The Best We Could Do

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THI BUI

As she recounts in *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui was born in Sài Gòn, South Việt Nam, in early 1975, shortly before the end of the Vietnam War. Three years later, she and her family escaped Việt Nam by boat to Malaysia and then to the United States, where she grew up in California. She went on to study art and law as an undergraduate at UC Berkeley, then trained as a sculptor in New York and received an MFA. from Bard College. Although she began exhibiting her work around the city, she soon changed paths and decided to become a public school teacher. While studying art education at New York University, she began to interview her family for a final project on Việt Nam, and she realized that comics would be the most appropriate medium for telling their story. She began learning to draw them and, over more than a decade, wrote *The Best We Could Do* while slowly working through her family's history. Meanwhile, she taught high school art in New York and then in Oakland, California, in an alternative school for recent immigrants. She taught her students to write their own stories as graphic novels and, after several years, published an anthology of them as the book *We Are Oakland International*. During this time period, she also exhibited art and published academic writing in various galleries, magazines, and journals. Since 2015, she has taught graduate students in comics at the California College of the Arts. But she has only become a prominent name in the comic book world since 2017, when she published *The Best We Could Do* to critical acclaim after more than a decade of work. Her book won an American Book Award, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Autobiography and the Eisner Award (the most important award for comic books), and was selected as mandatory reading for first-year students in at least a dozen colleges and universities around the United States. In 2018, Bui contributed to her friend (and acclaimed Vietnamese American novelist) Việt Thanh Nguyễn's anthology *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* and illustrated the Vietnamese American poet Bao Phi's children's book *A Different Pond*. In 2019, as though to combine these two projects, she and her son Hiển collaborated with Nguyễn and Nguyễn's son Ellison to create another children's book, *Chicken of the Sea*. She has also published many of her political comics on the website The Nib. She has emphatically declared that *The Best We Could Do* will be her only memoir, and she is now turning her energy to conducting journalism through comic books. In her next project, she seeks to document the projected effects of climate change on farmers in southern Việt Nam's Mekong Delta.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Best We Could Do interweaves the story of Bui's family in Việt Nam with that country's history during the 20th century, and particularly during the 1955-1975 civil war between the Communist North and American-backed South, which is called the Vietnam War in the United States and the "American War" in Việt Nam. Although she presents a brief timeline of the events at the beginning of her book and continually references important historical context, it can be difficult to keep up with the immense range of invasions, wars, leaders, and oppressive laws that have ruled Việt Nam in recent memory. According to folklore, northern Việt Nam's earliest emperors date back to nearly 3000 BCE, and it was ruled by a variety of dynasties until 111 BCE, when the Chinese invaded and took control of Việt Nam. The Chinese essentially ruled for a millennium, until the year 938, and then Việt Nam was run by a centralized native monarchy until the French invasion in 1858, which is where the nation's history becomes connected to Bui's work. Although revolutionary efforts to reclaim Việt Nam's independence were continuous throughout the next century, the French maintained control until World War II, when the German invasion of France in 1940 cleared way for Japan to invade Việt Nam. After its successful invasion, however, Japan allowed the French government to formally continue operating. Bui's parents were born around this time and lived their earliest years under the Japanese occupation; notably, her father distinctly remembers the famine of 1944-1945. Near the end of World War II, knowing they would lose, the Japanese overturned the French colonial government and installed a native emperor named Bảo Đại as the ruler of all Việt Nam. But when the Japanese were finally defeated, Hồ Chí Minh persuaded the weak and unpopular Bảo Đại to hand power over to his Việt Minh nationalist revolutionaries, who had already taken control over most of Việt Nam's smaller towns and cities. Việt Nam, in its current territorial extension, was united for the first time under Hồ Chí Minh's government. But, while World War II had already ended, in Việt Nam, three decades of nearly uninterrupted war were only beginning. First, the British, the French, and their unlikely ally the Japanese invaded French Indochina (the colony that included Việt Nam, Laos, and Cambodia) in order to reestablish French colonial sovereignty. After eight years of fighting between the French and the Việt Minh, in the 1954 Geneva Conference, it was agreed that France would withdraw and Việt Nam would be split: the North half would be governed by the Việt Minh and the South half by the old emperor Bảo Đại—who promptly left and moved to Paris. The Accords also established that an election in 1956 would reunify Việt Nam. However, the absent Bảo Đại's prime minister Ngô Đình Diệm seized control of the

South Vietnamese government through a fraudulent referendum and then cancelled the 1956 elections, all with support from the United States. Diệm began executing communists and expropriating land from peasants to return it to landlords. These policies won him at most 5% support in rural Việt Nam, where a communist guerilla army called the Việt Cộng began organizing against him. Conflict between the Việt Cộng and the Southern Vietnamese government escalated until the United States launched an invasion in 1964, which it justified by publicly lying about the so-called "Gulf of Tonkin incident," a military confrontation between the United States and the North Vietnamese in Vietnamese territorial waters. Northern Vietnamese involvement in the war escalated in response to the United States' invasion, turning the small-scale guerrilla war into a large-scale formal conflict for the first time. After the North and Việt Cộng's Tết Offensive in 1968, the American public's political opposition to the war and decreasing willingness to serve in it began weakening the South Vietnamese position. The United States fully withdrew in 1973, and despite a technical ceasefire, the war continued. The North handily defeated the South and took the Southern capital of Sài Gòn in 1975, then set about reintegrating the country. During this process, it persecuted people who were formerly involved in the South Vietnamese government, supported the American war effort, and those who were otherwise considered a threat to the new Communist government. This included Bui's family, which waited in fear in Sài Gòn throughout most of the war. Like many Sài Gòn residents at the time, however, Bui's father migrated from the North after the country's partition. Thousands of families, mostly those under threat from the regime, fled the country by boat. Bui's family was one of these, and this mass exodus of refugees created an international humanitarian crisis, as the neighboring Southeast Asian countries in which these refugees landed largely refused to accept them. Nearly 1,000,000 Vietnamese refugees were resettled, mostly in the United States, Canada, Australia, and France. Today, these refugees and their descendants are the principal constituents of the Vietnamese diaspora.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Best We Could Do is most often described as a graphic memoir, or autobiography told in a comic book form. The most prominent exemplars of this genre are Alison Bechdel's award-winning story of her childhood *Fun Home* (and its sequel *Are You My Mother?*); Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (Vols. I and II), the tales of her childhood during Iran's Islamic Revolution and coming-of-age between Iran and Europe; and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Vols. I and II), which retell the Holocaust and its aftermath, as experienced through the author's father's perspective, through the uncanny metaphor of cats implementing a genocide against mice. Other bestselling graphic memoirs include acclaimed Japanese artist Yoshihiro Tatsumi's *A Drifting Life*, Vanessa Davis's *Make Me a Woman*, Tom Hart's *Rosalie Lightning* (about his young daughter's death), Riad Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future* (Vols. I, II, and III), and Civil Rights Movement icon John Lewis's *March* (Vols. I, II, and III). G.B. Tran's *Vietnamerica* is another graphic memoir about a young Vietnamese American uncovering his family's refugee history. Vietnamese American literature has also emerged recently as a genre but is increasingly important in the contemporary world of English-language literature; since the principal Vietnamese migration to the United States occurred after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the first generation of Vietnamese immigrant writers to grow up in the United States began publishing in the early 2000s. The most prominent of this group is Việt Thanh Nguyễn, best-known for his 2016 novel *The Sympathizer*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as numerous other awards. In addition, Nguyễn is Thi Bui's friend and sometime collaborator, and won a MacArthur "Genius" Grant and Guggenheim Fellowship for his work. He has also produced the collection of short stories *The Refugees*, two academic monographs, and various edited anthologies. Other prominent Vietnamese American writers include Monique Truong (best known for her novel *The Book of Salt*, about a Vietnamese chef working in a Paris home), Ocean Vuong (acclaimed for his poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* and his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*), Lan Cao (famous for *Monkey Bridge*), and the poet Bao Phi (who has also collaborated with Thi Bui).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*
- **When Written:** 2002-2017
- **Where Written:** New York City and Berkeley, California
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary American Literature
- **Genre:** Graphic Memoir; Nonfiction Comic
- **Setting:** Việt Nam, the United States
- **Climax:** After the Vietnam War ends in 1975, Thi Bui and her family are persecuted by the government of reunified Việt Nam and escape to Malaysia on a boat.
- **Antagonist:** Trauma, North Việt Nam, South Việt Nam, the French colonial government, the war, the police, assimilation to American culture, Má and Bố
- **Point of View:** First-person comic book

EXTRA CREDIT

Frenemies with G.B. Tran. Thi Bui was reportedly devastated upon the release of G.B. Tran's *Vietnamerica* in 2010, because she felt it would make her own book seem redundant. She later realized that this was a reaction to growing up unaccustomed to seeing people like her represented in the American media;

she assumed that each minority group could only ever get *one* story. But, after challenging this belief, she befriended and collaborated with Tran—they published a joint cartoon about their "rivalry" in *Hyphen* magazine. In the joint interview that was published with the cartoon, Bui joked, "I've gotten over my initial jealous rage at you, and I don't want to kill you anymore. In fact, I think we could be friends. What do you think?"

Vietnam or Việt Nam? Bui intentionally left place and character names in the original Vietnamese, with diacritics that are often confusing to English speakers, because (as she put it in an interview) "I was always writing for us [Vietnamese people]. The existence of Vietnamese words being spelled in Vietnamese [with] the proper diacritics—people like me can read them."

PLOT SUMMARY

In her graphic memoir *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui retraces her parents' lives in Việt Nam and the United States in an attempt to better articulate her own identity and understand the "gray stillness" that has always lurked in the background of her family. Bui's book begins with three different prefaces: a short written explanation of how she began the project that became *The Best We Could Do* in graduate school and finished it after more than a decade of trial and error; a comic-strip preface that depicts her meeting one of her idols, the Vietnamese American writer Việt Thanh Nguyễn; and an illustrated timeline of Vietnamese history, focusing on the period of war from 1945-1975, which roughly coincides with the period during which her parents lived in Việt Nam.

Bui's first chapter begins in 2005, with her **giving birth** in New York City. Her husband Travis, is by her side, but her Má (Vietnamese for "Mom") is hiding outside the waiting room, unable to watch her daughter in pain and confront her own memories of giving birth. After reluctantly agreeing to take anesthesia, Bui gives birth to a baby with "a faraway face with old man eyes," whom she draws emerging from a cloud of smoke. She spends the night with her son, but she is more confused than overjoyed. The next morning, Má brings Bui phở and tells her about how her father (whom she calls Bố) did not even show up for the majority of her six children's births. Bui reflects on "FAMILY," which "is now something [she has] created" rather than "just something [she] was born into."

In Chapter Two, Bui fast-forwards to 2015 in California, where she, Travis, and her son are living with Má and down the street from Bố. She remembers the huge fight that ensued when she, like her older sisters Lan and Bích, decided to move out of her parents' house and in with her boyfriend. Now "both a parent and a child," her conflicts with her family are more internal: she does not know whether to hold herself to the Vietnamese expectation of sacrificing her career to care for her parents, or the American expectation of having them live alone and independently for as long as possible. She has never even been particularly close to her parents, who were always reluctant to talk about the past and their families in Việt Nam. Bui presents each of her siblings and narrates each of their births, which were all in Việt Nam except that of her younger brother Tâm, who was born in a refugee camp in Malaysia.

In Chapter Three, Bui looks back to her childhood, when her family has difficulty coping with the American way of life. Bố refuses to take a minimum wage job, so he stays at home while Má works. He does not do much for the children besides scare them: mostly, he tells spends his days chain-smoking and going after mysterious threats to the family, like "that PERVERT across the street" who he tells Thi is watching her. Young Thi feels that she has to be brave to protect her family from these threats.

In Chapter Four, Bui explores how Bố became so withdrawn and paranoid. She retells his early life to uncover his "wounds beneath wounds." The earliest detail known about his family is that his grandfather and father show up in a village near the northern Vietnamese city of Hải Phòng in the early 20th century. His grandfather marries the village chief's daughter and his father an ordinary girl from the village. After his birth, however, Bố's mother, father, and grandfather defraud his grandmother, stealing her precious opium jars and moving off to Hải Phòng during World War II. This is a difficult time—there is a famine, and the family is lucky to find anything but small portions of rice and stewed vegetables to eat. To add insult to injury, Bố's abusive father kicks his mother out, leaving her to die in the famine, and then disappears to join the Việt Minh revolutionaries. Bố is left alone with his grandfather, who brings him back to the village and his forgiving grandmother. However, the village is soon massacred by French troops, which seven-year-old Bố witnesses while hiding away in an underground shelter. The Việt Minh then stage a counterattack, which means the chief's family—including Bố and his grandparents—must get out as soon as possible. Reflecting on her father's history, Bui comes to understand why he was so traumatized during her own youth: she "grew up with the terrified boy who became [her] father," and her childhood fear was "only the long shadow of his own."

In her fifth chapter, Bui turns to Má's early life, which is luxurious compared to Bố's. Má's father is a prominent engineer in the French colonial government, so Má grows up comfortably in Cambodia and Nha Trang. Her mother is distant, and she spends most of her time reading—in fact, her academic promise leads her to a series of French colonial schools, where she learns two important lessons. First, she realizes that colonialism is oppressing her people and the Vietnamese need to obtain independence. And secondly, she learns that—as Bui puts it—"MARRIAGE = TRAP," but "EDUCATION = FREEDOM." Bui wonders how her parents ended up together anyway. The

answer is the Sài Gòn Teachers College. After his grandparents become successful shopkeepers in Hải Phòng, Bố moves into a French school—which is then dissolved, forcing him to move to Sài Gòn. After Việt Nam is divided in two, his father reconnects with him and tries to convince him to stay in Hà Nội. But Bố refuses—he is horrified by the poverty he sees in the North, and he wants to stick with his grandfather, who actually raised him. As Bui explains in Chapter Six, Bố proceeds to Sài Gòn, where his grandparents live in the dense working-class neighborhood of Bàn Cờ, and then he joins the Teachers College to avoid the military draft imposed by Ngô Đình Diệm's government. Meanwhile, Má ends up in the same college because it guarantees her independence and a career.

But Má soon gets pregnant, so she marries Bố even though her family does not approve of his working-class bloodline. And the drama does not end there: Bố also has severe tuberculosis that is very likely to be fatal. Decades later, Má finally admits to Thi that she was always hoping to "make his last years happy [...] and then be free as a widow." But Bố recovers and Má soon gives birth to their first child, Quyên, who dies as an infant under mysterious circumstances. Má and Bố are devastated and move to the Mekong Delta to try and recuperate. However, this coincides with the American invasion, which destroys the South Vietnamese economy and makes Má and Bố's wages worthless. They move back to Sài Gòn only to suffer repression at the hands of the government during the next decade of war. They have and raise Lan, Bích, and Thi—who is born three months before Liberation Day.

In Chapter Seven, Thi Bui reveals how her parents' fortunes only worsened after the end of the Vietnam War. Although Liberation Day was relatively peaceful, the new Northern government soon deems Bố "ngụy," or deceitful, and fires him from his teaching job. The family notes government spies watching them and loses all their wealth through economic shocks. After Má's brother Hải disappears, the family realizes that it needs to escape and begins planning in collaboration with Hải's wife, Kiều.

When Hải miraculously gets out of prison, it is time for the family's escape attempt—even though Má is eight months pregnant. They board a boat at night and hide below deck while the pilot, Mr. Châu, guides them toward international waters. However, the boat runs up against an island and attracts the attention of police patrols. The adults hide and quiet the children with valium, while Mr. Châu spends hours unsticking the boat from the island. Fortunately, the police move on, and when the high tide comes, the boat breaks free of the shore. Mr. Châu returns to the boat, but he is too traumatized to pilot it, so Bố takes over and guides everyone to the high seas. They celebrate that night, and after a few days they reach the Malaysian coast, where locals bring them to the Pulau Besar refugee camp.

Thi Bui's eighth chapter picks up at the refugee camp in Malaysia, where Má is ready to give birth. She goes to the hospital but insists on returning to care for her children in the camp, where Tâm is born. Má and Bố debate where and how to apply for asylum, and they settle on joining Má's sister Đào in the United States. When they arrive, the girls struggle to assimilate into the American way of life and get along with Đào's family, who have already lived in the United States for three years. Indiana's cold winters are the nail in the coffin, and Má and Bố decide to follow Hải to sunny California.

In Chapter Nine, the Bui family arrives and begins to build a life in California. Má takes a job building circuits in a factory for $3.35 an hour and the kids adjust to school. Lan and Bích become overachievers, and they still frequently come home from college to babysit Thi and Tâm. One day, there is an explosion downstairs, and the family instinctively hides. But Thi realizes that it is more dangerous to stay inside, not go outside, and so she convinces the rest to flee. She muses that this is evidence of her inheriting a "Refugee Reflex."

The tenth and last chapter of Thi Bui's book picks up where the first chapter left off, in the New York hospital after she gives birth. She reflects on the lessons she has learned from interviewing her parents and considers how she may apply them to her own parenting. In fact, like her Má and Bố during the escape attempt, Bui is "called upon to be HEROIC" in her son's first week of life: he develops jaundice and has to stay in the hospital, while she has to visit him every 90 minutes to breastfeed. As she speaks to him in Vietnamese, Thi remembers her own mother's voice and notes that she never thought of her mother as the "independent, self-determining, and free" woman that she actually was before marrying Bố—and perhaps would have remained had she not made that fateful choice. Bui realizes that she has now sacrificed some of her freedom for her son's sake, but she hopes that he will have "a new life," one defined not by "war and loss" but by the chance to "be free."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Thi Bui – The author, illustrator, and central protagonist of *The Best We Could Do* is a Vietnamese American writer and artist who sets out to uncover her family's roots and trace their history in Việt Nam. She hopes that undertaking this project will help her "learn to love [her parents] better," prepare her to communicate her family's history to her own son, make sense of differences between Vietnamese and American cultural expectations, and understand the history and tragedy of the country where she was born. Born in Sài Gòn only "three months before South Việt Nam lost the war" to the North, Thi Bui flees Việt Nam with her family and moves to the United States at the age of three. She grows up in California with her

dedicated, hardworking mother, her disconnected, traumatized father, her two older sisters Lan and Bích, and her younger brother and closest peer, Tâm. After college in 1999, Bui "mov[es] to New York to be an artist and live with [her] artist boyfriend." Over the next seven years, she becomes a teacher, marries Travis, has a son, and decides to move back to California to be with her parents. Although Bui had started investigating her family's past through oral histories, it is upon returning to California that she truly gets started on *The Best We Could Do*, learning to draw comics and hold more in-depth interviews with her parents. When she finishes and publishes the book more than a decade later, she has finally come to terms with her Má and Bố's difficult lives in Việt Nam and worked through the trauma she inherited. Bui realizes that she can accept and supersede this inheritance, letting the past shape rather than define her. At the end of the book, she applies the lessons she has learned as a daughter to the task of parenting her own son, whom she hopes will have the chance to "be free."

Má – Thi Bui's mother. Although her name is Hằng, Bui consistently calls her "Má" (the Southern Vietnamese word for "Mom"), and she calls herself "Mẹ" (which is a "weighty, serious, more elegant word" from the North). Má is born to a prominent, well-connected family in Cambodia and raised in Nha Trang, where her father works as an engineer for the French colonial government. Má loses herself in books as a child and proves an exceptional student; she attends various French schools throughout Việt Nam, which allows her to develop her own circle of friends and think freely, but also separates her from her family and challenges her sense of identity as a Vietnamese woman living under (and benefiting from) the French colonial system. Eventually, she becomes a nationalist and celebrates Việt Nam's liberation from the French, but also decides that (in the author's words) "MARRIAGE = TRAP" but "[French] EDUCATION = FREEDOM." She wants to become a doctor and study outside of Việt Nam, but ends up pursuing teaching instead. However, when she meets her husband, Bui's Bố, at the Teachers College in Sài Gòn at the age of 19, her freedom is suddenly shattered. Má expects Bố to die of his tuberculosis and leave her "free as a widow," but he survives, and Má gets pregnant. To add insult to injury, this first daughter, Quyên, dies, which devastates Má and Bố. Although Má is able to work outside the home, she spends the rest of her life devoted to providing for and raising her children, first in Sài Gòn and later in the United States. She ultimately escapes Việt Nam eight months into her pregnancy and gives birth to Tâm as a refugee in Malaysia. Into her 70s when Thi Bui published *The Best We Could Do*, Má is talkative and friendly but eminently practical and reluctant to openly express affection. With her plans and dreams of freedom crushed by the obligations of everyday life, Má's journey shows how family requires sacrifice, usually on the part of women, and how this sacrifice makes an imprint on people's personalities and identities.

Bố – Nam Bui, or Bố ("Dad") to the author, Thi Bui, is born in the early 1940s in a village near Hải Phòng, in the north of Việt Nam. During the first half of Bố's life, he is subjected to near-constant danger. When he is little, his parents and grandfather defraud his grandmother, then his father cheats on, abuses, and evicts his mother during a famine before disappearing himself. Bố hides underground while his village gets massacred, suffers from near-fatal tuberculosis, and then somehow makes it into the French colonial school system, which eventually culminates in his moving south to Sài Gòn. Here, in his early 20s, he meets and marries Má at the Teachers College. They spend the next decade trying to forge a normal existence as teachers and parents despite the constantly-changing political conditions that restrict their freedom of expression and drive them progressively closer to poverty, not to mention their family's internal turmoil and political disagreements. Eventually, when Bố is fired and nearly sent to a "New Economic Zone" after Liberation Day, his grows depressed and withdrawn, until he, Má, and their children miraculously escape on a boat. During this escape, when the captain Mr. Châu becomes incapacitated, Bố is suddenly deemed the most capable navigator and given command of the boat. Bui sees this as Bố's moment of heroism, and her illustrations of him piloting the boat in the middle of the hostile **ocean** are often reproduced as the most striking exemplars of her artistic style and ability. When Bố finally makes it to the United States some time after his family, he refuses to work, becomes a stay-at-home parent, and returns to the depression and paranoia that characterized his period of unemployment in Sài Gòn. Although Bui always feared Bố while growing up, after interviewing him for *The Best We Could Do*, she comes to understand his standoffishness as evidence of his childhood trauma's enduring aftereffects—Bố simply never learned to live in anything but "survival mode." Similarly, Bố's lack of family ties deeply marks him: feeling abandoned by his family into adulthood, he never returns to Việt Nam to visit them or even writes to his mother after learning that she survived the famine in 1944-1945 and moved to China.

