at landscape and psyche, *Split* explores what happens when deep trauma occurs and seeks to understand what it means to finally become whole.

**Cathy Linh Che** is the author of *Split* (Alice James Books), winner of the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America and of the Kundiman Poetry Prize. It was also an Academy of American Poets' Standout Book of 2014, a Publisher's Weekly Pick of the Week, and a Library Journal Amazing Title for Spring 2014. A Vietnamese American poet from Los Angeles and Long Beach, CA, she received her BA from Reed College and her MFA from New York University. She has been awarded fellowships and residencies from Poets & Writers, The Fine Arts Work Center at Provincetown, Kundiman, Hedgebrook, Poets House, The Asian American Literary Review, The Center for Book Arts, The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Workspace Residency, and a Jerome Foundation Travel Grant. She was also a Writer in Residence at Sierra Nevada College's MFA Program. She currently lives in Brooklyn, NY.



Check out her website here:

<https://www.cathylinhche.com/>



## COME CLEAN

Joshua Nguyen

Joshua Nguyen is the author of *Come Clean* (University of Wisconsin Press), winner of the 2021 Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry and the chapbook, "American Lục Bát for My Mother" (Bull City Press, 2021). He is a queer Vietnamese-American writer, a collegiate national poetry slam champion (CUPSI), and a native Houstonian. He has received fellowships from Kundiman, Tin House, Sundress Academy For The Arts, and the Vermont Studio Center. He has been published in *Wildness*, *The Texas Review*, *Auburn Avenue*, and elsewhere. He has also been featured on both the "VS" podcast and "The Slowdown". He is the Wit Tea co-editor for *The Offing Mag*, the Kundiman South co-chair, a bubble tea connoisseur, and loves a good pun. He is a PhD student at The University of Mississippi, where he also received his MFA.

Joshua Nguyen began writing with the Meta-Four Houston Youth Slam Team from 2008-2012 and competed in *Brave New Voices*. He is an alumnus of the University of Texas at Austin and was part of the UT Spitshine slam team from 2014-2016. He placed #1 in the nation in 2014, won 'Best Writing as a Team' in 2015, and was the 2015 CUPSI Haiku Champ. In 2016, he traveled to Washington D.C. as a member of Future Corp to organize the *2016 Brave New Voices International Poetry Festival*.

**Come Clean:** Joshua Nguyen's sharp, songlike, and often experimental collection compartmentalizes past trauma—sexual and generational—through the quotidian. Poems aim to confront the speaker's past by physically, and mentally, cleaning up. Here, the Asian-American masculine interrogates the domestic space through the sensual and finds healing through family and in everyday rhythms: rinsing rice until the water runs clear, folding clean shirts, and attempts at re-creating an unwritten family recipe.



