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INTERVIEW



'I'm trying to make a really pleasant garden path for you, a "Trojan horse" for history!': an interview with Thi Bui

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ABSTRACT

As 2020 came to a close we sat down with Thi Bui over Zoom to discuss her graphic narrative, *The Best We Could Do*, her recent collaboration on a children's book, *A Different Pond* (co-created with Bao Phi) and the urgency of her works in progress on climate change and immigrant detention and deportation. We discussed our generational responses to the Viet Nam War and her determination to reclaim the history of this *American* war from the perspective of the Vietnamese people. In an era where information is spread so quickly, often unreliably and indeed overwhelmingly, we recognise how important the slow journalism of comics continues to be.

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Vera Camden and Valentino Zullo: We have been so looking forward to meeting with you! It's really been wonderful knowing your literature – teaching your book has been so moving for both of us and for our students. There are certain books students really come alive for and this is one of them. We're very glad to meet you and hope that our conversation is enriching to you.

Thi Bui: Thank you. Thank you.

Camden: The students we are teaching – as you know – for them the Viet Nam War is all about their grandparents' generation, so, it's a fading memory. But as you capture so well in your autobiographical graphic narrative, *The Best We Could Do*, these traumatic

memories live on. We lived them and we continue to live with them whether we're conscious of them or not.

Bui: Yes, and a lot of the impressions that were available to people who were part of it were fragmented or distorted in the first place.

Camden and Zullo: What you're saying about distortion resonates with our recent interview with Derf Backderf, who tells the story of the student shootings at Kent State University in 1970 in his graphic narrative, *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio* – from a similar period of time as your work but, crucially, from the other side of the world (Camden and Zullo 2020). We talked with him about how he recreates iconic images in his comics and how he situates these images in the story he is telling. Can you describe how such reanimation works for you?

Bui: Well, the funny thing is that even though I am Vietnamese and my characters are Vietnamese, there were certain images that I drew that were iconic as well that I didn't have personal experience with, right? Like the monk burning himself or the helicopter evacuation from the rooftop of the American Embassy. I go through the same thing – where I think, 'How do I personally relate to this image?' And for me the feelings could be so strong that I had to spend some real estate talking about the use of a certain image.

Camden and Zullo: You mean within the book?

Bui: Yes, like the South Vietnamese general's Saigon Execution image (Figure 1), for example. I ended up having to do some research and thinking about the backstory of it, because I knew some of the historical context but I didn't know the photographer Eddie Adams's¹ backstory. That was really interesting to learn.

Camden and Zullo: Can you share some of that experience with the research you did for the book. Perhaps research done in Viet Nam?

Bui: The first time I went back was as an adult in my early twenties on a homecoming trip with my family. The second time was on a grant from Fund for Teachers to do research for *The Best We Could Do*, in its very, very, early form. The grant allowed me to bring my mom as my guide and we went to all of the places that my family had lived. I was not pregnant when I applied for it, but I was pregnant when I got it. And so, it was actually really emotional going while pregnant with my son when my mom had *left* pregnant with her son. The third time was actually only three years ago. I spent some time there doing research for another project around climate change in the Mekong Delta.

Camden and Zullo: Is this a comic on climate change that you are doing research for in the Mekong Delta? Are you focused on the impact of climate change within Southeast Asia or working on the crisis from a fully global perspective.?

Bui: That project is actually on the back burner right now, because I came back to the US in November of 2017, when Vietnamese and Cambodian folks were being rounded up by the Trump Administration to be deported. And it was really alarming in the Vietnamese community, because it hadn't been happening before. There's been this memorandum of agreement between the US and Viet Nam to not deport people who came here as refugees before the cut-off date of 12 July 1995. So, people with orders of removal but who came



Figure 1. From *The best we could do*, 209 ? Thi Bui © Abrams ComicArts.

before then, thought they were safe but suddenly they were getting arrested and for very old crimes, you know? It was this big crisis in the community, and I got pulled into to

help. And after doing just a couple of portraits of people in the midst of crisis to try to tell people's stories, I realised that to have any kind of lasting impact I'd need to go deeper.

So, then I did a comic for *The Nib* that went into some of the laws we have in the US which creates this situation because people are saying: 'we don't even understand why this is happening' (Figure 2). And then, I realised I had to go bigger, and again deepen my research on immigration and deportation. I convinced my publisher, One World, to let me switch my climate change book to a book about immigrant detention and deportation, which I have been researching and writing since then.

Now I am juggling a few different things. The climate change book I worked on briefly while at a residency in Bellagio last summer and it was especially enriching because while there, I had access to people from around the world. I am continuing to craft this project within the medium of comics. Because while the climate crisis is a global issue, the fact of the matter is that comics are better when they're specific. I am considering the format of the short story – like short stories around the world-in comics. This would actually move away from non-fiction, which is how I had approached the book initially, to possibly science-fiction, so that I could show the impact of climate change in a much more visceral, tangible way in the comics form, and through particular stories.

Camden and Zullo: When you say science-fiction, are you suggesting a dystopian vision, or is that not clear to you yet?

Bui: It most definitely is dystopian when you think about planet Earth in the future. But it doesn't have to be. Maybe I should call it speculative fiction. It will probably be speculative fiction that uses current research on situations that we know about in the



Figure 2. From 'refugee to detainee: how the U.S. is deporting those seeking a safe haven,' *The Nib*, 13 June 2018.

present but imagines the same place in the future. For example, Viet Nam fifty years in the future. I'm looking at the Mekong Delta right now where the sea is rising and destroying the farmland because it's making everything salty. And the adaptation that is already in place is some rice farmers are actually flooding some of their fields and using the salinised water to farm shrimp.

