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Interview with Kao Kalia Yang

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Kao Kalia Yang

18 January, 2008 – Center for Hmong Studies, St. Paul, MN

Interviewer/Transcriber/Editor – Paul Hillmer



*Kao Kalia Yang was born in Ban Vinai refugee camp and came with her family to Minnesota in July 1987, when she was six years old. Attending school in St. Paul and graduating from Harding High School, Yang was accepted at Carleton College in Northfield, MN, and went on to earn an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Columbia University. In 2008 Coffee House Press published her memoir, *The Latecomer*, which tells the story of her family in Laos, the refugee camps of Thailand, and their new life in Minnesota. Central to this story is Yang's grandmother, who embodies the way of life her family left behind and the culture and identity to which they all hold. Along with her mother and her sister Der (Dawb), Ms. Yang established *Words Wanted*, a business designed to help immigrants with writing, translating, and business services.*

(0:03) We'll start with the obvious stuff: your name, please.

My name is Kao Kalia Yang.

And you were born when?

December 17, 1980—although officially I'm December 15, 1980.

How close do you think that is to your actual birthday?

My mom says it's definitely the 17th, and my dad says, 'I forgot, and so it was two days off when it came time to do the papers!' [Both laugh] So for the most part, the 17th works.

Outstanding.

Mm-hmm.

Where were you born?

I was born in Ban Vinai refugee camp.

(0:34) And what are your earliest memories of life in that camp?

My earliest memories of life in that camp...

Yes, and obviously there are many aspects to your life in the camp, but just anything—I always just like to start with those things that are just sort of shadowy in the past—

Shadowy in the past...

—that still sort of—

I remember pink grass.

Pink grass!

Pink grass during the dry season when the hills all dried up. They were these tall stalks, and they would turn pink, because they had these fuzzy little feather-like tops. They would wave in the wind. I remember that. I remember looking up—because we lived in a compound with really tall trees, so I remember those trees had these cherries—small. You could try to eat them, they were a little

sweet, but they were really nothing. I remember the dogs, the hungry dogs were always running around, and I was scared of them. I remember the adults, everybody [Pauses] I remember only my grandma had keys—nobody else had keys in the compound. And I always thought, ‘What does she have to lock in this place? I remember flip-flops—lots of flip-flops, lots of dust, lots of—lots of sky. I remember sky and I remember heat, and I remember sweat. I remember my hairs sticking to the back of my neck. I had really short, fine brown hair. And I remember being held always. You know, my hand was always held. I don’t remember it being free in that place. But I don’t remember wanting it to be free, which is rare for children, ‘cause you want to be free and you want to grow up, but I remember being always taken care of in this place. I remember death, lots of dying, lots of crying, lots of drums beating and my heart—you know, the minute I would hear the drums beating, immediately the pacing of my heart would match. I don’t know how that works. It’s like the internal cell or something that I program into my system, but I remember that. I remember [Pauses] my mom’s miscarriages, I remember my dad looking handsome in this place. I remember [Pauses] I remember having young parents, which is strange. I don’t remember—I remember bathing. I love water, so all the memories of water—this little open canal that I thought was a river for the longest time, and then I found out that it was just outdoor sewage. [Both laugh] In my head, I swear it was a river, especially after the rains. People went looking for tadpoles in that river, but for me, I thought there could be dragons there, so maybe the tadpoles were deceptive, so... I remember these things like images, with sounds. Kind of nice.

(3:13) It seems to me, between watching your film and reading the manuscript for your book, that Ban Vinai is—I don’t think there’s any ‘seems to me’ about it, it’s true that Ban Vinai is a very special place in your memory and that it represents many different things for you: things about your family, about your way of life. How would you—and this could be a whole discussion, I’m sure—

[Yes]

How would you begin to help someone like me and other people who might read this later understand the importance of Ban Vinai in your memory and your sense of who you are?

When I think about it, homes—when we think about homes, especially in this country, I remember being here and reading books and being told that homes are bricks. The story of the Three Little Pigs—the brick home lasted the longest. And to know that my home was never meant to last, that it was a series of bamboo walls placed together to house some people for a time, and that when the seasons changed that these things would fall down and they would never rise again, it’s powerful stuff. And I think because right now there are so many refugees all over the world. And it doesn’t matter that I’m a refugee from Southeast Asia, when I say I’m a refugee, somebody else grew up in a tent in Africa says ‘I’m a refugee, too.’ And we share the fact that our homes were never meant to last, and there’s this need to remember. Because I think if you live in a place, and it becomes a part of who you are, and if you it longer existed, does it mean that who you were never was? And this is the thing that I am so scared that my mom and dad, my aunts and uncles, all these older people—and then the younger ones, too, the ones who would be born far after, what they wouldn’t get, because it’s such a fundamental truth. You know, especially for the Hmong, we don’t believe in the security of place, and yet it’s this thing that we want more than anything. So it’s a contradiction. It’s a part of my identity, and I think it’s a fact of life. It’s a sad fact of life, but it’s a fact of life that can make us better human beings.

