



DUONG THU HUONG IN CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT STONE

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: . . . to host these conversations in the Library. We don't quite know what will happen today, but it is, I think, a marvelous moment. Mrs. Huong has come to the United States, it's my understanding, for the very, very first time, so let's welcome her very warmly.

(applause)

And now, without further ado, I would like to welcome you to this conversation. We have as an interpreter—forgive me for mispronouncing your name, but who am I, anyway, to talk about accents—Nguyen Qui Duc, who is a writer and translator, and Antoine Audouard, who will also help moderate and set the stage for what will be with no doubt a wonderful conversation.

(applause)

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: My name is Antoine Audouard. I'm a writer from France, and I guess the reason why I have been asked to moderate—that's a strange word with a very rebellious person—to moderate this event is that, like many people, I guess, a number of angry or adventurous Frenchmen, and a number of quiet Americans, one of my forebears went to Vietnam, was sent to war there for the advancement of civilization. All that's left in the family is the sword that my grandfather, who was in the French colonial army, took back from his stay in Vietnam in 1914 and a photograph of my father, as a baby, in the arms of his Vietnamese nanny. So, in my memory there is an image of war—that's the sword, although it's blunt, but it's still a sword—and there's an image of life, and that's my father, and we have to live with that, and, as a writer, my personal obsession about this past, about this shared memory, became a book. In the course of the research for this book, I had the privilege, I would even say the grace to encounter the works of Duong Thu Huong. Not only did she open for me the door to a deeper understanding of Vietnam, its history, its traditions, its psyche, its pain, but I think I found a universal voice, not just a Vietnamese voice, a voice that can speak to all of us.

And I know Huong, as many people know here, has been through a lot, because of her books, because of her courage, because of her stand for her people. She's been to jail, her books have been banned, her passport has been confiscated. She has paid the price for who she is. And last year, at the first PEN World Voices festival, I was extremely proud to be able to read on her behalf some pages of her latest novel, *No Man's Land*, but it's much, much better to have her with us today.

Robert Stone, well, needs no introduction here, in this city, and in this country, but I think it was a very, very accurate choice for Mike Roberts to ask him to join in this conversation with her. Not only because with *Dog Soldiers* he wrote what is considered, with his other books, a classic that was—you'll correct me if I'm wrong—but was inspired by his trip to Vietnam, but also because he was among the first in this country to acknowledge Huong's work, to write generously about her, to welcome her among the community of writers.

We'll start—I wanted to ask you a question, Huong, you said, the first time we met, I remember, you said, "I'm ready to die at any minute. I have done what I had to do," and, every time we

meet, you say the same thing. It seems to me that this is the source of your freedom. What do you mean by that? What do you mean when you say this?

DUONG THU HUONG: I'm very sorry, I am partly deaf, so I have to change my position constantly to be able to hear. I feel I am a little bit inconveniencing you, because I have to hear from one ear. I accept the life of a criminal, of being chased, and I accept to die at any moment. I'm not actually an official criminal, but I am a troublemaker, so I have to accept such a fate, and once I accepted that, there is no more fear. So I live within the now and tomorrow is something I don't care about. And because of that, I am able to find a total freedom in my life, and I'm free even when I'm in prison. It seems a bit crazy to a normal person, but humankind has given birth to many such crazy people. And my fate is to be among those crazy people.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: You say, you wrote somewhere, that you, and I'm going probably to have this sentence somewhere, but you said, you wrote, "I think a woman lives inside me, a survivor from our most ancient past, a woman with her teeth lacquered in black, a leaf of grass clinging to the Vietnamese land, that made it through all the tempests and all the tragedies."

DUONG THU HUONG: That is precise. If there was no such black-teeth woman inside me, I couldn't remain alive.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: I'd like to go down memory lane a little. Sometimes she gives me a hard time when I ask her questions about her past, but we'll try to go through some of the most striking episodes of your life. I'd like to know first—you were, I think, twenty when you decided to join a brigade that was called "Sing Louder than the Bombs." I would like to know what was the original motivation of the young lady you were then?