### Other works by Joshua Nguyen:

- *American Lục Bát For My Mother*

### Check out his website here:

<https://www.joshua-nguyen.com/>





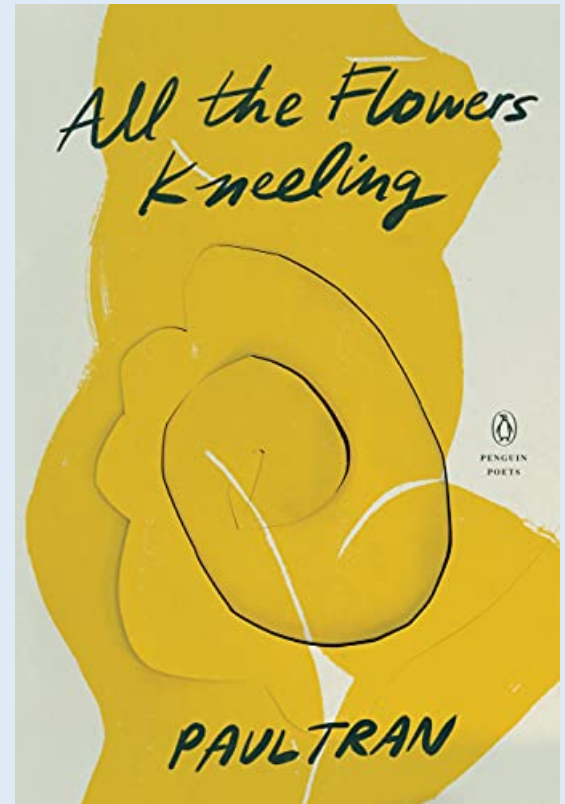
## ALL THE FLOWERS KNEELING

Paul Tran

Visceral and astonishing, Paul Tran's debut poetry collection *All the Flowers Kneeling* investigates intergenerational trauma, sexual violence, and U.S. imperialism in order to radically alter our understanding of freedom, power, and control. In poems of desire, gender, bodies, legacies, and imagined futures, Tran's poems elucidate the complex and harrowing processes of reckoning and recovery, enhanced by innovative poetic forms that mirror the nonlinear emotional and psychological experiences of trauma survivors. At once grand and intimate, commanding and deeply vulnerable, *All the Flowers Kneeling* revels in rediscovering and reconfiguring the self, and ultimately becomes an essential testament to the human capacity for resilience, endurance, and love.

**Paul Tran** earned their B.A. in history from Brown University and M.F.A. in poetry from Washington University in St. Louis, where they won the Howard Nemerov Prize, Dorothy Negri Prize, and Norma Lowry Memorial Award. As the Chancellor's Graduate Fellow (2017-19) and Senior Poetry Fellow (2019-20) in the Writing Program, and as Faculty in Poetry (2020-Present) in the Summer Writers Institute, Paul has taught the introductory, intermediate, and advanced poetry workshops at WashU.

From 2013-18, Paul coached the poetry slam teams at Brown University, Barnard College & Columbia University, and Washington University in St. Louis. Paul was the first Asian American since 1993—and first transgender poet ever—to win the Nuyorican Poets Café Grand Slam, placing top 10 at the Individual World Poetry Slam and top 2 at the National Poetry Slam. A two-time winner of the Rustbelt Poetry Slam, Paul has served as Poet-in-Residence at Urban Word NYC and head poetry slam coach at Urban Arts Alliance in St. Louis, which won the Brave New Voices Grand Slam Championship in 2019.



Check out Paul Tran's website here:

<https://iampaultran.com/about>



**FICTION**



## THE MOUNTAINS SING

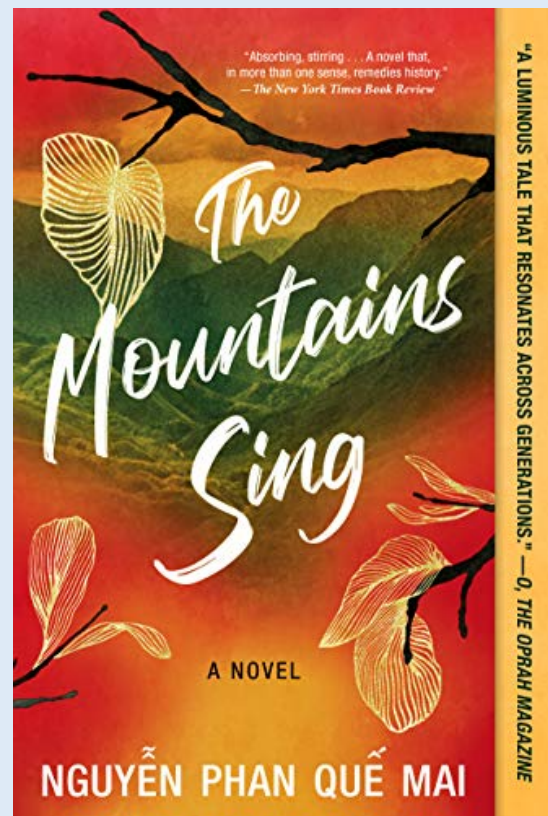
Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai

With the epic sweep of Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* or Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and the lyrical beauty of Vaddey Ratner's *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, *The Mountains Sing* tells an enveloping, multigenerational tale of the Trần family, set against the backdrop of the Việt Nam War. Trần Diệu Lan, who was born in 1920, was forced to flee her family farm with her six children during the Land Reform as the Communist government rose in the North. Years later in Hà Nội, her young granddaughter, Hương, comes of age as her parents and uncles head off down the Hồ Chí Minh Trail to fight in a conflict that tore apart not just her beloved country, but also her family. Vivid, gripping, and steeped in the language and traditions of Việt Nam, *The Mountains Sing* brings to life the human costs of this conflict from the point of view of the Vietnamese people themselves, while showing us the true power of kindness and hope. *The Mountains Sing* is celebrated Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai's first novel in English.



**Dr. Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai** is an award-winning writer in both Vietnamese and English. Her eight books of poetry, short fiction and non-fiction in Vietnamese have received some of Vietnam's top literary awards including the 2010 Poetry of the Year Award from the Hanoi

Writers Association, the Capital's Literature & Arts Award, and First Prize in the Poetry Competition celebrating 1,000 Years of Hanoi. In her roles as a consultant to UN organizations in Vietnam, she designed communications strategies to help combat human trafficking and child labor. She currently divides her time between Indonesia and Vietnam. Her journalism regularly appears in major Vietnamese newspapers.



### Other works by Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai:

- *Earth Cakes and Ski Cakes*
- *The Secret of Hoa Sen*
- *The Human Field*
- *Wild under the Sky*

Find out more about Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai here:

<https://nguyenphanquemail.com/>

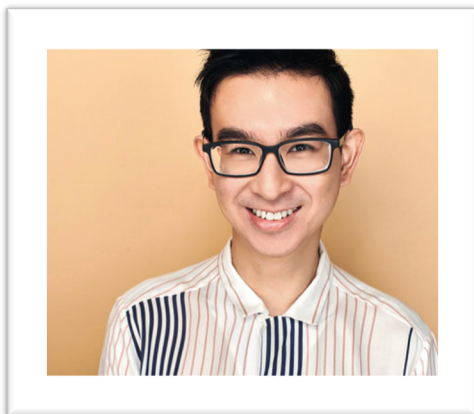




## THINGS WE LOST TO THE WATER

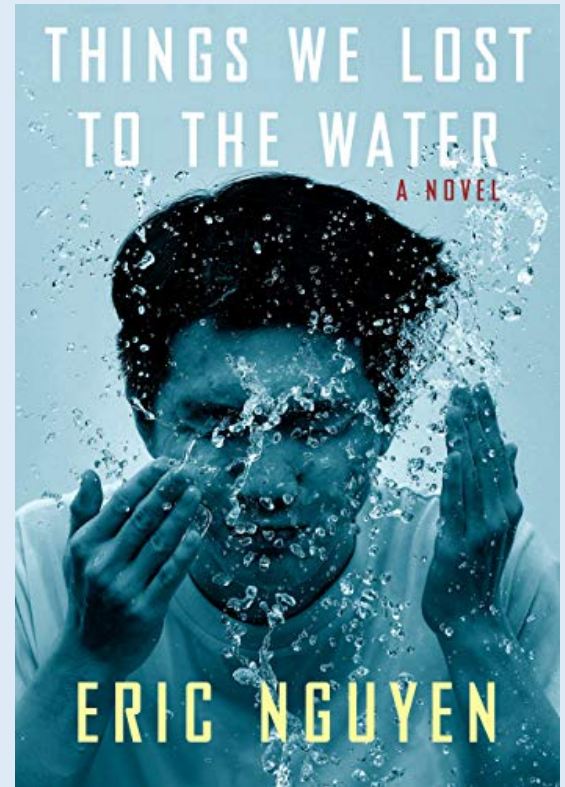
Eric Nguyen

When Huong arrives in New Orleans with her two young sons, she is jobless, homeless, and worried about her husband, Cong, who remains in Vietnam. As she and her boys begin to settle into life in America, she continues to send letters and tapes back to Cong, hopeful that they will be reunited, and her children will grow up with a father. But with time, Huong realizes she will never see her husband again. While she attempts to come to terms with this loss, her sons, Tuan and Binh, grow up in their absent father's shadow, haunted by a man and a country trapped in their memories and imaginations. As they push forward, the three adapt to life in America in different ways: Huong gets involved with a Vietnamese car salesman who is also new in town; Tuan tries to connect with his heritage by joining a local Vietnamese gang; and Binh, now going by Ben, embraces his adopted homeland and his burgeoning sexuality. Their search for identity--as individuals and as a family--threatens to tear them apart, until disaster strikes the city they now call home and they are suddenly forced to find a new way to come together and honor the ties that bind them.



**Eric Nguyen** earned an MFA in creative writing from McNeese State University in Louisiana. He has been awarded fellowships from Lambda Literary, Voices of Our Nation Arts (VONA), and the Tin House Writers Workshop. He is the editor in chief of

diaCRITICS. he lives in Washington, DC. *Things We Lost to the Water* is his first novel.



Find out more about Eric Nguyen here:

<https://www.ericnguyen.com/>



## NONFICTION



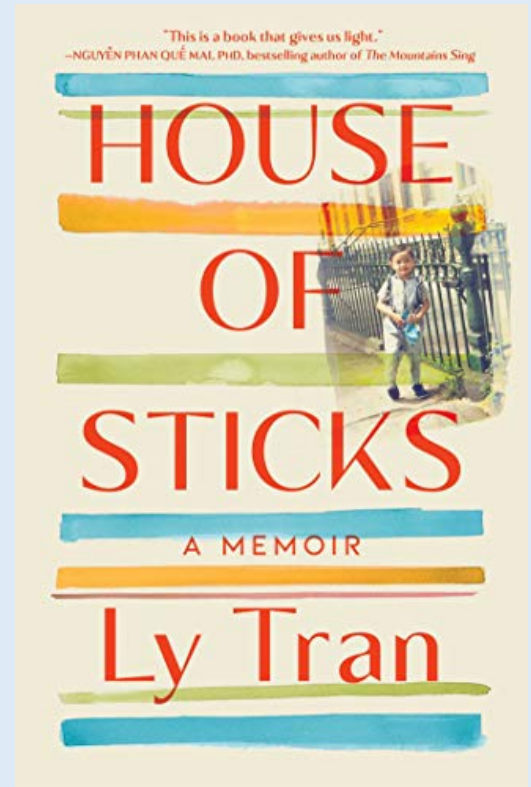
## HOUSE OF STICKS: A MEMOIR

Ly Tran

Ly Tran is just a toddler in 1993 when she and her family immigrate from a small town along the Mekong river in Vietnam to a two-bedroom railroad apartment in Queens. Ly's father, a former lieutenant in the South Vietnamese army, spent nearly a decade as a POW, and their resettlement is made possible through a humanitarian program run by the US government. Soon after they arrive, Ly joins her parents and three older brothers sewing ties and cummerbunds piece-meal on their living room floor to make ends meet. As they navigate this new landscape, Ly finds herself torn between two worlds. She knows she must honor her parents' Buddhist faith and contribute to the family livelihood, working long hours at home and eventually as a manicurist alongside her mother at a nail salon in Brooklyn that her parents take over. But at school, Ly feels the mounting pressure to blend in. A growing inability to see the blackboard presents new challenges, especially when her father forbids her from getting glasses, calling her diagnosis of poor vision a government conspiracy. His frightening temper and paranoia leave a mark on Ly's sense of self. Who is she outside of everything her family expects of her?