Travis – Thi Bui's husband, who moves with her and their young son to California in 2006. The author does not reveal much about him, but he comforts her while she is in labor and develops a relatively close relationship with Má, who tells him all about her childhood despite being hesitant to tell her own daughter.

Thi and Travis's Son – Unnamed in the book, Thi and Travis's son is born in New York in the first chapter and moves with his parents to California as a baby. As a newborn, he is confined to a hospital because of his jaundice and has difficulty breastfeeding. By the end of the book, Bui's son 10 years old, and Bui reflects on what his future will look like, and what he will inherit from her and her family's history.

Lan – Má and Bố's first daughter (besides Quyên, who dies in

infancy), and Thi Bui's eldest sister. Born in 1966 in the Mekong Delta when Má is 22, Lan remembers much about her childhood in Sài Gòn, and she is 12 when the family flees to Malaysia and moves to the United States. When she arrives in America with her family, she initially has trouble assimilating, but later becomes a high-achiever and goes off to college while Thi is young. In adulthood, she ends up living two blocks down from the rest of the family in California, with her husband and daughter.

Bích – Thi Bui's second-oldest sister, whose name (as she is frequently forced to explain) is "pronounced *BICK*." She is born in Sài Gòn in 1968 and spends most of the first month of her life locked inside, as her family hides from the violence of the Tết Offensive. She is about 10 when the family moves to the United States. Like her elder sister Lan, Bích remembers her childhood in Việt Nam and becomes a high-achiever in the United States, takes care of her younger siblings, Thi and Tâm, and gets into a huge fight with Má when she gets a boyfriend. In adulthood, she and her husband live "only two towns away" from the rest of the family in California.

Tâm – Thi Bui's younger brother, who is born in 1978 in Malaysia, near the Pulau Besar Refugee Camp. Because of their age difference from their older sisters Lan and Bích, Thi and Tâm essentially grow up in the United States and do not know anything about Việt Nam (indeed, Tâm never even lived there, and moved to the US as a newborn). He and Thi are also playmates, stuck at home with Bố while everyone else goes to school or work. Bố frightens them both, leading Tâm to spend hours and hours hiding in his closet. When they travel to Sài Gòn with Má and their elder sisters, Thi and Tâm spend their time "documenting in lieu of remembering." With his wife and two children, Tâm moves back to his hometown in California as an adult, just like the rest of his siblings.

Bố's Father – A violent, dastardly man who spends his early life following his father (Bố's grandfather) to the village of Bố's grandmother (who is not his actual mother) and then to Hải Phòng. He marries a girl from this village, Bố's mother, but quickly starts having affairs and beating her. He eventually kicks her out, leaving her for dead during a severe famine—but she survives. To avoid the famine, Bố's father joins the Việt Minh and goes "off to fight for the revolution," leaving Bố all alone with his grandparents. Bố's father resurfaces years later in Hà Nội and tries to encourage Bố to join him and his (third) family in a rural part of North Việt Nam. But Bố is horrified at the poverty he sees in the North Vietnamese countryside and feels no sense of obligation toward the father who abandoned him, so chooses to instead move south to Sài Gòn with his grandfather (who actually raised him). Bố's father's gestures to the ideal of the unified family are clearly a thinly-veiled attempt to manipulate and control his son, which illustrate one of Bui's central points about family: blood relations are less important than the labor and sacrifice that family members put into sustaining and supporting one another. Many years later, something similar happens in Sài Gòn. Bố's father visits with news about Bố's mother—she is alive and living in China—and then asks to "forgive and forget," but reveals that they cannot reunite because of politics. Bố feels this is too little, too late, and he sends his father away, never to see him again.

Bố's Mother – A girl from Bố's grandmother's village, who marries Bố's father and then runs away to Hải Phòng with him and his father (Bố's grandfather). However, Bố's father turns out to be violent and abusive: he cheats on her, then beats her badly and kicks her out of the house. This is the last Bố ever sees of his mother. He later learns that she ran away to China with an occupying soldier after World War II, but he decides never to write to her. Her effective absence from his life underlines the difference between biological blood ties and actual family relationships, as well as helping to explain Bố's insistence that he "has no parents" and relative inability to emotionally connect with his family.

Bố's Grandfather – A "dapper gentleman" of unknown origins who shows up in a village near Hải Phòng some time before World War II with his son (Bố's father). He convinces the village chief to let him marry his daughter, the woman Bố comes to know as his grandmother, and then steals her valuable opium jars and flees in consort with his son and daughter-in-law (Bố's father and mother). Although Bố's grandfather continues to be cruel and abusive to his wife after they later reconnect, he cares for Bố throughout his childhood and adolescence, eventually moving with him to the Southern capital of Sài Gòn after Việt Nam wins its independence and gets partitioned into two. Since the rest of his family is out of the picture, Bố is essentially raised by his grandfather (and, when she is around, his grandmother). Bố's grandfather eventually reunites with his wife a second time and lives out the rest of his life as a shopkeeper in Bàn Cờ. Thi Bui meets him when she visits Việt Nam.

Bố's Grandmother – The daughter of a village chief in a rural area near Hải Phòng, who marries Bố's manipulative and violent grandfather at a young age. She is not actually biologically related to Bố (whose father was born before his grandparents ever met), but nobody ever makes or acts upon this distinction—for all intents and purposes, her relationship to Bố and his family is like any other grandmother's, and indeed she plays an important part in raising him. But Bố's grandmother also suffers repeated twists of misfortune throughout her life: her husband steals her valuable opium jars and runs away and the government expropriates her land during the Land Reforms. Then, when she moves to Sài Gòn, fighting between the South Vietnamese army and the local mafia (Bình Xuyên) destroys her *remaining* opium jars, the only store of wealth that allows her to live independently from her husband. Lacking money, Bố's grandmother eventually reconciles yet again with Bố's grandfather. Like her grandson, she gets severe

tuberculosis but survives. She lives in Bàn Cờ for many years, eventually with Má, Bố, Lan, Bích, and Thi. But Bố's grandmother falls ill just before the rest of the family flees Việt Nam for Malaysia, so they make the difficult choice to leave her behind in the care of Má's mother and father. This tragic decision reflects the profound danger the family would have faced had they remained in Việt Nam and demonstrates the deep personal cost of their decision to leave their country behind in search of freedom.

Má's Father – A prominent engineer who works for the French government in colonial Cambodia and Việt Nam. Despite his job, he still resents French colonialism and recognizes that the French treat native Vietnamese people as second-class citizens in their own country. At the same time, he thinks it is imperative that Má (the most academically talented of his children) go to French schools, since this offers her the best chance of advancement in the future. These tensions reveal the contradictory nature of foreign domination in Việt Nam: in order to achieve freedom from oppression, people had to use the same tools that were oppressing them. When Má's father gets older, he and his wife (Má's mother) care for Bố's elderly grandmother, and then eventually move to the United States.

Má's Mother – A rigid and cold woman who, during Má's youth, spends most of her energy socializing and organizing elaborate dinners. As a result, Má never has much of a relationship with her, and this influences Má's own attitude toward her children: she dedicates all her energy to providing for them, but has difficulty connecting with them emotionally.

Giang Quyên – Má and Bố's first daughter, who falls sick and dies in infancy for unknown reasons possibly relating to adulterated baby formula. Her death devastates Má and Bố, who never fully forgive themselves for it and decide to move from Sài Gòn to the Mekong Delta in an attempt to move on. Her name means "GREAT RIVER." When Thi Bui's infant son is sick with jaundice in the hospital, Bui asks Má about Quyên's death in case she is about to go through the same kind of loss.

The Doctor – The OB/GYN who treats Thi Bui as Bui goes through labor and gives birth to her son. Although she is matter-of-fact and nonthreatening, she also does not empathize with Bui's fear about childbirth and inner conflict over whether or not to take anesthesia. She also refuses to promise that she will not give Bui an episiotomy, which further contributes to Bui's sense of alienation and lack of agency during childbirth.

The Nurse – Works with the doctor in the hospital where Thi Bui gives birth. She is cold, clinical, and impersonal—she gives Bui's son a checkup and transports Bui with him to another room, then leaves them there and says, "Here is your baby. Good night!" Like the doctor's indifference to Bui's feelings, the nurse's manner shows Bui the contradiction between her own experience of giving birth (as a singular, lifechanging moment that connects her to her mother and ancestors) and the world's relative indifference to what is now seen as a routine medical event. The contrast between the nurse and the midwives who help Má give birth six times helps Bui illustrate the differences between Vietnamese and American culture.

The General – A prominent general in South Việt Nam's army who is infamous worldwide for shooting a Việt Cộng member in a photo frequently referred to as "**Saigon Execution.**" In fact, he was shooting this man in retaliation for the man's murder of an entire family, but this context is erased from popular narratives about the photo—especially in the United States, where it won awards and played an important part in ending public support for American involvement in the war. Later, the general moves to the United States and ends up working in a pizzeria, where the man who took the photo finds him and apologizes. Because of this misunderstanding surrounding the photo, Bố has sympathy for the general. However, Bố also has a personal hatred for him, because the general once tried to make him cut off his long hair, which he associated with "hippie[s]." However, Bố explained that he was a teacher and that his students would notice something wrong if he showed up without hair the next day, so the general let him go. Bố's contradictory feelings about the general show Thi Bui that, because all sides in the Vietnam War were repressive and inhumane, it was next to impossible for most people (including her family members) to simply take sides and root for a straightforward resolution to the conflict.

Mr. Châu – The pilot of the boat that takes Thi Bui's family to safety. When their boat runs aground on an island in the Mekong Delta and is nearly caught by a government patrol, Mr. Châu jumps overboard to try and unstick the boat. He ends up doing this and hiding onshore for hours, and when he returns, he is in complete shock and unable to continue serving as the boat's captain. In a moment of heroism, Bố takes over this duty.

Đào – Má's sister, who moves to the United States three years before Thi Bui and her family, then sponsors their visas and houses them in Indiana. In retrospect, Thi thinks Đào and her family were more Americanized and probably looked down on the Buis for being "fresh-off-the-boat." When Má and Bố realize they cannot stand the cold in Indiana and decide to move west to sunny California, Đào is personally offended.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Thảo – Má and Bố's fourth daughter, who dies in the womb for unknown reasons in 1974, the year before Thi is born.

Hải – Má's brother, who is labeled ngụy and imprisoned after Liberation Day in Sài Gòn. But he is eventually released and helps Má's family escape Việt Nam alongside his wife, Kiều's, family.

Việt Thanh Nguyễn – The celebrated Vietnamese American author, best known for his novel *The Sympathizer*, who meets

Thi Bui in the preface to *The Best We Could Do*.

Kiều – Hải's wife, who invites Má, Bố, Lan, Bích, and Thi to join the escape plan she makes for her family.

TERMS

Việt Minh – An abbreviated name for the "League for the Independence of Việt Nam," a revolutionary socialist party and army founded and led by Hồ Chí Minh. The Việt Minh fought for Việt Nam's independence from France and Japan and secured this independence in 1954, after which it took control of the government of North Việt Nam. **Bố** lives through this independence war, and **his father** joins the Việt Minh.

Việt Cộng – During the Vietnam War, a guerilla army of South Vietnamese communists that fought alongside North Việt Nam, and against the South Vietnamese army and the United States. It is best remembered for launching the **Tết Offensive**.

Tết Offensive – A series of largely-unsuccessful coordinated North Vietnamese and Việt Cộng attacks against South Việt Nam in January, 1968, during the Vietnamese New Year (Tết). **Thi**'s family locks itself inside in Sài Gòn during the fighting, which breaks out just weeks after the birth of her sister **Bích**.

Agent Orange – A toxic chemical sprayed by American forces over much of Việt Nam in a largely successful effort to devastate the country's agriculture, force peasants to move to cities, and flush out Northern Vietnamese forces hanging out in rural areas. The American use of Agent Orange is widely considered a war crime, and exposure to it severely harmed at least three million Vietnamese and permanently disabled at least one million, as well as leading to a famine in which many hundreds of thousands of civilians perished.

Liberation Day – April 30, 1975, the day the North Vietnamese and Việt Cộng captured Sài Gòn, the capital of South Việt Nam. It marked the end of the Vietnam War and reunification of Việt Nam under the Northern government. Also called "Victory Day," "Reunification Day," "the Fall of Saigon," "National Day of Shame," or (to **Bui**'s family) "The Day We Lost Our Country," among others, Liberation Day is notable most of all because of the numerous conflicting narratives told about it. In the United States, Liberation Day is most associated with a famous photo of people climbing a ladder on a building's roof to evacuate by American helicopter. And it is imagined as a monumental day of conflict and chaos that represents the South Vietnamese government's incompetence. In reality, Bui's parents remember, on Liberation Day "no blood [is] shed" and the city is eerily quiet.

Episiotomy – A medical procedure consisting of cutting open the vaginal wall, often done during labor to make childbirth easier, and sometimes done without the mother's consent. In the first chapter, **Thi Bui** begs **the doctor** not to give her an episiotomy, but the doctor insists she will "do what's necessary."

Phở – A meat noodle soup commonly eaten in Việt Nam, which **Má** brings to **Thi** the morning after she gives birth.

Astral Projection – A deliberate out-of-body experience, in which one feels that one's spiritual or "astral" self leaves the body. **Bố** goes to great lengths in his attempts to project and leave his body, and he remembers playing a prank on an astrally-projecting friend back in Việt Nam, dressing him up so that his soul could not identify the right body to which it needed to return.

The Land Reforms – The large-scale redistribution of land, which was taken from wealthy landowners and given to landless peasants, by the North Vietnamese government from 1954 onwards. Although millions of rural peasants benefited from the program, it was implemented through repression and violence: the government killed several thousand landlords during the redistribution process. During the Land Reforms, the North Vietnamese government expropriates and redistributes **Bố's grandmother**'s land in the family village near Hải Phòng. She forever remembers the fear and danger she endured at the time.

Hồ Chí Minh – The Communist leader of the Việt Minh revolution against French colonialism, most important figure in the Vietnamese independence movement, and first Prime Minister of North Việt Nam.

Ngô Đình Diệm – The repressive United States-backed politician who led South Việt Nam from its independence in 1954 until his assassination in 1963 during a coup d'état that was *also* backed by the United States. **Má** and **Bố** work for his government as teachers, but also cope with its repressiveness firsthand (as when **a general** tries to cut off Bố's long hair).

Bình Xuyên – An organized crime group and, later, legal wing of the Vietnamese army that fought with the rest of the Vietnamese National Army (led by Ngô Đình Diệm) over Sài Gòn in 1955. **Bố's grandmother** is caught in the crossfire of this battle, which destroys her opium jars and leads her to move back in with **Bố's grandfather.**

North Việt Nam – In 1954, Việt Nam was divided in two at 17° North latitude according to the Geneva Accords, which ended the war between the Việt Minh and the French. The Communist North, or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was based in Hà Nội and initially governed by Hồ Chí Minh and his Việt Minh. Later, in the Vietnam War, it defeated and took over the South, reuniting Việt Nam under Northern rule. Into the 21st century, the Communist government of former North Việt Nam continues to rule the reunited country.

South Việt Nam – The Republic of Việt Nam, the southern half of partitioned Việt Nam, which was based in Sài Gòn from 1954 until its defeat during the Vietnam War in 1975. Run by a French and United States-allied capitalist government, it was supposed to reunite with the North two years after its creation in 1956, but its leader Ngô Đình Diệm (who had recently

deposed the state's earlier leader, the emperor Bảo Đại) refused to honor the Geneva Accords that set the conditions for Việt Nam's independence. Eventually, this inconsistent political situation and military campaigns by the Việt Cộng set into motion the Vietnam War, which the South lost on "Liberation Day" in April, 1975. **Bui**'s parents lived in South Việt Nam and started their family throughout this time, although neither of them was originally from there.

Bàn Cờ – Vietnamese for "chessboard," a neighborhood of Sài Gòn where **Thi** and her family live before migrating to the United States. Known for its "maze of alleys and passageways" inhabited by poor immigrants from other parts of Việt Nam, Bàn Cờ reminds Thi of New York's Lower East Side.

Sài Gòn – **Thi**'s family's home city, the capital of South Việt Nam and now the largest city of reunified Việt Nam (in which it is called Hồ Chí Minh City). **Má** and **Bố** both move here, then meet here in the Teachers College. But on Liberation Day, North Việt Nam government takes control of Sài Gòn. Since Má and Bố were employed by the South Vietnamese government as teachers, they are labeled "ngụy" and subjected to surveillance, which leads them to flee with their children to Cần Thơ and, later, Malaysia.

Mekong Delta – A fertile agricultural region in Việt Nam's southwestern corner, where the Mekong River separates into various smaller rivers and empties out into the ocean. **Má** and **Bố** move here to teach after **Giang Quyên**'s death in an attempt to reset their lives, but are stifled by the beginning of the American War in 1965.

Hải Phòng – The large port city in northern Việt Nam where **Bố** grows up. His family moves to Hải Phòng after their village, which is nearby, gets attacked by French colonial forces.

Nha Trang – The coastal city (and present-day tourist destination) on Việt Nam's south-central coast where **Má** grows up comfortably after her family leaves Cambodia.

Đà Lạt – A city in Việt Nam's south-central highlands, where **Má** briefly goes to a fancy French boarding school.

Hà Nội – The capital city of both North and present-day Việt Nam. After joining and rising up the ranks in the Việt Minh, **Bố's father** calls **Bố** to Hà Nội in an attempt to reconnect with him and convince him to stay in the North. But, intrigued by its southern counterpart Sài Gòn, Bố moves to the South anyway.

Hạ Long Bay – A bay in northern Việt Nam (and popular tourist destination) that is famous for its thousands of limestone karst mountains. When they leave Hải Phòng for Sài Gòn, **Bố** and **his grandfather** pass by Hạ Long Bay.

The Lower East Side – A Manhattan neighborhood known during the 19th and 20th centuries as a crowded landing point for immigrants. Thi compares her family's neighborhood of Bàn Cờ in Sài Gòn to the Lower East Side, which is familiar to her from her years living in New York.

Huế – A central Vietnamese city that served as Việt Nam's capital for most of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, but was largely destroyed by American bombs during the War. It was also the site of a massacre by the Việt Cộng, who killed thousands of civilians there in 1968. Remembering the atrocities at Huế, **Thi**'s family worries that Liberation Day might involve similar massacres in Sài Gòn.

Ngụy – A Vietnamese word meaning "false, lying, deceitful," which in the context of the Vietnam War referred to "Mĩ-ngụy" or "fake Americans"—i.e. Vietnamese people who sympathized with and supported the Americans during the war. **Thi**'s family is labeled "ngụy" and therefore subjected to endless surveillance in the years after Liberation Day in Sài Gòn. Accordingly, they leave Việt Nam out of fear for their futures.

New Economic Zones – After Liberation Day, rural areas designated for forcibly-displaced Southern Vietnamese people (especially American sympathizers, or "ngụy") to work in poor conditions, far away from the rest of society. **Bố** is nearly sent to a New Economic Zone after he is fired from his teaching job.

Cần Thơ – A city in the Mekong Delta in far southwest Việt Nam, where **Thi**'s family goes from Sài Gòn before boarding a boat bound for Malaysia.

Valium – The brand name of a benzodiazepine drug called diazepam, which causes sedation and memory loss. When they are nearly caught during their escape attempt, some of the adults on the boat inject the children with valium in order to put them to sleep.

Pulau Besar Refugee Camp – A refugee camp on an island off the coast of the Terengganu province of Peninsular Malaysia, where **Thi** and her family live for some time (and **Tâm** is born) after escaping from Việt Nam and before moving to the United States.

Red Cross – An international humanitarian aid organization that helps **Thi** and her family pay for their plane tickets from Malaysia to the Untied States.

Kuala Lumpur – Malaysia's capital and largest city, where **Thi** and her family goes for their medical checkups and flight to the United States. **Bố** is briefly stuck here, since his medical tests show scars from his tuberculosis decades before.

Tết – The Vietnamese New Year, which usually falls in January or February (on the same day as the Chinese New Year). Tết is by far the most important holiday in Việt Nam and among overseas Vietnamese. In 1968, the Việt Cộng takes advantage of Tết festivities to launch surprise attacks on South Việt Nam (the so-called Tết Offensive). And two decades later in California, the apartment downstairs from **Thi**'s family's explodes during Tết.

Jaundice – A medical condition in which the skin turns yellow because a certain substance builds up in the bloodstream. It is very common in newborns, but occasionally can signal a more

serious illness. **Thi Bui**'s son develops this potentially-serious form of jaundice right after his birth, and so has to stay in the hospital for a few days for treatment. During this time, Thi and her husband **Travis** have to visit the hospital every 90 minutes, in the freezing cold, to care for him. He quickly recovers and moves into their home.

Tuberculosis – A bacterial infection, which is harmless and without symptoms in most cases, but sometimes resides in the lungs and causes a severe cough that may be fatal. **Bố** and **his grandmother** both develop (but survive) this kind of severe tuberculosis while living in Bàn Cờ.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FAMILY, INHERITANCE, AND PARENTHOOD

Thi Bui explains that she began researching and writing *The Best We Could Do* in an attempt to better understand and connect with her Má and Bố (mom and dad)—that is, to "learn to love [her parents] better." While a wide gulf divides her parents' experiences from her own, her family sticks together anyway. Her book attempts to understand this contradiction and explain what motivates family to care for one another by investigating her own family's past. Ultimately, Bui realizes that sacrifice and labor—not blood—bind a family and that, while these sacrifices demand repayment, they can never be fully reciprocated. By recognizing the sacrifices her parents made for their children, Bui learns to become a better parent and child alike.