My vision in the future is this: there's salty land and everyone has left for the city because that's where the work is; the only thing that's left is salty land and salty water and salty women. So, it's a place without men and a story happens between two women.

Zullo: The idea is fascinating and sounds like you are exploring space in ways that are similar to Richard McGuire's *Here*. His comic explicitly explores the way that comics turn time into space (as all comics do) but he considers how time passes in the corner of a room over hundreds of thousands of years.

Bui: Oh, yes, that's right! I'm definitely doing this in comics because in the written word, I think when you talk about climate change, it gets pretty wonky pretty fast. And you can focus a lot on the science of it and then you sort of lose the story of the people. But then if you talk only about the people, then you lose a sense of the land. But I think in comics, because you're showing it all, you can have that relationship present all the time and then words can do something different. So, I feel like there's a lot of promise in the medium.

Camden: I'm thinking about what you're saying about the rice paddies being converted to shrimp farms, that's such an astonishing move. It is an adaptation but it's also a profound shift in the centuries of agriculture in that region. It's a perfect sort of metaphor – I guess it has a prospect of a future in the sense of that they have to do it to survive, but it's quite, troubling to imagine these rice paddies as they are losing their richness of their environment.

Bui: Yes, and the reason why I had to put it on the back burner is that it's really hard to get Vietnamese farmers to talk like that, like, they're just such survivors. You know? They've lived through *everything*. They'll farm in the crater left by a bomb, you know? They just adapt, and they say, 'yeah, I can make, six times more from shrimp than I can from this rice that has diminishing returns because –'

Camden: They're not willing to sentimentalise this land at all.

Bui: They're survivalists. They will talk about when things are hard, but they will very quickly adapt. I needed to think about how I was going to tell their story because obviously my framework was Western going into it. I still hope to capture the impact of climate change on people in the global South because they're going to be the first ones hurt by climate catastrophes. This is perhaps where my two ongoing projects converge because of course there's a direct correlation between our future and immigrants and refugees; the immigration debate and climate change are inseparable.

Camden and Zullo: Can we follow up on this idea that you said your framework was Western? Can you talk about that a little bit more?

Bui: I mean Western not in a cultural sense but Western in the sense that my priorities are shaped by the context that I live in, right? I don't have to be a survivalist for the most

part as an American. I can think about beauty and the loss of beauty in the landscape. But then going into a different context, into a different country, I have to shift and understand what the priorities of my subjects are and know their world.

Camden and Zullo: What's interesting that you're discussing is what the comics can do for the depiction of human experience, our perspective, and indeed the world we live in. This is something that is so significant to the form – there's a great attention to human bodies in comics ranging from the superhero narratives to the underground comix, they're all interested in the representation of bodies. Your comic, very dramatically, begins with the birth of your child, situating the physical body at the centre of the story. And as you likely already know, Alison Bechdel's new book moves from memory and the mind to her body in *The Secret to Superhuman Strength*. How do you think comics think about bodies? How does this fit into *The Best We Could Do* and your current work?

Bui: That is a great question. At first, I was trying to write autobiographical prose but then shifted to comics in the early stages of my work. I think when you write prose, an autobiography is like a disembodied voice for the most part; you're letting people into your brain, but there is no body to demonstrate all the things you are observing. By contrast, when you draw an autobiographical comic, you have to draw yourself, so it's a strange state of being in two places at once, both in your head and outside of yourself. I found it quite therapeutic, actually, because it forced me to have a perspective on myself. I had to think about what I looked like while I was feeling something, or what I looked like while I was talking to my parents, and what the differences were between us physically, and how – and this is actually, especially useful when talking about traumatic memories – we're stuck in our trauma, which means we are stuck in the past. But when you are drawing it out, you realise, I was a child at that time, and I am no longer a small child in a small body.

If you're drawing yourself at all of those stages of your life, even while you're processing a traumatic experience that happened when you were a child, something about drawing the bodies helps you place the trauma in the past, so that it is no longer something that you are living in, in the present. I think that's the therapeutic effect.

Camden: That's really fascinating in terms of Freud's essay, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through' (Freud 1914/1958, 145–156). You know, a trauma victim will frequently, in an unconscious way, repeat a traumatic situation. Freud says if we don't remember, we are doomed to repeat trauma; such repetition is an effort to master traumatic circumstances but we don't master it: we merely retraumatize ourselves. You're describing, what Freud says about remembering. You're putting the members back – the bodily members are being put back into a visual recreation or reconstruction. It is a powerful way to describe what it is that we do when we remember; we see it in a new way; we put it back in a new way.

Bui: It was interesting for me, also, to recreate the environment of the apartment that I grew up in too. That was a remembering of a place that was as important as the bodies in it.

Camden and Zullo: How did you recreate the space? Did you find old pictures? Did you rely on your memory?

Bui: A little bit of both. There were some photographs, and then there were my memories of moving through the space. I just tried to create a floor plan that ended up, being one of the drawings of me swimming through the space in a dream. That was a really nice exercise to try to recreate the floor plan from memory (Figure 3).

Camden and Zullo: And also the way you capture the stories that your parents tell you that, that's another way of – it's not so much your remembering but allowing them to remember and to go back into the worlds. Returning to Viet Nam, returning to the place, but also returning to the place in their own minds.