**Ly Tran** graduated from Columbia University with a degree in Creative Writing and Linguistics in 2014. She has received fellowships from MacDowell, Art Omi, and Yaddo. *House of Sticks* is her first book.



### Other works by Ly Tran:

- *Poe Coloring Book*
- *Little Birds Coloring Book*
- *William Shakespeare Adult Coloring Book*

Check out Odessa Begay's website here:

<https://www.odessabegay.com/>





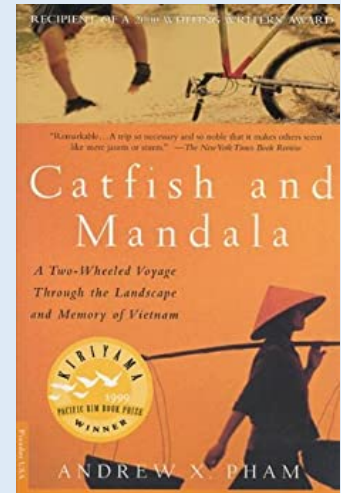
## CATFISH AND MANDALA: A TWO-WHEELED VOYAGE THROUGH THE LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY OF VIETNAM

Andrew X. Pham

Andrew X. Pham dreamed of becoming a writer. Born in Vietnam and raised in California, he held technical jobs at United Airlines-and always carried a letter of resignation in his briefcase. His father had been a POW of the Vietcong; his family came to America as "boat people." His sister committed suicide, prompting Andrew to quit his job. He sold all of his possessions and embarked on a year-long bicycle journey that took him through the Mexican desert, where he was treated as a *bueno hermano*, a "good brother"; around a thousand-mile loop from Narita to Kyoto in Japan; and, after five months and 2,357 miles, to Saigon, where he finds "nothing familiar in the bombed-out darkness." In Mexico he's treated kindly as a *Vietnamito*, though he shouts, "I'm American, Vietnamese American!" In Vietnam, he's taken for Japanese or Korean by his countrymen, except, of course, by his relatives, who doubt that as a Vietnamese he has the stamina to complete his journey ("Only Westerners can do it"); and in the United States he's considered anything but American. A vibrant, picaresque memoir written with narrative flair and a wonderful, eye-opening sense of adventure, *Catfish and Mandala* is an unforgettable search for cultural identity.



**Andrew X. Pham** is an independent journalist and author. At various periods of his life, he has worked as an aircraft engineer, researcher, technical writer, startup founder, farmer, food critic, pizza chef, bungalow builder, small business owner, a literary panelist, teacher, and an MFA faculty. He is a Whiting Writer and a Guggenheim Fellow.



### Other works by Andrew X. Pham:

- *The Eaves of Heaven*
- *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*

Find out more about Andrew X. Pham:

<https://www.andrewxpham.com/>



## MANGO AND PEPPERCORNS: A MEMOIR OF FOOD, AN UNLIKELY FAMILY, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Tung Nguyen, Katherine Manning, Lyn  
Nguyen, and Elisa Ung