When she comes of age, Bui, like many American young adults, moves out of her parents' house. Years later, she returns to California with her husband and son to help care for her aging parents. Her whole family now lives within a short drive of one another, but Bui learns that "proximity and closeness are not the same." She is emotionally alienated from her parents, unable to grasp their inner lives. And her parents are alienated from one another: although they remain friends, they have long since separated, and they are divided by "a chasm, full of meaning and resentment." In fact, this has always been the case: Bui never learned about her parents' and their families' histories in Việt Nam. And her parents resist discussing their past: Má ignores the subject, while Bố refuses to ever return to Việt Nam and says that "he had no parents." Hoping that she can grow closer to her parents by "record[ing their] family history," Bui begins interviewing them for a graduate school project (which is the only reason they agree). This project eventually—after a decade—turns into *The Best We Could Do*.

Through working on her book, Bui learns about the profound sacrifices her parents made in order to make her own relatively comfortable life possible. Bui is shocked to learn that Bố's parents effectively abandoned him: his abusive father kicked his mother out (and she moved to China), then joined the Việt Minh, leaving Bố with his grandparents. Years later, Bố had to choose between rejoining his father and moving to Sài Gòn with his grandfather. Bố chose his grandfather, who had invested more in him. Never able to take family ties for granted, Bố understands that his grandparents' dedication to him was a product of circumstance, but also required deep sacrifice. His story reminds Bui that her parents actively chose to invest in their children's future, and that their silence about the past was actually a way of protecting her and her siblings.

Má, meanwhile, grew up with distant parents and wanted education and a career rather than a family of her own. Ultimately, she married Bố out of sympathy, because he was severely ill with tuberculosis and everyone expected him to die. When he survived, Má's gesture of pity gave way to a lifelong obligation to Bố and their children, and she ended up burying her "independent, self-determining, and free" life to support the family she loved but never wanted. But, when retracing her own childhood, Bui realizes that she had never seen Má as anything but her own mother. In comparison to Má's selfless labor, Bui says, "being [someone's] child" is like having "a lifetime pass for selfishness." And Bui ultimately learns two important lessons from her parents' stories: first, that family is not a given and therefore should not be taken for granted, and second, that family is not always intentionally chosen and therefore it's possible to be part of a family (and be burdened with obligations to a family) without necessarily intending to.

Building on these two lessons and her own experience as a parent, Bui realizes that what holds family together is not blood, but sacrifice—specifically, the selfless labor of raising children, which can never fully be repaid but calls for unconditional affection and care in return. In her last chapter, Bui asks whether parents can "live on in what we leave to our children." In other words, she wonders what it is—besides DNA—that children inherit from their parents. Through becoming a parent herself, she realizes that children inherit a sense of *obligation*. Through the pain of **childbirth**, she recognizes what Má suffered (six times) to bring her and her siblings into the world. And during the first few days of her son's life, he is in the hospital and she has to trudge through bitter cold to visit and feed him every few hours. This helps her realize that parents are "called upon to be HEROIC," and that by realizing that one's parents have been heroes, one can become a hero for one's own children when necessary.

Bui also juxtaposes her depiction of this "hardest week of [her] life" with images of Bố piloting the boat that brought the family

to freedom and of Má pregnant with Tâm in the Pulau Besar Refugee Camp. This shows that she finally understands, through experience, how much parents must sacrifice for their children. And it is by recognizing this sacrifice that she comes full circle and "learns to love [her parents] better." First, she sees that their distance is a product of their sacrifice—their desire to avoid exposing their children to their trauma and their discomfort growing old in a country they have adopted for their children's sake. And secondly, she sees that she must *choose to inherit* their sense of responsibility and sacrifice—it won't necessarily happen automatically.

Although she can never fully repay her parents, Má and Bố's lifelong sacrifice encourages Bui to offer her own children those same sacrifices—to build the committed family she always took for granted, but that her parents never could. As she puts it after giving birth, "FAMILY is now something I have created—and not just something I was born into."

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

When Thi Bui first realizes that her parents are reluctant to talk about their past in Việt Nam, she already knows that her family's "gray stillness" has something to do with "a darkness [her parents] did not understand but could always FEEL." But as Má and Bố begin to recount their childhoods, Bui quickly sees that she is asking them to unwrap their "wounds beneath wounds." Not only has trauma marked her parents forever, but it also shapes the next generation, deeply affecting the way Bui and her siblings navigate their relatively trauma-free lives in the United States. As she looks to the future and wonders whether her son will inherit her "Refugee Reflex," Bui learns that her and her family's trauma is like a form of bodily memory that leaves an intergenerational imprint on each individual's identity and emotional life.

As her parents tell her about their pasts, Bui learns about the trauma they have experienced. Bố's childhood is incredibly difficult. His parents and grandparents fight endlessly, he falls deathly ill, and a famine strikes. His father cheats on, badly abuses, and kicks out his mother, who leaves Việt Nam with an occupying Chinese soldier. Then his father joins the Việt Minh, leaving Bố with his grandfather, who takes him back to their native village—which is then massacred by the French, and then by the Việt Minh. Bố, age seven, hides underground the whole time. After listening to this story, Bui realizes that her father is still that "terrified boy" on the inside.

While Má's childhood is comparatively comfortable, after her marriage to Bố her life is defined by constant fear and danger for 13 years. First, Má and Bố are devastated when their daughter Quyên dies as an infant. Then, war and inflation disrupt their brief "honeymoon period" in the Mekong Delta, and they return to Sài Gòn to find themselves living in a "police state" and subjected to constant suspicion. When South Việt Nam loses the war, this only gets worse: the Northern-led government fires Bố from his teaching position, labels him "ngụy" (or "deceitful"), and begins surveilling the entire family. Má's brother Hải disappears, and Má and Bố realize they are in danger of being killed, arrested, or forced to do hard labor in New Economic Zones. When they escape Việt Nam, Má is eight months pregnant—she **gives birth** as a refugee in Malaysia.

Bui's parents' trauma marks them for life, no matter how much they try to move beyond it. Bố recognizes that, given his childhood, he "wouldn't be [...] normal" as an adult. Of course, he isn't: he spends his days chain-smoking, drinking, obsessing about the supernatural, and stressing about invisible threats, like "that PERVERT across the street" whom he tells young Thi Bui is "watching" her. He is unable to relate to his children because he is so used to living in survival mode: when his life is no longer under threat, he has no idea what to do with himself.

Once the family reaches the United States, Má copes better: she starts working when Bố refuses and makes sure they both take classes. On top of all this, she cares for the children whenever she is home, which means she is occupied during every waking moment of her life. Dedicating all her energy to daily tasks allows her to put her trauma behind her both emotionally and concretely: work and home life distract her from the past and allow her to build a future for her family. For instance, when Thi Bui tries to interview her, Má repeatedly changes the subject to a more practical matter at hand: that night's dinner menu. Bui realizes that there is some connection between her family's past and Má's tendency to avoid "I love yous"—Má avoids emotions because she was hurt so deeply in the past. Similarly, Má cannot bear to watch Bui give birth, because this means reliving her own past pain (not just the pain of childbirth, but also the pain of losing Quyên and Thảo).

Ultimately, in the Bui family, trauma is intergenerational: Má and Bố's experiences forever shape their children's lives. Of course, the children experience trauma of their own during their escape from Việt Nam, although only the elder girls—Lan and Bích—really remember it. But Thi Bui also sees her emotional distance from her parents as a symptom of this trauma: her parents' inability to come to terms with the pain, fear, and danger they experienced in Việt Nam affects their parenting and their family's ability to communicate honestly. Like Má, Lan and Bích invest all their energies in their studies and future, and they cope with the past by turning their backs on it.

But in one way or another, this past deeply affects everyone in Bui's family, providing them with the motives and frameworks they use to pursue their futures. And Bui realizes how the past has left an imprint on her when there is an explosion in the apartment beneath the family's. The rest hide, assuming someone is coming after them—just as they might have when the North Vietnamese government came looking for them in

Sài Gòn. But Bui realizes that they need to get out of the house and leads the others to safety. She calls this instinct to flee her "Refugee Reflex," and she argues that it is part of her "inheritance." As Bui's story and so many other migration stories demonstrate, then, the past—especially histories of violence, fear, and oppression—leaves its mark through trauma, and over time its lessons become embedded in future generations as instincts and reflexes. Bui's "Refugee Reflex" shows how her body and identity, and those of others who have suffered or come from sufferers of violence, have become living archives of the colonialism, war, and repression Việt Nam suffered for so much of the 20th century.

ASSIMILATION, BELONGING, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Although the majority of Thi Bui's book focuses on her family's lives in and escape from Việt Nam, their arrival in and assimilation to life in the United States is also an essential part of the narrative. Before writing this book, having lived virtually all of her life in America, Bui feels caught between two competing systems of cultural values and expectations. Not only does she not know which system to choose, but she also does not know where (or how) she belongs. But when she dives into her family's history, she realizes that hers is not the first generation that has been forced to assimilate to completely new surroundings: her parents and their ancestors also moved around and found belonging in foreign settings. Ultimately, she realizes that belonging and culture are not absolute or inherent; rather, "home" and "identity," as far back as Bui can see in her family, are things people have actively made and chosen for themselves.

As a Vietnamese American, Bui feels a sense of loss at the beginning of the book: she feels that there is a cultural gap between herself and her parents, and that she does not fully understand the Vietnamese culture and history that should be her birthright. This cultural gap is first evident in her childhood, when Bui and her sisters arrive in the United States and feel a strong pressure to abandon Vietnamese culture and let themselves be "Americanized." For instance, when the family first arrives in the United States, they move in with Má's sister Đào, whose family has already spent three years in the United States. Bui imagines that she and her siblings "probably embarrassed [Đào's family] with [their] fresh-off-the-boat appearance." Jokingly, she recalls her sister Bích eating cereal directly from the box and one of Đào's daughters yelling at her, "Don't be such a REFUGEE!"

Bui remembers learning about "Americanhood" from children in her neighborhood but, eventually, becoming something like a "normal" American teenager. This causes conflict when, like her sisters before her, she decides to move in with her boyfriend ("something you just didn't do" according to Má). Essentially, like many immigrants, Bui feels that she is caught between her family's ("Vietnamese") culture and her environment's ("American") one. Having grown up in the latter, she believes that she has now lost touch with the former, which is part of her motivation for rediscovering her family's past. Specifically, she does this during a trip to her old neighborhood of Bàn Cờ. But she was too young when she lived there to retain any memories of the place, so she (and her brother Tâm) spend the visit "documenting in lieu of remembering." When she has to draw Bàn Cờ, she has little context so uses an American example—the Lower East Side—as a basis for imagining it.

But Bui soon realizes that her parents and their ancestors never lived a single, unchanging lifestyle—in fact, there is no pure "Vietnamese" culture, nor a pure "American" one. Rather, her ancestors have always been adapting to new and unfamiliar cultural contexts, moving between places and actively developing their sense of belonging (rather than having it handed to them). First, Việt Nam suffered so many waves of colonization and foreign intervention—from the Chinese, French, Japanese, and Americans—and has endured so many centuries of intermixture that there is no single definable "Vietnamese" identity. Rather, it has always been (and always will be) hybrid and layered, formed at the confluence of various places and forces, because Việt Nam has always assimilated foreigners *and* assimilated *to* them.

Specifically, Bui learns that her parents moved around a lot: Bố spends most of his childhood in Hải Phòng, and leaves his native village for the last time at age seven. He goes to Sài Gòn in young adulthood with his grandfather (by way of Hạ Long Bay) and then ends up in the Mekong Delta with Má, then Malaysia and the Untied States through a series of circumstances largely beyond their control. Similarly, Má grows up between Cambodia, Nha Trang, Đà Lạt, and Sài Gòn: she has no single home. The closest they can get in Việt Nam is the Bàn Cờ house where the whole family lived, but it is not theirs anymore—and when the family visits, they do not even recognize it, which underlines how secondary it is to the senses of self they ultimately develop. So while it could be said that they "belong" in Việt Nam, their experiences make it clear that Việt Nam is not one thing or place: not only are there immense differences between the North and the South, but they were not even the same country for the majority of the time that Má and Bố lived there.

Ultimately, by returning to Việt Nam and reconstructing her family's history, Bui realizes that identity is a *process*, not a *product*: it is always hybrid and in the process of formation. At the end of her book, Bui reflects on her relationship to Việt Nam and decides that she "no longer feel[s] the need to reclaim a HOMELAND," since she now knows that "the ground beneath [her] parents' feet had always been shifting" and so "Việt Nam was not [her] country at all." This does not mean she feels *no* attachment to Việt Nam, but rather that it is not the "true" basis

of her identity any more than California is.

Bui realizes that her identity is as much about the family and future she has chosen for herself—her husband Travis and her son—as the family she came from, the place she was born, and history her parents lived. She ends by noting that her son will have the same chance to define his own identity and sense of belonging: the chance to "be free." In tracing her family's past, then, Bui learns that this past—where and what she comes from—influences but does not have to define her.

REPRESSION AND FREEDOM

A historian might say that Thi Bui's parents and grandparents live through at least five different governments and four different wars. But for Má, Bố, and their ancestors, it would be more accurate to say that conflict and authoritarian (usually foreign) rule are a consistent fact of life in Việt Nam. It does not much matter to them whether their oppressors are French, Japanese, Chinese, American, or North or South Vietnamese, nor whether they are communists or capitalists, nationalists or imperialists. Of course, the Buis do understand the complexities of these conflicts—but (with one exception) they never pick a side or put a party before themselves. Rather, they focus their energies on seeking freedom and self-determination: they want to build their own lives on their own terms, and despite the great risks they are forced to run, they ultimately achieve this to some extent when they escape Việt Nam. Freedom is never absolute, but Bui's book shows how people still inevitably seek their own freedom, especially when it is repressed.

Bui's family bears witness to a layered, complex history of oppression, war, and foreign rule in Việt Nam. Bui points this out from the beginning by including a timeline of Vietnamese history in the front of her book. She notes that Việt Nam was occupied by the Chinese (many times), French, Japanese, and Americans—but she focuses on the period of 1940-1975, which was essentially one of constant war. (Her parents were both born in the 1940s and left Việt Nam with her and her three living siblings in 1978.) Má and Bố dealt with the consequences of these occupations and wars firsthand: for instance, in his village, Bố watches massacres by the French and Việt Minh (which his father then joins), and Má's father works for the French colonial government, but she realizes it is oppressive and becomes a staunch nationalist. They also both migrate from the North to the South because of political turmoil.

Bui struggles to understand her family's inconsistent political feelings throughout the book. Ultimately, since they are threatened and misunderstood from every side (the French and the Việt Minh, the North and the South), Má, Bố, and their families do not remain loyal to anyone. Rather, they see—and show the reader—the moral complexity behind Việt Nam's difficult history. Má and Bố both come of age under French rule and go to "EXPENSIVE!" colonial French schools. They see the irony in paying tuition fees to their oppressors, but also know that doing so presents their best chance at success. In short, they recognize the injustice embedded into their society but also see that they must use the tools of power to free themselves from it.

Later, Bui's parents are equally suspicious of the South Vietnamese "police state" that tries to shave off Bố's "hippie" haircut and the North Vietnamese government that labels them "ngụy" and actively persecutes them. Bui is particularly confused when Bố both defends and expresses his hatred for a particular well-known South Vietnamese general—he was the one who forced Bố to cut his hair, but was also reviled internationally for appearing in the "**Saigon Execution**" photo, a treatment that Bố considers unfair. Again, this complexity—which even baffles the author—shows the reader that simple narratives of "GOOD GUYS" versus "BAD GUYS" are not adequate to the complex and tumultuous history of Việt Nam. Bố does actively choose to live in the South over the North after his father tries to make him move to Hà Nội. In the North, he sees "even children" working and "people living in such poverty" in the countryside. He thinks that a comfortable life and French education await him in the South. Although he has this in Sài Gòn for some time, battles soon break out in the streets and he is threatened with Ngô Đình Diệm's military draft. In other words, he flees one oppressive government only to fall into another's arms.

Ultimately, Má, Bố, and others before them do not pick sides because they are pursuing their *own* freedom. During her French education, Má starts reading novels about revolutionaries and history books about colonialism; she quickly realizes that her country is being oppressed. (When she later gets sent to a school full of "FRANCOPHILE[S]!" in Đà Lạt, she is horrified and insists on going home to Nha Trang.) She realizes that the cause of freedom is more important than her family's comfort, and so she becomes a nationalist even though her father works for the French. This also motivates her to pursue her education, even though it is in French, since she decides that "EDUCATION = FREEDOM." Similarly, when he moves to Sài Gòn, Bố goes through a rebellious phase, dressing "like a movie star" and smoking cigarettes, reading philosophy and listening to rock music. This, like all teenage rebellion, is his way of articulating his own identity—expressing his freedom as an individual and refusing to conform to social expectations. (Later, Lan, Bích, and the author go through teenage rebellions of their own in the United States—namely, they move in with their boyfriends, to their parents' horror.)

Of course, the central quest for freedom in this book is Má and Bố's decision to escape Việt Nam with their children. Their preparations are secretive and their journey is dangerous, but the risk ultimately pays off: they make it to Malaysia, and they are relieved even though they have no idea what lies in store

for them. They are not absolutely free, but they are free from the forces that oppressed them before. Má and Bố's childhoods, educations, and escape to the United States suggest that the pursuit of human freedom is inevitable. On the ground, oppression and war look the same, whether perpetrated by one's allies or one's foes, and those affected will always seek their freedom from any oppressor through whatever means are available to them.

MEMORY AND PERSPECTIVE

Beyond its importance as a narrative of immigration and daily life in 20th-century Vietnam, *The Best We Could Do* is also celebrated as a pioneering work in a genre of illustrated nonfiction increasingly referred to as "graphic memoir." Noticeably, Thi Bui did not draw comics before beginning *The Best We Could Do*, but rather learned the art form for this project. As she explains in her brief preface to the book, she chose the comic book medium in order to "present history in a way that is human and relatable and not oversimplified." So it goes without saying that her drawings are central to the narrative: they express most of its emotional detail and many of its more complex storylines. But, beyond telling a different kind of story and eschewing a single perspective, the comic book format allows Bui to make a broader argument about the way history is *narrated* and *remembered*. Usually, these forces are opposed: while historical *narratives* claim to speak about the totality of events, *memories* are unique, individual, and therefore often deemed irrelevant to the "big picture" of what happened. Bui, however, argues that historical narrative and individual memory must be connected, so that history can be personalized and personal experience given its proper historical context.

The Best We Could Do cannot be understood without examining the relationship between the illustrations and the dialogue. Bui uses these illustrations to express a layer of complexity and ambiguity that cannot be adequately narrated through words. Many of the characters (especially Bui and her sisters during the family's escape from Việt Nam) are distinguished only by their outfits: it is difficult to know who is doing what without paying attention to who consistently wears what clothing in the images. For instance, Bui often draws herself and Má in red when they **give birth**. This visual cue signals the connection between them as mothers, which points to the way Bui ultimately learns to deeply respect her mother and follow in her footsteps at the end of the book. (In a sense, when Bui gives birth and dons red, she becomes a new incarnation of her mother.)

And Bui uses visual elements to imply relationships and feelings that would distract from the linear narrative if inserted into the dialogue. For instance, on page 71, Bố's cigarette unleashes a cloud of smoke that floats out of the panel in which he is sitting, and into the panels in which the author and her brother Tâm are playing. This meandering smoke represents the way his presence seeps into and affects his children's lives, even though he does not usually interact with them. Many of Bui's best-known (and arguably most powerful) illustrations from this book are uncanny images of solitude: single figures surrounded by vast expanses of **ocean**, empty space, smoke, etc., as on the title page within the book and pages 11, 36, 40, 41, 85, 248, 249, 323, and 329. These illustrations represent the sense of simultaneous alienation and freedom that many of the people in Bui's family encounter as they migrate from one place to another and face uncertain futures. In all these instances, the full sense of Bui's narrative is impossible to grasp without examining her images more closely than her words.

Just as Bui uses comic books' hybrid form to narrate her family's story in a "human and relatable" way that still captures its complexity, she suggests that personal experiences and historical fact should be merged to tell hybrid stories about events like the Vietnam War and its aftermath, which are simultaneously personal and global. Many critics have noted that Bui integrates a relatively extensive account of Việt Nam's history in the 20th century into her book. Beyond the timeline she offers before the first chapter, she consistently looks at how her parents' experiences reflected historical developments at the time and relate to the experiences of other Vietnamese people. She reminds the reader that there are endless other first-person stories like her family's, which always lie behind the history so often learned about from a third-person, ostensibly omniscient perspective. She writes that "every casualty in war is someone's grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, brother, sister, child, lover."

And because any historical event encompasses endless personal narratives, Bui emphasizes, there are multiple sometimes-contradictory sides to every story. For instance, she notes that some Vietnamese people remember the fall of Sài Gòn as "Liberation Day" and others, including her family, as "The Day We Lost Our Country." She also constantly notes that Americans learn an incomplete and biased picture about the Vietnam War—her book is, in part, intended as an alternative. But Bui also does not suggest that her parents' memories are always correct: she recognizes that memories are fallible, and that they change through the very act of remembering. (This, she jokes, explains many of the disagreements between Má and Bố). Ultimately, then, Bui's story does not aim to be definitive, but rather to strike down the very idea that a definitive single story can be told about historical events. By juggling words and images, personal narrative and historical fact, she emphasizes the complexity and multidimensionality of all experience, while nevertheless insisting that a reader's responsibility is to try and get as many angles as possible on the truth.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE OCEAN

The ocean represents Bui and her family's contradictory relationship to Việt Nam and their past. First, it symbolizes the sense of isolation and danger that defines their lives for so long: Bui's characters find themselves alone, surrounded on all sides by an interminable body of water, forced to fend for themselves and risk their lives for the sake of their freedom. This parallels the danger and crushing loneliness they feel in Việt Nam, under a series of repressive governments, the danger of their boat journey itself, and the fear and isolation they after moving to the United States, as they assimilate to a new, unknown culture.

