

# Duong Thu Huong

## Reflections of Spring

(VIETNAM)

It's not because of that evening. But since then, thoughts of her hadn't left his mind. They would linger for a while, then rush at him like a gust of wind, throwing his thoughts into chaos and disrupting his equanimity, leaving behind vague and anguished longings. That evening, he was returning to Hanoi from a midland province. An economic planner, he was used to these long, tedious trips. Dozing in his seat on the bus, he was awoken by loud clanking sounds coming from the engine. The driver lifted the hood and moaned: "Can't make it to Hanoi this evening. The radiator is broken . . ."

The passengers got off the bus to walk around and to breathe in the pleasant air of the midland area. Yellow fields ran to the horizon. In the distance, one could see the uneven peaks of dark green hills, like a clique of moss-covered snails resting on a carpet of rice paddies. The yellow of ripe rice was pale in the fading sun, but it flared up in spots, as if still soaked in light. At the edge of the road, the harvested field had a soft pink glow, as gentle as adolescent love. The autumn breeze made him feel light-headed: He was free from projects, reports, criticisms, approvals—all hindrances and distractions. It was an unusual feeling, this clarity. He walked briskly along.

By the side of the road was a row of houses. Their uneven roofs and white walls gave a strong warmth to the landscape. Butted up against each other, the houses were fronted by a mishmash of verandahs in different styles. In the small yards were tree stumps and piles of bricks. Nearby, pigeon coops perched on tree branches. At the base of a mound of shiny yellow straw, smelling of harvest, an old hen led her chicks, cluck-clucking, searching for food. A crude red and green sign announced a bicycle repair shop. In front, a dangling flat wire wobbled with each gust of wind. Bunches of bananas, suspended from hooks, hovered over the heads of diners in the cheap restaurants.

The serenity and melancholic air of the small town enchanted him. He didn't know what he was thinking, but he walked up and down the streets admiring the familiar views, especially the shrubs and poinciana plants behind the houses. The yellow flowers bloomed in the quiet evening.

"Uncle, come in for a drink. We have country rice pies and sticky-rice cakes."

An old woman behind a small glass display case leaned forward to greet her customer. He was a little surprised; it had been a long time since he heard such a natural, friendly greeting from a shopkeeper. He walked in and sat down on a long bench. He didn't know why he had walked in; he wasn't hungry, thirsty or in need of a smoke from the water pipe. But he had a strong intuition he was waiting for something. It was vague yet urgent. His heart beat anxiously. The shopkeeper leisurely poured out a bowl of green tea for her customer. Then she sat back, chewed her betel nut and said nothing. He raised the bowl of tea, took a sip and looked around. A gust of wind whirled some yellow leaves. From a distance, they looked like tiny gold grains that nature had generously scattered.

He had known all of this at one time. They were images from his past, although he wasn't aware of it. He felt increasingly uneasy.

"Grandma, should I make more rice wafers?"

A girl's voice echoed from inside the house. The sound of her voice startled him. He almost got up to rudely peer into the other room. But he restrained himself. The shop owner's granddaughter came out from the back.

"I baked ten more rice wafers, Grandma. There's none left in the basket!"

Seeing him, the girl stepped back cautiously. The old woman opened the bag and took out a bunch of small rice pancakes. "Bake twenty small ones for Grandma. They're easier to sell." The girl answered "yes" in a low voice and leaned over the earthenware basin to blow into the fire. The white ashes flew up, danced in the air and gently landed on her shiny black hair. Her teenage face was smooth and ruddy as a ripe fruit. Her nose was straight and graceful. She had a simple haircut, parted down the middle. He couldn't take his eyes off her; his heart beat excitedly.

"This is it!"

This unspoken sentiment had echoed within him as the girl came out . . . Twenty-three years ago, when he was in the tenth grade and a boarder in a small town, there was a similarly pretty and well-behaved girl. The same earthenware basin and red coals throwing off cinders, the same ruddy cheeks and round wrists . . . but the girl from his memory had a long hollow trace on her forehead. There were the same poinciana flowers and tiny yellow leaves, scattered by gusts of wind, dotting the ground in autumn, when sounds from the radio mixed with rustling from the unharvested rice paddies and the incessant noises of insects—the lazy, forlorn music of a small town.