Bui: These memories are older and less reliable. That was a harder process to reconstruct their memories from their interviews, because I had to do side research to have some clue as to what things might have looked like. I did an inordinate amount of research on clothing and hair styles and shoes. What stoves did people cook on? What were the shape of bushes? I pay a lot of attention to how to reconstruct new images from your imagination, but based on the feel and the logic of the place. I would show my parents the rough drafts, my thumbnail sketches, and they would remember more material based on those sketches. It became an important collaboration. They would tell me more about what I was trying to draw.

Camden and Zullo: We were also struck by your own evolution from a fine arts background towards the comics form, with a clear flow from your early orientation. Can you speak about the meaning of the shift?

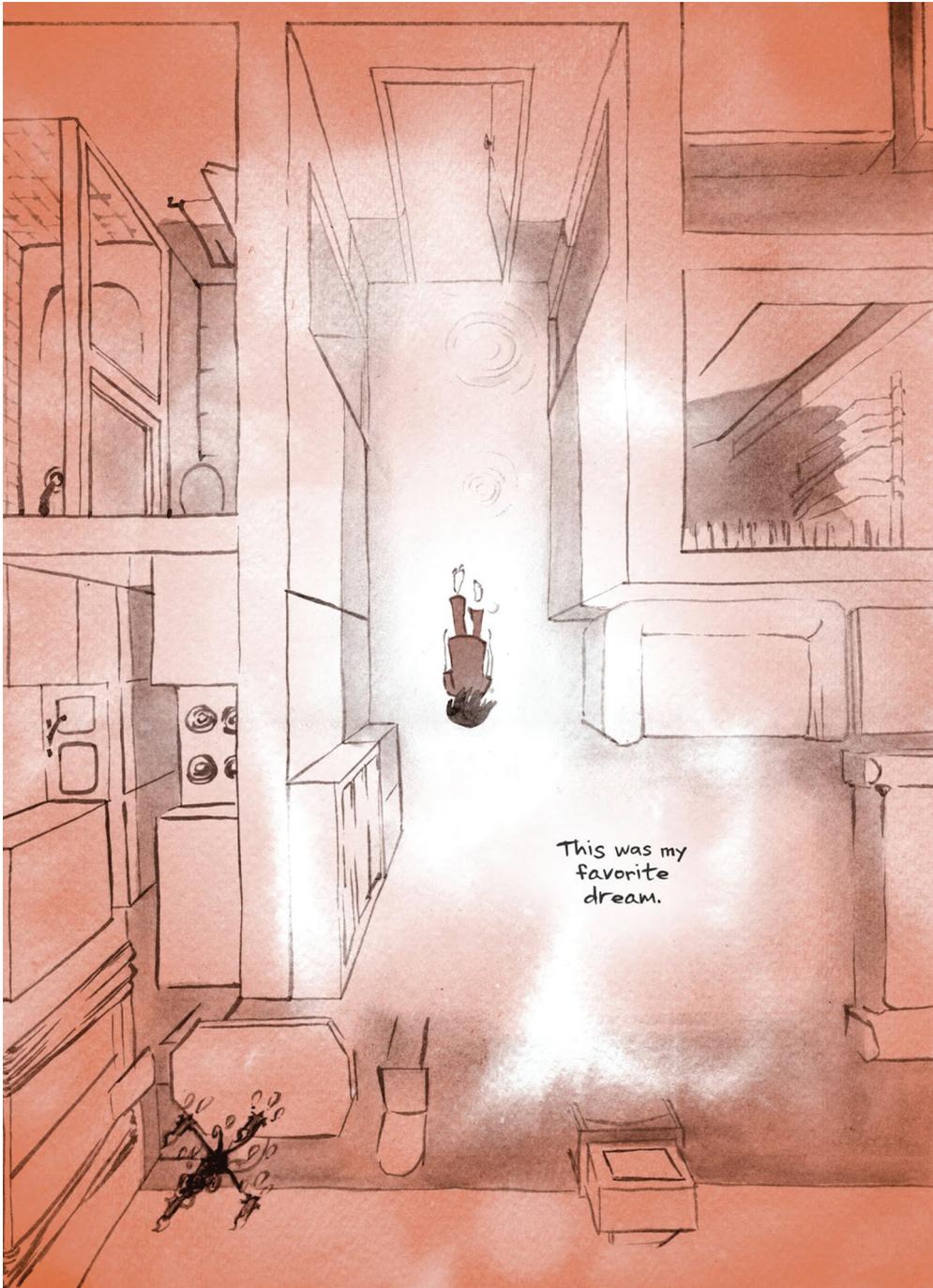
Bui: So, I have an MFA in Sculpture that's pretty useless to me. [laughs] And I almost flunked out of the programme because I kept making work that my teachers complained was 'too narrative' – whatever that means. So, at some point I realised I was in the wrong place; that I wanted to tell stories and that I should seek out a situation where there were other storytellers who could help me become a better storyteller, not just discuss whether one should or shouldn't tell stories.

Camden: That's really interesting! They felt something would be 'too narrative.' It's a postmodern notion, I guess – that sculpture cannot have a narrative.

Bui: Yeah, well you know, it was the year 2000 and so, when you wanted to tell stories and you were interested in exploring your Asian American identity, then you got faculty telling you 'well, we already tackled that in the 1993 Whitney Biennial,' or something like that.

Camden and Zullo: How absurd to imagine that exploring your Asian American identity is already 'done.' But surely, your desire to sculpt is coming through in these finely sculpted images that you create in cartoons; even in your attention to bodies. Sculpture is so physical. You are looking at the physical body in space as you do often in these texts. You were talking about the way you have to think about your face or how you express feeling. That sounds like something a sculptor would do. How do you express a mood in a physical form to somebody else?