DUONG THU HUONG: There's some conflicting thoughts about that period, but we joined the army and brigades then almost as a tradition of the country—the national instinct. It was a war against an outside invader, much like the war against the Chinese, and then after that was the war against the French. I voluntarily gave up a life that might have been much better in order to join

the struggle. So in 1969, when I first met the prisoners from the South, I understood that I had been mistaken. And a lot of humankind, humanity had been—

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: You mean that you had imagined the face of the enemy to be a white face, and you found out that they were brothers or cousins?

DUONG THU HUONG: So I thought of the invaders in the same way that I thought of the Mongolians who came to Vietnam with their hairstyle and this time we thought that the soldiers who we were fighting against were white people, with blue eyes. So in 1969, when I met the prisoners, they were yellow-skinned, black-eyed.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: Can you give us an idea of what life was like for you during those years?

DUONG THU HUONG: To tell the truth, I need to apologize. I'm a bit older now, but in those days we lived like animals. There were propaganda lines from the South that said that three Communists could be hanging from a branch of a papaya tree and that's quite, and that's very much the truth. So if you take the diet of somebody, even in the worst parts of Africa, you can compare it to the diet of the Vietnamese of that time during war. They brought in milk that was used for animals to give to the high-ranking officers. When the bombs from the Americans came down, all of our plates and dishes had been broken, so we ate out of cans, tin cans, or coconut shells. We ate things that a normal person could not imagine. For example, we ate what we carved out of the inside the tree trunks of the papaya tree, to eat that, or corns that would be used normally for pigs.

ROBERT STONE: One question occurs to me. To take you back to the days when you served with that brigade that sang louder than bombs—were you, did you create the songs? Did you play a role in creating the songs? Did you compose some of them?

DUONG THU HUONG: I'm lucky that I didn't write these songs. I'm sorry that I didn't write any such songs. All I did was train the singers. Other writers, other composers, wrote the songs, all I did was train these people to work for the war.

ROBERT STONE: The reason I asked that is it occurred to me that this might have been your beginnings as a writer, and what directed you toward writing, because one thing that concerns me very much, that I'm very interested in, having read your work, is where it, how it exists for you as a moral imperative, whether you are serving a cause that is much greater than your own perception of truth, or whether your perception of truth is where it resides, because I see that you go in two directions—to a great responsibility toward the nation and the world and your own perception of the truth, and I'm trying to find which of those is primary for you, if you understand one to be primary. If that's clear.

DUONG THU HUONG: I'm not a professional writer such as Robert Stone or others.

ROBERT STONE: I would disagree. Every once in a while one discovers a writer of extraordinary power, with a staggering grip on truth and a poetic means of making that apprehensible to a reader. I hope that you are, or that I am, a writer to the degree that you are, I don't understand why you should say that you are not—you are in fact a writer of extraordinary gifts, an extraordinary writer, and why do you—and if you'll pardon my asking a blunt question. Why do you deny it, why do you deny being a writer? **(laughter)**

DUONG THU HUONG: I'm grateful for your kindness, perhaps because you are of larger size and I am a smaller person and you are freer to pass on these kind words. While I was very young, I didn't have any such dream. My only dream was to become a champion of table tennis. **(laughter)** And perhaps with you to be a writer is to live in a very prestigious castle, but that's very far from me, I didn't really think about it.

ROBERT STONE: I would have traded it in a minute for table tennis. **(laughter)**

DUONG THU HUONG: But you are absolutely right. We've been mistaken, been taken for a ride. So we wrote so that we could tell that we'd been misguided, so the next generation would not be so misguided, deceived, and humanity has the possibility of always being deceived, deceived by leaders of religion, by politicians. The destiny is within history that we don't understand. What we come to understand always come too late.

ROBERT STONE: Does that mean, then, that Keats tells us, "Truth is beauty, beauty truth," that these are equivalent? Is that the morality of the writing life, that the truth is beautiful because it denies the false, because it is true, and recognized, becomes recognizably true? Is *that* the core of writing?