But the ocean also symbolizes the freedom that Bui's family seeks by escaping Việt Nam. Not only do they literally take to the ocean in their escape attempt to Malaysia, but this is the same ocean that separates Việt Nam from the United States, their old home from their new one. When she looks out upon the Pacific Ocean, Bui both remembers her family's voyage and realizes how estranged she has become from the place of her birth. When Bố looks up at the stars on pages 248-249, the family's isolation now means they have steered clear of persecution. And on the last page, Bui explicitly connects the ocean to freedom, autonomy, and self-invention: she depicts her son swimming in the ocean and suggests that "maybe he can be free" of her and her family's dark past. As her son takes to the sea, too, he also gets a fresh slate.

THE "SAIGON EXECUTION" PHOTO

When he tells Thi Bui about living under the repressive South Vietnamese government, Bố recalls one particularly shocking episode: a general ordered soldiers to cut off Bố's long hair. This general is famous for appearing in the photo often named "Saigon Execution," which shows him shooting a Việt Cộng prisoner in the head during the Tết Offensive. Cited as damning evidence of South Vietnamese war crimes, this photo became an important symbol in the American public's fight against the Vietnam War and even won a Pulitzer Prize. But the general's story is far more complicated than it initially seems: the man he summarily executed had just murdered "an entire family," and Bố sees the execution as fair retaliation. The photographer even approached the general decades later to apologize. So while Bố hates the general because of their personal encounter, he also feels sympathy for him because of the photo's misinterpretation.

For Bui, the "Saigon Execution" photo therefore demonstrates the way different narratives about the "GOOD GUYS" and "BAD GUYS" in the Vietnam War miss the complexity of the historical facts. In reality, both sides were responsible for atrocities and believed they were fighting for freedom and equality, so Má and Bố have no clear allegiances: they were too affected by the war to choose a side. This is similar to how Bui feels about the United States—she loves it as *her* country but resents the racism and discrimination she has experienced there. And, most of all, she resents Americans' tendency to narrate the Vietnam War as an *American* tragedy, while ignoring its impacts on Việt Nam itself. So "Saigon Execution" represents not only the war's complexity and ambiguity, but also the American tendency to erase that complexity and replace it with simple narratives, told from and for the American perspective.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Abrams edition of *The Best We Could Do* published in 2018.

Preface Quotes

❝ I titled my project "Buis in Vietnam and America: A Memory Reconstruction." It had photographs and some art, but mostly writing, and it was pretty academic. However, I didn't feel like I had solved the storytelling problem of how to present history in a way that is human and relatable and not oversimplified. I thought that turning it into a graphic novel might help. So then I had to learn how to do comics! I drew the initial draft of the first pages in 2005, and it's been a steep learning curve working in this medium.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: Preface

Explanation and Analysis

In the preface to her book, Bui briefly explains the history of *The Best We Could Do*, which went through various iterations over more than a decade before reaching its final version. Notably, Bui was not a comic book artist before starting this project (she was a sculptor). But she realized that the medium of comics would be uniquely suited to tell her story, since they avoid the pitfalls of personal and historical storytelling alike: personal narratives can be so particular as to alienate readers, and historical ones so general that readers can forget there are real lives and emotions behind the facts and figures. And most of all, because images can often express ambiguity, uncertainty, and other kinds of negative space (both physical and

emotional) better than words, Bui thinks comics enable simultaneously personal and political narrative without "oversimplif[ying]" the situation—namely, reducing the personal narrative to an example of the political one, or the political one to the extrapolation of a particular personal one.

Bui's initial project is also interesting for its title: what does it mean to attempt "A Memory Reconstruction"? And what does this reveal about the relationship between memory—which, if it needs to be reconstructed, must be disjointed and subjective at the outset—and people's real experiences, if they can ever be pinned down at all? Although she reconstructs her parents' early lives based on their memories in *The Best We Could Do*, she also combines this with political and historical commentary on Việt Nam; in fact, in this first version, her project would have been fragmented, academic in form but overly personal in content.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ But if I surrender, I'm afraid I'll want a full retreat—
to go all the way back. To be the baby and not the mother.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Thi and Travis's Son , Má, The Doctor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Early in her first chapter, as she goes through labor and prepares to give birth, Bui stresses about whether to stray from her plan. She has promised herself she would not take anesthesia, but she is overwhelmed with pain and feels helpless, with so many doctors and nurses surrounding her, but Má waiting outside in the hallway, unable to bear the sight of her daughter in labor. As though to underline the author's sense of insignificance, the panels on this page progressively zoom out from Bui, who is waiting in her hospital bed, to show the doctor standing next to her and then the entire hospital room.

Bui's decision about whether or not to take anesthesia is significant for a few reasons. Most of all, she sees her dilemma about taking the "drugs" as a kind of reflection on her relationship with her mother. She knows that Má never had access to anesthesia, luxurious hotel rooms, or professional doctors when she gave birth six times; and yet Má's inability to watch her daughter give birth suggests that her own experiences were traumatic for her, and she does not want to remember them. To Thi Bui, refusing anesthesia means replicating Má's experiences and, in a sense, empathizing with her and honoring and emulating her strength. Bui is also beginning to evaluate what it will mean to take responsibility for her family—for her parents as well as the son she is about to have. She needs to reformulate her relationship with her parents so that she can be their child without being their "baby," so in childbirth she wants to assert her independence and autonomy rather than forcing her mother to become a caregiver.

❝ FAMILY is now something I have created—
—and not just something I was born into.
The responsibility is immense.
A wave of empathy for my mother washes over me.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Thi and Travis's Son , Má

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter One, Bui lies in a hospital bed and ponders motherhood while her young son sleeps nearby in his crib. She has just spoken to Má, and now realizes that the pain of childbirth marks her transition from a fully autonomous woman to a mother. She now must answer for another being—a son that she has not only an "immense" amount of "responsibility" towards, but whom she is also responsible for bringing into the world in the first place. And, by recognizing this responsibility, her entire attitude toward family—and especially her mother—changes forever. She grew up taking family for granted, seeing it as an inevitable social structure that everyone has and nobody has to work for. Now, she sees that Má actively chose to prioritize her family and worked tirelessly for their benefit, taking on a "responsibility [that] is immense" by choice (even if she did not necessarily choose to have a family in the first place). In other words, Má sacrificed her autonomy for her children, to such an extent that Bui forgot Má was ever autonomous to begin with. At the same juncture, Bui finally begins to understand her mother—and recognize the *importance* of understanding her in order to better parent her own son. Bui's childbirth, then, is both the primary reason for Bui's desire to grow closer to her parents and one of the ways she accomplishes it.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ My parents escaped Việt Nam on a boat so their children could grow up in freedom.
You'd think I could be more grateful.
I am now older than my parents were when they made that incredible journey.
But I fear that around them, I will always be a child…
and they a symbol to me—two sides of a chasm, full of meaning and resentment.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố, Má

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

After she moves back to California from New York to live near and take care of Má and Bố, Bui realizes that she does not know how to navigate her new extended family, in which she is "both a parent and a child" at the same time. Bui presents the first two of these lines alongside a picture of the boat her family uses to escape Việt Nam. Surrounded by swelling sea and populated by foreboding shadows, this boat represents the dangers her parents accepted in the hope of taking their children to a place where they could avoid persecution. In contrast, Bui will probably never have this kind of life-or-death decision to make, and especially not at the young age at which Má and Bố made theirs. So Bui's fear of "always be[ing] a child" to her parents represents her worry that she will never fully be able to empathize with the sacrifices they made for her and her siblings, and that her parents will always treat her as incapable of understanding their past, or requiring protection from it.

But, along with a panel of Má and Bố standing side-by-side and looking in different directions, the last line of this quote speaks to the effects of this kind of division and misunderstanding. Not only does "a chasm" separate her experience from that of her parents, but "a chasm, full of meaning and resentment," separates her parents from one another. Although they still take care of one another, Má and Bố have not lived together for a long time. Their connection is so deep that it cannot be severed, but their problems so grave that they cannot be remedied or even necessarily understood by the other.

❝ My parents are retired, in good health, and free to do as they please…
…but also lonely, aging, and quietly wishing we'd take better care of them.
In Việt Nam, they would be considered very old in their seventies.
In America, where people their age run marathons or at least independently, my parents are stuck in limbo between two sets of expectations…
…and I feel guilty.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố, Má

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

As she describes their lives in the United States, Bui depicts Má boarding a cruise ship and Bố making himself dinner from a can, then Má watching television in bed alone, and herself thinking at her drawing table. She is conflicted between her desire to provide them with the comfortable existence they would have had in Việt Nam, living with their children as part of a joint family, and her recognition that American norms of aging are different, focused on independence and autonomy. In America, elderly people who are incapable of living independently are often treated as disposable, and living with one's children is seen as a sign of weakness. Bui "feel[s] guilty" for being unable to help her parents resolve their state of "limbo." She has moved to California in an attempt to do so, but realized that, even though the whole family lives nearby, they are emotionally distant from one another. In a sense, despite wanting to offer her parents the connection and stability of a traditional family that lives together, she realizes that they already have to some extent internalized and begun to fulfill the American expectations about aging.

Most of all, this scene illustrates Bui and her family's perpetual struggle to forge a hybrid cultural identity between the United States and the Việt Nam they left so long before. Now that she begins to take a greater responsibility for her parents' welfare, she has to put these expectations into practice in a way that will have serious real-world consequences for the people she loves. She neither wants to force her family into an old-world model it cannot fit, nor to accept the strange American notion that autonomy—rather than connection—is synonymous with strength and happiness in old age.

Soon after that trip back to Việt Nam (our first since we escaped in 1978)…
…I began to record our family history…
thinking that if I bridged the gap between the past and the present…
…I could fill the void between my parents and me.
And that if I could see Việt Nam as a real place, and not a symbol of something lost…
…I would see my parents as real people…
and learn to love them better.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố, Má

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This page comprises two panels. In the first, Bui depicts herself drawing comics in front of two large ocean waves. In the background, behind one of the waves, the reader can see the small, square wooden roof of the boat in which her family escaped. In the second panel, with her back to the reader, Bui looks out on Việt Nam (or at least its geographical shape) painted in red watercolors. A mirror image of the same shape appears tattooed into Bui's back.

These images and the text that accompanies them represent Bui's search for identity by turning to the past—and specifically through the school, art, and then book project that became *The Best We Could Do*. Having just visited Việt Nam and begun to see it "as a real place" rather than "a symbol of something lost," as she did in her romantic childhood fantasies about it, Bui realizes she can do the same with her parents' pasts, which have always been a mystery to her. Ultimately, she is successful: by learning about the past, she comes to more clearly understand her identity, so that Việt Nam no longer stands for her parents' loss and this loss no longer stands for Việt Nam. In an interview regarding this book, Bui mentioned that one of the most rewarding things about completing the project was being able to return to Việt Nam and simply enjoy it as a place, without foregrounding or constantly worrying about what it represented for her and her family.

In making the goal of her writing process the replacement of fantasy with history, Bui not only shows that many of the things people use to define their identities are based on hope and speculation (especially the children of immigrants, who tend to either idealize or hate their parents' countries of origin), but also illustrates the inaccurate way many laypeople learn about the past, through assumption and stereotype rather than personal experience and historical fact. When it comes to the Vietnam War, for instance, many Americans have no idea what a Vietnamese perspective on the events would look like, or even clearly understand the connection between American involvement in the war and the wave of Vietnamese "boat people" refugees in its immediate aftermath.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Though my world was small,
I would sometimes dream of being free in it.
This was my favorite dream.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Thi and Travis's Son , Bố

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

Bui's third chapter focuses on her difficult home life growing up in California, where Má worked and did most of the domestic labor, while Bố stayed at home and unintentionally made a full-time job out of frightening his children. Although she does not realize until adulthood that Bố's strange behavior was a reflection of his own childhood trauma, Bui eventually realizes as a child that the invisible threats Bố sees all around them do not actually exist. Among her siblings, she becomes the brave one. She learns to fend off monsters and nightmares and instead look to the future, "dream[ing] of being free" in contrast to the sense of confinement she feels in her family's apartment.

These captions come from the last two pages in Chapter Three. In the first, Bui shows herself sleeping and then (in her dream) swimming in an abstractly drawn ocean, first toward and then away from the reader. Of course, swimming in the ocean represents a profound freedom of movement—one can move in all six directions, as opposed to only four on land, and go wherever one wishes. So again, the ocean figures as a symbol of independence and freedom for Bui—but also of her isolation, both during her childhood and in the dreams she uses to escape it. This drawing is also crucial because Bui replicates it on the book's very last page, only with her son in her place. As she again draws swimming in the ocean to represent childhood, freedom, and the

future, this final drawing also reminds the reader that Thi Bui's conclusions about her own family also apply more generally to all parenthood and inheritance: one is conditioned but never determined by their family's past. As a child, one is confined by the limits of their parents' imagination, but as an adult, they can supersede their parents and forge their own path.

In the chapter's haunting last page, Bui lies face-down in the family's apartment, showing the reader what she means by "my world was small" and emphasizing the expansive power of the imagination by contrast. She depicts the apartment from a bird's eye perspective, as in a floorplan, which makes it look more bare, cramped, and alien than it might otherwise seem. Bui's position—facedown in the middle of the hallway—adds to the uncanny sense of this drawing, in which Bui underlines how, during her childhood, home became a foreign and uncomfortable site of fear and confusion.

Chapter 4 Quotes

To understand how my father became the way he was,
I had to learn what happened to him as a little boy.
It took a long time
to learn the right questions to ask.
When I did, the stories poured forth with no beginning or end—
anecdotes without shape,
wounds beneath wounds.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92-93

Explanation and Analysis

After explaining her tense early relationship with Bố in the third chapter, Bui focuses her fourth chapter on his childhood. Slowly but surely, she learns about Bố's upbringing in Việt Nam by interviewing him; she gives him the space and time to process his memories in addition to using their conversations to fill in her own narrative gaps about the past. Bui draws her father sitting on the same chair at the same table in four different stages of his life—at the age he was when he left Việt Nam, as a young boy, as an adolescent, and now, in old age. The only constant is his cigarette—presumably, he has smoked all his life, but the cigarette also shows how habits—like memories and trauma—stay with people and often only grow stronger over time. In the first three drawings, Thi Bui is also a child. Of course, she was this age when he was in his 30s and 40s, as shown in the first drawing, but in the second drawing, suddenly they are the same age—she tries to imagine him experiencing the trauma he saw when he was this age. Suddenly, in this drawing, the hierarchy of parent/child disappears and Thi Bui can try to process her father's experiences empathetically, as an equal. The third drawing shows the same—Bui has grown to adolescence along with Bố. And the fourth and final drawing shows their ages at the time Bui is actually interviewing Bố. Overall, these juxtaposed drawings of Bui and Bố side-by-side are a way of showing how people's past selves remain nested inside themselves, and often the trauma or hardship people have experienced in the past can continue to define their identities and emotional responses for the rest of their lives.

I had never, before researching the background of my father's stories, imagined that these horrible events were connected to my family history…

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

In this panel, Bui draws the end of World War II through devastating American atomic bombs, and a devastated urban expanse full of rubble and dead bodies. After Bố recounts the numerous horrors of his childhood to his daughter, Bui begins to connect his tragic experiences to Việt Nam's tragic history during the 20th century. From watching his father leave his mother for dead during a horrible, World War II-induced famine to seeing his village massacred and then having to choose a side between North and South Việt Nam, Bố *was there* and remains affected by what he experienced, even well into the 21st century.

While Bố and his family were still real people with complete control over their actions and some limited control over their circumstances, they were also victims of history. Their fates were products of a century of imperialism and European colonial plunder, the atom bomb, the spread of Communism, and America's Cold War. Therefore, in recognizing that her parents' stories were at once personal and political, products of and fights against the untouchable forces of modern states and war, Bui in turn came to recognize that *she* needed to narrate her book in a way that merged personal narrative with political history.

I grew up with the terrified boy who became my father.
Afraid of my father, craving safety and comfort.
I had no idea that the terror I felt was only the long shadow of his own.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128-129

Explanation and Analysis

After her father finishes recounting the numerous horrors of his early childhood, Bui comes to this conclusion about her own childhood at the end of her fourth chapter. As a child, she never knew anything about the trauma her father had experienced in his past life—she simply saw his tendency to terrorize as an inherent part of his personality, rather than something with antecedents in his own experience. By extension, this means Bui saw him as responsible and blameworthy for his failures as a parent.

However, after interviewing her father, Bui realizes that he was not a caring, safe figure in her childhood becuase he never felt safe in his entire life, and never received sustained affection or care from his family. He could not provide something he was unacquainted with—having always lived with survival and nothing else on his mind, Bố was unable to adapt to the comfort and safety of life in carefree California.

Through this experience, Bui learns two lessons. First, she sees how trauma and "terror" leave "long shadow[s]" and thereby pass from one generation to another. Bố's experiences left an imprint on him, and he reflected these experiences, which will in turn leave an imprint on his daughter. The child of a traumatized child, Bui is not destined to in turn traumatize her own children—rather, Bố's imprint on her is the lessons about her identity and family she learned from growing up with and interviewing him. She will bring this knowledge into her own parenting, of course. And secondly, by recognizing her father was simply reflecting what he knew, Bui learns to forgive him, not by denying the damage he did, but rather by understanding and accepting it.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Every casualty in war is someone's grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, brother, sister, child, lover.
In the decade of the First Indochina War, while my parents were still children learning their place in the world…
…an estimated 94,000 French soldiers died trying to reclaim France's colony.
Three to four times as many Vietnamese died fighting them or running away from them.
This was the human cost of ending France's colonial rule in Southeast Asia…
…and winning Việt Nam's independence.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố's Grandfather, Bố's Grandmother, Bố

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

As he comes of age in Hải Phòng, Bố suddenly finds himself in a fancy French school but then watches the First Indochina War end and the French imperial forces *finally* withdraw from Việt Nam. Not only is his school dissolved, but his grandparents—who are still wealthy landowners in their village despite all the hardship they experienced over the previous 20 years—suddenly lose all their land to the land reforms, which redistribute it to landless peasants and farmers who need it. Not only are their wealth and status wiped out, but Bố's grandparents legitimately fear that they will be killed, too.

Although the land reforms were a great equalizer and Việt Nam's independence from the French was a great accomplishment, Bui notes that people cannot tell themselves simple narratives about such events being entirely good or evil. Even noble political campaigns have a "human cost," and every war and conflict, she firmly believes, must be recounted not only through big-picture information (facts and figures), but also the personal narratives of those affected, displaced, and lost. Bui emphasizes the moral complexity of all conflict as she draws the Việt Minh tearing down the French flag and replacing it with the Vietnamese one in the background. With this, she contrasts the neat, feel-good narratives about history and war that people often like to hear with the grim reality that war forever affects everyone who participates in or witnesses it, and that everyone—even one's enemies—has a family, dream, and story of their own.

"But the month I spent in the Communist North had a very different effect on me."
"It was true that the Việt Minh had won independence by winning the WAR."
"But the new society I dreamed of didn't EXIST."
"Here there was no freedom of thought, no allowance for individuality."
"I was fourteen. Sài Gòn represented a whole new world of possibility to me."
"Who would choose a world that had become so narrow, so poor and gray?"

Related Characters: Bố (speaker), Bố's Grandfather, Bố's Father

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

After the First Indochina War, in 1954, the Communist Việt Minh take full control of North Việt Nam, but a western-backed government takes power in the South. Accordingly, all the French schools in the North shut down, and Bố decides to move South to Sài Gòn to continue his education. Just before he leaves, however, he hears from the father who abandoned him so long ago to join the Việt Minh—and whom the rest of the family has subsequently disowned for his political affiliations and ambitions. Bố's father asks Bố to visit him in the rural, heavily Communist area in the North, where he now lives with his new family (his third, in fact). When Bố arrives, his father pleas for him to stay with him and his new wife and children in the North, so that they can "be a family again." For Bố, not only is this too little, too late—he has lost all trust in his father by this point anyway—but he also simply does not want to stay in the North. Although Bố has flirted with Communism himself, when he visits North Việt Nam he is overwhelmed to see profound poverty in rural areas and watch children of his own age working instead of going to school. Most of all, he realizes that anyone who does not agree with the Communist Party's ideology faces dispossession, forced labor, or even execution. While it is unclear how the rural South would compare, Bố has already seen more than enough to know that he does not want to stay in the North, and he quickly agrees to go South with his grandfather.

In short, Bố realizes that although he agrees with the Communists in theory, he sees individual freedom and autonomy as more important than a collective political project. One might say that this is only a product of his own privilege, and it is true that the South eventually turns into a similar kind of police state. Bố is less turning his back on Communism than realizing that he does not want it if it is only available in combination with authoritarianism, and his desire for freedom—no matter who is repressing him—is what eventually leads him and his family to escape Việt Nam.

Chapter 6 Quotes

I imagine that the awe and excitement I felt for New York when I moved there after college—
—must be something like what my father felt when he arrived in Sài Gòn in 1955.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of her book, Thi Bui draws numerous parallels between her mother and herself, usually through her depictions and descriptions of childbirth. However, it takes her a much longer time to find a way to empathize with her father, who has always been more opaque and emotionally distant. But when Bố describes his sense of wonder and freedom upon moving from Hải Phòng to Sài Gòn to continue his education in 1955, Bui realizes that it is just like her sense of "awe and excitement" upon moving to New York to be an artist.

Beyond showing how she managed to connect with and understand her father through the archetypal narrative of a dizzying migration from the country to the big city, Bui's side-by-side depiction of her move to New York and Bố's move to Sài Gòn allows her to explore how this experience of migration marks and changes people, transforming their senses of self and freedom. Just as Bui pursued her artistic aspirations in New York, Bố won true independence for the first time in Sài Gòn: he got to develop his own sense of taste and fashion (no matter how garish it looks in retrospect) and, like all immigrants, reconsider and actively reformulate his identity in relation to his new environment. Although this was a relatively brief phase, soon cut short by war and repression, it gave Bố a taste of the freedom he would later strive for in the United States—the consumerist freedom of a financially comfortable, well-connected person under capitalism. (Of course, since his family is neither well off nor well-connected in the United States, this freedom proves out of reach.)