It was odd how deeply buried these memories were. He was very poor then. Each month, his mother would send him only three *dong* for pocket money and 10 kilograms of rice. But he studied harder than all the other boys in his class, who called him a bookworm. The pretty girl lived next door to the house where he rented his room. She used to lean her arms against the fence and listen to him memorize poems out loud. Her mother was a food vendor; she would squat in front of the earthenware basin to bake rice wafers for her mother. At night, when he studied, she also lit an oil lamp and sat under the carambola tree to do her homework. At 10 o'clock, as his face was still buried

in a book, she would hoist a carrying pole onto her shoulder to go get water for her family. She was a good student and never needed his help. Still, she would look at him admiringly as he diagrammed a geometric problem, or as he closed his eyes and recited, smooth as soup, a long poem. By the time she came back with the water, he would be ready for bed. He was so hungry he had to literally tighten his belt. It was then she would bring him a piping hot rice wafer. The two of them didn't say much. Usually, he just smiled:

"What luck, my stomach was growing."

He never bothered to thank her. But they both felt that they needed to see each other, look at each other's faces and talk about nothing. Neither of them dared to ask too deeply about the other. Truth is, there was nothing more to ask . . . Her piping hot wafers; the hollow trace on her forehead; the bright face; the understanding looks when he was homesick, sitting all bunched up during cold, rainy evenings.

He suddenly remembered all these things. All of them. He now understood what he had been waiting for that evening. It had arrived. That beautiful, sweet, distant memory. A memory, buried for more than twenty years, awakened suddenly by a gust of wind.

The young girl, who was fanning the fire, looked up: "Grandma, I've finished ten . . . Give me a hand . . ."

She gave the stack of yellow cakes to the old woman and glanced curiously at the strange customer. He rotated the tea bowl in his hands while staring at her. She became flustered and clumsily swatted a lump of coal to the ground with her fan. She picked it up immediately, threw it back into the basin, then blew on her two fingers to cool them off, her brows knit in a frown.

"Now she looks like a twelve-year-old. The other girl was older, and more pretty," he thought.

Once, he didn't have enough money to buy textbooks. It wasn't clear how she found out. That night, along with the wafers, she also gave him a small envelope. He opened it: inside was a small stack of bills. The notes were so new you could smell the aroma of paper and ink. It was her New Year's money. He sat motionless. It looked like she had been hoarding it for ten months and hadn't touched it. "But what did I do that day?" After graduating, he was preoccupied with taking the university admissions exam. After his acceptance, knowing he was going away, he excitedly took care of the paperwork, merrily said goodbye to everyone, then took a train straight for Hanoi.

"Why didn't I say goodbye to the girl? No, I was about to, but it was getting too close to my departure date. I was rushed by my relatives. And intimidated by such an opportunity . . ."

And after that? A fresh environment; a strange city; life's frantic rhythm made him dizzy; bright lights; streetcars; the first parties where he felt awkward, provincial, out of place; teahouses; the blackboard in the classroom; new girlfriends . . .

"Eat the hot rice wafers, Uncle. It's aromatic in your mouth. In Hanoi, you don't get country treats like this." The old shopkeeper gave him a small rice

wafer. Its fluffy surface was speckled with golden sesame seeds—very appetizing. He broke off a small piece and put it in his mouth. It was a taste he had long forgotten about.

"I used to think rice wafers were the most delicious food on earth," he thought. He remembered studying at night, particularly nights when he had to memorize history and biology lessons—two damnable subjects when he was so hungry waiting for her footsteps near the fence that his mouth could taste the deliciously baked rice flour and the fatty sesame seeds . . . that taste and smell . . . and her wet eyes looking at him, as she rested her arms on the windowsill and smiled:

"I knew you were hungry, Brother. I get pretty hungry at night also. Mother told me to go into town tomorrow to buy cassava so we can have something extra to eat at night." The next day she brought him pieces of boiled cassava. At eighteen, eating them, he also thought her boiled cassava was the most delicious food on earth. Once, she gave him cassava wrapped in banana leaves. It was steaming hot. As he yanked his arms back, she grabbed both his hands and the hot cassava. She let go immediately, her eyes wide in astonishment. As for him, he was as dizzy as he had been that one holiday morning, when he had drunk too much sweet wine . . .