[Marlin Heise enters the Center, recorder is turned off. New track begins]

(0:08) So let's—I mean, there are so many different things we could discuss about Ban Vinai and about your experiences, but let's start with your family.

OK.

You already said you remember having young parents.

Yes.

What other memories do you have of your life with your family, and, of course, with your grandmother, who I came to know through your book?

You know her very well. You know her better than so many. [Interviewer chuckles] I think I was the second daughter in a family that would only have two daughters in the interim at Ban Vinai refugee camp. I was the baby. I remember—you know, in America there's a term where they say, 'There's the snob from the projects.' [Interviewer chuckles] In some sense I think it's almost applicable. I look at these photos, and everybody's dirty. My feet are really dirty, but usually I have on these dresses, really cheerful dresses. And I know that my mom spent her days selling sweet tapioca dessert so I could have these dresses. And I don't remember ever saying I wanted one; I just remember—you may be looking, and then maybe you see me later the dresses in the room or in my hands. So it's a very privileged existence, and I think even—it's hard to believe that, 'cause—and it's hard for me to rationalize in some sense, because I knew there were children who were so poor, who were so much less privileged, but I was always rich in love, and in all of these people who wanted to take care of me, because they couldn't take care of themselves, intellectually, emotionally, educationally, so they wanted to take care of me. And my grandma, who had never been to school, she tells me all these stories—and now I realize in the hopes of giving me an education that I could have—because I couldn't touch my ears—the classic test of whether you're ready for school or not. [Interviewer reaches over his head and touches his right hand to his left ear.] Exactly. So she was trying to give me this education, and my mom and dad were trying to raise this little girl when, I think, maybe in their hearts, they were always ready to raise a son. And so, in the midst of raising this little girl, they gave me all of the things that they would have given a son—my sister and I—which is to say confidence to go into the world and do something. It was only for a while, and then one day we would leave this place, and I would have to do things. And these things would go beyond my gender or my height or the size of my feet. All of these things are really evident. You know, I have seven uncles and two aunts, and the aunts were already—one was in France, and one was already in the US—in California. But all my seven uncles lived in this compound with me. And I have all of these aunts and all of these cousins, and for me it was a time when we were all really together, together in this place. And every day was like the next, so time—it moved really fast and it moved really slow. As a kid, I think you realize this, even as—you know, every day I see my father and my uncle sitting on the patio talking about the past. They were afraid to talk about the future. Only when there was news or there was pressure to think about America or resettlement did they talk about the future. There was a recognition there that life could go on, but it was all about the war, and all about these people who had died before me and I would never get to meet. And so I lived in a world, I think, where family was—people were around me alive, but family was also the ones who were dead, or the one uncle who was in Laos who wasn't really like—who was more their cousin and brother by relation, but he lived and grew up with them. And he was the wisest one, and he was the most intelligent one, he was the kindest one. And he was the one that I would never get to meet. And so that's the kind of family I grew up with, right? One that was around me, one that wasn't. That was me.

(3:52) How do you think the stories that you heard as a child shaped your understanding of what happened to your family and the Hmong people in Laos? What kinds of things were you hearing about?

I think the games, as much as the stories shaped. ‘Cause they were always playing—and I call it Viet Cong, but it’s really the North Vietnamese army. I call it Viet Cong because I was educated here about the Vietnam War, and we only fought the Viet Cong, we didn’t fight the North Vietnamese army so much. But we were always playing, and there was always a North Vietnamese person chasing a Hmong person, and there was always that. Or we talked about the river that was not too far away; a big, big river that I couldn’t imagine, because the only river I knew was the sewage canal. And so they talked about this huge river that was houses and houses wide, and all of the Hmong people that drowned in that river. And they talked about this jungle, and all I had of the jungle was the trees in the compound. It’s so funny how my world was so limited, and yet all of these things and these places they were taking me to were so foreign, but I felt like I knew, ‘cause I said if that was a river and this is the river I know, OK, then imagine this river wider. Imagine the tadpoles bigger or if this is what one tree looks like, then imagine trees and trees and trees and trees. So in my head it was really elaborate, because I could know these places. My imagination made up for them, and I think this shaped so much of what I would become and who I am as a person. But it teaches me magic, the magic of imagination, going beyond walls, walls that people can’t see holding us in, because there was nothing holding us in in Vinai—I mean, there was no wall, no physical thing, but we were held in. And so parameters and limits and what a people could do and what a people have done and what a people would die doing. I think if I was—if it was inside of me, I feel like I’ve always known, but I know there must have been a moment of knowing, I just don’t remember. Because none of these things strike me as surprising. None of these things impressed me overmuch, or amazed me, which is kind of—‘cause sometimes I live in these stories, and I see them every day, and people say, ‘Oh my God, is that real? That’s amazing!’ And I say, ‘Is it?’ And I have to re-think, and I have to humble myself again, because what you have here is a really fractured, I think, kind of existence.