I still have the chessboard my father made when I was a kid, and the wooden set of pieces we played with.
the CHARIOT
the ELEPHANT
the GENERAL
the COUNSELOR
the SOLDIERS
Revisiting this game of war and strategy, I think about how none of the Vietnamese people in that video have a name or a voice.
My grandparents, my parents, my sisters, and me—
—we weren't any of the pieces on the chessboard.
We were more like ants, scrambling out of the way of giants, getting just far enough from danger to resume the business of living

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Tâm, Bố

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185-186

Explanation and Analysis

When Bố tells Bui about his adolescence and early adulthood in Sài Gòn, she learns that—despite going to a fancy colonial French school—he lived with his grandparents in the chaotic, working-class neighborhood of Bàn Cờ. She also realizes that the house in which he grew up was the same one in which she lived the first three years of her life—but, of course, she has no memories of it, and when the family returns, she and her younger brother Tâm (who never lived in Việt Nam) spend their time "documenting in lieu of remembering." Later, Bố gives Bui a documentary about the neighborhood, the name of which means "the CHESSBOARD." The documentary says Bàn Cờ is full of "hoodlums and CRIMINAL ELEMENT[S]," and Bui is disappointed at its lack of perspective or sympathy for people like her and her family.

Thinking back to this actual chessboard, which she depicts on the entirety of page 185, Bui turns the documentary's depiction of Bàn Cờ on its head: she realizes that the movie, and the Americans, saw Vietnamese civilians as powerless, unimportant, homogeneous, and disposable. And, in fact, this is the way stories about the Vietnam War (and other, similar imperial conflicts) are often narrated in the United States. Because those in power fought the war from this perspective, to an extent, it became reality: American generals and Vietnamese politicians treated civilians like "ants" and had no qualms about forcing them to "scramble[e] out of the way of giants." Life turned into a game—of fleeing danger and dodging repression in order to "resume the business of living" while the "giants" played chess in their cities and villages. Their freedom denied, they were told to adapt to whatever circumstances the levers of power forced them into—up to and including when they immigrated to the United States, Bui's family had no choice but to assimilate in order to survive.

I understand why it was easier for her to not tell me these things directly, and I DID want to know.
But it still wasn't EASY for me to swallow that my mother had been at her happiest without us.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Travis, Má

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

In California, Má sits in the front seat of Bui and Travis's car. In English, she tells Travis, who is driving, about her girlhood and education in Việt Nam. Meanwhile, the author sits in the back seat, listening and processing the conversation. She finds it strange that Má is more willing to open up to her husband than to her—but she also understands: Má is not comfortable mixing her motherhood with the independent life she had before. She does not want to scar her children, to make them question her absolute dedication to and love for them, or to influence their thinking about their own marriages and children. But, as she admits to Travis, she never wanted a husband or a family, and fell into her relationship with and marriage to Bố almost by accident. The best years of her life were during her education at boarding school, when she was free to pursue her own friendships and relationships, able to think for herself without family or peers' expectations hanging over her.

Hearing all of this puts Thi Bui, who draws herself in a "thinking position" in the back seat, in an awkward bind. She is grateful that Má opened up about her past, and she completely understands Má's desire for freedom and autonomy from Việt Nam's patriarchal family and community structures. But she also realizes that Má's years of dedication to her children were more out of obligation than choice—although she never faltered in caring for her children once they existed, she simply never planned to have them. In short, Bui realizes, she and her siblings were unwanted until they were there.

This conversation marks an important shift in Bui's thinking

about her own family: she learns to see her mother as someone formerly independent, who agreed to sacrifice that independence for the sake of children who were not part of her life's plan. In other words, Thi Bui and her siblings' freedom as adults has come about, to some extent, at the expense of their mother's. And yet Má—unlike Má and Bố's parents—sacrificed her own happiness anyway. This sacrifice is what holds her family together. Her children can never repay her for this, and she can never take it back.

> The contradiction in my father's stories troubled me for a long time.
> But so did the oversimplifications and stereotypes in American versions of the Vietnam War.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), The General , Bố

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

Living in South Việt Nam, Bố has a frightening brush with a military general who later becomes famous for shooting a prisoner in the Pulitzer Prize-winning photo that is widely known as "Saigon Execution." Although he hates the general for personally targeting him, Bố feels sympathy for the man because "Saigon Execution" was widely interpreted and taken out of context.

At first, Bui is "troubled" by this "contradiction," but then she realizes that she is making the same mistake that Bố is already critiquing. American narratives of the Vietnam War—like so many stories of war recounted by people who did not experience it—tend to reduce a long and complex history to a simplistic conflict between "GOOD GUYS" and "BAD GUYS." Bui assumed that her father, who lived through the war, would do the same—he would choose a side to root for, and root against the other. But, through interviewing him, Bui sees that both sides were morally complex, responsible for atrocities despite apparent good intentions, and potentially threatening to civilians uninvolved in politics, like Má, Bố, and their children.

So just as the public reception to the "Saigon Execution" photo painted the general as evil and forgot that the man he was executing murdered a whole family just hours before, Bui herself assumed that there *were* definable heroes and villains in the conflict—she just needed to figure out who was who. Now, she sees that people do not experience war like a football match against two teams, but rather like the grass that both teams trample on—most people simply want to go on living, and for the war to end. They suffer despite having no responsibility for or complicity in the conflict, and this is perhaps the greatest tragedy of the war. American narratives of the war, Bui declares, should recognize this complexity and take responsibility for the violence that American involvement in the conflict perpetrated and enabled, rather than nationalistically valorizing it.

Chapter 7 Quotes

> The American version of this story is one of South Vietnamese cowardice, corruption, and ineptitude…
> …South Vietnamese soldiers abandoning their uniforms in the street…
> …Americans crying at their wasted efforts to save a country not worth saving.
> But Communist forces entered Sài Gòn without a fight, and no blood was shed.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

At she reaches the point in her interviews where her parents' experiences collide with the end of the war, Bui again emphasizes the great gulf between the way Americans learn about the war and the way those affected by the conflict actually experienced it in Việt Nam. The American narrative blames the ally it abandoned for losing the war and advances a series of stereotypes and insults to justify this blame. What's more, most American stories of the Vietnam War only look at American casualties—which were less than five percent of the total.

The various competing narratives about "LIBERATION DAY"—also called "THE DAY WE LOST OUR COUNTRY," among innumerable other names—are further evidence of how the "official" versions of history are only partial, missing not only the majority of the suffering that the war inflicted, but also the majority of the personal experiences of those affected by the war. So while Liberation Day was a big deal in the United States, in South Việt Nam it was like any other day for the majority of citizens, whose fears far outpaced their suffering.

My father explained to me that there was a word for our kind—
NGỤY
It meant "false, lying, deceitful"—but it could be applied to anyone in the South.
It meant constant monitoring, distrust, and the ever-present feeling that our family could, at any moment, be separated, our safety jeopardized.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

After North Việt Nam wins the war and takes control over the South, Má and Bố are treated even worse than they were under the previous government—which they used to work for, as teachers. Although they do not know precisely why they were considered "ngụy," it likely has something to do with their colonial education and jobs, plus the fact that Bố had migrated from the North to the South, and Má's father worked for the French. Although they committed no crimes and never opposed the new Communist government, they suddenly have to live in constant fear of being fired (which happens to Bố), sent to forced labor camps (which *nearly* happens to Bố), or worse. The new government teaches children to report their parents and sends a monitor to evaluate the books Má and Bố stock in their home (leading the family to burn all their books before the check). And when Má's brother Hải disappears, the government is clearly involved.

While the "ngụy" label marks a crucial turning point for the family—it's the moment when Má and Bố start considering escape—it also illuminates how repressive governments work, using language and sowing suspicion in order to consolidate absolute power over their own citizens and repress dissent. "Ngụy" is an allegation with the power of a conviction, a label that leads the government to dig as deep as possible for evidence that falls within defined categories of illegality. Once it finds this evidence—which can be as innocuous as a CD or book—it declares citizens enemies of the state and revokes their rights for all practical purposes, legitimating absolutely any action it wishes against them.

Chapter 8 Quotes

We were now BOAT PEOPLE—
—five among hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding into neighboring countries, seeking asylum.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bích, Lan, Bố, Má

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

After they successfully escape Việt Nam, the Buis end up in the Pulau Besar Refugee Camp off Malaysia's northeastern coast. Although Má is eight months pregnant, she insists on leaving the hospital to join the rest of her family in the camp, and once they establish a skeleton of a life for themselves—they get a tent and some food—the next order of business is for them to get their "names registered, and identification pictures taken for processing." Bui notes that this process of registration by the Malaysian authorities turns them from individuals into representatives of a larger group, the "BOAT PEOPLE" who escaped Việt Nam after the end of the war. In other words, contact with the official bureaucracy erases the individuality from their stories and, for the outside world, turns them into names and numbers that need resettlement.

In fact, on this page, Bui includes the *actual photos* that her family took in March 1978, when they arrived in Pulau Besar. Lan, Bố, and Bích get their own photos, but since Thi is only three years old, Má carries her in her arms for their joint photo. Lan, Bố, Bích, and Má hold up boards with classificatory information: their names, "BOAT N[UMBER]," "DOA" (date of arrival), and "DOB" (date of birth). If their photos were buried among "hundreds of thousands of" similar ones, it would be easy to forget the Buis' humanity and fail to empathize with their suffering. Indeed, to many American readers, the photos will resemble "mugshots" taken in jails or prisons, and therefore may even suggest criminality—it is because they arrive to Malaysia with no legal status that they need to be classified and defined, after all.

As she has explained in interviews about the book, Bui was very deliberate about where to position these refugee photos. Although they show a moment of dehumanization—the Buis' conversion into "BOAT PEOPLE" in the eyes of the world—they are also profoundly humanizing for readers, who, until this moment, have only seen the book's characters as cartoons. These photos are a stark reminder that Bui's story, although told in the medium of a graphic novel, is a real story about real people.

The refugee camp was also a place where many people reinvented themselves.
Some people met each other in camp…
…and listed themselves on paper as married couples.
Some even adopted children traveling alone. So they could be resettled together.
Some changed their names or their age.
"If I'm ten years younger, I'll find a job easier!"
"If I'm ten years older, I'll retire earlier!"

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 269

Explanation and Analysis

On a more jovial note, Bui looks at how the refugee camp gave people a kind of unexpected freedom precisely *because* it was nobody's final destination, a neither-here-nor-there stop along everyone's way. Suddenly lifted out of the social networks and legal status that defined their previous lives, people were suddenly able to remake both of these for themselves, turning a stranger into a spouse or child in an instant, or giving themselves more or less time to work, at will. (This absolute neutrality of life in the refugee camp is part of the reason Bích is so astonished and uncomfortable to meet an old school friend there.)

People's ability to remake themselves in the camp—to immediately take advantage in some way of the freedom they won themselves through escape, even while they suffer the profound uncertainty that freedom entails—also more broadly reflects how migration can create a sort of blank slate for people to start anew, redefining their identities, tastes, and goals in (and in relation to) their new geographical and social contexts. After all, when Má and Bố arrive in the United States, they immediately put their minds to improving their English and finding new jobs. They remake themselves and their children through migration, in part deliberately and in part by simply absorbing what their new environment offers them.

Our cousins were older and had been in America for three years already.
We probably embarrassed them with our fresh-off-the-boat appearance.
"Don't be such a REFUGEE! Eat it [the cereal] in a bowl with some MILK!"
"I don't LIKE milk! And who DOESN'T eat cereal out of the box?"
"Well, at least don't eat like that in front of my house where everyone can see you!"

Related Characters: Bích, Thi Bui (speaker), Đào

Related Themes:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

When they move to Indiana to live with Má's sister Đào and her family, the Buis—like most immigrants who show up in a completely unfamiliar, foreign land with the goal of making a home there—have difficulty assimilating at first. In comparison with their cousins, they are "fresh-off-the-boat"—conspicuously foreign. In this exceptionally humorous panel, Bích eats directly from a box of "SUGAR CORN POPS" on the front porch of Đào's house, and one of Đào's daughters (her cousins) insists she eat it like an American, "in a bowl with some MILK!"

From their refugee cousins, Thi and her siblings immediately learn about the cultural hierarchy of American life: conformity will win them status, and anything but will threaten it. Their appearance puts them at a disadvantage to begin with, especially since many of the people around them implicitly associate Việt Nam with the Communist North (and forget that Bui's half of the country used to be on the United States' side).

But beyond noting the difficulties posed by assimilation, Bui shows that it consists of a certain kind of cultural violence—it means crushing other ways of life through prejudice. Especially as she contemplates how to combine Vietnamese and American cultural expectations about how to treat her aging parents, she asks readers to question the received wisdom that immigrants must, will, and should eventually assimilate to the places where they move rather than preserving their own cultural practices and ways of life. She sees the United States as enriched by *embracing* immigrants, not by swallowing them into the norms of its white majority.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ This—not any particular piece of Vietnamese culture—is my inheritance:
the inexplicable need and extraordinary ability to RUN when the shit hits the fan.
My Refugee Reflex.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 305

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of her penultimate chapter, Bui recalls a difficult event from her childhood: the apartment downstairs exploded. Her parents, accustomed to hiding from war in Việt Nam, instinctively lock themselves in the bedroom. But then Bui realizes that they are in danger if they stay inside, and they need to leave to save themselves. Actually, she does not realize this—she simply runs instinctively, grabs the family's "IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS" folder, and pulls her parents after her. Unlike "a normal fourteen-year-old," she does not have "some kind of freak-out," but coordinates her whole family's evacuation. Later, as firefighters rush to the scene, Bui analyzes her "Refugee Reflex" (which was the book's original title).

Bui argues that this "Refugee Reflex" is her "inheritance" because it is the specific response to danger she has learned from her parents and possibly even from her earliest years living in Việt Nam. While she does not necessarily think it resides in her DNA, neither does "Vietnamese culture." Inheritance, she suggests here, is less about some fixed, essential identity—being "Vietnamese," for instance—than about the practices and habits that one learns from one's family and community. The fact that this kind of inheritance is about action for Bui also means that people have relatively more control over what their children inherit—what parents teach and transmit to their children is as important as (or more important than) the genes they pass on. The "Refugee Reflex" is a reflex because it is so deeply embedded in Bui's thinking that it no longer needs to be conscious—she has successfully played refugee once and knows she can do so again if need be.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ That first week of parenting was the hardest week of my life, and the only time I ever felt called upon to be HEROIC.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Bố, Má, Thi and Travis's Son , Travis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

In her final chapter, Bui returns to the place she started: the hospital where she gives birth to her son. Unfortunately, her infant son develops jaundice and has to stay in the hospital for another week—which means that Bui has to visit the hospital every 90 minutes to breastfeed him and check on his progress. It is winter, New York is freezing cold, and Bui is hopelessly stressed—but, compelled to "KEEP HIM ALIVE," she forces herself to make it to the hospital over and over.

On this page, she depicts herself making this difficult journey—her face exhausted yet determined—below images of her father piloting the boat that led the family to freedom and her mother about to give birth in the Pulau Besar Refugee Camp. These are just some of the moments when her parents were "called upon to be HEROIC" for the sake of her children. By remembering these moments, Bui draws strength from her parents' heroism: if they did all they had for her, she knows she can and will do what she needs for her son in his first week of life. This page demonstrates that one important dimension of Bui's project has proven successful: by reconstructing her parents' past, she has learned to become a better parent herself.

❝ I'm no longer a kid...am I?
Having a child taught me, certainly,
that I am not the center of the universe.
But being a child, even a grown-up one, seems to me to be a lifetime pass for selfishness.
We hang resentment onto the things our parents did to us, or the things they DIDN'T do for us...
...and in my case—
—call them by the wrong name.
To accidentally call myself Mẹ
was to slip myself into her shoes
just for a moment.
To let her be not what I want her to be
but someone independent, self-determining, and free,
means letting go of that picture of her in my head.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Thi and Travis's Son , Má

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 317-319

Explanation and Analysis

As she reflects on her relationship with her own mother and its implications for her own motherhood, Bui comes to her central conclusion about family, one perfectly captured by her book's title: *The Best We Could Do*. By learning about her parents' difficult pasts and recognizing that they did the best they could do for their children, she learns to forgive her parents for their errors and let go of her "resentment" and disappointment. She recognizes that they were making unpredictable choices within imperfect circumstances. Parents are still human, and she cannot hold hers to an inhuman standard.

She also begins to analyze why children *do* hold their parents to such high standards: they fail to see their parents as *more* than parents, to remember that they were once *not* parents and might not have even *wanted* to be. This does not diminish their love for their children—but children can miss this love by evaluating their parents as though they had no other purpose in life besides serving their children's every wish. This is what Bui means when she talks about calling her mother "Má" instead of "Mẹ," the name her mother preferred for herself: she used to fix her mother's identity instead of letting Má set her own. Now, having learned about Má's history, Bui is ready to let Má be herself—to treat Má as a fellow adult and not as only her mother. She understands that her own son will have to go through this same process as he comes of age, but she also knows that she will continue to do the best she can do in raising him.

> What has worried me since having my own child
> was whether I would pass along some gene for sorrow
> or unintentionally inflict damage I could never undo.
> But when I look at my son, now ten years old,
> I don't see war and loss
> or even Travis and me.
> I see a new life, bound with mine quite by coincidence,
> and I think maybe he can be free.

Related Characters: Thi Bui (speaker), Thi and Travis's Son

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 327-329

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing lines of *The Best We Could Do*, Thi Bui turns from being a better child to her parents to being a better parent to her son, the other half of what she hoped to accomplish by investigating and reconstructing her parents' history. She has learned to let go of her own romantic attachment to Việt Nam, not because she does not care deeply about the place, but rather because she has learned that she does not belong to it just because she comes from it. All that is her parents' is not hers, and vice versa. While conditioned by her parents' past, Bui is still free to build her own future on the foundation they have given her.

So in her final pages, Bui extrapolates this lesson to her own son: although he has inherited her genes and will inherit her history, she realizes, he can do so without defining or confining himself through it. He can recognize that their lives are "bound [...] quite by coincidence" and "be free" to set his own identity and future—it is not her job to "undo" his "damage" or fix his identity any more than she does for her parents. The book closes with an image of Bui's son swimming in the ocean, which closely resembles the drawing she made of herself as a child, dreaming of freedom, on page 89. She has had this chance—and with her freedom, she has chosen to give her son the same.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

The author, Thi Bui, explains that *The Best We Could Do* began with an oral history project in graduate school. She realized that mere transcripts did not "present history in a way that is human and relatable and not oversimplified," so she learned to draw comics and began the book in 2005. Burdened with numerous commitments—raising her son, moving across the United States, and teaching—Bui often had trouble finding time to work on this research-intensive and emotionally intense book, which is why it took her more than a decade to complete the process. She also acknowledges and thanks the "artists, writers, and editors" who made the book possible, along with her family.

More than a decade of careful thought, work, and trial and error went into The Best We Could Do. *One of Bui's primary motives for undertaking this project was actually the potential she saw in the graphic novel medium, which is uniquely poised to tell personal stories with an emotional subtlety that first-person narrative cannot capture and a narrative continuity and specificity that visual art alone cannot offer. Because graphic novels are a hybrid form that combines two different kinds of information, they are also a useful way to integrate personal experience with political and historical fact. In fact, with her skepticism about singular and totalizing narratives, Bui also clearly wants to challenge the strict division of life into separate "personal" and "political" spheres.*

Thi Bui narrates a 2017 conversation between her and the celebrated Vietnamese American novelist Việt Thanh Nguyễn. They meet in a bookstore, where Bui asks Nguyễn how he keeps his hair so perfectly coiffed. Nguyễn jokingly explains his four-step routine, but then recalls that hair was an important sign of "masculinity and style" for Vietnamese refugees in California in the 1980s. He shows Bui pictures of himself from that era, and she comments that his hair gave him a kind of "power" as a marginalized immigrant. Bui dedicated herself to school for the same reason. Nguyễn notes that he was not nearly "as motivated as [Bui]." He only got into one college, and was so "deeply disappointed in [him]self" that he started to work hard—which he has kept doing ever since.

Although this preface has no direct connection to the rest of the story, Bui's conversation with Nguyễn still allows the reader to digest her artistic style and sense of humor, and also addresses Vietnamese immigrants' struggle to integrate into and assert their identity within the United States after the end of the Vietnam War. Nguyễn's hair and Bui's dedication to school were both strategies for self-empowerment and the pursuit of freedom in a society that did not necessarily recognize them as legitimate or "proper" citizens. Finally, through this episode Bui inserts herself into the contemporary conversation around Vietnamese literature and representation in the United States—Việt Thanh Nguyễn is the only Vietnamese American writer that many Americans have ever heard of, and Bui idolizes him (and his hair) because he is one of few Vietnamese American writers in the mainstream. At the same time, the familiarity of their encounter makes it clear that Nguyễn is just another normal person, whose fame does not convert him into a mouthpiece for all Vietnamese Americans. He and Bui are friends, not competitors; they clearly agree that there is space for more nuance and complexity in narratives about Việt Nam.

Bui then provides a detailed, illustrated timeline of Vietnamese history. She notes occupations by the Chinese (111 BC-938 AD), French (1887-1954), and Japanese (1940-1945), but focuses on the period relevant to her book: 1945-1975. In the decade after World War II, the First Indochina War led to Việt Nam's partition into two countries. The Communist North was run by the Việt Minh, the anti-French and anti-Japanese independence movement led byHồ Chí Minh, and the capitalist South was run by the Western-backed, antidemocratic leader Ngô Đình Diệm.