"I really did love her back then . . . I really did love . . ." Then why hadn't he gone back to that town to find her? Finished with his studies, he was assigned a job by the government. Then he had to apply for housing. Then he was involved with a female colleague. Life worries. There was a secret agreement then the marriage license. That was his wife, unattractive yet dogged in her pursuit of his love, who used every trick imaginable to make him yield to the harsh demands of necessity . . . And then what? Children. Problems at work. A promotion. Steps forward and backward. Years spent overseas to get a doctorate degree . . . Everything has to be tabulated.

"Is the wafer good, Uncle?" the old woman asked.

"Very good, Grandmother," he answered. Crumbs fell onto his knees and he brushed them off. The old hen came over, cluck clucking for her chicks to come pick the crumbs.

"Why didn't I look for her? Why did I . . . Well, I had to achieve, at all costs, the planning targets for operative 038 . . . And, to raise my kids, I had to teach to supplement my income. My daughters don't resemble me; they are like their mother, ugly, stuck-up . . . But do I love my wife? Probably not . . . Most likely not. I've never tangled because of that woman like I did years ago waiting for the sounds of the little girl's footsteps. Especially in the afternoon, with everyone gone, when she washed her hair—with her cheeks dripping wet and strands of hair nappy on her temples. As she dried her hair, one hand on the fence, she would smile because she knew I was secretly admiring her . . . As for my wife, there's never any suspense; I never look forward to seeing her, nor feel empty when we're apart. Back then, going home to get rice, how I anticipated seeing the little girl again, even after only a day . . . My wife needed a husband and she found me. As for me . . ."

This thought nearly drove him mad. He stood up abruptly. The girl fanning the fire stared at him, her eyes black as coal, a deep dimple on one cheek.

He paid the old woman and started walking toward the bus. He wanted to return to Hanoi immediately. He wanted to forget these thoughts . . .

But the bus wasn't fixed until 2 in the morning. They returned to Hanoi by dawn. He returned to his daily life, to his daily business and worries . . . The thoughts of the little girl never left him. They would circle back like the hands on a watch.

"Why didn't I go find her back then? I surely would have had a different wife. And who knows . . ." The little girl is thirty-eight now, but to him she's still fifteen. She is his true love, but why do people only find out these things twenty years later? He flicked the cigarette ashes into the fancy pink ashtray and watched the tiny embers slowly die. On the bed, his wife sleepily raised her head:

"Why are you up so late, dear? Are you admiring me?"

"Yes, yes, I'm admiring you," he answered, squashing the cigarette butt in the ashtray. His wife had just bought an embroidered dress from Thailand and had asked what he thought of it three times already.

"Go to bed, dear."

"I still have work to do."

"I wonder where the little girl is living now? What is she doing? Maybe I can take a bus there tomorrow. No, no, that's not possible." He saw clearly that to walk away silently twenty-three years ago was wrong. How could he possibly go back, when he had dismissed love so easily?

He retrieved the cigarette butt and lit it again. The ember returned to his lips.

A garden full of shades. Carambolas on the ground like fallen stars. And the smell of ripe carambolas. And her wet eyes. Her head tilted as she stood near the fence . . .

"But I was very shy then. I didn't dare to make any vow . . . Stop denying it—it is useless when it comes to love." He knew he had loved her and she had loved him, but he was impatient to get out of there because he was dazzled by his own prospects. During the last hectic days, he did brood over a petty calculation. He did plan to . . . but never realized it.

"It wasn't like that, because . . ."

"Sure it was."

"It wasn't like that . . ."

"Yes, and you can't be forgiven . . ."

He threw the cigarette butt into the ashtray and flopped into an armchair. The polyester-covered cushions weren't as comfortable as usual. He stood up again, went to the window and pushed the glass panes open.

"It's cold, honey," his wife shrieked.

He didn't turn around, but answered gruffly:

"Then use the blanket."

Many stars lit up the night sky. He suddenly smelled the scent of fresh

straw, of harvest. This familiar smell shrouded the neighborhood, a fragrance to stir one's soul. The poinciana flowers bloomed in the evening . . . Everything revived—vague, spurious, yet stark enough to make him bitter. His head was spinning.