(6:30) Tell me more by what you mean by that: a fractured existence.

A fractured existence. So we have the little girl who comes to America thinking that she can—that in dust there are worlds, ‘cause they float and they’re glittery. Dust is glittery. And dust is beautiful. And here, dust causes allergies, and a rainbow is a dragon—no a rainbow is just moisture reflected in sunlight. Airplanes are iron birds—no, they’re just airplanes. So I understand; I know what I want to believe. I know the world, the parameters of the believing world around me, and I jump between those two chasms. And for me, it’s a fracture, but it’s only a fracture that reminds me that it’s there. It’s not an impossible chasm or a leap. So it’s only a fracture, because I’m not broken. In a thousand ways, I’m not broken. But I know where the lines are and where the scars are, because it’s got—maybe once upon a time it was broken, but now that I think it’s healed, there are these things that I look at and I see and I recognize where the chasms, where the leaping needed to be. And it’s not just in me, it’s in all the people around me, like my mom and my dad, who are more broken than I am by necessity, by time. They’re older. Maybe by the time I am their age I will be a little—I’m hoping to be less broken, but maybe I will be more so. Who knows?

(7:59) Well...Yeah, it’s hard to say. I mean, they certainly went through a lot of things that, with any luck, you will not have to, but...

There’s all kinds of broken.

Are you saying—I just want to make sure that I'm understanding this—that in a way you sort of ignored the fractures in your life and simply allowed your imagination to fill in the chasm that existed between them, and that this is where this imagination and this creativity came from, do you think?

No, not ignoring. It’s impossible to ignore the guy with the gun. [Both laugh]

Well, yes.

It's impossible to ignore the lines that you knew were there, because I think I'm a very careful person in this way; I'm very careful with the people I love. And so I remember trying to protect them as a kid. They were holding my hand, but there was a sense that I was also holding them on to something. Or I was held in a lap, but there was also a feeling, an acknowledgment that they were also holding on to me. And I think this kind of awareness began early on. It's not ignoring, but it's allowing me to believe so the people around me can believe. Or knowing the things, but believing that this isn't it. Because people need to believe, especially people you love. In order to teach you love, they have to keep on believing. And I think I know this. It's a lesson that some kids, I think, are born with, and it's a lesson that some kids have to learn. But I think I was very lucky. I learned it young, so it came very naturally.

(9:32) One of the other things I remember from your book, and I think will take a parallel track with some of the other things you said, is that you said you remember a lot of miscarriages for your mother.

Yep.

And that you also remember your father taking you to various places to meet other women, that there was a suggestion within the family that if your mother couldn't provide your father with a son that maybe he needed to look elsewhere. What is that like as a young child, seeing these kinds of things—certainly within a culture that tolerates, or even in some cases encourages polygamy, but still, as a child, this has to be a very odd, even disturbing thing to witness.

It is, and only on me, because I was too young to understand the male-female relationship. I only understood it as a relationship, a question on love and loyalty. So I was really loyal to my mom, which means I was really jealous of every other woman he saw, and they were never really good enough to be my mom. And then I also understood his loneliness, in some sense—and spiritual loneliness, because he really believed that if he died without a son, that his spirit would go on walking the earth forever. And after all the years of walking through this jungle—and I knew he had done so, I didn't want him to wander anymore. I think it was—I tested the power of imagination and faith, right. If I could have been—if I could wake up a son, the next day, I would have, in a jiffy, in a heartbeat. But I know that if that was possible, my sister would have awoken a long time ago as a son, and it would have never fallen on to me! [Interviewer chuckles] 'Cause that's the kind of personality she had and the kind of initiative she would have taken. But you know, you wake up the next morning and you don't know what it means to be a girl, what it means to be a boy. If it—you know, when my dad's combing my hair, he's really gentle. My uncles didn't comb the hair of their sons. So you know that you are still a girl. And when we walked around this place, I don't think—I didn't allow myself to believe, and to this day I don't know if I believed that he was really looking, 'cause he would have found. My father is not the type of man to go looking and not find. And I knew this about him. And I knew that my mom, if she thought for a minute that he would have found, if he was really looking, she wouldn't have stayed around for the hunt, 'cause she's got this feisty heart. And I knew. I knew this much: if you were really looking, why did you take your little girl with you? Right? If you were really looking for a second wife, why didn't you just go by yourself, or with the brothers who thought it was a good idea, and you could go advocate for your cause Hmong-style, right? But you take your little girl, and she goes, and she doesn't want to stay there, and it's always disrupted, and then you take her home again and you comb her hair the same style, and you hold her hand the whole time and you carry her around on your shoulders. Just not conducive! So I think that in some ways, they were playing for their survival. He was playing for his manhood, and to believe that there were still roads open. And my mom was praying for time. And

in all of this praying there was me. And they both needed me in some sense. He needed me to go with him, but she also needed me to go with him, right? [Interviewer chuckles] And so I think they were intelligent people

(12:53) This is just a thing I'm asking you to guess, and maybe I shouldn't even ask he question, but do you have any impression that maybe your father was trying to fulfill the expectations of his family, of, 'OK, at least I'll go look'...