Although Việt Nam's history is complicated and can be excessively confusing for readers with no previous knowledge of the region, Bui also re-narrates much of this history where relevant throughout her book. However, her timeline can always serve as a reference for confused readers. Notably, Việt Nam has been ruled by various different foreign empires for roughly half of its recorded history—conflict, change, and cultural mixture were not unusual there, and were certainly not introduced by Europeans. For the purposes of Bui's book, the most important detail is the partition of Việt Nam between the Communist North and the Western-backed South. The Cold War meant that Việt Nam's internal affairs had wide-reaching consequences.

In the late 1950s, the Việt Cộng began military activities in the South. Starting in 1955, the United States gradually escalated its own military involvement, first providing support to the South Vietnamese government and then launching a full-scale invasion in 1965. In the next five years, the anti-war movement won over much of the American public, and the US began slowly withdrawing troops from 1969 onwards. But it continued supporting the South and secretly bombing Cambodia until 1973, when American troops fully withdrew. On Liberation Day, April 30, 1975, North Việt Nam officially captured Sài Gòn, and the South Vietnamese government surrendered.

This portion of the timeline covers the Second Indochina War, which is usually called the "Vietnam War" in the United States (and in Bui's book) but the "American War" in Việt Nam. Bui seems to be going into the book with the goal that readers from the United States (and countries allied with it) will be better able to reflect on the way they have learned about this war in the past. Through her book, readers may be able to gain a new perspective on the war and the suffering it caused—which continued for long after the American withdrawal.

CHAPTER 1: LABOR

In 2005, Thi Bui is about to give birth in a New York hospital. She is in pain, but Má (her mother) has left the delivery room. Instead, Bui's husband, Travis, comforts her. Má is anxiously waiting in the hallway, even though she came from California for the birth.

Birth is not only an emotionally intense and dramatic place to start Bui's story. It also shows how family and inheritance are to some extent based in trauma in the form of the severe pain Bui experiences, which is necessary for the next generation to come into being. Má, too, is visibly pained, which suggests that watching her daughter give birth has triggered some traumatic memories of her own—from the start, then, Má's difficult past is connected to the future Thi Bui is building for herself and her son.

After a whole night of labor, Thi Bui's face shows her anguish, and she begins to wonder if she should take anesthesia. She planned not to, and she worries that the drugs will make her into "the baby and not the mother." The doctor rambles on about the medicine and Thi worries about her mother, who is vomiting in the hospital bathroom. A nurse brings a "tray of surgical instruments." This reminds Thi of overhearing Bố tell Má a graphic story about someone being raped with scissors.

Bui feels a sense of guilt about the prospect of taking anesthesia and ceasing to be fully psychologically present. She also clearly worries that it might adversely affect Má, who will end up caring for her and calling her back into the role of a child, "not the mother" she is becoming. Medicine and physical pain are, it seems, clearly tied to violence and fear for Bui and her family; it points to some trauma embedded in their past.

The doctor arrives and insists that Thi Bui decide about the anesthesia—Thi agrees, despite not wanting to. It is "the beginning of [her] defeat—" the doctor inserts a huge plastic tube into her back. Thi asks the doctor not to do an episiotomy, but the doctor says she will "do what's necessary," because sometimes babies can "tear [their mothers] open from front to back!" Thi covers her ears and tells the doctor to stop.

Bui is terrified that the medical procedures surrounding childbirth will deprive her of her autonomy over her body; an episiotomy is likened to getting raped with scissors, only under the care of a doctor who sees it as routine procedure and Bui as just another patient. This contrasts with the stories Bui later tells about Má giving birth, which always happens unmedicated and under the care of an empathetic midwife.

Later, in a daze, Thi Bui tries to push but "can't feel anything." As "hands descend upon" her, Má lingers in the corner of the room, and Travis holds and comforts her. At last, through the haze of the epidural, Thi gives birth, and "a little voice" comes out of her son, who is drawn falling out of a cloud of smoke. He has "a faraway face with old man eyes." Thi thinks "don't let him fall," and she holds him to her belly before the nurse takes him away and he starts to cry. While Thi deals with the placenta, "Má seems to be revitalized, and plays with the baby.

Having admitted "defeat" and agreeing to take the drugs, Bui is not completely lucid as she gives birth, and she acknowledges that this distortion in her perspective is an important part of the narrative. Her description of her son is uncanny, highlighting the newborn's "old" and "faraway" traits as though to connect him to the generations that proceeded him and perhaps even to Việt Nam. Bui gives a whole page to depict just her son coming out of the cloud of smoke that represents her, which slows down the narrative and allows the reader to absorb the emotional intimacy of the moment, before on the next page the doctors abruptly interrupt it by yanking Bui's baby away from her.

Má and Travis leave, and the nurse takes Thi to another room, where the baby gets a crib by her side. The nurse tells Thi, "Here is your baby. Good night!" Thi nurses her crying baby to calm him, then sees what appears to be Death—but is really just her hospital roommate—behind the room's curtain. This other woman talks jovially to her new daughter, who seems to take to breastfeeding easily. The women and their babies keep one another awake all night.

Again, Bui's experience is emotionally alienating because the singularity and importance of her new son to her *contrasts with the routine and mechanistic way the nurse approaches relocating them. Similarly, while she is jarred by the new life in her arms, the other woman in her room seems to be perfectly fulfilling the social expectations of a new mother. In a sense, by consistently drawing out this contrast between "inside" and "outside" perspectives throughout this chapter, Bui foreshadows the rest of the book, recounting the personal stories and emotional upheavals that lie behind otherwise sterile, impersonal, "objective" narratives of history.*

The following morning, a concerned-looking Thi Bui learns about diapers and breastfeeding. Soon, Má and Travis come, "bring[ing] food and RELIEF." Má's phở helps Bui a feel a little more at home. Refreshed, Thi watches her sleeping son "with fresh eyes." Má tells Thi about giving birth alone, while "your father went to the movies!" Thi tells Travis he is "wonderful" and reveals to the reader that "it took Má twenty-eight years to leave Bố." After this, Má leaves with Travis to rest at home. On the way out, Thi asks Má, "how did YOU do this SIX times?" Má explains that the pain is easy to forget—but watching her daughter give birth brought the memories back.

Má and Travis return and infuse the alien, imposing, impersonal hospital with the sights and smells of family. Unlike many American mothers, Bui does not view herself and her child as an independent unit; rather, her sense of identity as a mother is inextricably tied to her relationships with the rest of her family, and this already signals that she has to navigate the tension between Vietnamese and American cultural expectations about the structure of family. Bui also explicitly connects her experience giving birth with Má's six births, which happened under very different conditions, and it is clear that Bui's motherhood is already changing the way she thinks about and relates to her mother. Finally, Má's comments about memory foreshadow the difficulties Bui encounters in the rest of her book, as she interviews her family members about traumatic memories they may rather not revisit.

Again alone with her son, Thi Bui realizes that she has contributed to her family for this first time—her lineage is no longer something she was merely "born into." She notes that "the responsibility is immense" and feels a newfound sense of empathy for Má. The chapter ends with a large drawing of Bui's own face, weathered and asleep.

Bui makes it clear that becoming a mother does not only change her own sense of identity; it also changes the way she thinks about the rest of her family, especially her mother. She now realizes that family is not always a given—in her case, it was something she actively chose and for which she must now actively take responsibility. And in Má's case, Bui realizes, family must have also introduced new responsibilities and reshaped Má's identity in ways she could not have predicted. So Bui not only comes to see the "immense" amount of "responsibility" Má took on to raise her; she also realizes that Má must have been a different person before becoming a mother.

CHAPTER 2: REWIND, REVERSE

Thi Bui draws her residential neighborhood in Berkeley, California—by 2015, her responsibilities have multiplied: she has a son, a job, and a mortgage. But she rewinds to 1999, when she was a young woman and about to move from San Diego to New York to pursue art. She tells Má that she'll be living with her boyfriend (who is also an artist), and Má responds, "I see," with a turned back. Thi tells herself that, "for an immigrant kid," moving in with a boyfriend is "living the dream." When Thi's older sister Lan left home to live with her boyfriend, Má had been denial. Whenever Má called Lan's house and Lan's boyfriend picked up the phone, Má hung up immediately: she believed cohabitating before marriage was wrong.

By returning to 1999, Bui shows how completely her life transformed in just a few years, in a way she could not have predicted beforehand. Má's refusal to sanction Thi's plans or to acknowledge Lan's boyfriend shows not only the difference in cultural expectations about family and romance between Việt Nam and the United States, but also suggests that Má—like Thi—is not entirely sure how to make sense of two opposite systems of cultural values. Notably, she does not throw out or threaten Thi and Lan—rather, she chooses to simply ignore the behavior of which she cannot approve.

But Má and Lan's disagreement was not nearly the family's worst. Bích, another of Thi's sister, tried to hide her boyfriend from Má, who grew furious when she found out. Bích simply leaves home—in the illustration, she leaves a note reading, "I'm sorry." Má discovers it and takes "a whole bottle of pills" in her room. Lan has already moved out, and Bố tells Thi and her younger brother (Tâm) that Bích "is DEAD to us." Má recovers, but the family never talks about what happened—Má even thinks Thi has forgotten, but after 30 years, Thi is "still ANGRY."

By leaving home, Bích threatens the family's integrity and unity, and Má's extreme reaction reflects the energy she has put into establishing this family throughout her life. This explosive episode demonstrates how Bui's family buries its conflicts, which perhaps explains why she did not grow up with a full understanding of the trauma that her parents experienced in Việt Nam and decided to reconstruct and narrate it later.

Thi Bui presents her family through a series of portraits. There are her parents, Má and Bố, and then her siblings, two of whom—Quyên and Thảo—are depicted as shadows. The other siblings, from oldest to youngest, are Lan, Bích ("pronounced *BICK*"), Thi, and Tâm. In a drawing of her, Travis, and her son, Thi says that she has made sense of how to be a wife and mother, but still *cannot* figure out how to be "both a parent and a child, without acting like a child." Thi depicts her parents as silhouettes, younger than she is now, fleeing Việt Nam in a boat. She wonders if she "will always be a child" to them, and if Má and Bố will always be polar opposites separated by "a chasm, full of meaning and resentment."

Bui portrays her family with serious expressions, which indicates the enduring tension between them. Quyên and Thảo have discernable faces but are clearly no longer around—whether they have died or disappeared, the family has clearly suffered loss. Bui makes it clear that parenthood has forced her to challenge the understanding she has of her family, and specifically to empathize with her parents. She understands that they have made immense sacrifices, but wonders why, to what end, and whether she might be able to do the same.

Thi, Travis, and their son move from New York to California in 2006, to be with Thi's parents. But she realizes that "proximity and closeness are not the same," as while her entire family lives close by, her parents are still lonely in their old age, longing to be taken care of. In Việt Nam, Má and Bố would be "very old" and expected to live with children—but the United States, they are expected to live on their own. Thi does not know how to resolve these conflicting expectations. She talks it over with Travis in bed.

Before, Má was forced to negotiate between the Vietnamese cultural expectations she grew up with and the American ones her daughters were fulfilling, but now, Bui has to make a similar choice, deciding whether to care for her parents according to Vietnamese or American norms about aging. She now inherits responsibility for the family from her parents—but she realizes she does not completely understand the conditions under which they made their *decisions about what to do with and for the family.*

Thi remembers meeting Má's mother and Má's father and her uncle Hải when she was 12, after they moved to the United States. The visit was transactional and failed to give her insight into parents. Bố insisted that "he had no parents," even though he did, and he never went to visit any of his family in Việt Nam. But Thi did go, and this trip inspired her to start "record[ing] our family history" in order to better understand and love her parents. She interviews Má over coffee at their back patio table, in front of the picture she is imagining, a small wooden boat in the **ocean**. Má answers the questions, but likes to change the subject to more "practical" matters (like dinner). In general, she is not fond of "I love yous."

Bui zeroes in on the fundamental contradiction in her relationship with her family: although they have sacrificed profoundly for her and her siblings, she does not have the close relationship she needs to reciprocate their care and labor. Bố's comment adds another layer of contradiction: he clearly does not value his own parents, even though he presumably dedicated so much energy to his own family. Má's more "practical" concerns suggest that perhaps labor and sacrifice have become second nature to her, to the extent that she no longer recognizes or is willing to process the reasons that she made sacrifices in the first place.

Alongside images of Thi Bui's neighborhood, she asks, "how did we get to such a lonely place?" Looking out over the **ocean**, she hopes that tracking her family's lineage back to Việt Nam by "seeking an origin story [...] will set everything right."

Setting the stage for the rest of her book, Bui gazes at the Pacific Ocean that separates California and Việt Nam, which represents the distance she has come from her place of origin. An enduring question throughout the book will be whether, and to what extent, Bui can claim Việt Nam as her true home or the basis of her identity.

In 1978, Má gives birth to Tâm in a Malaysian refugee camp. She makes dinner during the labor, and does not mention that she is about to give birth until everyone finishes. The family takes Má in a hammock to the water, where she, Hải, and Bố take a boat to the midwife's hut. She gives birth "quickly [and] without the aid of drugs."

Bui returns to her siblings' births, narrating them in reverse. The difficult conditions under which Má gives birth to Tâm contrast with Bui's relative comfort and passivity in the hospital. It's clear now that Bui may have been reluctant to get an epidural precisely because she knew that Má never had that luxury.

In 1974 in Sài Gòn, Má has a stillbirth. Nobody knows why this daughter, Thảo, does not survive. A year later, in 1975, Thi Bui is born. Her parents say she has the face of "Phật Bà Quan Âm, the Goddess of Mercy," to whom they prayed. Bích is born in 1968, two weeks before the Tết Offensive, during which the family locks itself inside with the radio, to avoid the war on the streets. And Lan is born in 1966, in a rural part of the Mekong Delta, where Má is employed as a teacher.

Thảo's death explains why she was blacked out in Bui's family portrait, and Bui makes it clear that she herself was a sort of replacement for her sister, a way for her parents to cope with the trauma of losing a child. Like Tâm's birth, those of Bui's other siblings take place under difficult circumstances. Má and Bố's lives do not stop for their children; rather, they deal with war and pursue their careers, and their children are only born along the way. In contrast, Bui's son's birth is an essential and defining event in her own life—it even changes her life's course by convincing her to write this book. Perhaps Bui shines a light on Má's six births in order to show that, in retrospect, they were more important and life-altering than they may have seemed at the time.

Although she is just 22 when Lan is born, Má has just lost another daughter in Sài Gòn. Some Vietnamese people fear that "giv[ing] a baby a beautiful name [means] jealous spirits will come take the baby away," but Má and Bố name her Giang Quyên, "a name that sounded like and meant GREAT RIVER." Má and Bố's families are divided about how to feed Quyên. The formula gets the baby, and she dies soon thereafter in the hospital. Má is devastated. As Thi shifts the scene back to California in the present, she asks how Quyên's death affected Má's feelings and hopes for her other children. The past created a "gray stillness" in the family, a lasting sorrow that they did not fully acknowledge or understand but were always aware of.

When Quyên dies, Má and Bố's family life begins with a heartbreaking loss and tragic disappointment. Their choice of a "beautiful name" suggests that they were fully invested in and excited about parenthood, to the point of naivety. The role of Quyên's death in the rest of the family's story is something like the place of Việt Nam in Bui's life: it is a foundational trauma, which sets the tone for everything that follows. If Má and Bố blamed themselves for Quyên's death or were traumatized by it, this would explain their subsequent emotional withdrawal from the rest of their children.

CHAPTER 3: HOME, THE HOLDING PEN

Má and Bố separated decades ago. They are still friends who care for each other, but disagree about many things. For instance, Thi asks Bố if he actually went to see movies during his children's births. He gets furious and denies this, but Má gets him to admit that he did skip most of the births. He excuses this by saying that he was not allowed into the room, and that he was afraid Má would die in childbirth and leave him all alone.

Má and Bố's relationship, like Bố's reaction to Má's accusation, is based on a kind of hope for the worst: Má and Bố continue caring for each other because they have no one else and feel an obligation to sustain each other, and Bố claims to have skipped the birth out of his own fear. In both cases, this pessimism is clearly related to Má and Bố's difficult experiences and unaddressed trauma in Việt Nam.

Thi remembers the concrete apartment building where her family first lives in "claustrophobic darkness" after moving to the United States. Thi's neighborhood and school teach her about "Americanhood," but racism from the community and the family's lingering trauma and struggles at home present challenges. Má and Bố's college degrees do not count in the US. Má finds Bố a minimum-wage job, but he does not want it, so she takes it instead.

Since Bui has no recollection of her earliest years in Việt Nam, her memories of childhood are specifically about feeling trapped and alone in the United States, both by a family she could not understand and by a foreign culture she was expected to conform to (but was always told she did not belong to). Má and Bố's difficulties finding work reflect a harsh reality for immigrants whose qualifications are devalued and who are treated as an underclass because their first language is not English. This is particularly ironic because Má and Bố were highly-educated teachers in their home country. While Bố is understandably reluctant to accept the affront to his dignity that minimum-wage work represents, Má realizes that she has no other option and puts her family above her autonomy and sense of self.

So Bố becomes a stay-at-home parent, but he is not particularly good at it. He chain-smokes and occasionally lashes out in anger at Thi and Tâm, the youngest children, who are not yet in school. He scares them, using "scary stories [...] to educate" and convincing Thi that a perverted man who lives across the street is spying on her and will come after her. Tâm spends his days hidden away in the closet, and Thi reading Bố's "supernatural" books. They play outside with Lan and Bích in the afternoons, until Má comes home at night.

Although Bui does not say it until later in the book, Bố is clearly depressed. It's implied that he had a traumatic early life in Việt Nam and is now unable to make sense of the fact that, having survived war and escaped persecution by his own government, his reward is to be sent to an unfamiliar country and asked to do unfulfilling work. He clearly cannot imagine his children's perspectives and continues to imagine that he lives in the dangerous environment in which he grew up: his memories take control of his present.

The kids are allowed to watch anything and sleep whenever they want. On the weekends, they accompany Má and Bố to family parties, and then Bố drunkenly drives the family home. On the way, Thi dreams that they are on a highway to hell, and then that she is lost on her tricycle, never to make it home. Bố is interested in astral projection, and even has some funny stories about it from Việt Nam. So he "practice[s] leaving his body" during the night, while Thi "practice[s] being brave" to impress her siblings. She illustrates herself traversing the dark house to get water from the "scary" kitchen—she reminds herself that dead people aren't allowed to talk to the living because they exist "on different planes." Her bravery lets her relax and fall asleep, and she dreams about freedom.

Má and Bố's hands-off parenting style, far from typical in the United States (although closer to the norm in the 1980s than today), shows that they are embroiled in their own concerns—Má in work and providing for her children, and Bố in his world of memories, parties, and astral projection. Bui realizes that this is not normal or healthy but does not understand why; when she begins to brave the apartment's unspoken dangers, she sees that Bố's concerns reside in his mind. But the constant sense of danger and fear that hangs over the family, a relic from their time in Việt Nam, is the "gray stillness" Bui talked about in the previous chapter. Bố's interest in astral projection—escaping his body at night—is a way of seeking freedom from himself and his past. At the end of the chapter, Bui realizes that she, too, has similar dreams of freedom—but freedom from the dark present, full of invisible threats that she cannot understand.

CHAPTER 4: BLOOD AND RICE

Returning to the present, Thi Bui notes that her relationship with Bố has improved since her childhood, but she interviews him to try and understand why he "became the way he was." She illustrates him smoking at the table beside her in four different eras of his life, from his own childhood to his current old age. He tells Thi anecdotes that uncover his multilayered wounds.

The illustrations for this passage show Bố and Thi conversing at four different periods in their lives—with the only similarity being Bố's cigarette, which he smokes even as a young boy. These panels represent how Bui recognizes that Bố's strange behavior during Bui's childhood was somehow shaped by his own childhood—that he somehow never fully processed his childhood experiences, which continue to live inside him.

Bố's first story takes place in 1951 in Việt Nam's northern port city of Hải Phòng, where Bố's grandfather and great uncle construct an entire street of houses. They dig a hole to get clay for the houses' foundations, and the hole fills with water and becomes a pond. When he is little, Bố swims and his father catches shrimp in this pond. But then a fabric dyer moved onto the street and began dumping his dyes into the pond, killing everything in it.

Although the story of the pond in Hải Phòng is ultimately disconnected from the rest of Bố's narrative, it can be seen as a metaphor for his entire childhood in Việt Nam. He builds something briefly sustainable in beautiful in consort with his grandfather, only to watch it destroyed by outside forces and to be forced to move and remake his life in a new place—much like the war destroyed Việt Nam as a whole and forced Bố to move to the US.

All of Bố's other stories have "the same ending." One day, in a village near Hải Phòng, "a dapper gentleman" arrives and manages to find a job and seduce the village chief's daughter. But his son, whom he brings to the village, becomes an outcast. This son is Bố's father.

This is the earliest information anyone has about Bố's family: his origins go no further than his grandfather, the "dapper gentleman," arriving without explanation in the village. He has no clear idea about who his biological grandmother is, and he recognizes that his grandfather was less than morally upstanding. In other words, Bố never had any sense of his family as a unified, coherent, or loving entity.

During the Japanese occupation of Việt Nam in the 1940s, Bố's grandfather ("the dapper gentleman") convinces both Bố's mother and Bố's father to steal opium from his wife, Bố's grandmother, and run off into the jungle. But they cannot get to the town they want to reach, and Bố falls sick, so they end up in the city. Because of the war, food is scarce—Bố remembers spending countless days hungry, and it is a luxury when his mother manages to buy a small blood sausage to share with him.

Before Bố is even old enough to understand it, his family is defined by strife and internal conflict. It is no wonder that he has little sense of loyalty to them in adulthood. Additionally, the famine adds another layer of trauma and fear to Bố's childhood. This history makes Bui's parents' emotional distance even more tragic: Má and Bố have fought hard to give their children the family they never had, but then cannot connect with the family they successfully build. This illustrates how Bui's attempt to connect with her parents through their histories is, in fact, part and parcel of her mission to take responsibility for her family.