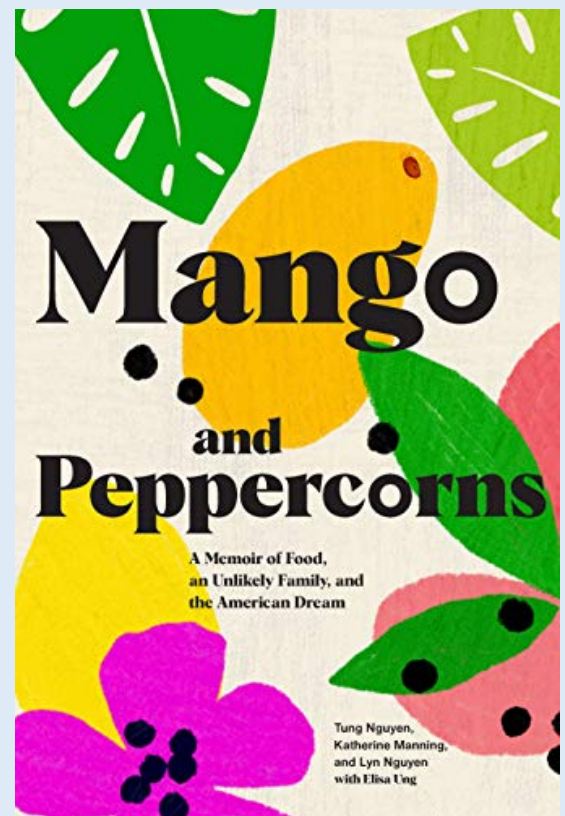
In 1975, after narrowly escaping the fall of Saigon, pregnant refugee and gifted cook Tung Nguyen ended up in the Miami home of Kathy Manning, a graduate student and waitress who was taking in displaced Vietnamese refugees. This serendipitous meeting evolved into a decades-long partnership, one that eventually turned strangers into family and a tiny, no-frills eatery into one of the most lauded restaurants in the country.

**Tung Nguyen**, who fled Vietnam almost fifty years ago, cofounded the award-winning Hy Vong, a pioneering Vietnamese restaurant in Miami. She currently cooks for select pop-ups and catered events.

**Katherine Manning** cofounded Hy Vong. She manages Hy Vong's pop-ups and catered events.

**Lyn Nguyen** is Tung Nguyen's daughter. Before earning degrees from Harvard and Cornell, she helped wait tables at Hy Vong. She is the CEO and cofounder of Liquid Analytics, an artificial intelligence innovation firm.

**Elisa Ung** is an award-winning writer, book collaborator, and editor. She was the restaurant critic and dining columnist for Northjersey.com and the (Bergen) Record in New Jersey, and a staff writer for the Philadelphia Inquirer.



**View recording of the authors in  
conversation at Miami Book Fair:**

[miamibookfaironline.com/event/in-conversation-on-mango-and-peppercorns-a-memoir-of-food-an-unlikely-family-and-the-american-dream/](https://miamibookfaironline.com/event/in-conversation-on-mango-and-peppercorns-a-memoir-of-food-an-unlikely-family-and-the-american-dream/)

Find out more about *Mango and Peppercorns*:

[shop.booksandbooks.com/book/9781797202242](https://shop.booksandbooks.com/book/9781797202242)



## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**



## Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network (Dvan)

The Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network (DVAN) celebrates and fosters diasporic Vietnamese literary voices. DVAN promotes nonfiction, fiction, and poetry to empower Vietnamese artists in the diaspora to inspire understanding and dialogue within our community, and with others. Their complex and diverse stories must be championed and passed on to current and future generations. They are refugees, immigrants, survivors, and descendants, and their stories must be heard.

### Why is DVAN's Work Important?

Through their work of promoting Vietnamese diasporic literature:

- They celebrate the joy & pride of creating art in today's modern world.
- They resist racist stereotypes linked to colonialism and war.

They foster a sense of belonging for upcoming generations.



Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen and Professor Isabelle Thuy Pelaud co-founded DVAN to empower and disseminate Vietnamese voices and visions.

## She Who Has No Master(s) Mentorship Program

**She Who Has No Master(s)** is a collective project of womxn and nonbinary writers of the Vietnamese diaspora who engage in collaborative, polyvocal, and hybrid-poetic works. Through a collaborative writing process and art engagement activities that reach across borders, this project endeavors to bring into concert the women/womxn and nonbinary voices and experiences of the Vietnamese diaspora.

Founded in 2015 as a project of DVAN (Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network) and led by co-founder and creative director, Dao Strom, the structure of this collective project continues to evolve and grow.

