

In Time of The Breaking of Nations

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There are times when the world's events seem to dwarf the human perspective. When whatever one might do feels small and gestural, energetic work with shovels in the midst of an avalanche.

In January 1916, Thomas Hardy published these twelve lines in *The Saturday Review*.

In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'

I

Only a man harrowing clods
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.

II

Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.

III

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

Like seedling trees working their way at the foundations of a great edifice, the slow action of ordinary human lives lifts away and pushes aside what appear at first to be impossibly larger forces.

A handful of weeks ago, my two children and their four cousins, six children under the age of ten, washed their grandfather's grave in San Jose on the fifth anniversary of his death. He and my wife's mother, Lan, were married in Vietnam during what they knew as the American War. They fled with their first daughter, Thuy, by boat. Their second daughter, Tran, was born in a refugee camp in Malaysia. Uyen, my wife, was the first born in this country, in Wichita, where the family was sponsored by Catholics and where her father worked in a meatpacking plant. Their fourth daughter, Van, arrived several years later, after the family had moved south, to Bayou La Batre, Alabama, the closest American equivalent to a Vietnamese shrimping town.

Hung ("Tony") has three dates on the tombstone he'd occupied himself designing in his final year with cancer: his birth, his death and his arrival in America. He had a little over thirty years here, enough to build a family, to own shrimping boats and lose them, to claw back from bankruptcy, to move to San Jose, to sell nuts in the flea markets, to learn a trade, to build a machinist's shop, to raise four American girls, and to celebrate the arrival of the first three of his six grandchildren, watching them play in a garden full of fruit trees behind a house in the hills of San Jose he owned outright.

If you, reading this, and I could somehow turn time back, and starting from a vantage far above, somehow steer our gaze to see Tony and Lan's courtship, how small their lives would look against the backdrop of "war's annals," with Vietnam itself simply one fiery patch in a conflict that defied any human scale. And if we moved our sights west, we'd see an America hurtling with full fury into being torn apart, without any clear path to healing.

How did we heal then, how did we tear again and how will we heal now?

Nothing is more powerful than the slow force of families building their lives, having children, making the best try they can at their own idea of America. The annals of this time too will "cloud into night," lifted, turned and smoothed by the steady, multiplicative action of love's bond. We have work to do in the meantime, as each generation does, work of no small urgency. May we do this work with a sense of wonder for how our parents pointed their lives upward toward what light they sensed amidst their generation's storms, and with a sense of hopefulness for the world our children will grow from the soil of our ordinary lives.