Bố's father starts an affair with a neighbor and physically abuses Bố's mother. One day, after beating her, Bố's father throws Bố's mother out of the house, and she never returns. Bố has no idea if she survives: there is a famine, with "the dead piled up in doorways" around the city. Eventually, Bố's father runs off to join the Việt Minh, and Bố's grandfather brings Bố back to the village in an attempt to manipulate his wife into taking him back. Bố's grandmother cares for and feeds him, and the whole family—Bố included—disowns Bố's father when he goes "off to fight for the revolution."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Bố's father treats his wife with the same cruelty as Bố's grandfather; indeed, this suggests that abuse and trauma can, in a sense, be inherited from generation to generation. Bố sees his only caregiver left for dead, and then his father abandon him. It is difficult to separate the personal precipitants of these events—domestic abuse and Bố's grandfather's greed—from the political and social causes that likely exacerbated them—namely, the famine that sowed desperation throughout Việt Nam.

World War II comes to a close, and Hồ Chí Minh declares Việt Nam independent. When the Chinese come to "disarm the Japanese" in Việt Nam, Bố's mother meets a soldier and follows him home to China, where she lived out the rest of her life. Việt Nam nearly builds a peaceful, democratic union—but the French decide to reinvade and, unsure who is and is not Việt Minh, starts slaughtering villagers indiscriminately. Bố's village is one of their targets, and Bố's family hides him in an underground shelter where he waits, alone, while the soldiers massacre his neighbors. After four days and a failed rescue attempt by the Việt Minh, the village surrenders, and the French turn it into a base. The Việt Minh retaliate by attacking the chief, Bố's great-grandfather, and he leads his family—including seven-year-old Bố—away to Hải Phòng.

Bui explains what happened to Bố's mother only because she needs to close the narrative thread of Bố's father abandoning her; in fact, for many years, Bố simply assumes that she has died. Her fate reveals both how decisions about family are often made because of circumstance and even desperation. This passage also demonstrates the fragility of "belonging" in Việt Nam: people were constantly moving around, changing their affiliations (even becoming Chinese), and slaughtering people whom they would now consider fellow citizens. So it is unsurprising that Bố feels no great allegiance to his village, which now stands mostly for suffering and traumatic memories. Again, through no fault of his own, he watches his whole world crumble.

Reflecting on her conversations with Bố, Thi realizes that the man who raised her was, in a sense, the same "terrified boy" from his stories. Her own fear as a child was just an extension of Bố's. On the next page, Bố looks at Thi's draft of this chapter and comments that this explains why he isn't "normal."

After learning about his earliest years, Bui begins to clearly see why Bố was such an absent and unempathetic parent. Although unconsciously, he was reproducing his own experiences as a child for Thi and Tâm; he simply did not know what a "normal" childhood looked like, or how to create one for his children.

CHAPTER 5: EITHER, OR

Sitting at her drawing table, Thi Bui notes that she has more trouble writing about Má, whose identity is too closely tied to Thi's perception of herself. She looks at an old photo of Má and remarks that everyone says they look alike—although Thi thinks Má was more beautiful. But, during Thi's childhood, Má is older, less beautiful, and busier than she is in the photos. She works and does everything for her kids on top of it—so Thi has no idea what Má used to look like until one day, the family "receive[s] a box of old photos from Việt Nam." With these photos, Thi learns to see her mother as "a princess" and Việt Nam as "a country more ancient and romantic than the one I knew."

Turning from Bố to Má, Thi Bui begins to examine two other kinds of inheritance: her physical inheritance from her mother and the photos she has inherited from (and about) her. The photos represent another kind of memory for Thi: something physical and tangible, as compared to the unreliable and emotional record of Má's memories. She can know Má as she was before becoming a mother, before sacrificing her independence and beauty for her family. But this is precisely what lets her set up a romantic fantasy of Má's—and Việt Nam's—past. Of course, one of the reasons Bui wrote this book was to test this fantasy against reality.

In her adulthood, however, Thi rethinks her old fantasies about Việt Nam when she starts doing oral histories with her family. But Má tells Thi very little—she says more to Travis. Má is born in Cambodia in 1943, where her father is an important engineer with a well-paid government job. But Má's family has to flee Cambodia for the central Vietnamese coastal city of Nha Trang, where Má grows up as the beloved youngest sister. She loves swimming in the **ocean** and succeeds in the "EXPENSIVE!" French colonial school. She starts out reading French books, but learns to read Vietnamese so that her siblings will not make fun of her (and then gets bored and starts teaching her family's servants how to read).

Má's reluctance to talk with Thi reflects, perhaps, her fear that knowledge of Má's past might somehow injure her daughter. Má's childhood is a stark contrast with Bố's: she is relatively free and unburdened by family conflict, even though her father does need to leave Cambodia for political reasons. And, of course, her family is wealthy and well-connected. Through Má's academic prowess, however, she soon realizes the contradiction in being a colonial subject so closely tied to the French that she cannot even read her native language.

But Má's mother is strict, distant, and humorless. She spends her time putting on fancy dinner parties but ignores her children. Meanwhile, Má befriends a servant girl named Tranh, who brings Má to her home in the countryside for vacation during the summers. Tranh's family soon marries her off, however, and Má returns to books. She secretly reads a romance novel about a man who fights the French—just as her paternal uncle has done (and gotten imprisoned for)—and then starts reading about the history of colonialism. Má becomes a nationalist and refuses to "speak French outside of school anymore." But then she gets sent to a French high school in Đà Lạt, where "everyone is a complete FRANCOPHILE!" She cannot stand it and calls her father to take her home.

One similarity between Má and Bố's childhoods is that neither of them has a close relationship with their parents: Má is essentially completely independent as a girl, and her friendship with Tranh indicates that her sense of identity (unlike her mother's) is not yet based on the social and economic hierarchy in which she grows up. However, Má's fascination with the countryside and Tranh's early marriage are symptoms of this hierarchy, and when Má comes to fully understand it—namely, when she realizes that her own privilege is a product of her family's contribution to a colonial regime that oppresses her people—she immediately takes a political stand.

Thi notes that Má's father had once suffered a nervous breakdown because of a Frenchman." One of his bosses, who had complete power over him, abused him to the point that he had a mental breakdown and was institutionalized for six months.

In fact, despite Má's mother's investment in high society, Má's father does not accept the colonial regime as legitimate and sees the oppression and madness in the foreign rule to which his country is subjected.

Má goes to a different French school, where she fits in much better and dreams about forging her own path in life. She becomes a freethinker—as Thi depicts it, Má believes that "MARRIAGE = TRAP" and "EDUCATION = FREEDOM." But Má gets married anyway. How, Thi wonders, could two people who are as different as Má and Bố end up together? Beside an illustration of Bố cowering in a corner, Thi wonders, "how did they even meet?"

At this stage, Má and Bố's trajectories could not be more different: she uses the advantages her colonial education gives her—freedom of thought, material comfort, and leisure time with likeminded students—to envision a future free from the social hierarchies that entrap Bố. And yet she lives them out anyway, building and dedicating herself to her family despite her intentions to avoid doing so.

Thi turns to Bố's life after his move to Hải Phòng. His grandmother and grandfather open stores and he becomes "citified." Thi draws all the changes, from Bố's new clothes to his new bicycle to his new taste for city food. His grandparents manage to send him to French school, where he is surrounded by the children of the Vietnamese upper classes and French colonists. Bố sees that these same people are responsible for Việt Nam's severe inequality and becomes a communist, to his grandparents' chagrin.

At last, Bố finds a semblance of stability living with his grandparents in Hải Phòng. As if his move to the city does not already require enough of an adjustment, however, he now has a contradictory experience in French school similar to Má's; he recognizes that he is benefitting from inequality and injustice, and that he should neither wholeheartedly reject nor unquestioningly accept these advantages. Ironically, too, Bố now understands why his father—whom he has disowned—became a communist.

In an aside, beside images of war and the replacement of the French flag with the Vietnamese one, Thi Bui urges the reader to recall that "every casualty in war is someone's grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, brother, sister, child, lover." She explains that 94,000 French and at least 300,000 Vietnamese died during the Revolution.

Bui realizes that the details of Việt Nam's war of independence against the French are too complex to include here, so she instead makes an important point about how *history should be told: specifically, she thinks it is essential to remember the personal narratives that lie behind it, and to recount these personal narratives alongside official statistics and dates in order to give them an emotional texture appropriate to their reality.*

After Việt Nam's independence, Bố's French school is disbanded and he goes to Sài Gòn, where there is still a school for him to attend. But his father, now a powerful figure in the Việt Minh, calls to see him in Hà Nội. Bố is surprised to see everyone ("even children") working, and the poverty of the countryside around the city. Bố goes to visit family in the town of Thái Bình, which is "deep Communist territory," and where the police actively persecute dissidents. Even deeper into the countryside, Bố meets his father's new family—his third. He meets his younger siblings, who give him their portion of dinner, and then talks politics with his dad.

In short, when Việt Nam wins its independence, the country gets divided in two. North Việt Nam—ruled by Hồ Chí Minh's Communist Việt Minh—turns its back on Western colonialism, while the South continues to embrace support from France and the United States. Bố's perspective attests to the contrast between these halves, and he is part of a large-scale migration during this period from the war-torn North to the not-yet-war-torn South (which, however, becomes the theater for the Vietnam War in the coming decades). His encounter with his father again puts the personal and the political in conflict, and although Bố was at one point a communist himself, he has just realized that he is unwilling to submit to the iron fist of one-party rule.

With an illustrated map, Bui explains the political situation at this time, in 1954. Việt Nam is provisionally divided between North and South for two years, until the planned elections. There is "a MASS EXODUS" from North to South.

Needless to say, the planned elections never happen—after a coup d'état, the South refuses to honor them. Like many others, Bố moves south to pursue his freedom, but he does not yet know that he will face another oppressive police state when he arrives. In other words, he flees repression only to run straight back into it.

Bố's father expects Bố to stay in the North. But, having seen the poverty and conformity of the North, Bố wants to return to Sài Gòn in the South. Plus, the land reforms mean his grandmother will lose her property—and the whole family could be killed. Bố and his grandfather pack their things and sign up to go south with the Americans. Bố's grandmother does not, however: after a nasty fight with Bố's grandfather, she ends up in the hospital, and she cuts things off with her husband as soon as she gets out. Bố and his grandfather board a large American ship in Hải Phòng, and arrive in Hạ Long Bay many hours later.

Bố resolutely chooses both the life he wants and the man who has actually cared for him—his grandfather—over his dishonest father, whose promises of family unity are vague, manipulative, and too-little-too-late. (While Bố's grandfather is no better to his wife than Bố's father was to Bố's mother, he takes care of Bố at the very least.) The land reforms are, in a sense, Bố's father's unintentional revenge against the village that rejected him—and a concrete motive for Bố to leave North Việt Nam as fast as possible.

CHAPTER 6: THE CHESSBOARD

Thi Bui illustrates herself looking out over the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, alongside Bố standing on the sidewalk in Sài Gòn. She writes that they both felt "awe and excitement" upon moving to "the big city." Bố and his grandfather live well when they get to Sài Gòn in 1955. His grandmother comes shortly thereafter, but refuses to live with his grandfather until she nearly gets caught in the crossfire of a street battle between Ngô Đình Diệm's government forces and the local mafia, or Bình Xuyên. The shooting destroys her opium jars, and out of desperation, she goes back to Bố's grandfather.

Just as she empathizes with Má's life in Việt Nam through the shared experience of childbirth, Thi Bui connects her experience moving to New York to Bố's in Sài Gòn, in an attempt to try and reconstruct the emotional texture of their memories in a way that simple third-person narrative cannot do—and a way that Bui's illustrations facilitate. Like Má in her French school, Bố finds freedom and the material comfort he needs to pursue it in Sài Gòn, so for the first time he can shape his own identity and follow his own desires. Meanwhile, a frightening twist of fate again forces Bố's grandmother to return to her abusive husband and reminds the reader that the conflicts that have repeatedly uprooted Bố are far from over.

Bố's grandmother and grandfather buy a cheap house, which Bố explains to Thi is "really just the space between two other houses [...] with a roof made of palm leaves" on top. Thi realizes that she lived there, too, when she was a baby—it was her "first home." She recalls visiting the house in 2001—although "the street ha[s] changed beyond recognition," a neighbor recognizes Má and points her to the right house. Everyone reacts differently: Lan looks ahead, Má and Bích are thrilled, Thi and Tâm are "documenting in lieu of remembering" with their cameras, and Travis lingers awkwardly in the background. But a new family lives in the house, and Thi's family does not enter.

Bui learns about this house before connecting it to her own past, which attests to how little she really knows about her family's time in Việt Nam: although she lived there, she has no memories of it, and so it feels like a hole in her identity. Nevertheless, for the rest of the family, memory does not match up to the Sài Gòn they see in 2001—and the house that used to be theirs is no longer accessible to them, which demonstrates the futility of trying to reproduce and return to one's memories, which by definition cannot exist in the present. At the same time, Thi and Tâm's mission—"documenting in lieu of remembering"—also describes her mission in this book and shows how important it is to combine documentable facts with firsthand lived experience in order to understand the past.

As Thi's family walks around the neighborhood, Thi's older sisters Lan and Bích catalogue their memories, but Thi has none. She remedies this with research—Bố gives her an old American documentary with video of their neighborhood, "Bàn Cờ, or the CHESSBOARD…" so called "because of the maze of alleys and passageways." Thi notes that the documentary portrays her neighborhood as a "caricature" of poverty and criminality, so she wonders how to draw it in her book and decides to model it after the Lower East Side. She also draws the chessboard Bố once made her, and playing the game, she realizes that "none of the Vietnamese people in [the American documentary] have a name or a voice," including herself and her family. Instead, they were "more like ants, scrambling out of the way of giants," only hoping to resume their normal lives.

Bui continues to emphasize the role of narrative form in the transmission and understanding of history: like most American media about Việt Nam, this documentary treats them "like ants" who have no moral or human value in comparison to Americans. Of course, the "ants" metaphor also describes the way historical and political narratives tend to ignore the interests and experiences of normal people. Bui bases her illustration of Bàn Cờ on New York's Lower East Side because the latter is a familiar example to her; the fact that a city she has adopted resonates more with her than the city where she was born is an early sign that she cannot claim Việt Nam as her country in any meaningful sense, no matter how much she tries to understand her identity by investigating it.

Bố grows up like this in the tiny Bàn Cờ house, but also goes to one of the city's fanciest private schools. He dresses "like a movie star" and likes to imagine he is one. He reads existentialist philosophers and listens to rock, and hangs out on benches smoking cigarettes in "shoes with no socks, [a] shirt with all the buttons undone, [his] hair long and [his] pants tight." Bố and his grandmother both get tuberculosis, which nearly causes him to fail out off school, but he still graduates, and joins the Teachers College because it guarantees him a job, salary, and a way out of Ngô Đình Diệm's military draft. It is at the Teachers College that Bố meets Má.

Bố's divided life, although in retrospect fitting or even stereotypical for a rebellious but wavering young communist, also speaks volumes about South Việt Nam's precarious position between colonialism and freedom in the aftermath of World War II. And of course, like many adolescents' clothing, Bố's demonstrates his desire to stand out and take control of his own identity. Nevertheless, the threat of the military draft shows that his life in South Việt Nam will not remain his own, and even though he joins the Teachers College mostly out of circumstance and political convenience, it ends up defining the rest of his life.

Although Thi wishes it were "a happy story," Má reveals that, although she loved her high school in Đà Lạt, college was a hard time in her life. After meeting Bố, he takes up all of Má's time, and she has little freedom. As Má narrates all of this to Travis in the front seat of the car, Thi sits in the back and realizes she is conflicted, since it's clear that her mother was happier before she got married and had a family. A few years later, when Má is 71 and Thi is 40, Thi again asks Má about this period of her life. Má explains that she wanted to be a doctor, or to study abroad outside of Việt Nam, but never had the chance to do either.

Má's decision to marry Bố begins looking more and more contradictory: although they were both enjoying their freedom in these years, they sacrificed it all to marry, something neither of them particularly wanted to do. Thi also learns that Má was much more than just her mother—that she had an entirely different life with completely different aspirations before having a family. In a sense, Bui and her siblings are responsible for crushing Má's dreams—although, of course, this does not mean she loves them any less.

At her drawing table, Thi looks over two photos from the Christmas party at which Má and Bố met, which she also illustrates into the story. Her mother was 19 and her father 22, and they married quickly because, as everyone realizes but Thi's parents will never admit, Má was pregnant. Má's family disapproved of Bố, mostly because of his social class, but Má loved his intelligence. Má declares that she still thought she could study abroad because, "to tell you the truth, I didn't think he would live all that long!" The summer after she started college, Bố felt seriously ill, and she thought she would make the end of his life happy—Thi interjects, "and then be free as a widow?" With a palm turned upward, Má signals her agreement. Thi draws photos of the wedding and Má moving in with Bố. "It turns out," Má reveals, "he got better."

Like so many couples, Má and Bố end up together because of an accident and then make the best of their new situation, even though it means throwing away their plans and dreams. Understandably, Bui is surprised to hear that Má expected Bố would die (and might have even secretly hoped he would, since becoming a widow would mean she could live as a single woman without social pressure to marry). Both these twists remind Bui that, unlike her own marriage and parenthood, Má and Bố's was not completely intentional or planned—but unlike Bố's parents, Má and Bố nevertheless stuck by their children and did whatever they could to guarantee a better life for them. By looking at the Christmas party photo and illustrating their wedding, Bui attempts to get into Má and Bố's psyches and understand how, at one time, they could have intensely loved each other and been happy together.

Despite Má's dashed expectations, she is excited about her first baby with Bố—but when Quyên dies, Má and Bố leave Sài Gòn to go teach in a rural town in the Mekong Delta, which they fell in love with after seeing a documentary set there. They leave Bố's grandmother and grandfather in Sài Gòn, and they expect a carefree "honeymoon period." But this is 1965, and the war is already starting. The Americans destroy Việt Nam's agriculture with Agent Orange and create hyperinflation by introducing cheap military goods into the economy, which makes Má and Bố's wages fall rapidly.

Quyên's tragic death returns Má and Bố to their state of relative freedom, but only by shattering their hopes and expectations about building a future together through parenthood. After taking decisive action to improve their lives by moving to the countryside, however, Má and Bố end up trapped in the same cycle as before, with politics upturning their plans and forcing them to return to "survival mode." This also shows that, contrary to the narratives often told in the United States about the Vietnam War, American involvement did not immediately improve life in South Việt Nam—in fact, it did just the opposite.

South Việt Nam became a "police state," and the police interrogated Bố. A general even threatened to cut his "hippie" hair until he pointed out that his students would note the change. In fact, this was ordered by "the SAME general in that famous **'Saigon Execution' photo**." Bố mentions that this photo was misinterpreted—not because the South Vietnamese were not brutally violent, but because the Việt Cộng man shot in the photo had just massacred "an entire family."

Ultimately, Bố suffers the same oppression in the South that he fled the North to avoid. However, his mixed feelings about this general again show how the narratives told about the war in the United States are unnecessarily simplistic, whereas in reality Bui's parents see good intentions and profound evil on the part of both the North and the South (as well as the French and the Americans).

Alone, Thi confuses herself trying to clarify whether her father "hate[s] the general" and "like[s] Communism or not." She is disturbed by "the contradiction in [her] father's stories," but also by "the oversimplifications and stereotypes in American versions of the Vietnam War." She explains that Eddie Adams, who took the "**Saigon Execution**" and won a Pulitzer Prize for it, also "knew the context of the shooting" and was tormented by the misinterpretations of it for years. Eventually, Adams found and apologized to the general from the photo, who was "in a state fallen from grace— / —working behind the counter in a pizzeria in Virginia."

In fact, Thi Bui realizes, the seeming "contradiction[s]" in her father's stories are products of his experience*: he realizes that the different sides in Việt Nam's conflict were not singular actors, but rather groups made up of various parts which were themselves often in disagreement. The photographer's sense of guilt is based on the same principle: his desire to document events on the ground and deepen the conversation about the war in fact did the opposite, leading people to snap judgments. And indeed, the ruthless general's ultimate fate—which clearly parallels Bui's parents' "fall[] from grace"—implores the reader to see the humanity in even a ruthless killer, not because he should be forgiven or felt sorry for, but rather because this is a way of seeing that stories of war and loss are incredibly complex.*

While "**Saigon Execution**" convinced many Americans to oppose the war, Thi Bui emphasizes that "for the Vietnamese… / the war continued, / whether America was involved or not." Má and Bố lost close friends and nearly died themselves. They were constantly separated and stressed while they were busy being parents, ultimately giving birth to Thi "three months before South Việt Nam lost the war."

Bui finishes her appeal to American readers by reminding them that, although in the United States the Vietnam War ended in 1973, in fact the American withdrawal led to the intensification *of conflict in Việt Nam and the defeat of the ally that America abandoned. Bui is not saying that the United States should not have withdrawn, but rather showing that it was in some way too late for the United States to undo the damage it did by involving itself in the war.*

CHAPTER 7: HEROES AND LOSERS

Thi Bui offers various images and stories about what some call "Liberation Day" and others, like her family, call "The Day We Lost Our Country." She illustrates "the image that most people know of the fall of Sài Gòn," a crowd of people climbing into a helicopter on their roof. But this contrasts with her parents' experience: they learn about the events through their radio, worrying as they raise Thi and learn about the North Vietnamese progressively approaching Sài Gòn. They remember "the 1968 massacre in Huế" and worry that "Sài Gòn would become a sea of BLOOD." When they hear of South Việt Nam's surrender, Bố runs outside and is relieved to see that no one has been injured. This relatively tame takeover contrasts with "the American version of this story," which blames the South Vietnamese for not saving themselves from the North.

The competing names for and narratives about "Liberation Day," which again show the war's deep human cost and people's sometimes-contradictory allegiances to whichever side promised to oppress them the least. This contrasts almost comically with the singular, inadequate "image that most people [outside Việt Nam] know of the fall of Sài Gòn." After all, this is an image of Americans and American allies, not the Vietnamese who constituted the vast majority of those affected by the war. Má and Bố's fears, borne of their experiences in the war's previous phases, are a much more typical story of how people on the ground experienced the end of the war. But, as Bui consistently emphasizes, their experiences are individualized, never a "typical" or "adequate" narrative for the conflict as a whole.