He lit a second cigarette and slapped himself on the forehead.

"What is going on?"

There was no answer. Only a rising tremolo of rice stalks and leaves rustling. Again, the swirling sky over the crown of the carambola tree; her smooth, firm arms on the windowsill as she smiled at him. White teeth like two rows of corn. His love had returned, right now, within him. He walked unconsciously to the mirror. His hair had begun to gray. Lines were etched all over his cheeks. Behind the glasses, his eyes had started to become lifeless. He drew deeply on the cigarette then exhaled. The pale blue smoke billowed shapelessly, like the confusions in his life.

His report contained many interesting proposals and was very well received, a complete success. Both his bosses and rivals were equally impressed. He himself didn't know how he had managed to do it. All the endless nights, walking back and forth, watching smoke rise then evaporate, when he had thought of her. She, the object of his true love—a love not shared, not articulated, what does it all add up to? But these soothing, melancholic memories had kept him awake at night, and he had written his report during these late hours, as he tried to recover what had disappeared from his life.

At the conference, people were admiring the exhibits illustrating his proposals. He had succeeded almost completely. Even his enemies were congratulating him. He smiled, shook hands and thanked everybody before slipping out into the hallway. Alone.

His closest colleague ran out to find him. The man looked him in the eye and said:

"The newspaper photographers are waiting for you. What's wrong, Brother? Are you in love?"

"Me, in love?" he chuckled, then snapped, "Me, love?! Are you mad? Me still in love . . . a steel-and-cement man, a . . . and with my hair turning . . ."

He didn't finish his sentence, but rushed out the gate. He walked down a little lane. For some reasons, his eyes were stinging, as if smoke had blown into them. Where's that hamlet, that town? With pigeon coops and piles of straw in the yards. And poinciana flowers blooming in the evening sun. And the windswept rice paddies, with their ripe stalks rustling. And the harvested fields glowing, a soft pink, distant . . .

*Translated from the Vietnamese by Nguyen Nguyet Cam and Linh Dinh*

# An entry in the forthcoming Encyclopedia on Southeast Asian Literature

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by Nina McPherson

In the space of the last decade, Dương Thu Hương has become the most prolific, and the most widely-read Vietnamese novelist in the world. Although banned in her native Vietnam since 1991, Dương remains, by the breadth and quantity of her work – eight full length novels, half a dozen short story collections, poetry, essays, and film scripts – one of the most important and most influential voices of her generation. For the last three decades, Dương's journey from Communist war heroine and Party passionara, to become an outspoken dissident and internationally-acclaimed author has been dramatic and controversial. Having personally suffered or born witness to virtually every chapter of Vietnamese history since the country's independence, Dương Thu Hương's transformation from idealist to disillusioned critic informs all of her work.

Born in 1947 in the northern province of Thái Bình, Dương was strongly influenced by the example of her father, a Communist Party patriot with impeccable credentials who fought with Ho Chi Minh's guerrillas and was at the forefront of Vietnam's struggle for independence from French colonial rule. By her own account, Dương Thu Hương, had a happy, boisterous childhood as the eldest in a family of four children. Growing up in the countryside of the Red River Delta as the daughter of a teacher mother and a soldier father, the author remembers her earliest ambitions were not to be a writer, but to become a champion athlete. But at age 9, her traumatic witness to the horrors of the Maoist-style land reform campaign (1953-56) led by Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary government marked the first stage in her early vocation as a writer.

Dương would also later recall this period as her first premonition of her later disillusionment with the Communist experiment. The land reform, launched by the Viet Minh to gain support for their anti-French resistance, triggered waves of violence, and Dương has vivid memories of how terrified villagers were forced to denounce their "landlord" neighbours to political committees and makeshift "courts". By 1956, tens of thousands of villagers – some with only a few acres of land – had been arrested and nearly 100,000 "landlord" farmers were sent off to forced labour camps, or killed, their corpses left to rot on the sides of the road. (Dương would later chronicle her difficult coming of age in northern Vietnam and how the land reform shattered her family and childhood "paradise" in her novel, *Những Thiên Đường mù* (Paradise of the Blind, 1988). In this bildungsroman and story of a young North Vietnamese woman's coming of age, the protagonist Hang recounts how the land reform "ripped through the village like a squall, devastating fields and rice paddies, sowing only chaos and misery in its wake.")