Bui: Oh, the creation – creation being an act of love – transfers, right, to any medium you're working in. It's a devotion to draw somebody.



This was my
favorite
dream.

Figure 3. From *The best we could do*, 90 ? Thi Bui © Abrams ComicArts.

The sculptor who taught me how to draw was Jane Rosen. I got really into drawing through working with her. I took all her classes and became her TA. She has this way of

drawing that she calls ‘drawing through touch’ or ‘seeing through touch’ that really affected my line quality.

The biggest shift for me, therefore, was to diverge from such training in old master Renaissance technique and towards drawing comics. I had to pack away most of that observational drawing skill and allow myself to draw the *idea* of the thing versus what the thing *looks like*. Because Jane would teach us how to draw our hand as though we were an alien looking at something completely unfamiliar whereas drawing comics is so much about finding a shorthand to just get the idea of the thing across. This focus on idea is blasphemy in the type of training I that I had as a fine artist.

In fact, that fine arts background still makes me less of a good cartoonist because I can’t do things like, you know, Will Eisner it up. I’m not very good at cartoons!

Camden and Zullo: Your work, though, is *outstanding*, right? It’s different from other cartoonists and a distinct hand in the history of contemporary graphic narrative. Like Marjane Satrapi, who also has a fine arts training. Not to say that one must have that training, but the uniqueness of the hands in comics is partly what makes these books so stimulating.

Would you mind if we talked more about the work you’re in the middle of about the Vietnamese refugees being rounded up? I mean in the decades following the Viet Nam War, there was an open embrace of the refugees, so it’s quite shocking and quite shameful to now punish them. This something that I do not think that most people know about.

Bui: I mean, that’s good that you feel that way because it means that my book is needed. Maybe one of the reasons why they are not visible is because the way that they end up in the deportation machine is, they committed crimes that put them on a list that mandated detention. They serve really long prison sentences first, and then when they complete their prison sentence they’re transferred to ICE and then put into the system for deportation. The men, and some women that I’ve talked to, committed crimes in their youth, because they came as refugees and then they maybe joined a gang or got caught up in something as a teenager and then were sentenced, overly harshly because, they didn’t have proper representation; they didn’t properly speak the language; nobody explained to them what was going to happen if they took a plea deal but everyone pressured them to take a plea deal. So, they went to prison as children and then left as thirty-something, almost forty-year-olds, but got transferred straight to ICE. They’ve lived out of the public imagination for some time already, without rights. Actually in prison, you have a sentence and as a defendant, you have at least the right to legal counsel, but in immigrant detention, there is no right to legal counsel. So nationally, only maybe seven percent of people in immigrant detention have any kind of representation. And in some places, it’s lower than that. I have to seek out people, and it’s quite hard to get access. On top of that, these folks – they don’t fit the model minority myth. I’m very conscious of how I play into the idea of the ‘exceptional minority’ as well – or the ‘good refugee.’ – The guys who go to prison are easy to throw under the bus when we push for immigration reform.

Camden and Zullo: And never mind the impact of their own trauma on their dislocation or their immigration. It's a traumatic history, in and of itself and the fact of that is diminished; it isn't fully recognised.

Bui: It's really heartbreaking when you see the cycle continuing generations into the future because they have families and so, if they're deported, they're being torn away from their children who need them.

Camden and Zullo: Well, we're glad you're doing this book. We hope you get it done fast!

Bui: The book will be called *NowhereLand* because it's about all the spaces that we shove people when we don't want to incorporate them into our idea of 'us'.

Camden and Zullo: As you say, they're out of the public imagination, so how do you bring their lives back into focus? How do you use the cartoon to ask us to think about them again, to imagine their lives again? In contrast to the ways that we use video and photography and other forms to distance.

