



HA BAO NGAN DONG

Colours and Memories of Us

My first love was painted with shades of magenta, cyan, and yellow, and tainted with nuances of red, blue, and green. Colours primarily shed light on how it bloomed and eroded. They add tones and tonalities to every second of its emotional fragments, and complement the oscillation between blame and shame in its aftermath. They also subtract the pain from my conscience years after its evaporation.

Colours fascinate me, not only because they make life more...colourful or because of the intricate science behind our perception of them, but also the things we associate with them, such as sounds, emotions, sensations, and symbolisms. Colour idioms endow languages with imaginative and discursive possibilities; it's usual to be "feeling the blues", or having a "yellow laugh" in an awkward situation in France. To "have a white heart" is a virtue in Arabic, and to "flow orange blood" may require a doctor's visit in Vietnam. There is something oddly universal about the ways in which humans have coded meanings and symbols for colours, despite cultural and linguistic differences.

Colours' wavelengths saturate my empirical world with alarms and triggers. A few years ago, I researched the politics of memory in "post"-civil war Lebanon, and although concepts such as "amnesia," "site of remembrance," "nostalgia," and "identity and memory" bore foreign flavours, they also sheltered a familiar feeling, like a *déjà-vu*, *déjà-su*, *déjà-vécu*.

In my mind, pictures and scenes just propel from memory cabinets, altogether catalysed by a familiar face, a place, a colour. Public places evoke a history, revive memories, and filter emotions; examining public sites is to contemplate ourselves, since they reflect us and how we tell our stories, akin to how statues and memorials unearth the stories of a society and nation. The comparison between my first love and the narratives and legacies of the Lebanese civil war is unfair, but in retrospect, the research project helped elucidate my thought processes. Lebanon's public sites of remembrance were transposed into my Montreal and Vietnamese landmarks in a different context; somehow, I was selectively crafting my own colourful politics of memory.

Fall (head over heels)

On my first day of Arabic, a tall silhouette cast shadow on my books as she passed by my desk. She displayed clumsy mannerisms, ramming into chairs



and tables, perhaps unintentionally. The bright wooden tiles would squeak as soon as the giant figure entered the room, disrupting my reading and causing me to put my earphones on to avoid further irritation. My annoyance at the furniture-bumping peaked one day, and I decided to glare at the culprit. Dumbstruck, I fell in love with the maladroit, blue-eyed person, whose name I later learnt was Blair.

Her eyes intrigued me particularly, but since we sat on opposite ends of the row, I failed to introduce myself. She never smiled and looked hung over every morning, yet her unfriendly veneer seemed to have shrouded a tantalising charm.

Our first conversation occurred after our first Arabic test and she left an agreeable impression. Laughter sprinkled on the asphalted paths of McGill's campus as our friendship grew. We bonded over our unfavourable opinion of the Islamic Law professor, and attended the festival of lamentations in our boring Canadian Politics course.

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Facing McLennan library's ugly gray concrete wall, we exchanged some of our favourite artists. I introduced her to *Sleeping at Last*, and she showed me the *Head and the Heart* and told me about seeing them live in Maine. That January evening suddenly felt warmer in contrast to the koala-gray wintery mood that had set itself in motion.

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The bone-piercing cold of February set my craving for spicy food alight, so I invited Blair and our mutual friend, Sharon, to Chand Palace in Parc-Extension. The next thing I remembered was crashing at Blair's house, musing on the red amber hops of *Maudite* beer, and singing *Daughter's Youth* until our throat hurt.

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It was a snow-white blizzard day in March. Studying in Redpath library, she presented to me Angus and Julia Stone's *Big Jet Plane* and Brandi Carlile's *The Story*, asserting that I would like these songs. Rewinding to this day, I just chuckle at her Brandi Carlile obsession on Instagram.

Fall (through)

As radiant Spring started closing the curtains on Winter, I began gathering up my courage. For my Arabic presentation, I talked about Halifax and read



aloud a poem drafted on the shores of the Atlantic ocean during my visit of the sea-side metropolis. In this public declaration of love, I conjugated Blair in foreign rhymes and unknown verses, hoping she could read my heart through telepathy. I scanned the room for her eyes, but the silence and the curious looks from my classmates left me shivering and red-faced.

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In Molson stadium's dimly lit carpark, I handed Blair a booklet wrapped in turquoise gift paper. "Just read it when you're home," I smiled tiredly after our Arabic exam on a cool April night.

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A week after my confession poetry, feeling like I had made a mistake, I reached her on WhatsApp to ask if everything was alright.

"So, I read everything. I read it all," the first line of her message delivered. "But I don't think I have the capacity to reciprocate..."