Yes, definitely. In his culture, and also his spirit, because my father's really superstitious. I think he [Pauses] he didn't want to say, 'I'm gonna'—because in some sense, to him, because he really believed, that he really believes if he doesn't go, there is son, my mother will also wander the earth, looking. So for him, it was [Pauses] I would never say that he went looking for a second wife for her. She would kill me on the spot. But I think there was an awareness that it could happen, that it could be for both of them. And if I was there and I gave my OK, too, in whatever sense a child can give an OK, that it would be OK. So I think that's fair and I think that's true. Maybe if he were sitting right beside me, I could say so, and he would say, 'Perhaps.' 'Cause my father likes that word. 'Perhaps.' And maybe that's how he's lived his whole life. 'Perhaps my girls can become as great as the boys. Perhaps one day we can have a son. Perhaps one day we will be free. Perhaps one day all of this will mean something.' He's a dreamer.

Wonderful.

(14:12) I'm wondering if even now—or maybe you even might have noticed it back then—you mentioned that your parents were very affectionate toward you, quite doting, that you got beautiful dresses. Do you think this was, in a way, a result of the miscarriages, that you and your sister were even more precious because of the children they were not allowed to keep?

I think that's definitely true. I think—you can't really say that your mom and dad are better parents than other parents, or less, 'cause I know a parent's love runs deep, 'cause I see my aunts and my uncles, and they have more kids than my mom and dad, and they love their little girls, too. But they had dirtier legs than I did, because there was more of them. And they had more rips in their skirts sometimes, because there was more of them. So definitely, that was so true, I think. Because they had lost so many—they were losing so many—it was such an active, ongoing, dynamic process, traumatizing for all of us, because we were losing so many, with each child that they lost, I think they [Pauses] They realized that one, we were either really strong, that they could keep us, or two, that we were really weak, and they had to protect us. So there was a lot of that.

(15:25) Tell me about your sister.

My sister. Her name is Der. She is a little shorter than me, which probably, for the rest of our lives she will probably be the only person who is a little shorter than me, [Interviewer chuckles] in close proximity all the time. [Laughs] But I fondly believe that she is—my father says that you are born sometimes, and you are born with—that the first people who loved you will be the last ones to love you. I think she is my partner for life in this sense. I think one day we will fall in love and get married and what have you. But I will have known her for longer than I will have known any other person. And that's just the reality of our birth. I adore her. I see her weaknesses more clearly than my own, and I see her strengths in the face of my own weaknesses. I think in this way we're a really strong team. We really love each other. We get along better than most sisters do. But temperamentally, we're entirely different. She's an attorney now. She is much more of a fighter, and I guess a good example of how different we are, or how different we are as individuals, yesterday—my uncle's really sick. He's at St. John's hospital. Yesterday we go and we're saying goodbye and I

go give my uncle a hug and I say, 'Please get better. Please get well so you can come and live with us again. We'll all now how to love each other so much more because this time it's so precious. That's all I can say.' And then the tears start coming. But when it's her turn, she says—she stops and she says, 'You know, my grandma was the oldest person in our family and she died, and we all miss her a lot. But there has always been you. And now you're the oldest person in our family, and we need you to shelter us.' She accords responsibility, whereas I just give. And this kind of edge is all over our lives, and it's in her profession. She's always protecting people. I think if—she has a non-profit heart, if that makes sense, and she takes on these clients that other attorneys won't, that they're so challenged in so many ways—physically, intellectually, emotionally, sometimes, and she accords them freedom to choose what happens next. It's not always the winning cases, but it's how to settle the thing so they can continue living. And that's the kind of work that she does. And I think I'm more in the business of inspiration. She gets the things done, and I like to inspire people to do things, if that makes sense. But she accords him [their uncle] real, physical responsibility and says, 'You can't die. You still have to stay here; you're the umbrella, and we're going to hide under the shade that you provide, 'cause the world is too sunny.' And so she hugs him and she pats him. He pats me, because he's comforting me. And that's the dynamic. And it's been an interesting, dynamic, I think. We've been to—I'm 27 years old, so I've known her for 27 years, and I think she's a very special person, and I'm not the only one to believe so. There's a resilience in her spirit and her soul, and a fragility. I think emotionally she's more fragile than I am, which is just my theory.

We'll keep that between us.

Yes, I don't think she agrees! [Both laugh] 'Cause she wants to always be the rock for everything that's shaking in the world.