In 1967, although still a gifted 20-year-old student at the Vietnamese Ministry of Culture's Arts College – she studied music, painting, and art - Dương Thu Hương volunteered to serve in a women's youth brigade on the front lines of "The War Against the Americans." Dương spent the next seven years of the war in the jungles and tunnels of the Central Highlands, the most heavily bombarded region of the war. Her mission was to "sing louder than the bombs" and to give theatrical performances for the North Vietnamese troops, but also to tend to the wounded, bury the dead, and accompany the soldiers along the perilous Ho Chi Minh trail. One of only four survivors of her brigade of over a hundred, Dương narrowly escaped death several times; she lost all hearing in her right ear when a bomb exploded, killing the girl sitting next to her. After Dương's first love was killed, she was forced into a marriage with a man she did not love in 1968, and she had two children with him. She gave birth to both her son Minh (1970) and her daughter Hà (1972) in the tunnels and air raid shelters of Quang Binh. Her daughter Hà was born during an American air raid, an event she fictionalizes, along with her experience as one of three survivors of her troupe in her deeply autobiographical *Tiểu thuyết Vô Đề* (Novel Without A Name) which is told from the point of view of a soldier ten years after he enlists as a naively patriotic eighteen-year old.

The central character of Dương's novel is platoon leader Quan, who has fought on the front lines for ten years, but who returns to his village on home leave in despair and deep disillusion. When Quan and his friends went off to war, "drunk on our youth....marching toward a glorious future," the mothers in the village wept, imaging how Vietnam had been "chosen by History", how the Party would create "humanity's paradise" when the war ended. But as Quan and his recruits plunge deeper into the war, they realize with horror that the war against the foreign invaders is in fact an interminable civil war: "the more the memory of the first day haunted us...we had renounced everything for glory. It was this guilt that bound us to one another."

Dương remembers her own disillusionment, at the end of the war, when she entered Saigon with the Northern "liberating" troops: "From the very beginning, I was among the first to enter the city of Saigon after April 30th 1975. And yet, as everyone around me turned to congratulate each other, I somehow felt no joy, only vague, sinister premonitions. For me, this glory was an illusion; only happiness was real to me. Bertolt Brecht was right when he wrote: "Woe to a people who give birth to too many heroes." With time, my vague premonitions became a reality. I believed that after victory was won, that our people, a people full of courage and innocence, who had suffered a million deaths, who had supposedly performed a glorious feat for humanity, would have everything they needed. Today, this same people must scramble for grains of rice in the mud, eke out a living on an annual income of misery, with a huge percentage of its population left handicapped by two rival armies."

Haunted by these "sinister premonitions" and her own growing disillusionment, even as one of the triumphant "liberators," Dương Thu Hương returned to Hanoi in 1977. She was immediately hired as a screenwriter at the Hanoi Fiction Film Studio, but was too critical, as she recalls, to remain long as "one of 600 employees writing Party propaganda films to glorify the war." In the late 1970s, while still an official screenwriter, Dương wrote a script called Đất của những dây trường xuân (Land of the Flowers of Eternal Spring) that was adapted as a satirical play. The play was banned by the censors and she first came into the public eye when she protested this censorship publicly. (Her criticism resulted in the first official ban on her work in 1982, and none of her short stories or plays were published for three years following.) During this same period, Dương wrote her first short story, Miền Cỏ Tơ ( Land of the Cotton Grass ) and the story was finally published in 1985 in a collection entitled Chân Dung Người Hàng Xóm (Portrait of My Neighbors).

By 1979, although a vocal critic of the Party, Dương's patriotism was still fervent. When China launched a frontier attack against Vietnam in that same year, she stepped forward and wrote anti-Chinese tracts and stories and was the first women screenwriter to volunteer to make films about the northern frontier battle. At the same time, however, she began distributing critical pamphlets and making public speeches expressing her disillusionment with the corruption and elitism of the Communist leadership.

