

# Across the Sea of Memory:

## Navigating Postmemory in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*

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**Abstract :** This paper studies memory, trauma and silence in *The Best We Could Do* using the concept of postmemory developed by Marianne Hirsch. Hirsch explains postmemory as a form of generational transmission shaped by stories, images, and family archives. This paper argues that Bui moves beyond this view. She locates postmemory in the formal features of the graphic narrative itself, where meaning is produced through visual structure. The memoir uses fragmentation, repetition, spatial gaps and juxtaposition in a deliberate way. These elements do not simply depict inherited trauma. They help to shape it as an emotional experience for the reader. Silence and visual gaps are not empty. They work as active modes of transmission. They make it possible to express histories that cannot be fully spoken. By focusing on form, this paper redefines postmemory as something created through narrative structure and visual design. It shows how graphic storytelling reshapes inherited trauma into an engaging and participatory act of remembering. In this way, Bui extends postmemory beyond the family. She places it within wider visual and cultural practices of representation.

**Keywords - Postmemory, trauma, generation, experiences, inheritance, parents, transgenerational trauma.**

Memories are repositories of emotions and experiences. Sometimes they are nostalgic, allowing us to reminisce about our jubilant days. Sometimes they are agonizing, making us confront our darkest days. When such traumatic pasts are inherited by the next generation through stories, images, and silence, they are understood as postmemory. These intangible yet enduring memories function as the invisible thread that shapes identity across generations. For survivors of trauma, the first generation, memory becomes unstable. Painful experiences are often fragmented, reshaped or suppressed to protect the self. Yet, even in silence, these memories continue to be passed down through stories, photographs, gestures or unspoken absence. Children inherit these memories not as witnesses but as second-generation bearers of a legacy they never chose.

To understand this inheritance, Marianne Hirsch introduces the concept of postmemory. According to Hirsch, it is the connection that the following generation has with their parents' pain and experiences, which they did not witness but which continues to shape them. This paper studies how memory, trauma, postmemory and silence are interwoven in Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*. Through evocative panels and narrative introspection, Bui confronts the challenge of stitching together the memories that do not belong to her but nevertheless define her sense of self.

Hirsch first introduced the concept of postmemory in the early 1990s in her foundation article, "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory", published in *Discourse* (1992-93), and later expanded in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (1997). She explained how family stories, photographs, and silences enable descendants to "remember" events they never witnessed personally as if they were part of their own life. Bui's *The Best We Could Do* reimagines memoir as an act of postmemory. The graphic form, through its images, layout, and pacing, creates a unique framework for reconstructing forgotten experiences. Bui's narration is marked by admissions of uncertainty; she admits her reliance on her parents' stories, the gaps in her knowledge and her own actions of imaginative filling in. The medium enables Bui to depict what cannot be directly recalled, unlike a textual memoir. She depicts her family's terrifying flight from Vietnam, which she only witnessed as an infant. She employs repetition and shadow to arouse fear and confusion. The anxious faces of parents and kids are portrayed, along with panels of dark, rolling water and tightly clasped hands. Hirsch's concept of postmemory is embodied by these pictures. They provide an

emotional sympathetic reconstruction of the past without claiming documentary authority. The visual narrative maintains that inherited fear remains intense despite the absence of firsthand experience.

Both Bui's family history and her memoir are marked by silence. Parental trauma is frequently incommunicable, and survivors may be unable or unwilling to narrate painful pasts, such as those of Bui's father. Little is known about Bui's father's early years, which were characterized by emotional isolation and abuse. His silence demands interpretation because it is more than a blank space. Bui views silence in the graphic form as an active transmission process rather than absence. Panels of subdued colour and blank space reflect her father's emotional loneliness, whom she depicts as a diminutive, lonely figure.



Fig. 1 is from *The Best We Could Do* page no. 85. It shows Bui's father practising a process to leave his body.

This illustration poignantly captures Bo's internal struggle, depicting a desire to retreat into escapism rather than confront a harsh reality. When Bui reminisces her childhood, she tries to understand her emotionally wounded father. Her mother went to work for them and her father stayed at home, taking care of the children. Traumatized by the Vietnam war, her father wanted to escape from reality. The war had left a lasting scar in his life. He even practised leaving his body as he slept. He yearned to go back to his peaceful childhood in Vietnam. He rarely expressed his feelings and thus, his panels are filled with silence and pain. Silence operates as a formal structure of postmemory, where visual absence becomes a mode of transmitting what cannot be narrated.



Fig. 2 and 3 are from *The Best We Could Do* page no.128 and 129 showing young Bui's perspective of her father.

Bui's relationship with her father was emotionally complicated. The trauma he carried from the war shaped the way he raised her. In various ways, the trauma was passed down to her. He smoked often and struggled to give the emotional support she and her siblings needed. All these things he had done were not due to a lack of love but because he was fighting his own inner battles. Bui understood this later in life. Bui felt isolated and alienated from those around her in America. She grew up between two cultures and was unsure of where she truly belonged. Together, these things led her to imagine a world of her own. In that imagined space, she felt free and had her own identity. In this way, memory travels through generations via absence rather than narrative fullness. This theme is furthered by the memoir's frequent use of hands — grasping, holding, releasing. When language fails, gestures persist. During the escape scenes, hands clutch objects and children. In this context, hands serve as the means of postmemorial transmission, passing on survival, fear, and love from one generation to the next.