In 2022, **She Who Has No Master(s)** is initiating a creative writing mentorship program led by and designed for Vietnamese and SE Asian diasporic women and nonbinary writers. The centering of this perspective is important because in most educational settings the focus on subject matter and perspectives of women/nonbinary SE Asian diasporic women is marginal, if not totally unaddressed. These offerings fulfill a dire need in our nation's current environment for creative writing education. Mentorship is designed so that each student receives intensive one-on-one creative writing guidance from a mentor, one of the distinguished, award-winning writers from the **She Who Has No Master(s)** collective. If selected for a mentorship, you will receive 4 months of tuition-free mentorship, conducted remotely from May to August 2022. The first cohort will engage 4 students and 4 mentors.

**Learn more about the program here:**

[dvan.org/2022/01/2022-swhnm-mentorship-program-call-for-applications/](https://dvan.org/2022/01/2022-swhnm-mentorship-program-call-for-applications/)





## Asian American Writers' Workshop (AAWW)



The Asian American Writers' Workshop (AAWW) is devoted to creating, publishing, developing and disseminating creative writing by Asian Americans, and to providing an alternative literary arts space at the intersection of migration, race, and social justice. Since their founding in 1991, they have been dedicated to the belief that Asian American stories deserve to be told. At a time when migrants, women, people of color, Muslims, and LGBTQ people are specifically targeted, they offer a new countercultural public space in which to imagine a more just future.

**READ MORE ABOUT AAWW FELLOWSHIPS HERE:**

<https://aaww.org/fellowships/>

### Open City Fellowship

Open City documents the pulse of real-time Asian America as it's being lived on the streets of New York right now. They tell the stories of the Asian and immigrant neighborhoods that comprise one million New Yorkers and 13 percent of the city, but that rarely find their way into the mainstream media. They are looking for writers to create deft, engaging narratives that bring the face, name, place, and heart of the community to issues like gentrification, labor, and community policing in neighborhoods such as Sunset Park in Brooklyn, Manhattan's Chinatown, and Flushing, Jackson Heights, and Richmond Hill in Queens.

Open City Fellows receive a \$2,500 grant, skill-building workshops, and publishing opportunities in *The Margins* as part of two nine-month fellowship opportunities: the Open City Neighborhoods Fellowship and the Open City Muslim Communities Fellowship.

### The Margins Fellowship

*The Margins* is an online magazine of arts and ideas. They seek to bridge the allegedly contradictory worlds of literary thought and social justice, pop culture, and critical theory while engaging with immigration, race, and transnationalism.

The Margins Fellowship grants a \$5,000 fellowship, mentorship, workspace, career guidance, and publishing opportunities to four Asian diasporic creative writers based in NYC for a full year. Fellows also receive special residency space at The Millay Colony for the Arts, a seven-acre artists retreat space at the former house and gardens of poet Edna St. Vincent Millay.





## National Youth Poet Laureate Alexandra Huynh

Alexandra Huynh, an 18-year-old Vietnamese American from Sacramento, Calif., was named the 2021 National Youth Poet Laureate. Huynh is a first-year student at Stanford University.

Watch her read poem “Autumn Prayer” for ABC News here:

<https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/GMA3/video/national-youth-poet-laureates-inspiring-spoken-word-performance-77963874>

Read her interview for NBC News here:

[nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/alexandra-hunh-nods-vietnamese-background-youth-poet-laureate-rcna1109](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/alexandra-hunh-nods-vietnamese-background-youth-poet-laureate-rcna1109)



“You don’t have to be of a particular background or have your words sound a particular way for your poetry to matter”

– Alexandra Huynh



## Vietnamese Lo-Fi Video (Saigoneer)

A new lo-fi tracklist by Vietnamese graphic designer Jiji is gaining a small following. This playlist is modeled after the Lofi Girl character originally created by streaming channel ChilledCow, which plays lo-fi hip-hop songs around the clock.

View the video and read more about the playlist [here](#).