The corner of my eyes blurred the phone's screen and inky colours spilled into brighter ones all over my heart.

Fall (in love)

I continued chasing rainbows at dusk and blacking out at dawn, praying that she would change her mind.

On the first of June, Blair, Sharon, and I had Moroccan food at Salon Mogador, where the aromas of terra-cotta tajines took our breath away. We walked to my flat afterwards for a few drinks and I flaunted some of my angsty teenage poems. Sharon left around midnight, and I had the brilliant idea of making Blair watch *Grave of the Fireflies* on this cheerful evening.

No sooner had the credits rolled than Blair did something once in a blue moon. Beneath my lime green string lights, she gave me the green light with her nervous kiss, leaving me flabbergasted. My vision of love through rose-coloured glasses finally came true: someone loved me back! Our love blossomed in an orchard full of ash-turned roses, where we loved all things bright and beautiful to dust. I whispered to her that we would be ablaze; that we would be as dark as the pubescent sun, as bright as charcoal tar.

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The next few days, Blair needed a new place for the rest of June. After our summer Arabic class, we hopped on our bicycles and visited house after house in the Plateau. The nascent, yet intense heat radiated above us and forced us to cool down at the pastel pink shop of L'Armoire à Glaces. Our talk swayed between her laughing at Turkish Duolingo and my eagerness to learn the language. On the other side of Saint-Hubert, I pointed at Renaud-Bray's bright yellow sign that enticed us into its bookworms' heaven.

On the way to my flat, Blair rode through all the red lights and stop signs, and almost ran over a pedestrian crossing the street. *Is this a red flag?* I joked to myself.

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The deeper in love I fell, the more I exalted Blair. Similar to the summer days that were hotter than blue fire, my heart set itself ablaze in its steamy attire. Our trio of friends often took refuge underneath tanned bur oak trees and lay down on the sun-bleached grass of Parc Jarry, where laughter and chit-chats rendered the sky's colour from lazuline into lilac and ultimately ebony.

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Poetic encomium about Blair flooded my Instagram profile, yet my beloved's identity remained invisible. My plume claimed to have worshipped a mystical goddess whose glamour would not wither. My colourful verses and hopeless rhymes conspired against me to love her, and I wrote to be loved.

"Can you not post that? I don't feel comfortable," my screen buzzed with Blair's request.

"I'm sorry! I will take it down!" I grabbed a red pencil in a hurry.

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I would ask Blair "Am I seeing pink elephants?" to confirm that this *whole thing* was real. I wanted to know why she had rejected me in the first place and later came around. My insecurity slithered down my spine in the absence of clarification. In truth, we never acknowledged this *whole thing* as a formal relationship; it was in a perplexing gray zone.

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In late June, Sharon brought us to a salsa bar on Saint-Denis. My giggles coalesced with the place's spinning lavender and violet lights, and emerald Stella Artois bottles and translucent vodka cocktails summoned the inner child in me.



I felt like an idiot around Blair all along, for I was convinced of my nonexistent dancing skills, yet something about this obscure bar and its hypnotising disco lights kept me moving.

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That sunny July morning before Blair's trip home, we sluggishly made our way to Barbounya on avenue Laurier for a delightful Turkish brunch. As we settled down, a vivid palette of culinary arts embraced us: light amber honey swirled beautifully with creamy white kaymak; flamenco-dyed strawberry jam interweaved gracefully with tangerine apricot jam; and cardinal purple olives, golden brown toasts, and medium-roast coffee blended harmoniously on the darker side of the gastronomic canvas. Adorned with light brown heartwood tables and stools, the airy terrace sheltered us from the harsh heat of mid-summer.

Following the fulfilling meal, we strolled towards Laurier's east end. I asked Blair if we could hold hands, but she bluntly said no. The moment we reached Place du Côtéau-Saint-Louis to take the Orange line, she suddenly grabbed my face and kissed me, to the symphony of street pianist and quivering green tree leaves. *This gal is confusing*, I thought to myself.

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We were in a *de facto* long-distance "relationship" for the first two weeks of July. It felt strange to have a border separating us, but hearing her voice on the phone amidst the Fourth of July's festivities drew a smile on my face. She sent me pictures and videos of the celebration in her hometown in Maine, tinted with crimson fireworks and saffron flames.

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Our plans destined us to meet up shortly after, and our sun-shined summer romance went continental. On my vivid cerulean Honda scooter, we stared into one of the rearview mirrors and snapped a picture of our goofy faces in the chaotic Hanoian traffic. The next few days, we escaped to somewhere in between the brown mud of monsoon season and the depressing smoky gray clouds to esquisse each other's body with strokes of our pale fingers in paradise. Mai Chau's tussock stilt houses blended grandly in the contrasted landscape of mossy green mountain tops dotted with transparent rain.