Pressured by her colleagues, Dương nevertheless agreed to join the Party and the officially sponsored Writer's Union in the 1980s; she quickly became one of the most eloquent and outspoken advocates of the Party's 1986 decision to allow greater literary and intellectual freedom. At this time, Dương began to write short stories and novels that openly described the suffering, deprivation, and creeping disillusionment of average Vietnamese people under the Communist regime. As a veteran of the war and a Party member herself, Dương was in a unique position to speak out. With her cinematic training as a screenwriter, Dương was also a gifted storyteller whose cinematic plotting and hypnotically lyrical style made her stories and novels immensely appealing to readers of all ages. The novels she wrote during this period were enormously popular in Vietnam – *Chuyện Tình Kể Trước Lúc Rạng Đông* ( Love Story Told Before Dawn, 1981) a tale of the Party's intervention in the private lives of a mismatched couple who agree to divorce, sold 100,000 copies before it was withdrawn from circulation. (As in all of Dương's work, there was a large element of the autobiographical in Love Story; in 1981, already a prominent writer, Dương became a divorced, single mother like the heroine of her novel. After her colleagues at the Hanoi Fiction Film Studio publicly petitioned the government to press charges against her violent and abusive husband, Duong

was finally able to obtain a divorce, a defiant action which she undertook despite the decade-long opposition of her family.)

In 1986 Dương travelled to the Soviet Union as part of a delegation of screenwriters. This first trip abroad was another psychic shock to her image of Vietnam and her compatriots, as well as a new stage in her deepening disillusionment with the corruption and hypocrisy of the Communist Party. The author's ever darkening vision is clear in the scathing portrait of Communist officialdom that she paints in her novel *Paradise*. Set in the Soviet Union and Vietnam in the Eighties, the central character, Hang, is a "guest worker" in the Soviet, where she works to support her mother, a Hanoi street peddler, who has sacrificed her health and most of her money to advance her brother's career, now a corrupt Communist Party bureaucrat. When this uncle – once a leader in the murderous land reform – comes to Moscow on an official junket, he uses the trip to stockpile scarce material goods which he will shamelessly barter and resell when he returns to Hanoi.

From 1985 to 1987, her first novels *Itinerary of Childhood* (Hành trình ngày thơ ấu 1985) and *Beyond Illusions* (Bên Kia Bờ Ảo vọng, 1987) were again bestsellers, with over 120,000 copies sold. In 1986, however, Dương secretly undertook a private documentary film project - *Đai của những người niếm thật vọng Đên* (The Sanctuary Of Despair) – an exposé of a gulag-style psychiatric camp for 600-700 dissident war veterans in Tân Kỳ, Hà Tĩnh province. The film, which she financed with her own savings and contributions from supporters, was later destroyed by order of then Party Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh, who promptly began to refer to her in public speeches as "that dissident slut," an epithet which she still wears as a badge of honor and authenticity.

First championed and then vilified by the Communist leadership, Dương's career as a Party member was not surprisingly short-lived; Dương's outspoken criticism and speeches, her satirical play, the underground documentary film project, and finally the publication of her third novel *Paradise of the Blind* (1988) – which so scandalized Party officials by depicting the brutality and horror of the land reform that it was withdrawn from circulation – resulted in her expulsion from the Party in 1990. As with many events in her life, Dương cleverly managed to turn the Party's attempt to discredit and ostracize her to her advantage and the expulsion was ultimately widely-publicized and celebrated as a characteristically daring act of dissidence in itself. When Dương learned of the Party Secretary's decision to expel her, she demanded there be a democratic vote. When the controversial meeting of her 13-member party cell ended in a tie vote, Dương, who was present and still a cell member, cast the deciding vote - against herself!

In the years leading up to her expulsion, Dương recalls how she was considered "the darling of the regime" as she naively led Party-sponsored public debates debating democratic political reform. Beautiful, charismatic, and utterly fearless, Dương was openly courted by the anxious Party leadership, who attempted to co-opt her by offering her a spacious villa and a leadership position. Dương bluntly and publicly refused this attempt to silence her. Even as the Party began to crackdown on the very writers and intellectuals it had encouraged to speak out, she gave the keynote speech at the official Writer's Union Congress in 1989 that delivered a scathing outline of the stages of her disillusionment with Communism. Although Dương was fast becoming "a lone wolf" in Hanoi, in 1990 she embarked on a tour of the country, giving informal talks attended by thousands of students and intellectuals. At one such gathering, at the Intellectuals' Club in Saigon in April that year, she drew over a thousand fans. Already well-known as a popular novelist, these speeches earned her a reputation as a fearless orator and she began to gain recognition and a following among disaffected overseas Vietnamese intellectuals and journalists in France and the United States.