One of the memoir's most affecting techniques is juxtaposition, which brings Bui's experiences into direct relation with those of her parents. When narrating the birth of her son, Bui contrasts her own experience in an American hospital with her mother's harrowing labour during wartime. Visually, the memoir alternates between panels of sterile safety and panels filled with anxiety.



Fig. 4 is the illustration reflecting Bui's fear of being a parent from *The Best We Could Do*, page no.12

In the above illustration, Bui's fear is being reflected. She worries that she might fail as a parent and could not provide a better life for her son. Bui's physical pain becomes a mediating site through which postmemory is constructed, enabling an empathetic engagement with her mother's suffering. This act of imaginative identification is the heart of postmemory. Bui does not remember her own birth or her mother's labour; she reconstructs both, using empathy and narrative parallelism.

Bui emphasizes the postmemorial logic of the memoir by repeatedly visualizing the sea. Whenever Bui talks about her motherland, she uses water, sea or boat in the panels. Even in *Fig.1*, when her father dreams of leaving his body, he swims across the ocean. Her parents associate it with both fear and opportunity, having fled their homeland across it in desperation. The recurring image of the sea functions as a formal mechanism of postmemory, where repetition produces an affective continuity between past and present. Throughout the story, the darkness and boundlessness of the sea reappear. It signifies both continuity and rupture.

According to Hirsch, repetitive imagery has the potential to act as a connective tissue, tying the present to the unresolved suffering of the past. The sea is more than just a location in Bui's memoir. It functions as a recurring structure through which postmemory is produced and as a striking reminder that transmission between generations is recursive and eerie, rather than a linear one. Thi Bui's memoir destabilizes the boundaries of postmemory by highlighting how trauma is carried across cultures, generations, and media. The ability of the graphic medium to tell stories in both linear and fragmented fashion reflects the erratic, incomplete, and emotionally charged nature of inherited memory. Bui takes Hirsch's theory a step further by arguing that postmemory is influenced by broader historical and cultural contexts in addition to familial ties. Her memoir poses the question of whether inherited trauma always shows up as suffering or if it can also foster empathy, connection, and resilience. Bui emphasizes the positive elements of transmission by

illustrating her parents' suffering and perseverance. The past is not just a burden; it is also a source of meaning and identity that can be used in new stories about belonging and healing.

The memoir foregrounds survival, care, and the ongoing effort to understand family history. Through the language of postmemory, Bui's memoir transforms trauma from a solitary wound into a shared space for empathy and connection. The act of drawing, narrating, and imagining the unremembered past reveals the fragile humanity of inherited memory. It insists that the postmemory theory is inextricably linked to the lived realities of suffering and caregiving.

Bui's narrative bridges the gap between history and emotion, employing the illustrated memoir as both archive and creative reconstruction. Her work shows that memory is not only about loss but also about reconstruction. In her hands, postmemory becomes not a theoretical abstraction, but a living and breathing attempt to carry the stories that have shaped and proceeded to shape family and self.

At the same time, Bui's memoir speaks to a global dimension of postmemory that transcends her own family's Vietnamese refugee experience. Communities across the world, whether marked by war, genocide, colonization, or migration, grapple with similar legacies of silence and survival. By grounding her personal story within a wider framework of inherited trauma, Bui makes her narrative resonate beyond its immediate cultural context, inviting readers from other postmemory communities to recognize themselves in her story. The memoir's structure highlights the impact of past trauma on present life. It shows how creativity and effort are necessary to connect experiences across generations.

The graphic medium of the memoir is central to its articulation of postmemory. Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory often operates through visual elements like photography, family pictures or albums, video recordings, and other forms of representation that allow their descendants to access a past they never experienced. Bui extends this idea to the realm of graphic narratives, where sequential art not only depicts moments but also creates emotional and mnemonic structures that mimic the fragmented way trauma is remembered. Her use of muted colour palettes brings out the emotions and tone of the memoir. Specifically, Bui's illustrations are primarily washes of sepia and gray. They function as a visual metaphor for memory's fading yet persistent quality. These subdued tones underscore the emotional distance between Bui and the events she reconstructs while simultaneously drawing the reader into a shared space of affective recall. Similarly, Bui's panelling technique oscillates between rigid grids and disrupted, irregular layouts, enacting the instability of postmemory itself. Particularly powerful are the moments Bui fills panels with blank space, silhouettes, or shadows, signalling not absence but the presence of silence as a form of transmission.

According to Hirsch, descendants often inhabit the past through an imaginative reconstruction of events that is both haunting and incomplete. Her images invite the reader into this postmemorial space, asking them to participate in the act of empathetic reconstruction. In this sense, the graphic memoir does not merely illustrate her family's story, it embodies the very logic of postmemory by creating gaps and repetitions central to the aesthetic experience. Where traditional written memoirs may lean on narrative continuity, Bui's illustrated pages emphasize fragmentation and affect, aligning with Hirsch's assertion that images can function as both testimony and metaphor. It extends Hirsch's theory by showing how visual storytelling can carry trauma across generations with a force that words cannot achieve.

Ultimately, the graphic memoir emerges as a progressive medium for engaging with memory. Its hybrid composition, merging visual and textual elements while embracing both fragmentation and cohesion, serves as a model for how future generations might confront and interpret inherited traumas. Bui demonstrates that memory is not a fixed entity; rather, it can be continually redrawn, reinterpreted, reimagined in ways that acknowledge both pain and resilience. In this regard, *The Best We Could Do* not only exemplifies the concept

of postmemory but also reconceptualizes it as a dynamic and creative endeavour, thereby preserving the ethical and active nature of remembrance.

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