I questioned Blair about her change of heart in our hotel's bar to the orchestra of crickets' chant, raindrops, and sizzling platinum-hued gin and tonic.

"Why did you kiss me that night?" I prompted.



Blair gave me an uncomfortable look and smile. My heart beat rhymed with the sound of rain falling upon the citrine palm leaf roof in anticipation to her response.

“I thought I didn’t have the capacity for love,” she sighed. “I was looking for someone my type...”

“Your type?” My eyebrows raised.

She emitted an aura of embarrassment and perturbation. “You know... Someone kinda like me, with my height... Feminine...”

“Okay,” I bobbed my head around in confusion.

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Although the menace of monochromatic black hole would dilute her divine image, I wished I had been hallucinating when I was hers. But then, my life would have been an illusion, and so would she. A dusted silhouette that had tarred my arms, turned my heart as black as skillet, and sold my soul on the black market. She was my Time Keeper and Destroyer, my Magical Muse, whilst I was merely a scarlet woman – I used to identify as a woman, but not anymore – for phantom touches of her hues and brushes of her love. And yet, the shades and contour of my dearest’s ghost were still not enough.

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Blair spent the rest of the summer completing an internship in Indonesia. Meanwhile, I returned to Montreal after the “honey moon” in my motherland. She was a daydream away, maybe too far away, and distance gradually splattered waves of ambiguous colours between us. I was green with envy over her adventures on the other side of the globe, whereas I was stuck with a disappointing summer job, babysitting children instead of tutoring them at a local language school.

Fall (apart)

Our August conversations were mostly one-sided. My anxiety splashed all over my love letters as Blair was considering going on exchange in Jordan. In a panic, I asked her if she would be gone forever, just to be dazzled by the capri “message read” indicator.

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My mental state started declining and September ushered in the preschool rush. We broke up on WhatsApp underneath my bittersweet lime green string lights. My heart was black and blue, and I made her cry on the other side of the faintly lit screen.

In actuality, I made her sail under false colours at the tempestuous sea of delusions whilst unveiling my true colours. I had put her down in black and white and lent colour to her tale in my purple prose, just to tickle myself pink until I planted a colourless flag; just to be as white as a sheet offering her a silver platter; just to be blindfolded by a shadowy figure with a blank face. Another daydream in my sobering moment and mourning phase.

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I plowed through September sobbing alone. My rationality receded just as I endured insanity under Dionysos's spell. I pushed Blair away and wanted to cease our friendship, to her utter devastation. What could I do, when my life was an intolerable gradient of sorrow and heartache? I could barely function, and numbness crawled under my skin like an agonising parasite. I stopped taking medication for my illness to let the emotions overcome me. I was hoping to *feel something* from the polychromatic catalogue fluctuating from depression to mania and anything else in between. And to erase this anguish, I tried focusing on Arabic and completing my Lebanon research. But distraction was not a cure; I was simply repressing my misery to stay alive.

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The early chills of October dashed upon my shoulders. Sharon and Blair dragged me to Trois-Brasseurs at the corner Sainte-Catherine and McGill College to paint the town red on my birthday. The taste of our mutually loved red amber beer didn't inspire me anymore, and my morose aloofness was the opposite of what Blair and Sharon had expected.

Later, a friend of ours, Reiko, joined the party and babbled about her recent contact with her ex-boyfriend. When she mentioned the prospect of them reconnecting, my knees accidentally touched Blair's as she was sitting in front of me. Our cheeks turned rosy and I knew she could read my mind.

The supper concluded and our group parted ways. Sharon and Reiko took the Green line whilst Blair and I sauntered to the campus to retrieve our bicycles. Seeing my inebriety, Blair suggested we grab tea at Starbucks and sober up at Carré Saint-Louis for what was left of the evening. The caramel-hued peach tea tasted like cough syrup and I burnt my tongue at the first sip.



“When our knees touched... It sent me right back to when we were in Hanoi...,” I sighed.

“I know,” Blair exhaled.

“And when Reiko talked about her and her ex potentially getting back together, I just...,” my voice started shaking.

“Do you think we can have a physical relationship?” Blair suggested.

“No! I love you, I want you. But not just that!” I grimaced.

Choking on the lump in my throat, I felt incapable to sustain this fruitless talk as silence filled up the opaque nocturnal air.