DUONG THU HUONG: To answer this question, I'd like to borrow a line of poetry from a Hungarian poet, a poet that I have loved since I was a young girl. Wrote beautiful lines about love. Love is like an ocean, happiness is like a piece of jade perhaps, a gem, a jewel. Once you find a gem in the middle of the ocean, then that would be completely broken, destroyed, there would be nothing left. So for me the love in Petofi's poems is the truth. We have to pay a very dear price for that truth. I fear that the mission and the responsibility of a writer is still to go look for those pieces of gem, although they would be broken and destroyed.

ROBERT STONE: Conrad writes a preface to one of his novels, it's called *The Nigger of the Narcissus*. It's a wonderful piece of writing about writing, and it reminds me very much, madam, of what you write about writing in your auto-explanation for example, and Conrad begins this preface by writing, "A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art, should carry its justification in every line, and art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe by bringing to light the truth manifold and one, underlying its every aspect." Is Conrad speaking for you?

DUONG THU HUONG: I thank you, because it is exactly what *I* think.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: Huong, you've known two extreme situations in your country, as a writer. When you started writing, you were immensely popular. I think you had the honor of

having one of your books translated into Russian, which was then, as now, a huge deal, and then, your books were banned, and basically in the last fifteen years, you, who write *for* the people, are separated *from* the people. How do you feel about that?

DUONG THU HUONG: Before I chose to be a troublemaker, I obviously had to think about it. I would accept any price for that kind of choice. Once my heart is at peace, I followed the Buddhist principle of saying, “Alone, I alone will see, and that’s enough for me.”

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: What made you become a troublemaker? I mean, was it some sort of long process, a number of events in your life, or . . . ?

DUONG THU HUONG: It’s not a quick process, it’s a process that resembles a journey, and my journey to return to the truth started in 1969, when I met the prisoners, and I was very young. So that process of turning my thoughts around continued until 1975, when a lot of people, many, many people went south, and they were quite happy and laughing, happiness in the South. While I was considered a fairly mad person, a crazy person, because I was crying as if my father had just passed away, because I thought that that war had been a cruel joke by history. All of the energy of a people had been devoted towards **(inaudible)**. And winning forces had belonged to a more barbaric force, lost the war. I felt that I’d lost my youth unjustly. And it created, for me, a situation of bitterness and confusion. And I also understood that beauty would not always win, would not always be the winner, but that beauty could disappear, could be destroyed. Civilization, civil ways, had to surrender. If one was to make a comparison, then Vietnam was a feudal society that once you divided it into half, then the Northern half had a more barbaric regime.

ROBERT STONE: I think this is a difficult question for me, and an impertinent and impossible question, perhaps, but I want to ask you what you think of William James’s maxim that we require the moral equivalent of war. And I ask this question because one of the things that emerges in your work, besides the irony and the terrible suffering, and the cruelty, and all the results of the war, is the mutual sacrifice, the transcendence of the individual, the kind of things that the writer, who serves truth, has to do. So how do we resolve this? What do you think of

James's motto, because James was saying, "We must not have war, war is too dreadful, but war brings out from human beings the capacity to sacrifice for more than the self, for more than the individual, something that we cannot do without." Is this a hopeless paradox? What do you think?

DUONG THU HUONG: It is reasonable, because war is a constant companion of humankind. We need to be antiwar, we need to be against war, humans live with that controversy, irony, it is the destiny of people.

ROBERT STONE: So it will be there, whether we worry about its continuity or not.

DUONG THU HUONG: Indeed. I'm not a world politician, so I am only concerned with the wars that happened to the people of Vietnam. I consider that, though, the war that most people have been heralding, the war against the Americans, is in fact the most stupid war in our history. And it created a war where brothers became enemies and Vietnamese became a Kotex in between the two forces of two trains colliding. Our people are a tampon of a race. **(laughter)**

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: You wrote that the Vietnamese people had the courage to die, but they couldn't find the courage to live. What did you mean?

DUONG THU HUONG: All of the bravery, and the courage to die, but we've never had enough intelligence to live, to have the aspirations to live decently, and that's the reason I have become or I need to be a troublemaker. It's the one reason that I write so that I tell the people of my country to open their eyes and to find a way to live, a life that's fit to live with—that's fit for human beings.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: But if—I mean, this week I opened the *New York Times* a couple of times and I saw young Vietnamese in the streets of Saigon with portraits of Bill Gates, and today there's a piece about some sort of tourism in the traces of Marguerite Duras, so people might tell you well, the young people of Vietnam today want to move on, they don't want to hear about the past. Why is it so important that the truth and the pain is told?