By July 1990, expelled from the Party, and no longer able to publish in Vietnam, Dương's excommunication was complete. In the fall of 1990, Dương sent the unpublished Vietnamese manuscript of her hastily titled *Tiểu Thuyết Vô Đề* (Novel Without A Name) to be published by small overseas Vietnamese publishing houses in France and the United States. In April 1991, she was arrested on trumped up charges of "stealing state secrets and selling them abroad to foreigners". Dương spent just over 7 months in solitary confinement in a high-security prison for political

prisoners before she was released on November 14, 1991, largely due to pressure from the French government and international human rights organizations, most notably Amnesty International. During her time in prison, the publication of *Novel Without A Name* – first in Vietnamese by a private overseas Vietnamese press in California, created an uproar. While she was in prison she was forced to write, under the eyes of her guards, a letter denouncing the anti-Communist preface to her novel, but she turned the essay – entitled “Tự Bạch” (“My Clarification”) – to her advantage, writing about the reasons that compelled her to write her novel and break the law by sending it abroad. When her interrogators refused to make the letter public – it was nevertheless widely read and circulated at the highest levels – Dương managed to leak the letter to the overseas Vietnamese press. The essay, which is one of the most powerful and direct indictments of the war ever written by a North Vietnamese war veteran, was a sensation among Vietnamese readers when it was first published in *Diễn Đàn Forum*, an overseas Vietnamese magazine in France and later in the influential literary review, *Hợp Lưu*, in the United States.

Dương’s seven-month imprisonment was a turning point, forging her resolve and transforming her from loyal critic into dissident, a lone woman warrior in a new battle against the regime itself. One of her interrogators in prison asked her why she even bothered speaking out at all; very few Vietnamese had ever heard of her, he observed, and if she were to disappear or die, within a week of her death she would be forgotten. She replied: “I am not like you. I don’t do what I do in order to be remembered. I oppose you because I want to, and it pleases me to oppose you. Earlier I volunteered against the Americans, against the Chinese, and now I am volunteering against you with the same force.”

The international outcry that led to Dương Thu Hương’s release in 1991 helped launch her as a novelist in the West, leading to the translation and publication of *Paradise of the Blind* (France 1991; US 1993) and the banned *Novel Without A Name* (France 1993, US 1995). Both works were widely acclaimed by the foreign press, especially in France, where both works were short listed for the Prix Fémina foreign category. In 1992, after the success of both novels in France and the United States, Dương was a recipient of the Hammett-Hellman grant, an award made to persecuted writers from the legacies of American left wing engaged writers Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett.

In the fall of 1994, Dương Thu Hương travelled to Paris - her first trip abroad since her imprisonment – where she became the first Vietnamese writer to become a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. That the award, given by then Minister of Culture Jacques Toubon, would be to honor a dissident whose works were banned in her home country, so angered the Vietnamese authorities that it provoked a diplomatic incident. The Vietnamese Ministry of Culture and Information announced that it was suspending all co-operation with the French government, and viciously denounced Dương as a traitor in the official press.

Dương Thu Hương declined exile in France, and returned to Vietnam in 1995, despite explicit threats from the government to block her return. When she did return, she was escorted off the plane by the police and her newly-minted passport was confiscated by the Ministry of the Interior, making it impossible for her to accept numerous invitations abroad. Despite heavy surveillance and constant harassment by the security police, Dương continued to write two more full-length novels – *Lưu Ly* ( *Memories of a Pure Spring*, published in France as *Myosotis*, 1998) and *Chốn Vắng* ( published in the United States as *No Man’s Land*, 2005, and in France as *Terre des oublis*, 2006). Unable to publish in Vietnam, she sent both these novels abroad, where they were first serialized in the California-based overseas Vietnamese literary magazine *Hợp Lưu* and then translated into more than a dozen European and Asian languages.