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About a fortnight later, the undergraduate students’ association – in which Blair partook – of my unit organised a wine and cheese event. I was reluctant to show up, for alcohol had taken residence in my daily routine as a coping mechanism and I would be spouting nonsense with it flowing in my bloodstream. But knowing Blair would be there, I entertained the idea of seeking her comforting eyes at the expense of my mental soundness. Like a moth seduced by a flaming incandescent light.

I allowed inexpensive deep ruby Cabernet Sauvignon and pale gold Chardonnay control me for the evening. When Blair checked up on me, I had already sunk into an armchair, observing the event’s participants and glancing at my ex-lover.

“What’s up?” She sat down next to me.

“I love you, you know? I really do,” I vociferated in the deafening room just for Blair to hear. My breath smelled like rot and cheap booze.

Blair gave me a poker-face smile that was full of pity and mockery, refusing to look at me.

Fall (out)

On white Christmas Eve, after a long night of drinking and crying, I opened WhatsApp to admit to Blair that I hadn’t really loved her, that I had been faking my feelings for her all along.

“Why are you telling me this? Why now? Why?” the pixelated screen read.



The next morning, I woke up to a heavy dose of regret and aching in my brain.

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I composed a lengthy apology for my impulses. A few weeks later, she was packing her bags for the Jordan exchange programme. Before her flight, I rushed out of my class and slipped on brown slush just to wish her safe travels.

“I miss you,” I mumbled over the phone, standing in front of the room in Arts building where memories of the wine and cheese were long lost.

“Me too...,” she hesitated.

“Please stay in touch and give me news some time.”

* * *

I sat on my snow-coated balcony, barefoot and poorly clothed. A cigarette in one hand, a beer bottle in another. There was something so serene about February flurries and the pitch-dark streets at eleven o'clock in the evening, yet so desolate and menacing at the same time.

I opened our WhatsApp chat and shared details of my deteriorating mental condition, of how little joy I felt about Arabic, and how difficult it was to survive another day in the abyss of despondency. Blair was my *only* lighthouse.

“Your negativity is contagious!” Blair retorted to my quasi-suicidal thoughts.

Eyes damp from the words she left, I plummeted through the cracks of lifelessness. She damned me for having sought her support at my worst. I wanted her to comfort me and hold me even though we were apart, even though we were already over.

I was looking for solace, but I came to the wrong place and the wrong person. It was all my fault; for having nurtured this love, for having pursued this hubris, for having clung onto her.

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March poured scorn all over my face as I registered myself for a crisis appointment at my university's Psychiatric Services. Disconcerted by my suicidal ideation, the psychiatrist called an ambulance and explained that the clinic



couldn't deal with "cases like mine." She then ordered me to sit at a corner and disappeared. Somehow, the police got involved and escorted me, at first to the back of their car to gather some personal information, and then into the ambulance vehicle for a colourless ride to the General Hospital.

My phone fizzed with Blair's apologies after she had learnt of my hospitalisation from Sharon. It took me a month to recollect my mental strength to tell Blair that she had done nothing wrong and I was trying to get better, albeit no recovery path was in the horizons. I begged my mind to stop fixating on death, and instead reviving my child-like elation at learning Arabic, or feeling passion for my internship at the Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East organisation. My life was so achromatic that I felt nauseous just existing.

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Spring's discreet rays brought forth enlightenment and I decided to quit drinking. My undergraduate studies ended and leaving school was just a formality. The day after my convocation, I packed my bag and embarked on a six-hundred-kilometre bicycle trip to Quebec City and back. It was liberating to dedicate my poetry to something else on the road other than Blair.

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In September, I came back to the familiar hallways of my department to attend a panel on Palestinian children. No sooner had I entered the room than Blair turned around; we locked eyes awkwardly and I greeted her with a deadpan expression.

Absorbed by anger and bitterness, I saw red instead of blue for the first time. I thought I had mastered my pain, but it only took an eye contact with my ex-lover for the progress to nullify. Then, there was a strange mixture of confusion and regret; I had already completed my Lebanon research and had it published by Columbia University's Journal of History. The fruit of my intellectual labour should have borne witness to my growth as person. Rather, I still hadn't learnt anything when it came to my life, for I treated the work as a mere distraction from my longstanding chaos and tragedy.

(No matter how the dice) Fall(s)

I reckoned I would never see Blair again. To my surprise, a familiar face in blue denim and black Blundstones in the Islamic Studies library spotted me in a September afternoon of 2019.

"Hey," the familiar face smiled.



My heart skipped two beats. “H–Hey,” I faked my politeness, rushing towards the exit in a panic with my friend.

“Well... That was awkward...,” I exhaled as soon as we were outside.

