

Inside  
Out & Back  
Again

FICTION  
Thanhha Lai  
2011



Introduction

studysync 

In many ways, the first novel by Thanhha Lai (b. 1965) mirrors her own childhood experience. Like the main character, Hà, in *Inside Out & Back Again*, Thanhha Lai witnessed the harsh reality of the Vietnam War, had a father who was missing in action, and fled with her family to America. Through Hà's character, Lai captures many of the universal feelings refugees experience in an unfamiliar place. In the four excerpts here, written in verse as first-person journal entries, Hà feels a rush of emotions as she repeats the fourth grade in her new home—Alabama.

“Deep breaths.  
I’m the first student in class.”

NOTES

*The Outside*

- 1 Starting tomorrow
- 2 everyone must
- 3 leave the house.
  
- 4 Mother starts sewing
- 5 at a factory;
- 6 Brother Quang begins
- 7 repairing cars.
  
- 8 The rest of us
- 9 must go to school,
- 10 repeating the last grade,
- 11 left unfinished.
  
- 12 Brother Vũ wants
- 13 to be a cook
- 14 or teach martial arts,
- 15 not waste a year
- 16 as the oldest senior.
  
- 17 Mother says
- 18 one word:
- 19 *College*.
  
- 20 Brother Khôi
- 21 gets an old bicycle to ride,
- 22 but Mother says
- 23 I'm too young for one
- 24 even though I'm
- 25 a ten-year-old
- 26 in the fourth grade,
- 27 when everyone else
- 28 is nine.

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29 Mother says,  
 30 *Worry instead*  
 31 *about getting sleep*  
 32 *because from now on*  
 33 *no more naps.*  
 34 *You will eat lunch*  
 35 *at school*  
 36 *with friends.*

37 *What friends?*

38 *You'll make some.*

39 *What if I can't?*

40 *You will.*

41 *What will I eat?*

42 *What your friends eat.*

43 *But what will I eat?*

44 *Be surprised.*

45 *I hate surprises.*

46 *Be agreeable.*

47 *Not without knowing*  
 48 *what I'm agreeing to.*

49 Mother sighs,  
 50 walking away.

September 1

*Sadder Laugh*

51 School!

52 I wake up with  
 53 dragonflies  
 54 zipping through  
 55 my gut.

56 I eat nothing.

57 Mother shakes her head.

58 I take each step toward school evenly,  
 59 trying to hold my stomach  
 60 steady.

61 It helps that  
 62 the morning air glides cool  
 63 like a constant washcloth  
 64 against my face.

65 Deep breaths.

66 I'm the first student in class.

67 My new teacher has brown curls  
 68 looped tight to her scalp  
 69 like circles in a beehive.

70 She points to her chest:  
 71 *MiSSS SScott,*  
 72 saying it three times,  
 73 each louder  
 74 with ever more spit.

75 I repeat, *MiSSS SScott,*  
 76 careful to hiss every s.

77 She doesn't seem **impressed.**  
 78 I tap my own chest: *Hà.*

79 She must have heard *ha,*  
 80 as in funny *ha-ha-ha.*

81 She fakes a laugh.

82 I repeat, *Hà,*  
 83 and wish I knew  
 84 enough English  
 85 to tell her  
 86 to listen for  
 87 the **diacritical** mark,  
 88 this one directing  
 89 the tone



90 downward.  
 91 My new teacher  
 92 tilts her head back,  
 93 fakes  
 94 an even sadder laugh.

September 2  
 Morning

*Rainbow*

95 I face the class.  
 96 MiSSS SScott speaks.  
 97 Each classmate says something.  
 98 I don't understand,  
 99 but I see.  
 100 Fire hair on skin dotted with spots.  
 101 Fuzzy dark hair on skin shiny as **lacquer**.  
 102 Hair the color of root on milky skin.  
 103 Lots of braids on milk chocolate.  
 104 White hair on a pink boy.  
 105 Honey hair with orange ribbons on see-through skin.  
 106 Hair with barrettes in all colors on bronze bread.  
 107 I'm the only  
 108 straight black hair  
 109 on olive skin.

September 2  
 Midmorning

*Black and White and Yellow and Red*

110 The bell rings.  
 111 Everyone stands.  
 112 I stand.  
 113 They line up;  
 114 so do I.  
 115 Down a hall.  
 116 Turn left.  
 117 Take a tray.

118 Receive food.  
 119 Sit.

120 On one side  
 121 of the bright, noisy room,  
 122 light skin.  
 123 Other side,  
 124 dark skin.

125 Both laughing, chewing,  
 126 as if it never occurred  
 127 to them  
 128 someone **medium**  
 129 would show up.

130 I don't know where to sit  
 131 any more than  
 132 I know how to eat  
 133 the pink sausage  
 134 snuggled inside bread  
 135 shaped like a corncob,  
 136 **smeared** with sauces  
 137 yellow and red.

138 I think  
 139 they are making fun  
 140 of the Vietnamese flag<sup>1</sup>  
 141 until I remember  
 142 no one here likely knows  
 143 that flag's colors.

144 I put down the tray  
 145 and wait  
 146 in the hallway.

September 2  
 11:30 am

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1. **Vietnamese flag** until 1975, the South Vietnamese flag consisted of a yellow background with three horizontal red stripes