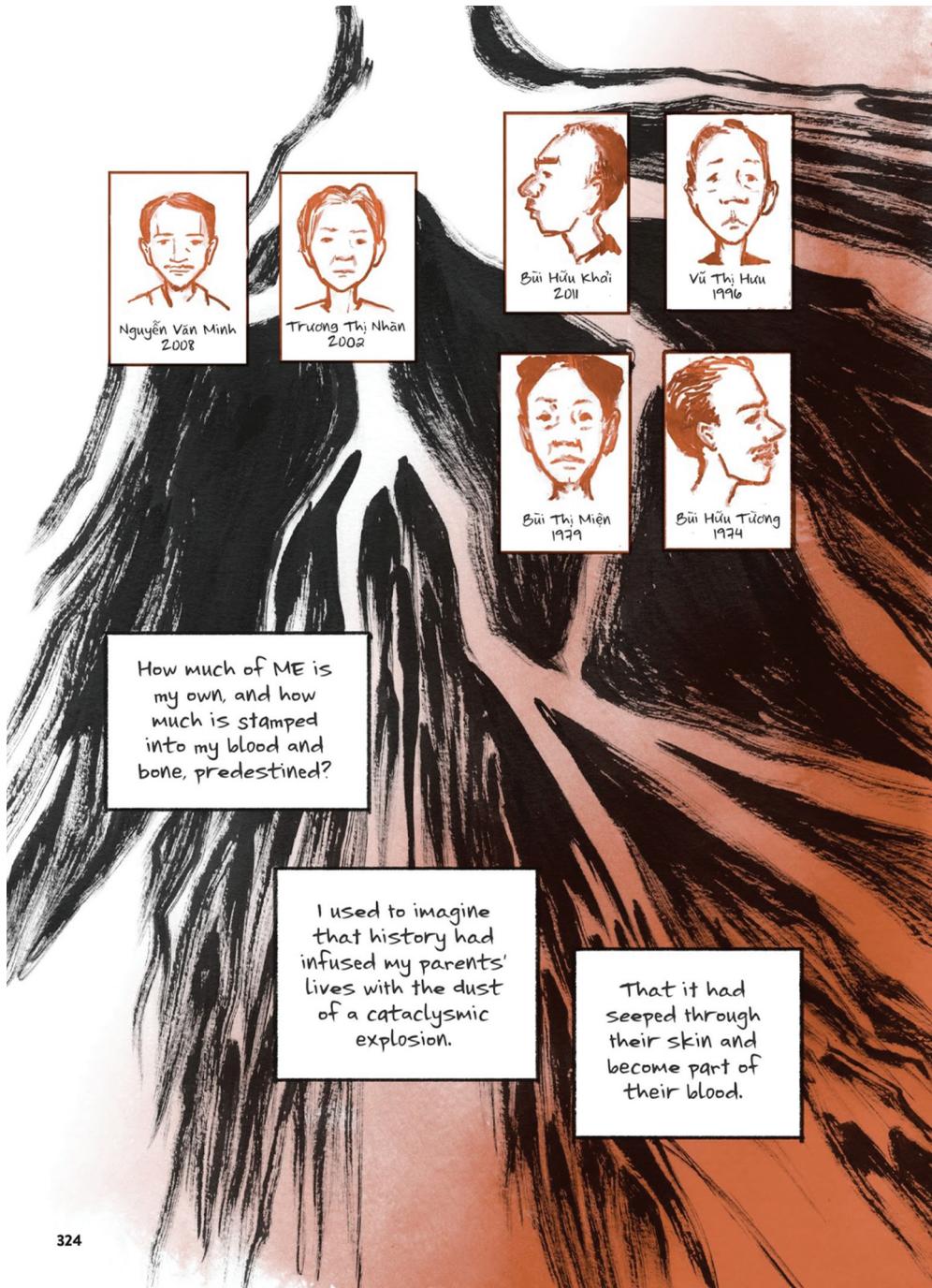
Bui: I'm never going to start with somebody's mug shot. That's a horribly dehumanising way to present somebody. It's the trick that I did in *The Best We Could Do*, in that sense, like the one place that I used photographs in that book was our refugee identification photos that I deliberately saved till almost the end of the book, so that you would have a lot of time with these characters as moving and talking people before they become those faces (Figure 4).

Zullo: Absolutely. You do that so well, giving your characters' lives beyond the photographs that perhaps might be used to distance us from them.

Bui: Sometimes I feel like I didn't do dialogue very well in *The Best We Could Do*. I was trying to learn so many things at the same time, that I think that the dialogue suffered. Partly because I had to invent a lot of it, or I had to translate a lot of it. Now I try to pay more attention to the way different individuals talk and honour the really beautiful texture of their voices more.

Camden: I will say though in *The Best You Could Do*, there's a lot of explication that I think is essential: the history of Viet Nam, the history of colonisation, the history of the conflict. The way that your father remembers is an important story. I wouldn't, for a moment, discount the learning that the reader must go through to understand where you are, where your family is, and then where we are. You know, it's not just your family; it's the way that we all participate in that history now in many ways.

Bui: I was a high school teacher for ten years; I taught history, so, yes! That's never going to change about me. But because I taught high school and not graduate school, I never got to just explain stuff. You always had to make things interesting or exciting. I really had to think about coaxing my students along on a ride. I think about that a lot as someone who makes a book. I'm trying to make a really pleasant garden path for you, a 'Trojan horse' for history! And it's the same with detention and deportation. There's going to be a lot of legal history that I have to make palatable and understandable to people. I'm reading Joe Sacco's *Paying the Land* right now. And it's incredible. I'm learning so much. I have to read it really slowly and reread sections because it's so packed.



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Figure 4. *The best we could do*, 324 by Thi Bui © Abrams ComicArts.

Camden: That's what comics do. I just finished teaching Nick Drnaso's *Sabrina* – Comics force you to slow down; you can't skim these books. You can't cannot skip ahead. It creates perception.

Bui: Maybe. But I think you're a special reader. There are a lot of people that tell me 'yeah, I read it in like, two hours!' and I'm like 'Great . . . that . . . took me ten years!'

Camden and Zullo: It's like a good meal, right? It takes you – a Vietnamese meal – could take three or four days to prepare, but you could eat it in a couple hours. That brings us to the interesting question about speed and comics Where do you think comics fit into our contemporary moment which is so driven by speed in the sense where we crave information so quickly but where do comics fit into that? – you call yourself the slowest cartoonist . . . I thought that was so funny. But, where do you think comics fit in this? With Twitter and Facebook, we just want information immediately. Comics asks us to slow it down and really contend with information.

Bui: Yes, comics force us to slow down because they take so damn long to make right? Comics journalism is the weirdest job. I try to be a comics journalist, but, I know I cannot crank these things out fast enough to actually deliver breaking news ever in this medium. It's better for long form stories and it's better for slow journalism. The news cycle moves really fast and people forget things that happened earlier in the year because they've already moved on to the new catchphrase. A slower medium has the ability to catch all the information and then sift it into something that has lasting meaning, otherwise, we lose the plot, the bigger story of what's happening with humanity or our country or democracy. That can be lost when you over involve yourself in the nitty-gritty details of who did what today.

