

THE LANGUAGE OF HOME

(Trần Nghi Âu Cơ)

The thing that amazes me most about Viet Nam is the same thing I miss the most when I leave. It's not the warmth of the people or the delicious food or the ridiculously low prices. Nope. The thing that amazes me most about Viet Nam is the language. It always takes me at least a few days to wrap my head around the fact that Vietnamese is the official language of the country. The signs were in Vietnamese. The forms and emails and phone keyboards were in Vietnamese. I didn't need to request a special translator. I didn't even need to interpret for my mother. Conversations of passerbys were in Vietnamese. A whole entire country...everyone speaking Vietnamese. This remains to be one of the most amazing things about VN to me.

I'm often told that my Vietnamese is more than adequate. But I've never been really confident with it. My tongue trips on the words and my brain swims around in the spelling and grammar. Even so, Vietnamese has come to represent comfort and familiarity and love. It is the language of home. The language in which my grandmother told me old VN legends; the language in which she sang my lullabies. It is the language in which my mother scolds me. And the language in which I first learned how to describe the world. It is the language of family, of *anh* and *cô* and *chị* and *bác*. Everyone was an auntie or a brother or a sister. It was nearly impossible to feel isolated and lonely when speaking Vietnamese, at least to me.

However, from the age of four and up, Vietnamese became something I had to tuck away on the shelves of my brain whenever I stepped out my door. English words shined in my mind because it was more practical. We were living in America, after all. Vietnamese in public became a delicacy. My ears perked whenever I hear a Vietnamese-esque conversation and I can't help but look at the conversationalists with a knowing smile which says, "I understand you. We are of the same blood." (But not in a creepy way, of course.)

I met someone in VN whom I've dubbed "Wingman." He said to me, People like you, children of the Vietnamese diaspora, are the key to changing VN for the better. You who balance the best of both worlds, who effortlessly juggle the two languages, you are the key. You are the key to expanding the minds of the Vietnamese people because like your mom said: writers are the doctors of society and literature is the medication. Don't worry about writing your epic novel. Learn the language. Translate. Bring the greatest works of literature to VN. (And translate it well. Because today's translators are shit.) You have the heart and the skill to bring about change. That could be your mark on the world.

That is one of the worst and best things you can do for me: make me believe that I have the ability to change the world, to fix and improve on

something that I already love so dearly. You've given me a very important mission, o wise Wingman. And I shall do my best to not disappoint you and this tiny, mysterious, loving little S-shaped country whose secrets and stories and songs and everything beautiful are whispered in ever gentle Vietnamese.

[]