A week after "Liberation Day," Má and Bố are ordered to teach a totally "new curriculum" and write confessions about their and their families' complicity in the war. Teachers start disappearing, and Bố's grandmother worries, since she remembers the land reforms.

With the North Vietnamese government now paying their salaries, Má and Bố have to adapt to teaching the opposite of what they used to, which is a reminder of the flexibility and power of the narratives that people tell and teach about history. They also begin suffering the exact kind of persecution Bố's family used to fear in the North. In other words, the nightmare of Bố's childhood returns in full force.

Má and Bố start planning to escape on a friend's boat—but the friend gets captured. The family's neighbor, a spy, hints that the same might happen to them. In preparation, Má and Bố burn all the books in the house. During his "visit," the "neighborhood monitor" finds nothing incriminating, but the family knows they are going to be labeled "ngụy," or "false, lying, deceitful," and therefore subject to constant surveillance and the threat of separation.

Although Bui does not discuss migration trends at the time in much depth, the kind of escape her family planned was an exceedingly common way for Vietnamese people to escape the new government. Their burning of books directly represents the new regime's suppression of ideas and attempt to impose a new culture by force. And the government does not even require concrete evidence against Bui's family to deem them enemies of the state.

Bố gets fired and nearly sent to a "New Economic Zone"—a place "to do hard labor in rural isolation." The government changes the currency, wiping out the family's savings. Má must become the sole provider for their children while Bố "retreat[s] into a deep depression."

These devastating events, although officially ways of redistributing resources and reducing inequality, hit Bui's relatively comfortable family hard. While Má adapts to the situation, Bố's "deep depression" looks a lot like the one he suffers in the United States many years later, and the timing of it suggests that it is connected to the repeated dangers and threats of death or disappearance he receives throughout his life. In other words, he gets demoralized because he feels he is gradually losing the fight for survival.

In 1976, Bố's father pays Bố a surprise visit to tell him that his mother is alive and well in China. Bố's father asks if they can "forgive and forget," but reveals that they cannot reunite because Má's family is "just too ngụy." Bố's father leaves, and they never meet again. Bố never writes to his mother.

Bố's father only further demoralizes Bố, because he visits for selfish reasons and is forced to put politics above family. He expects further betrayal, and his father delivers. Indeed, Bố's father's call to "forgive and forget" reveals his complete misunderstanding of how deeply Bố's past has affected him. But perhaps the greatest tragedy in Bố's family is his relationship with his mother—who did not choose to leave him and decided to move to China only out of circumstance. Still, for Bố, regardless of her intentions, she has never been present in his life and has nothing to contribute to it.

Má sells the family's possessions to buy food, and Hải is arrested and disappears. In school, the children are taught about "how to report suspicious behavior." Má and Bố plan another escape, which also fails. Meanwhile, Bố's grandmother falls ill and Má gets pregnant. Legally, she is required to abort, but the doctor makes an exception.

The family's situation continues to deteriorate, and the government's war of ideas goes one step further, weaponizing children against their parents. Although always adaptable, Bui's family begins to approach the limits of its flexibility. In retrospect, it is easy to see why Má and Bố were forever scarred by these experiences.

Finally, some good news comes. Not only is Hải alive, but his wife, Kiều, and her family are buying a boat and planning an escape. If Má can help recruit other people to buy seats on the boat, her whole family can go, too. When Hải gets out of prison, it is time for the escape, even though Má is now eight months into her pregnancy. The family takes a bus to the city of Cần Thơ, leaving Bố's grandmother in Sài Gòn, in the care of Má's parents. After a stressful day of waiting, they make it to the boat, which is full of friends and family members. The children cannot stomach the food and have trouble sleeping at night.

Although the chance to escape surfaces almost miraculously, it also could not happen at a worse time, given Má's pregnancy and Bố's grandmother's illness. Forced to make sacrifices, Má and Bố lead their three daughters into a completely uncertain future, as evidenced by their complete lack of knowledge about when they will be picked up in Cần Thơ. And beyond the dangers of leaving and potentially getting caught in the act, the boat itself is uncomfortable and dangerous, even if Bui is surrounded by family and friends.

Suddenly, the boat hits an island and gets stuck. There are police boats nearby, so everyone worries about drawing their attention. Mr. Châu, the boat's pilot, swims away to try and unstick the boat. Meanwhile, the other adults hide below deck and sedate all the children with valium. After a few hours, the rising tide releases the boat back into the river, and Mr. Châu returns from the water.

Although Má and Bố are lucky to survive this brush with fate, the children are perhaps luckier still to not remember it; the police could put an end not only to the family's escape attempt, which is many months in the making, but also to their autonomy and livelihoods.

But Mr. Châu is traumatized and incapable of piloting the boat, so the adults decide that Bố should take over the job. They head out toward international waters, after which they plan to turn southwest toward Malaysia. They continue to face challenges, however. Some Thai fishing boats, possibly pirates, start following them—but eventually turn away. Lan discovers that the travelers' water supply is contaminated, and the men stress about refueling the boat.

Suddenly, Bố is called to be a hero. After a life of suffering at others' hands and trying to escape danger however possible, he is finally charged with taking others' *lives into* his own *hands, and he meets the challenge. The journey continues to pose difficulties, but the savvy adults on the boat respond to them in kind, and the voyagers' air is jovial but cautious.*

But at night, it is finally safe to open the hatch and bring everyone up onto the deck for some fresh air. Má teaches Lan to avoid seasickness by watching the stars. Bố is illustrated alone on the deck of the boat in an expansive, swelling **sea** illuminated only by these same stars.

This stunning full-page spread on pages 248-9 is the most widely reproduced image of Bui's book. It represents the freedom and relief Bố—and the family—feel as he begins the more promising future, towards which the stars point them. But Bui also depicts Bố looking up at these stars alone because he, as the boat's substitute pilot, was the one to make this future possible for his family and the others on the boat.

The next morning, the women wash everyone's clothes, but realize that someone has accidentally peed in the water. Má treats Bích's infected hand with **ocean** water.

Although these trials are uncomfortable and unsanitary, fortunately, they are nothing compared to what the family has just endured.

Finally, the men above deck see land, and Má makes the children lemonade "to celebrate." Bố realizes that local fishermen have approached them to guide them ashore, and the men light a lantern to communicate with them. Everyone anxiously prepares to land, but then an oar strikes Bố and knocks him into the **ocean**. He is shocked at first, but manages to surface and realizes he needs to swim ashore. He does, and he tells the people waiting for him on the shore that he is from the boat in the distance. The boat arrives and its passengers disembark, while Bố offers the boat and some gold to a local man who reciprocates by inviting them to stay in his village, Merang.

As though surviving and escaping multiple wars and oppressive regimes was not enough, Bố faces yet another scare. Like many Vietnamese refugees, Bui and her family arrive in Malaysia without fully understanding where they are or what lies ahead for them. They are completely at the mercy of the people who receive them, and—unlike many refugees, both past and present—they are fortunate to be accommodated with grace. Still, the phenomena of boat-bound refugees was not limited to Việt Nam, and Bui certainly wants the reader to recall that many people in the 21st century still fall victim to the dangers that Bui and her family narrowly avoided.

About to give birth, Má goes to the hospital while Bố stays in the village with Lan, Bích, and Thi. In the morning, they befriend a local boy. But then, it is time for them to go to the Pulau Besar refugee camp, where Má is supposed to meet them. They spend the day traveling there by truck and boat.

Although Bui and her family have presumably reached freedom, their journey continues—the trials become lesser, but do not disappear, as Bui's first chapters have already revealed. Some of the trials are even humorous—like Lan and Bích's attempts to understand the Malay-speaking boy who offers them juice boxes. But the family also visibly struggles to make sense of their identities and understand what steps to take next, as their confused faces reveal while they are herded into the Pulau Besar camp with a huge crowd of other refugees. Of course, this crowd is also a reminder that their experience is not theirs alone.

CHAPTER 8: THE SHORE

Three days into her hospital stay, Má still has not given birth and insists on leaving to reunite with her family. Lan, Bích, and Thi are delighted when she returns, but everyone is hungry. However, Má manages to get the family more space and cooking supplies. They have photos taken, which turn them into "BOAT PEOPLE." Bui includes the original photos: they show each of the family members holding up a sign with their name, "boat number," birthdate, and date of arrival in Malaysia. Thi is too young to get her own photo, so Má holds Thi in her own.

Tirelessly dedicated to protecting her children, Má foregoes her own comfort, turning down the hospital to fight for her daughters in the camp. The photos Bui includes in the book are jarring, both because they put faces to the characters that readers have so far only seen as cartoons and because, at the same time, they are forced to hold up classificatory information—names, dates, boat numbers—that erase them of their individual stories in the eyes of the authorities who are charged with caring for and resettling them. Therefore Bui humanizes herself and her family for the reader at the same time as she shows how their conversion into "BOAT PEOPLE"—mere examples of a broader stereotype—deprives them of humanity.

When they arrive in March 1978, the Pulau Besar refugee camp has 3,000 people, and representatives come from different countries seeking to interview and resettle refugees. Má and Bố speculate about where they can and should try to move—they consider France (because they speak French) and America (because Má's sisters already live there). People also "reinvented themselves" in the camp, marrying or adopting children, changing their names and ages. The kids see it like "a wonderful vacation […] an escape from regular life." Bích even runs into an old friend, who shows up at the beach in a school uniform.

The refugee camp is an ambiguous place, where people wait for a foreign government to assign them a new life, and therefore it is profoundly depersonalizing. As Má and Bố's conversation reveals, the possibilities before them are so dizzying and uncertain—but their own autonomy so limited—that it is difficult for them to do more than speculate. So people's "reinvent[ion of] themselves" in the camp can be seen as a reaction to this ambiguity and loss of identity, a way of experimenting and trying on selves in a place that is completely discontinuous with their past and their future.

But Má worries about how she will raise her next baby—and Tâm is soon born in the camp with the help of a Malay midwife. Giving birth, Thi Bui muses, is a clear and focused effort, but gives way to "the rest of the child's life—[which] is another story."

Childbirth is like the family's escape: it is a narrow goal that must be achieved to open up endless possibilities. Of course, this moment also recalls Bui giving birth in the first chapter, when pain, fear, and trauma were a means to an end—the better and freer future she could build for her son.

Life is difficult in the camp—the refugees have to find their own water, wood, and toilets out in the forest. Luckily, Thi's family's stay is brief. Má's sister Đào soon helps sponsor the family to move to the United States, and they buy plane tickets with the help of the Red Cross. The family gets checkups in Kuala Lumpur, but Bố's shows a lung problem related to his old tuberculosis, so he has to wait in Malaysia while the rest of the family travels to their new home.

Luckily, the family already has connections that make their stay in the refugee camp short and comparatively comfortable. Bố runs into yet another roadblock, and is again forced to wait indefinitely while mysterious forces decide his fate. Although it is not explicit in the book, this probably ignites his worst fears—his new family is leaving him behind, just as his original one did in his youth.

At the airport the next day, Má is the only refugee who speaks English, so she helps "about a hundred people" navigate the airport procedures and get onto their planes. Má tends to Tâm on their flight, and then they land in Los Angeles, where they chaotically rush to their connecting flight for Chicago. Đào is waiting in Chicago, and Bố gets clearance to follow them—but actually misses his connection in Los Angeles, ends up in Alaska, and "spen[ds] his first night in America on a bench in the airport." But he makes it to Chicago and finds the family in Indiana.

Although Má and her family were reduced to the status of "BOAT PEOPLE," the same as everyone else and without unique identities, now her English education comes in handy, and it is her turn to be a hero. Bố's first moments in the United States are much rougher than his family's—and perhaps foreshadow the isolation he will experience in the coming years.

Đào's family has already spent three years in the United States, so they are more Americanized and start pressuring Thi's family to follow in their footsteps. Má and Bố come across "a welfare program" that promises to give them classes leading to minimum-wage jobs—but they forget to select classes, since in Việt Nam school schedules are pre-set. Bích, Lan, and Thi go "to the local elementary school," "the junior high," and "day care," respectively, where they all struggle to assimilate. Má and Bố succeed in their classes.

Although the kids feel isolated and ostracized immediately, forced to adjust to new expectations and a new language without any guidance, Má and Bố hit the ground running, taking advantage of the opportunities that present themselves in order to rebuild their lives. Of course, they encounter some unexpected bumps, but their ability to choose their own classes in the United States clearly stands for the broader autonomy and freedom they achieve by immigrating.

Soon, more of Má's family comes to Indiana, where and there are "now seventeen people in one house!" But Má and Bố cannot stand the cold weather, so they decide to move to California, where more family lives. Đào and his family are angry that Thi's family is leaving so soon, but Má insists that they "just need to make [their] own way." The chapter closes with an illustration drawing of their small, snow-covered house in suburban Indiana.

"Seventeen people in one house" is comically overstuffed by American standards—indeed, it is an image stereotypically and often derisively associated with immigrants and the poor, and predicated on the notion that a nuclear family is "better" or more "American" than an extended one. But this is not actually what dissuades Má and Bố from staying in Indiana with their extended family—as many immigrants to latitudes further North probably know well, assimilation to weather is as much a challenge as assimilation to culture.

CHAPTER 9: FIRE AND ASH

Anxious and dressed in winter clothes, Thi's family arrives in sun-drenched California, where they quickly move from welfare to living on Má's minimum wage of $3.35 an hour. They are forced to make sacrifices and learn lessons about "what was important to survive"—school, staying together, "lock[ing] the door!" But Má and Bố scarcely amass souvenirs of their life. They have a folder marked "IMORTANT DOCUMENTS," where "the most essential pieces of [their] identity" are closely-guarded. And each of them get another folder for all their school documents. When Thi is nine years old, Má and Bố get United States citizenship.

Although American readers are probably used to the clichés about immigration, hard work, and freedom, Bui implores them to recognize the particularity and diversity of migration stories rather than fall into the easy trap of grouping all such stories under stereotypes. The lessons Bui and her siblings learn in their youth are all directly related to their parents' experiences in Việt Nam. School gave them social mobility; staying together allowed them to survive, support one another, and maintain their identities amidst turmoil; and "lock[ing] the door!" is a practical measure to avoid clashing unexpectedly with unsavory characters like the North Vietnamese. The "IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS" folder also speaks volumes about the way Bui's parents choose to memorialize the past: as they did upon arriving in the United States, they choose not to be burdened with their past as they move forward with their lives there. Of course, while this is to some degree an effective coping strategy for their trauma, it also prevents them from ever fully confronting it, and the silence it leaves behind is what inspired Bui to write this book as a form of remembrance.

Lan and Bích succeed in high school and go to college while Má takes night classes and eventually becomes a teaching assistant. She convinces Bố to start studying, and he "trie[s] his hand at graphic design." When Má and Bố are away taking classes, Lan and Bích watch Thi and Tâm, making them spaghetti and telling them stories. Eventually, movies start replacing Lan and Bích as babysitters.

Lan, Bích, and Má all direct their difficult experiences in Việt Nam into tireless work in the United States—and, despite the long depression Bui wrote about in her third chapter, Bố eventually begins to do the same, with some prodding. But the family also still sticks together—at least until the movies come around. They are, as Bui explained in her opening chapters, close by American standards but not necessarily by Vietnamese ones.

One night during Tết when Thi is 14, there is a loud sound downstairs. The family instinctively hides in their room, but then hears an explosion. Thi realizes they have to run: she grabs the "IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS" folder and goes downstairs in the darkness. As firefighters surround the house, Thi muses that her most important "inheritance" from her parents is this "Refugee Reflex." Fortunately, Thi's family's apartment is not damaged, and they return home and sleep a few hours later.

While the family's instinct to hide represents one kind of inheritance from Việt Nam—the impulse to hide, as they did in the boat, when under threat—Bui inherits a different kind of awareness of danger: the instinct to run, as the family fled from Sài Gòn. It is notable that she claims this "Refugee Reflex" as the core of her "inheritance," rather than any particular aspect of Vietnamese culture. The "Refugee Reflex" is physical, subconscious, and instinctive—it is a different kind of memory, one that in turn demonstrates how trauma passes on from generation to generation. It is built into Thi Bui's very being, rather than something she consciously chooses or pursues. She seems to find a happy medium between Bố's excessive, overhanging fear and Má's tendency to ignore the past.

CHAPTER 10: EBB AND FLOW

The narrative returns to where the first chapter left off: Thi lays in her hospital bed, having just given birth, and turns to her son. She realizes she "was[n't] prepared for" parenthood. Her son is hungrier—and breastfeeding is harder—than she expects. He gets jaundice, and has to stay in the hospital. Worried, she asks Má about Giang Quyên's death, and Má remembers Quyên's last smile to her before passing away. Travis and Thi rent a room near the hospital and go visit their son every hour and a half. This is "the hardest week of [Thi's] life," because she is "called upon to be HEROIC." She juxtaposes the image of herself, walking to the hospital, with illustrations of Bố piloting the boat and Má pregnant with Tâm.

The structure of Bui's book allows her to indicate to the reader what she has learned from interviewing her parents about her own identity, family, and responsibility as a parent. In comparison to the sacrifices Má and Bố made, Bui feels that her problems are comparatively insignificant at first—as are her abilities. But her knowledge of her parents' sacrifices are also what compel her to "be HEROIC" when duty calls, as she demonstrates by juxtaposing her image with Má and Bố's. The first weeks of Bui's son's life, it seems, will be a test of all Bui has learned, an indication of whether the kind of memory she has dredged up and the narrative she has fashioned out of it successfully drive her to be a better mother and daughter.

When her son recovers and it is time to leave the hospital, Thi finally manages to breastfeed "COMPETENT[LY]" without help, and she starts speaking to him in Vietnamese: "Con ơi, mẹ nè," she says, which means, "Child, it's Mother." Thi remembers her mother's own voice, which she always "loved [for] its raspiness." She remembers that her mother called herself Mẹ—a "weighty, serious, more elegant word" from the North—whereas her children called her by the Southern "'Má,' a jolly, bright sound we insisted fit her better." But Thi wonders how she would react if her son, for instance, insisted on calling her "Mommy" instead of "Mama."

Bui's maternal instinct to talk with her son in Vietnamese suggests that the language is deeply embedded in her sense of identity. But she also sees that she has used the language to usurp her mother's identity, to define Má in her own terms. Indeed, calling her Má instead of Mẹ seems like a way of depriving her mother of independence and seriousness, even a way of negating her sacrifices and contributions. Now that she is also a mother, Bui sees the other side of the equation and begins to think about what she can draw from her mother's example—and what is incorrigibly different between them.

Working on her book, Thi Bui thinks about her parenthood and recognizes that she is "no longer a kid" and "not the center of the universe." But she thinks that "being [someone's] child" guarantees a lifetime of selfishness because children are always resentful of their parents' past decisions. Breastfeeding her son alone in a large, empty expanse, Thi notes that "to accidentally call myself Mẹ / was to slip myself into her [Má's] shoes / just for a moment." Considering her mother as a younger, more fashionable woman, Thi realizes that she must see Má as a complex individual rather than merely her mother.

Between Bui's parenthood and her research, her identity has transformed forever, and she now realizes not to fault her parents for doing the best they could do. *(This new understanding is, of course, the basis for the book's title.) So now, returning to the problem she posed at the beginning of the book—how to simultaneously be a child and a parent—Bui realizes that the first step is to challenge her conceptions of her own mother, to see Má in all her complexity rather than simply in the role of caregiver. And this new understanding of complexity means that Bui can learn to forgive Má for her mistakes—and, by extension, herself for her own.*

Thi remembers saving coins as a child, and gifting them to her mother one year on Mother's Day: she thought she had amassed $100, but she was wrong, and she remembers crying to Má because of it. She wonders if Má blames her, and how she can cope with all the anger she's held onto. Thi knows that life is finite, but wonders what happens to people when we die, and whether we people live on in the legacies they leave for their children. Is her identity "predestined" by her family's past, she asks, reconstructing her family tree? Is she necessarily "a product of war," and will she ever "measure up to" her own mother? Or maybe her responsibility is simply to "always feel the weight of their past." As a child, she is forever indebted to her parents.

Rather than remembering all the times her mother has let her *down, Bui looks at an example of the opposite, and suggests that Má is also capable of a similar forgiveness—indeed, that her endless labor and sacrifice mean she has always already forgiven her children for being forever unable to "repay" her. Although Má and Bố might not have gotten the same from their parents, the thing that now binds them to their children—which is the same as the thing their children inherit—is an unpayable debt and a reciprocal obligation to unconditional, loving sacrifice. Thi and her siblings owe it to their parents and their own children to pass this debt along.*

Alongside images of herself fleeing Việt Nam with a backpack, Thi notes that she "no longer feel[s] the need to reclaim a HOMELAND," since she now knows that this place was always in flux throughout her parents' lives. "Việt Nam was not [Thi's] country at all." But, holding her son, Thi worries that she might "pass along some gene for sorrow / or unintentionally inflict damage I could never undo." She looks out at her now-10-year-old son, playing in the **ocean**. He does not look like "war and loss," but rather "a new life, bound with mine quite by coincidence." He has the chance to "be free."

Bui now turns to the other aspect of her inheritance: the national and cultural identities that she struggled with for much of the book, and that she tried to reclaim upon her visit to Việt Nam in 2001. But she realizes that her parents never got to claim this identity, either, for they lived in so many different versions of Việt Nam that there is no single "HOMELAND" they can clearly point to. By recognizing her parents' sacrifice, processing it through this book, and replicating it for her children, Bui hopes, she can pass along the best of her inheritance without saddling her son with the trauma of "war and loss." The book's closing panel clearly imitates the second-to-last panel of Chapter 3, in which Thi dreamed about herself swimming freely in the ocean as a child. By replicating this image with her own son in her place, Bui shows that people also inherit the quest for freedom from their parents—and parents must do the best they can to support their children's quests while fulfilling their own.

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