And some people can be strong for everyone else, but not for themselves.

I know! So I f—exactly, you're right.

(18:56) Would you say that your description of her and of other people in your book is an attempt to be absolutely 100% faithful to not just your memories, but really the historical people they were, or are you trying to insert at least a little bit of writer's liberty in making these descriptions of the people who are in your family?

I would say that when I'm talking about the people in my family, like my sister, it's really alive and it's really true now, as much as it's history. It's really contemporary. This is how I see them. This is how I think—and this is going to be the tricky answer. I'm going to be [Pauses] it's such an important question, because you can't just write about the good of a people. That's not true; it's not history, it's not life. You have to write about the chasms in their everyday [lives] and the complexity, embrace the complexity, what we were talking about earlier. But I think that the way that I see them is the way that I need to see them and they need to see themselves to survive and do the best work they can do in the world. It's about doing what is good for the world, I think, if that makes sense. It's not writer's liberty, because I can paint the sky. I can paint the sky if I want to, but no, I'm just floating with the clouds. 'Cause we need to get somewhere. We need work to be done. I think the way I see her accords her more power to do the work that she needs to do, that I need her to do in the world, that the world needs her to do. I think my grandma, who I talk about so much, who I miss so much, especially around this time of year—but I write of her in the way that will allow her life to do the most work for herself and all of those to come after her. We need her in this way.

Well, and I think—

Does that make sense?

(20:47) Here again, please correct anything I say that you think isn't accurate, but obviously there's an element of nostalgia, a sort of longing for the way things used to be, but perhaps

there's also—well, if you want to call it—you're sort of writing through the eyes of love. These are people you know, and whose faults, as you say, you could highlight perhaps more, and that might make it more 'historical' in some people's minds, but these are the roles they played in your life; these are the ways that you remember them and that you want other people to remember them.

The nostalgia—that's interesting, because I actually—I grew up looking to the future, not the past, which is interesting, and so I think in that way—I don't know. I don't know if I'm nostalgic for the love that was, because it feels so alive to me now. So to put it in a time frame, time space is inaccurate. But I think—I love my grandma. I adore her. She didn't let us come to America, and I included that in the book. I love her and I adore her, and she adores me, but there was a day when I had to climb on the shelves on America to get things for her. All this is true. All this is [Pauses] I think the way you paint people, the way I paint people is to see them for what they are, and what they are to you. So the way I see her is the way she was to me: good and bad and all of it. Because whatever she did, good or bad, I think, I see clearly, and I register clearly, I respond to honestly. So there's a lot of honesty there instead of just beautifying, because I know their faults, I know their challenges. But I also know that the way they love me is almost a perfect kind of love, in whatever it is. And so you're right when you say I write from the lens of love. I think as a young writer, especially, it's the easiest lens to write from, and sometimes the most challenging, because it forces you to [Pauses] 'Cause love is an emotion that we haven't even really come up with a good definition for yet. But it's the thing that we hold on to when life is done. It's the most powerful. And so this is where I think intelligence comes in a little bit. I have no intelligence; I don't care about IQ. I think I have kind of emotional—a way through it, but I am not intelligent, and I would never use that word to describe myself. But I think this is—

I think others might, though.

I don't know, Paul. [Interviewer laughs] It's a shaky road! We're going to have to wait on that one. But I think, 'Why not use'—as a young writer you ask yourself, 'Why not use the thing I have most powerful thing I own, which is the ability to love? I have nothing—I've not tried anything in my life, but I have all of these people who love me, which just means that I'm good at loving them back. Which means, if I'm a writer, I'm going to use whatever resources I have at my fingers. All I ever had was love, and all I ever have is love, 'cause at the the end of the day I don't have a lot of money. I have a lot of credit card debt with this negative energy, so it's not going to count. Why not use the thing that you have the most? Why not share that with the world, when the world needs it?

(23:52) Well, I think, too, that love allows you to share some of those faults, but also to interpret them in a compassionate and loving way, so that when you talk about your grandmother not wanting her sons to go to America, I think you can understand that as a reader—that she wants to keep the family together, that she wants to be the matron over this family, and that that doesn't come off as crude or selfish, but as a desire to sort of embrace everyone and keep them close to her.

Love forces us to understand.

Well, and I think, too, when you mention that you heard stories about, for example, an uncle who was the wisest and the nicest and everything—well, was he, or is it because he's dead and so your parents want you to remember him that way?

Uncle Xiong? Uncle Xiong—he died shortly after my grandma died, so when I was hearing all of these stories, he was still very much alive.

Oh, OK.