DUONG THU HUONG: I think that the Vietnamese who are now looking towards the West is in fact a reflection of their attitude towards the government of Vietnam. You know well that the Communist regime in Vietnam, similar to many other regimes in underdeveloped areas of the world, is a rotten, corrupt government. I don't know where the other regimes, the totalitarian regimes around the world, would find the strength to survive, but in Vietnam there are three sources for their survival. The first one is of the fears of the people, to rely on the fears of the people. The Vietnamese have a tradition of fighting the foreign invader, but not the inside invader, inside the country. The other forces, that this totalitarian regime in Vietnam relies on, is the notion that people don't understand *how* they must live. When you are suffering so much, you are only concerned with survival, and you don't know any further, you have no further thoughts on living better. The third force for this (**inaudible**) is the pride for having won the war against the Americans. It becomes a fortress for the regime to survive and to avoid collapse. We have no other credibility than to sleep with dead corpses. And so, thirty years later, we still hear the songs from the anti-American days on the radio. And so, for democracy fighters like ourselves, we have the responsibility to tell the truth about the war and the stupidity in continuing to dig up this dead corpse, to smell it.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: But when you hear when, for instance, I think, last year the Vietnamese prime minister traveled here in America, when you hear talks of reconciliation, when you hear the word "reconciliation" at the highest political level, does that mean anything to you, or is it another travesty?

DUONG THU HUONG: I'm not Phan Van Khai, but I don't think that he had another choice to act in any other way.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: Although you don't consider yourself as a professional writer, I think Bob and I would like to dwell on your latest book, the one that was published here last year, *No Man's Land*. When we first met, two days ago, Bob had just finished reading the novel, and he said something that I found very true and very generous. He said, "I'm still trying to— this novel is so powerful, made such an impression upon me, that I'm still trying to understand it,

to understand where it takes me.” Bob, can you say a few words about this book and where it took you?

ROBERT STONE: I think its strength is where the strength of a literary work will always be, and that is in what Conrad was talking about, in the recognition of truth. I mean, how does art work? What is the morality of art? It lies in recognition. If I happen on one of those pieces of jade in the poem at the bottom of the sea, I say, “Ah! There it is, I see it,” and the metaphor, the pictures, the images, the degree to which every scene in that book holds the reader, and compels the reader to a visceral response, is a constant discovery of truths, and it becomes undeniable. It becomes something that cannot be put aside, so I couldn’t free myself from these images of mud and stars and death, and those intersections of death and sexuality and renewal, the renewal of life in death, all these things, so strong that they were—I was just unable to put them aside and I took this as being the authority of the book, being its justification, its moral essence.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: That’s not a question, it’s a statement, I think.

(laughter)

ROBERT STONE: All great books. You’ve read one great novel, you’ve read them all. That’s a joke.

(laughter)

DUONG THU HUONG: I’m thankful for your kindness, but I’m a little bit skeptical, because I just think that you’re a compassionate person.

(laughter)

ROBERT STONE: My compassion is not required here, whether I’m a compassionate person or not, I don’t require compassion to your art nor do you require my compassion, it’s not an issue.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: One more literary question that you're not going to like, but. . . . Your work, but especially that novel, but I think that each and every one of your novels, deals with the modern tragedies of Vietnam, but at the same time, it seems to belong to a very old tradition that relates to the poetry of your country, to the folktales of your country. When you started writing, did you feel you were somehow part of a tradition?