The place that I found for myself is this: I want to remind people of the broader stories that are happening over time. Comics help me sift through language. I hate comics that have too many words. I need my comics to have space in order for them to convey the things I want them to convey. I'll never have more than 50,000 words in a graphic novel. I won't have more than 150 words on a page. How do I sift down the language – it actually takes a little bit of time to take the news from this week and distill it into a few sentences.

Camden and Zullo: You've now told stories both in comics form and children's books. How do you understand the two visual forms? Where do they meet and where do they diverge for you? What kind of stories does each allow you to tell?

Bui: Both books were flukes, actually. I never sought out to do children's books. But they're easier to do than comics; they're fewer pages ([Figure 5](#)).

Camden: I feel like *A Different Pond* captures in a small form some of the moments that you had in *The Best We Could Do*. The boy and his father share this special bond through fishing in the early morning. Morning fishing was communal and communion, it brought them together. But it also provided food that they needed for the family and that they brought home to eat.

Bui: Thanks. I was following the writer, Bao Phi's, manuscript. Sometimes, people ask me about the way I illustrated that book and how I used graphic novel elements in it and like what was my thinking around that. I've never known how to answer that because I'm like 'I just drew how I know how to draw.' And maybe it's because I'm a cartoonist and that's just kind of my vocabulary. And I hadn't done a picture book before that, so I didn't know like what one is supposed to do; what are the conventions of picture book illustration?

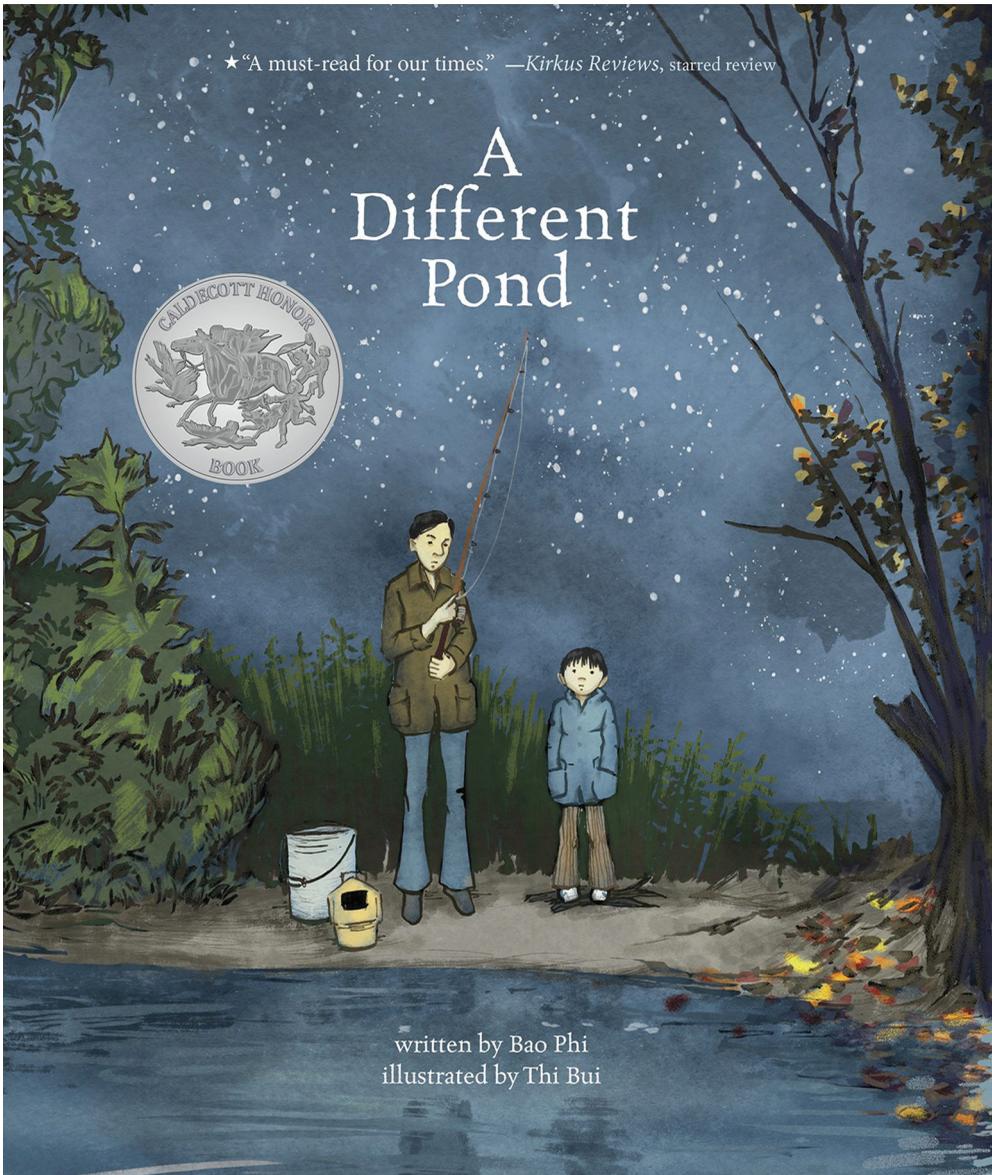


Figure 5. *A different pond*, cover. © Capstone young readers.

Camden and Zullo: Well what I think what's happening is that there's a lot of fluidity, which is welcome.

Bui: I just try to make my drawings look good.