And even to this day people talk about his wisdom. My mom is the most critical thinker of them all—maybe not thinker. She doesn't think, she feels things, which is interesting, I think. She says

that he had faults. She says, and she's always said that he had faults. His loyalty to his family was the fault. Regardless of whatever happened, he would always fight for the side of blood. He never had any brothers. All he had was my father and he gave up everything in his life for their ability to be. And this makes him, in their eyes, a martyr. My mom is really careful about how we see things. And my daddy says—you know, he said this to me, he taught me this lesson and that lesson. I wrote an essay about—we had to write an essay about things we believed in. It's an international campaign—the global youth campaign. And it's called "This I Believe."

Oh, yes.

And I ended up writing about him [Uncle Xiong], because when he came to America, I was maybe—I was a teenager. And I was really tired, lazy one day—didn't want to get up to go to school. And he's really soft spoken. He comes and he says really quietly—and by then, he'd already been tortured, so mentally he was already half gone, but there were moments of lucidity. And he came and he said, 'You know, the body works in the world; it gets tired. But the heart, the heart—you have to get up with your heart first.' And if that wasn't wisdom right before my eyes, if that wasn't everything that my father and my uncles had been teaching me all along, then I didn't know what was. 'Cause I was there, and I couldn't sleep anymore afterwards like that, you can't sleep anymore! And so I got up, and I looked at him, and he smiled at me. And I think I saw him the way my father would have, many, many, many years ago. You know, when my father rolled that boulder into the neighbor's fence, and all my uncles were really angry, and they said, 'You have to go and fix the fence.' And he starts crying, because he doesn't have a father, and there's no way he can fix this fence. And my uncle comes up to him and he says, 'I'll go fix the fence for you, 'cause this is only how you learn how to be a man.' Like my mom and dad, when they got married, nobody had money to pay the bride price, but he came and he said to my father, 'If you want to [Pauses] 'Everything is a gamble at this point. We don't know if we're going to live or if we're going to die. But if for however long you want to live, you want to live with this woman by your side, then let us go.' And this is the kind of spirit that they want me to see in him. And I was so shocked, because you grow up hearing a thousand stories about a man who is as tall as I am in the world only. And he speaks as softly. And you can't imagine how so much could be packed into something so small as yourself, and then you see him before you, and he's frazzled in the head, he's shaking. But that morning, when he came and he said those words, I believed, and I think he was—so much distance, so much place, but you cannot be alive in somebody else's mind, unless you give something of yourself entirely. And he gave so much of himself, and there was so little left. 'Cause he was crazy—in Laos they said he was turning up roots [roves?] and he was making fires, and he was just far gone. But for the moment, it was [I don't know] I don't think they lied, that's the thing. I think they believed him because he gave so much for them to believe. Maybe my mom saw, because she was my father's wife, so every time if they were to disagree, I think that if he was in the vicinity, I think she could see where the alignment was, in terms of loyalty. And my aunts—and so they had this different view, and so I recognize that his [Pauses] When you're so good at something, you're bound to be bad at it, too. [Both laugh] Right?

I can see that.

You've seen that in history time and again, in all of the figures that you've studied.

Oh, indeed.

(28:53) So was your uncle a resistance fighter, or what was it that kept him in Laos and that led him to be tortured?

He was carrying his son on his back, and they were all running in the jungle, and they shot the boy in the head. The North Vietnamese army shot the boy in the head. And he'd only had three kids in his life. He loved children; he helped raise my father. He wouldn't leave the boy. And there was no

way the boy would have survived the run. So he stood in the place of his son, and his wife stood by his side. And they came and they found him, and they that he was Uncle Xai Soua's brother—'cause they were brothers in all the ways that mattered. And so they took him into a hut, and they—he woke up in a hut, and he says they inserted hot syringes in his arm, day in and day out, looking for where my uncle was, where my fathers were. And he didn't speak. He refused to speak, because that was his loyalty was, also. That's how he went crazy, right? It's the same thing, the loyalty in his blood. And so he went crazy after that. He wasn't a resistance fighter. Paul, he was my size, 4' 11", and he was skinnier than I was, so he was probably 90 pounds, and he was—he didn't have the build of a fighter. But he had the intellect of general. He thought he led them on—you know, he led them through the jungles and through the years, all the difficult years of their life. He even told my grandma, 'When you die, I will come after you, because you will need me by your side. We're going to go a long way to finding my uncle and my father. And so when you die—because all of your life I tried to stand by your side. And when you die I'll find my way to your side.' So a month after she died, he died in Laos. When he heard news of her death, it was only a little while and he just died.

So he was a romantic, too. [Chuckles]

He was a romantic, yes. A hopeless romantic.

Yes.

(30:51) Well, let's talk about your grandmother, who's so central not only to your book, but also to your life, and it seems to me, just a sense of your identity in many ways. What would you want people to know about her—some of which I'm sure you've included in the book, but maybe things that didn't make their way in?