“Are you okay?” My friend asked.

“Uh... No!!!”

I would meet the same blue eyes later that day at a Noura Erakat talk in Chancellor Day Hall, and eventually at a Sara Ahmed conference in Stewart Bio in the span of two weeks. We had always had similar interests and frequented the same circles, so running into each other was inevitable.

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On a chilly October night, just a few days after the Sara Ahmed event, I strolled to Club Soda in the Red Light district to attend Mashrou’ Leila’s concert. Under the tuscan-sun gleam of fatigued lamp posts, I saw her in the dark right in front of me. We walked into the unilluminated venue without even acknowledging each other’s presence.

That was the last time my dark brown eyes collided with her Atlantic blue eyes.

(The scales) Fall (from my eyes)

Reminiscing through the kaleidoscope of my childhood, I used love my grandma’s multicoloured tear-away calendar. Always excited about the future, I even ripped away the current day in anticipation to the day after. Nowadays, I look forward to my past and rethink my experiences, especially this first love and those red-letter days with Blair kept in the dark from almost everyone.

The past is a foreign land with familiar flavours, and this failed first love is a blueprint for my vision of romantic relationships. It has taught me to harden my skin and question popular tropes plaguing our love culture. It has also led me to take a vow of celibacy. For now.

Analogous to Lebanon’s quasi-absence of post-war reconciliation and dialogue, my ex and I never discussed our expectations over the course of our fleeting romance, nor reached any closure after our separation. If we don’t sincerely communicate, how can we understand the other’s perspective, for we are not alone in our remembrance? How to break the cycle of blaming the other



and blaming ourselves if all we have is our side of the story? How can we accept the responsibility for having hurt the other to attain our self-fulfilling prophecies? How do I redefine my identity apart from my stained canvas of traumas and interpersonal failures?

Occasionally, I stop thinking about myself and wonder what had happened to Blair that shackled her to communication and commitment issues; what kind of traumas, whether she was aware of them or not, had moulded her into the Blair I knew. She sporadically joked about being a psychopath when we tried talking about emotions, and although I'm not a psychologist, her self-deprecation could have been symptomatic of something unresolved in her conscience. In the end, emotional vulnerability was one of Blair's sides that her stern pigmentation excelled at disguising.

Trapped in a constant state of limbo and numbness, trauma made my life go backwards and time collapse in my mind. To break free from this temporal, spatial, and emotional emptiness, I had to confront my wounds and see myself in a new light. Through a system of signs and ideas, my memory had braided an illusion of timelessness of past events relevant to my existence and identity. I thereby (re)constructed my present self in relation to my past, giving meaning to each memory to justify my choices. My selective use of symbols and memories is a testament to my internal struggle; a tug-of-war between amnesia and nostalgia.

As I embarked on my therapeutic journey, I grew receptive to the idea of self-made closure, for never had I thought that I could seek validation from myself. I needed to widen my visual field and abridge my story at the same time. I needed a cleaner slate to refract my perspective on myself and my experience.

My turning the page on Blair mirrors the collapse of phenomenal places with sentimental significance. Barbounya closed down a year after our breakup, whereas Salon Mogador has shown no vital sign since the lockdown measures of late 2020. Bodies and litter have left imprints on our spot at Parc Jarry, where I have unceremoniously commemorated ghostly giggles and phantasmal smiles once in a while. I no longer experience these places and their intrinsic colours the way I used to; sometimes, I smile at their vanishing grace; other times, I relive the pins and needles by staring at myself in the glass windows; though most of the time, indifference and gratitude are my sole greetings, like a type of colour-blind repose, perhaps a silver lining.

The sadness has never left, though; it has simply become less unbearable. Beneath the primary colours I have exhumed bitter nostalgia, and within the secondary colours I have inhumed sweet amnesia. I experience(d) colours and memories not as they are and were, but as I was, as I am, as I become. Through the iridescent dialectic between nostalgia and amnesia, colours have helped me



mourn and move on. And all the vanishing sites of memories will always be my communion, and colours my healing prayers.

This is the story of my first love that I choose to tell and remember. A *clair-obscure* portrait of Blair and I. A nuanced gaze at my past and I.



BIOGRAPHY

Ha Bao Ngan Dong is a graduate student at the McGill Institute of Islamic Studies. Their non-academic writings have appeared in The McGill Daily and at the “L’Amour is Love” exposition, whilst their academic publications can be found in the Columbia Journal of History and Michigan Journal of History. A non-binary queer Vietnamese person occupying the unceded territory of Tiohtià:ke on Turtle Island, Ha spends their pastime hoarding knowledge and decolonising their mind.