[Laughter]

The other thing that I didn't know was that in picture books, often the artist and the author don't know each other and don't talk to each other. I didn't know that and so I set up a meeting with the author and I asked him for reference photos. And he went out to

a pond on the side of the road and took a bunch of reference photos for me, and I took a lot of Google Earth walks around the neighbourhood that he talks about in Minneapolis and tried to find just the right corner to draw and stuff. His old photographs . . . we're the exact same age. It was cool to use my own memories of what was likely to be worn by a refugee family at that time. Like, 'What was the knockoffs for Adidas shoes at the time?'

Camden and Zullo: In all of your works you really capture the life of these communities. What kind of community do you have today? Do you have a community of Vietnamese within Oakland? Is there a community that you continue to identify with and, you know, enjoy in terms of your life?

Bui: I enjoy travelling to do research, so my community is often fellow nomads who want to join me. As far as a Vietnamese community goes, I've been organising since January of 2017 with a political group called PIVOT, the Progressive Vietnamese American Organization. I've realised there's a lot of us in the arts who've had a similar experience of going into the arts and leaving behind our communities, because, in this generation, it's still rare to go into the arts – which are unstable and not usually lucrative – instead of doing something that would give you the stability your parents fled their countries to try and get you.

I've been a bit of an astronaut most of my adult life. It's been nice to come back into a feeling of community based on shared language and shared culture and trauma and baggage as well. It's been really powerful to organise around the elections with that too; I feel you have an impact on people who are otherwise overlooked by mainstream politics, so it's empowering because you're empowering people and leveraging your understanding of the culture and language and people and their baggage. The musician/songwriter Thao Nguyen of Thao and the Get Down Stay Down became a closer friend doing this work together. There's a bit of an artistic community from DVAN, the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network, which was founded by the author Viet Thanh Nguyen and the educator Isabelle Thuy Pelaud, who's at SF State. So, they will occasionally bring people together. They brought together writers of the Vietnamese diaspora for a retreat at the Djerassi Center, south of San Francisco, and we got to have some dialogues with each other about what it means to be creating in this Vietnamese diaspora.

Camden: We think of the Viet Nam veteran or the experience of the Americans that were in Viet Nam, all of whom need to be remembered. But we also have this imbedded, intertwined, involvement with this part of the world, in a deeply traumatised way. There needs to be a recognition of this. Through the arts this is possible. Memorialisation in the Washington DC monument is profound and important, but the voice of the Vietnamese people needs to be heard . . . and the Vietnamese people that came over here as refugees can find a memorial in the stories you and others tell.

Bui: Thanks. Well, there's more coming from me. I mean literally there are some more stories down the pipeline. The younger ones, I think, groan every time another book about the war comes out and I'm like, 'I understand that. You don't have to write about the war, but it's a big deal for me and I think one of us has to do it, right?'

Zullo: And I believe you've lamented this before, I think in *The Comics Journal* Interview (Tisserand 2017) that even though, there are films and documentaries about the war, they

are almost never from the perspective of the Vietnamese; they're always from the perspective of the U.S. veterans. This is a moment where we are able to witness the story from the perspective of someone who is Vietnamese and it's in comics form, which is just so much more accessible to a larger audience.

Bui: Gotta love that Trojan horse. I just keep experimenting.

Bui: I'm currently illustrating a beautiful manuscript for a children's book called *Finding Papa*, by first time author Angela Phram Krans, to be published by Harper Kids. The art director and the editor are both Asian American women; it's an amazing team. I'm finding a lot of joy in drawing Southeast Asian characters in full color, with extra attention to their golden brown skin, their early 80s clothes and hair, the swagger in their postures and joy and resilience in their faces.

Zullo: **Gene Luen Yang and Gurihiru's recent *Superman Smashes the Klan* focuses on the Asian American children. As in your work, this creative team centers on the children's stories and he doesn't make it a Superman story. It could've easily been a Superman story where he saves these kids but it's not. Again, the point is that the narrative perspective allows us insight and identification with the Asian experience that has often been overlooked.**

Bui: Gene does a great job making the children multidimensional and real, not just archetypes or stereotyped props in someone else's story. You mentioned some of the other topics you were covering in this issue [of the journal], have you talked to people who do, or who study, graphic medicine? That's another fascinating thing to me.

Camden and Zullo: One of our next journal issues will be on graphic medicine. We do see your book as part of graphic medicine: the way you think about the birth and the way it affects the family members and the way you think back to your mother's pregnancy as well. That is graphic medicine to me.

Virginia Woolf says, 'For we think back through our mothers if we are women' (1929/1998, 99). Of course, she's thinking metaphorically but there's away in which you literalise that with the portrayal of the pregnancy.

Bui: I've seen some graphic representation of labour and birth. Chris Ware did one in *Lint* and even in his very clean style, it's pretty graphic to see a baby come out of a woman. But I wanted to flip it and put the reader in my position which is the other side of the fundus (Figure 6). I don't get to see the baby come out. I'm a big fan of Jungian symbols. All of the chapters were about a feeling I was trying to create. My original outline was a collection of cryptic sentences about water.

Bui: The water metaphor for me was powerful because the boat escape was a moment of disruption and transformation. People died and I know that. But we were survivors comfortable in the danger; water can be this life-giving thing, but it could also be this destructive force; it's both life giving and life taking. And our vessel was so small: how would we survive, literally and metaphorically? The whole thing was about being human next to these larger forces and surrendering oneself to those forces rather than constantly feeling battered by them.

Camden and Zullo: It feels like that is now what your climate change book is also about, just the human in this larger landscape the experience of that.

Bui: Yeah, and there's definitely a reason why I'm drawn to climate change that has to deal with water. The rains and sea level rise. These are all very potent images for me; things that I want to draw. I feel like that's important too, like when you're coming up with ideas for things; you should want to draw these things because they are going to take a while.