So my grandma was always scared of being forgotten. Imagine growing up with someone who was always scared of being forgotten—'cause I met her when she was already old. She was already an old woman by the time I came along. But she was always busy. She was always doing something. She couldn't—she wasn't an idler. At the same time, she was really slow in everything she did. [Chuckles] And so she was constantly doing things. Though she sat by the window every day and she did all of these things, and she was always willing to tell stories, 'cause she always wanted to be remembered. So it was such a conscious thing: she said, 'Go get the camcorder so one day you will remember me and my words.' And I would say, 'Oh, you tell me; I'll remember.' It's such a big promise, to go against technology. Maybe it was laziness, I don't know. It's hard to say. But I would sit there and she would tell me all of these stories. Or you're a little kid and you get jealous, 'cause my sister's a lazy bones. She takes care of everything external to the house, but within the house she doesn't touch a thing unless she has to. And that's just the rules of operation, the rules of the game. And so when I was younger I would get jealous and say, 'Grandma, why doesn't she have to do this or that?' And she would say, 'Because you're training yourself how to be a better person.' And I would say, 'No, I am not. I am training myself how to be a better dishwasher. How many dishwashers that you know are great people?' And we would get into these kinds of debates. And I think for a woman of her generation and her age, who had been accorded so much respect (because my grandfather died when she was really still kind of young, and she had nine children to raise all on her own, and in a war where so many died all of her sons and daughters remained alive—and that is not for nothing)—she had something going on. And so there's this—but I would get into all of these childish debates with her, and she would get into them with me. But she was always scared of being forgotten, and yet to me she was just this woman that I would challenge on all of the things that maybe didn't matter so much. Like—she was so funny. She said, 'Sometimes you have to wash'—or 'If you drop a spoon, you have to wash it three times.' Or like these things—if you wake up from a bad dream, then you have to spit in the toilet and wash it away—wash it away forever, 'cause you don't want it—all of these little things that I think are so important. You know, as much

as the woman that she was, the mother that she may have been, she was a woman who had so much wisdom and lived life for so long. At 93—and now that I’m getting older I’m realizing how 93 isn’t so long at all. To forget all of that, the world would be a less richer place—you know, all of these things that nobody else would remember, but a granddaughter who is always so scared of forgetting. And so it’s this kind of love—I think, ‘Youa Lee—what do I want the world to know about her? I want the world to know that she grew up an orphan, but that by the time she died, she had more people to love her than so many other people would dream of—so many people who have never been along would dream of. I want them to know that to this day, five years after the fact of her dying, if I close my eyes, I can still feel the imprint of her skin on my lips. This is [Pauses] The way she walked—the lopsided way that she walked; it was always a balancing act. Or the money bag that she carried on her waste, with all her important documents, because she never had a safe enough place to put them. These things are as important as the history that she lived through, ‘cause she was born in 1918 or something... But she was born a long time ago, and she was born and she never went to school, and yet I think I learned more from her than I did from any book. In the dedication for my book I said it’s ‘for my grandmother who never learned how to write, for my baby brother who will be the things she never wrote.’ That is so true, and I think it’s for the rest of the world who will never get a chance to know this woman, and to read all of the [Pauses] It’s so humble—all of the humility that was her life, and that taught her so much about honor and integrity and fearlessness. But she feared death more than anything, more than anyone I’ve ever known. And yet [Chuckles] it’s ironic. I would say she was the most fearless woman, because beyond death there was nothing that she was scared of. But in death itself—and I understood. Her parents had died. My grandfather died. Everybody died, including she had children who died on her. And so [pauses] Interesting woman. Yeah.

Yeah.

(36:19) What do you think she represents to you, not just about her own personal essence or spirit, or whatever you might want to call it, but the sort of way of life that in many ways you left behind when you left Ban Vinai and came to the United States?

She represents industry. I will never be as industrious as she—without having a final product—a tangible, final product. She was the most industrious woman I think I will ever know. It’s like the ants, you know? If they work all the time, do we ever see any great thing? Not really. There are ant hills sometimes, but it’s (***) [Laughing] it’s an architectural wonder. But this is, I think, more than a time or a place, because she came from a place I couldn’t imagine. She grew up in a time—well, I can imagine, but I bet I’ve never known. And she shared my world with me, right here in St. Paul. And it’s all of this that is locked inside of her, and it could never be unraveled—not really. Not completely. So she represents the wonder of human beings. She wasn’t—we talked about embarrassment, right? She wasn’t afraid to be embarrassed. So she was always learning, because it was always—if people were to look at my grandma, sometimes without loving her and understanding her, it would be a little embarrassing. I remember being a kid, going to a mall store with her, and she’ll talk to the person behind the cash register, and she’ll say—she’ll say, ‘Let’s become family,’ you know? And that’s so embarrassing! You’re offering this stranger this thing that they may or may not want, but it’s the most precious thing you own. You’re putting your heart on the line, and if that’s not embarrassing, then what is, right? Or we’ll go shopping and she’ll be counting coins, a long string of coins, and there will be people waiting, and it’s embarrassing. But does she—is she embarrassed? Yeah, she laughs about it; she knows. But this kind of lack of fear... And you asked such an important question, and I can only honestly say for me there is no divide between what is worthwhile and important to me and what should be to the rest of the world. ‘Cause I think we can—there’s so many ways we can escape from who we are and who we are meant

to be, if we focus on the things that should matter to the world. Because in the end, we're a part of the world if it matters to us and we spend enough time cultivating it, then it should matter to the world, and that's the only way the world improves is if we improve, because we're a part of the world. We can't go into the world and fix it if we're not willing to go into the world as ourselves to begin with. So that's how I would counter it.

