

Climbing Many Mountains

AN ESSAY BY

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In 1983, when I was ten years old, I went secretly to the post office in my hometown to mail a letter to Hà Nội. The letter contained my entry for a writing competition. When a notice arrived announcing that I had won a prize, my parents were shocked. Due to the long history of Vietnamese writers' experiences in my country, my parents reminded me of their wish that their only daughter would not become a writer.

I had to put aside my dreams of writing to do a variety of jobs to earn a living and help support my family. But the writer in me always listened to other people, always asked questions about their experiences during the war, and memorized their stories. In my teenage years, I began to travel to my parents' villages to talk with our elder relatives and family friends so I could imagine how life had been for my grandparents, who had either died or been killed before I was born. Gradually, the more I began to understand Việt Nam's painful past, the more people shared with me the events of their lives.

Unbeknownst to me, at that young age I was already carrying out the research for *The Mountains Sing*. It was only with time and distance and my ongoing academic research that I could comprehend the complexity of Việt Nam's history and its relation to other nations. My extensive exchanges with Vietnamese and American combat veterans, as well as volunteer work with victims of the war, has expanded this understanding.

The Mountains Sing embodies my yearning to know my grandmothers, and to bring to life the underrepresented women and children who often suffer the consequences of wars the most but must hide their sorrows to become

pillars of strength and comfort for returning soldiers. Through Grandma Diệu Lan and her granddaughter Hương in the novel, I could talk to them, trace their footsteps, and imagine their dreams and hopes.

It may seem ironic that I have chosen to write this novel, by far my most personal work to date, in English, which is also the language of invasive military powers and cultures. But this language has given me a new voice and a way to fictionalize the turbulent events of my country's past, including those that have not yet been sufficiently documented in Vietnamese fiction, such as the Great Hunger or the Land Reform. I am also responding to Hollywood movies and novels written by those Westerners who continue to see our country only as a place of war and the Vietnamese as people who don't need to speak—or, when we do, sound simple, naïve, cruel, or opportunistic. The canon of Việt Nam war and post-war literature in English is vast, but there is a lack of voices from inside Việt Nam.

When I first learned English in eighth grade, I didn't know that one day it would be the language that would save *The Mountains Sing*. Khương Dụ, the small northern village where I was born, did not have an English teacher. Bạc Liêu, the southern town where I grew up, didn't have many people who could speak English. For me, a student who also worked as a rice farmer and street vendor, the Western world was mysterious, existing only in the black-and-white movies I would occasionally catch a glimpse of while selling cigarettes in the town's cemetery, which also served as our only open-air movie theater.

I didn't know any English words until well into secondary school, when one afternoon my eldest brother brought home a notebook. He told me he had just learned English from someone and would teach me. I was so excited I could barely swallow my dinner. That night, after I had lit the oil lamp (we had electricity only occasionally) and put on long pants and a long-sleeved shirt to ward off the zillions of mosquitoes, my brother solemnly brought out his notebook. He opened the first page and pointed at a strange-looking word. “Sờ cu lờ,” he said, and then looked at me, expecting me to repeat after him.

“Sờ . . . sờ . . .” I said, and brought my hand to my mouth.

“Sờ cu lờ,” he said again.

“Sờ . . . sờ cu . . .” I repeated and burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it! The words that had just escaped my mouth sounded like the Vietnamese phrase for “to touch a male’s genitals.”

So ended my first English lesson. Because I hadn’t been able to stop laughing, my brother slapped his notebook shut and stormed out of the room. His face was as red as a *gấc* fruit.

“Brother! Teach me, please,” I called after him, but he didn’t turn back.

Later, much later, I found out my brother was trying to teach me a very important word: “school.”

I didn’t dare ask him to teach me again, but occasionally I would steal his notebook when he was gone, hide under the mango and coconut trees that circled our fish pond, and stare at the English words. I sensed that behind those strange-looking words existed some magic doors, and if I managed to push them open, I would be able to enter the big, wide world.

And now, with *The Mountains Sing*, I am taking my baby steps into that world. It took me seven years to write and edit, hundreds of revisions, many sleepless nights, tears, and countless moments of doubt. I doubted that I was a good-enough storyteller. I doubted my ability to express complicated thoughts and emotions in English. But I never doubted my decision in 2006 at the age of thirty-three to return to my dream of becoming a writer.

By turning to the first page of *The Mountains Sing*, you will open the door into an authentic Việt Nam where proverbs are sprinkled throughout daily conversations, where lullabies and poems are sung. You will experience the colors, richness, and complexity of our culture, beginning with our Vietnamese names and language, which appear in full diacritical marks. Those marks might look strange at first, but they are as important as the roof of a home. The word “ma,” for example, can be written as ma, má, mà, mả, mạ, mả; each meaning very different things: ghost, mother, but, grave, young rice plant, horse. The word “bo” can become bó, bở, bọ, bơ, bở, bò, bở, bở, bở (bunch, abandon, insect, butter, mushy, shore, chamber pot, father, mistress, nutritious).

Just like Hương in *The Mountains Sing*, for several of my childhood years, books were my only friends; they allowed me to escape from desperation and poverty. My family had moved from the north to the south of Việt Nam; it was just a few years after the war, and despite the country’s unification, the

north-south tension ran strong. While living amidst this tension I understood the deep wounds that divided our country and families. Many of these wounds have still not healed, even though nearly forty-five years have passed since the war's ending on April 30, 1975.

Tremendous progress has been made in terms of reconciliation between Việt Nam and the United States, but the wounds that divided our country and families, both at home and in the diaspora, remain profound and painful. For that reason, *The Mountains Sing* places our people at the center of the Việt Nam War in the hopes that we will be open to difficult but necessary conversations that can help one another heal. And at the same time, I hope the story of Hương and Diệu Lan helps international readers discover our common humanity, as in the words of Hương: “Somehow I was sure that if people were willing to read each other, and see the light of other cultures, there would be no war on earth.”