For more lo-fi videos, visit [Jiji's YouTube channel](#). Visit her [Behance](#) for more artworks.



## Reading List: “Essential Books by Vietnamese American Writers” (Electric Literature)

Eric Nguyen recommends literature that resists any neat idea of a singular Vietnamese diaspora narrative.

Listed works:

*The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui

*Monkey Bridge* by Lan Cao

*water/tongue* by mai c. doan

*Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* by Bich Minh Nguyen

*If I Had Two Lives* by Abbigail N. Rosewood

*Fantasy* by Kim-Anh Schreiber

*We Are Meant to be a Gentle People* by Dao Strom

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

*The Book of Salt* by Monique Truong

*Night Sky With Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong

*Fantasy* by Kim-Anh Schreiber

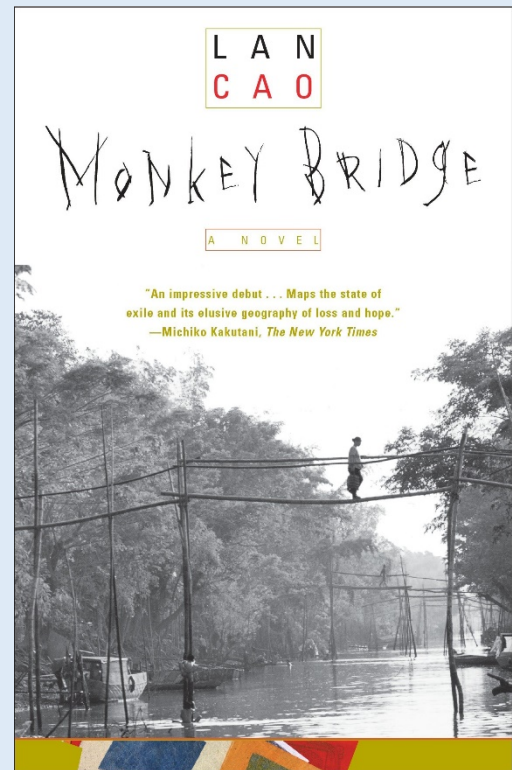
*We Are Meant to be a Gentle People* by Dao Strom

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

*Night Sky With Exit Wounds* by Ocean Vuong

**READ THE FULL LIST HERE:**

[electricliterature.com/10-essential-books-by-vietnamese-american-writers/](http://electricliterature.com/10-essential-books-by-vietnamese-american-writers/)



“It wasn’t until college that I encountered a book by a Vietnamese American writer. From there, I tried to read every book by a Vietnamese American I could find, learning that unspoken history along the way, often waiting years until another book was published.”

– Eric Nguyen



## **The 88 Project for Free Speech in Vietnam: Profile On Trần Đức Thạch**

Trần Đức Thạch, born in 1952, is a poet and former North Vietnamese soldier. He is the author of the short story “The Haunting Mass Grave.” He was sentenced in 2009 to three years in prison for “propaganda against the state.” A founder of the group the Brotherhood for Democracy, Thạch was arrested a second time in 2020 and sentenced to 12 years for “conspiracy to overthrow the government.” His appeal of his 12-year sentence was denied on March 24, 2021.

**Read his story “The Haunting Mass Grave” here:**

<https://vietopian.wordpress.com/2021/03/24/the-haunting-mass-grave/>

**View a translation of one of his poems here:**

<https://the88project.org/repentance-poem/>

**READ THE FULL PROFILE HERE:**

[the88project.org/profile/489/tran-duc-thach/](https://the88project.org/profile/489/tran-duc-thach/)



The 88 Project (“Dự án 88”) supports and encourages freedom of expression in Vietnam by sharing the stories of and advocating for Vietnamese activists who are persecuted because of their peaceful dissent. Their vision is that one day the Vietnamese people will be able to freely express themselves and actively take part in socio-political processes to bring about the changes they desire without fear of discrimination or persecution.