DUONG THU HUONG: I have two persons in me, or two personalities. One is one that is a fighter for democracy, which is why I have been accused of selling a national secret to the outside, and the second personality is about a woman with black teeth. If there was no such woman inside me, I would have been dead a long time ago. But the Vietnamese woman is one that teaches me to be patient and to be accepting. When the entire system of a nation is there to attack a person, a single person like myself, obviously I would have a psychological shock. The threats by the government would not be as harsh as the feeling that one is being attacked from many different directions. Those who live around you look at you with eyes as if you were the enemy. Because the government put out literature to the streets, to the neighborhood, to the district, that I am the number-one enemy of the state. And so when I am sad and disheartened, I think of the image of the Vietnamese women, the peasant who carried on her shoulders a heavy load trying to climb up the mountains or the dikes. Such old, traditional images create a strength for me.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: Is it true that, when you were expelled from the Communist Party, there was a meeting of the local committee, of which you were still a member, and there were five voices for your exclusion, and five courageous voices against, and so your voice, your vote was the decisive vote, and you voted for your own exclusion. Is that true?

DUONG THU HUONG: That is true. To tell the truth, I joined the Party because of the requests of colleagues. The film company that I worked for had six hundred people, and only a few dozen of the people who worked there, of the six hundred, were Party members, but they decided the fate of all of the six hundred people. They decided on salaries, they decided on housing, they decided on the means to get abroad. And so my colleagues requested that I join the Party,

because they felt that I was the only one with the ability to fight with the officials, to argue with them, and to stand up to them, and my colleagues had to bribe me for a year, with candies and such, before I joined the Party. **(laughter)** And so the real and unique reason I joined the Party was to fight for those who were voiceless. And later I realized that it would be more efficient to be inside the Party and criticizing it than being outside of it and criticizing it. And in that meeting that you were referring to, I felt that it was the end of the game now, so I decided to vote for my own expulsion.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: I think we're getting near the conclusion of this meeting. Huong, will you take some questions?

DUONG THU HUONG: It depends on everybody.

NGUYEN QUI DUC: Will you be translating your own question?

Q: There's a little sibling rivalry. [Question in Vietnamese.]

NGUYEN QUI DUC: You may want to start translating now, because you'll forget what your question is.

Q: My question is. . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's make questions very much questions rather than statements.

NGUYEN QUI DUC: So what is the question?

Q: The question is that throughout her novels there is an aspiration of the people who want to be living a good life and is that against the idea of Communism, and what is really human nature? Do they seek to live a good life, or do they want to live as Communists?

DUONG THU HUONG: Let me just first apologize to you. You did mention that I am a little bit harder than President Bush and being able to find me is more difficult than finding President Bush. That is a gross exaggeration. I am an employee here, and PEN is my boss. And so to return to your question—the Communist Party proclaims that it is about seeking a better life for the people but the leaders of the Party live a much better life, a life without morality, privately, but in terms of people understanding what a better life would be, that's a complete different issue.

Q: [Question in Vietnamese.]

NGUYEN QUI DUC: Let me just take the one first question, which is about a love story written in *Love Stories Written before Dawn*, and these people had illegitimate love relationship, but yet they had no shame that Vietnamese people would generally have. How do you feel about that?

DUONG THU HUONG: Such captives didn't have any shame about what they were doing, because they were the first ones to realize that we must live true to ourselves, to our feelings.

NGUYEN QUI DUC: The second question had to do with the psychological effects of the war after the war and the author feels that she's wrongly written about, she's touched upon 1 percent of all of the psychological illnesses that resulted from the war.

DUONG THU HUONG: And since there are many Americans here, non-Vietnamese speakers, let's all speak in English and there is a translator available.

ANTOINE AUDOUARD: Why is it wrong that one has the impression, reading your books, that most of the male characters are extremely weak and that courage—not courage, but the hopeful life, is only with women?

(laughter)

DUONG THU HUONG: I wasn't conscious of any of this when I wrote these stories.

(laughter)

ROBERT STONE: I didn't notice it at all.

(laughter)

DUONG THU HUONG: I want to apologize to all of the male members here of the audience, I meant no harm. I only told the stories that I'd been obsessed with in my mind, the ones I wanted. I didn't want to lower the men, because I always felt that they are bigger and stronger than I am.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We've unfortunately come to the end of our program, I'm so very sorry. We have come to an end, the next program is at 1:45, but I thank you very much for coming, thank you very much for coming, and thank the panelists. Thank you very much.

(applause)