Camden: The Thais have a saying 'as long as there's fish in the ocean and rice in the fields we will never starve.' There are many fishing cultures in other parts of the world where water is celebrated. The water festivals celebrate life.

Bui: The rains now are a huge problem. I mean like the floods that happen in central Vietnam and kill people every year. Those get in the news quite a bit and then when you do more research into where the irreparable changes are, they actually have to do with the sea level rising which not easy to portray, something slow moving like that. That's why I have to use speculative fiction.

Developed countries consume a lot more. The global South feels the impact of the world's consumption of fossil fuels and at the same time has to contend with the needs of their people.

Camden and Zullo: It's time to act; it's time to intervene to remedy and even repair where we can. We appreciate your voice.

As we wrap up, we did want to ask, what you are reading. We talked about Sacco, but what Southeast Asian cartoonists are you reading?

Bui: I'm reading, *Long Thân Tướng*, a series by the artist, Thanh Phong. Then there is a great anthology, *Liquid City* volume three, which is a whole bunch of cartoonists from Southeast Asia. It was edited by Sonny Liew, who won awards for *Charley Chan Hock Chye* and my friend Max Loh is in here and Thanh Phong has a story in here too.

Camden and Zullo: These sound like excellent books. We will definitely check them out! Thank you very much. It's been a really great!

Bui: Thank you for a nice conversation!

Note

1. Eddie Adams photographed the execution of a Viet Cong prisoner, an image, which won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1969.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

CHAPTER 1 LABOR

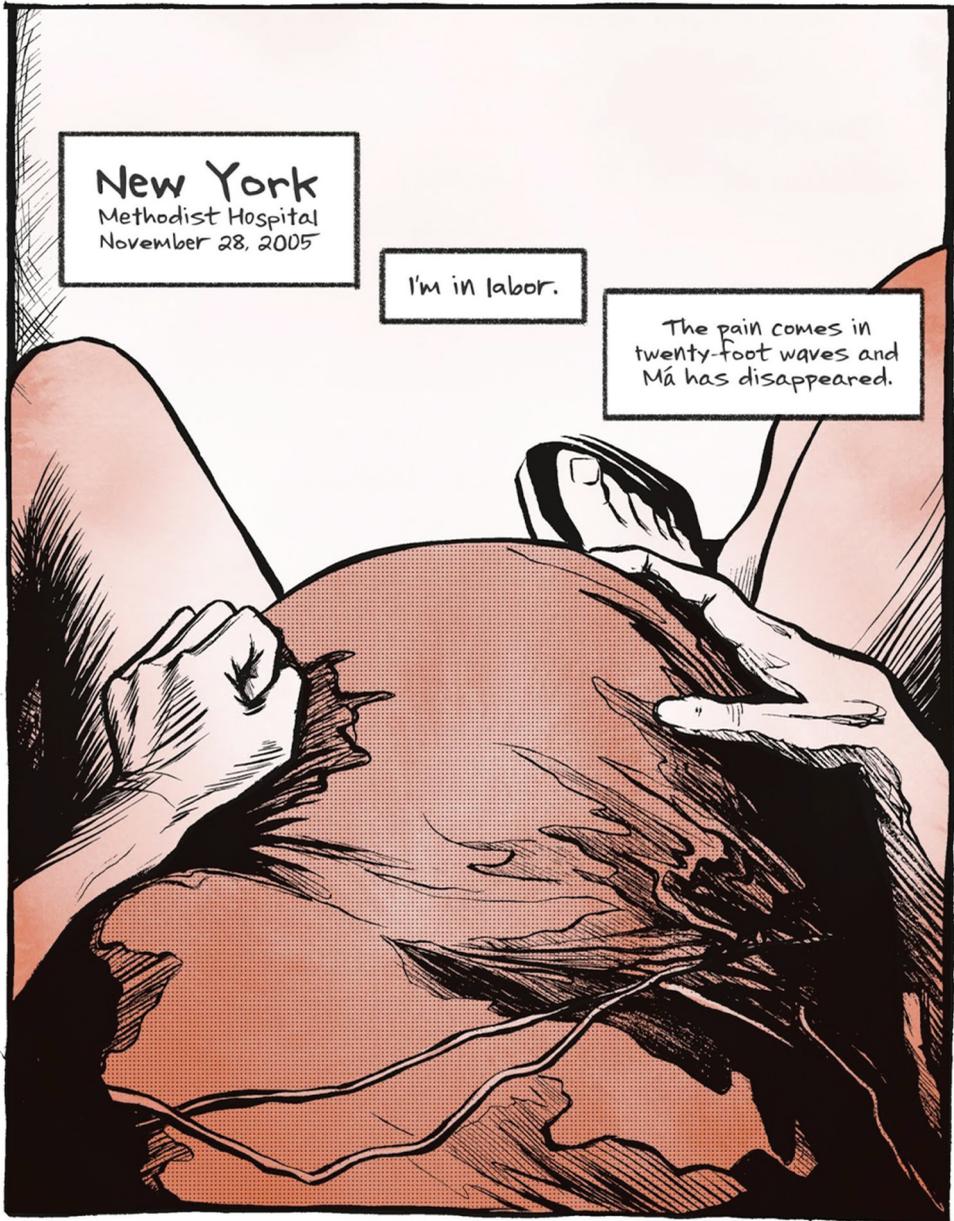


Figure 6. From *the best we could do*, 1 by Thi Bui © Abrams ComicArts.

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