(39:19) For someone who's never lived in a refugee camp that sort of temporary, fleeting nature of living in these places, yet at the same time growing up and sort of feeling like it's your home, what would you want to share with us that might help us better understand what it was like for you, for your family, for the Hmong people you grew up with?

You remember even if you don't want to! [Laughs] And like my mom doesn't want to remember it, but she remembers it. I didn't think I was going to remember it forever, but I will. Only six years, and I was so young, but I'll remember it forever, 'cause the [Pauses] What can be seen as temporary go on for years and years and years all over the world, and in your mind it becomes like a song and you can never forget it. And that's how experience and that's how places are to me. The song and an image, and you can be 8,000 miles away. If I close my eyes, that place that is dead now can come alive again. It really can. And so I don't; know what is so important. It challenges who we all are as countries, borders, states, nations. We think we belong to a place, and we get courage from that, and we get inspiration from a place like that. For example, watch 'The 300.' Did you see 'The 300?'
No.

King Leonidas and the whole plight of the [Spartans]. I mean, patriotism like that—and it was a powerful movie. Or we watch TV and we see soldiers falling down, and they say, 'They're dying for our country.' Are they really? I mean, what is a country, right? 'Cause I feel like—I'm always rooting for the Vikings, and they do bad every year. [Both laugh] I'm a big fan, and it's because of a place.

(41:24) That's something I never would have guessed. Kao Kalia Yang is a Minnesota Vikings fan.

A big one. Big one. And so I'm rooting for the Vikings, they lose all the time, but in that I'm rooting with them, I am siding with the people who do. And in the refugee camp that doesn't happen. That's the difference, and it's different on a profound level. Nobody fights for the refugee camp! [Laughs] You know, there is no team, and there is no—the feeling, unless we build it inside of ourselves. So now years and years after the fact, after the place no longer exists, who fought for the Ban Vinai refugee team, and who's leading that charge? I think it's worth saying, 'I am.' And I'm not the only one. Although the team never existed then and there, because it can and it needs to, just 'cause wherever we belong to, there is power to be gotten, and we need to be as powerful as we can if we want to do anything positive for the world, any positive change. We talk about how you come to a place and you take away from it the immigrant experience. We talk about the point where you can actually contribute back. We don't talk about the contributions you make in the process of doing. Darfur—what did that remind us of? Afghanistan, Iraq, you know, all of these things. Sometimes if we lived a little closer to history—and you would agree with this, because you're a historian!—then we live a little closer to ourselves.

(43:05) So what power do you believe that you and the people who lived in Ban Vinai take from that place?

We take—what do we take from that place? We take one, an understanding, and understanding of politics on a very personal level. We're there because the international forces were all around us. Now Thailand didn't necessarily want us, but they wanted the UN money. So you can be in a place,

and you can live a life in a place that is fairly political in some sense, and understanding politics on a very personal level, so now when we talk about politics, it's entirely—there is no question of, 'Is it going to affect me?' 'Cause we get that. It affects you, and it doesn't just affect you in the future, it affects what you eat today, and it affects the tomorrows that will happen. We take an understanding that bodies buried in a place cannot always stay there, especially with the grave desecrations now. You think that you live on the earth, and that you're going to be hidden inside that earth, and it's going to hold you safe—'cause nothing in the world has. It's not true! You can get dug up with or without your wanting to. Now I believe in ghosts, but really, did the ghosts rise up and revolt against this thing? Not really. Not in a way that has affected their destinies or their futures in that sense, right? So there's that understanding that the earth cannot protect. The earth cannot protect. We have to protect each other—which is sad, but it's powerful, too, and it's a little profound.

(45:00) So when you look back to Ban Vinai, you obviously have at least some happy memories, even though a little wistful, or a little—but it's not all bad, right?

No, it's not all bad. I remember lots of good things.

Is this a result of the place, or is it more a result of the people who, despite the place they were in, could still function as families and as communities and as students and as people who had fun?

Is it a result of the place? Well, it's such a good question, because I remember—you asked for good memories. I think about the food. The food that was rotten for a lot of people, I remember it as being good! [Both laugh] I enjoyed that food! You know, when I went back to Thailand, I was looking for the same kind of food and no, they didn't have soggy rice and no, it wasn't like that, but I remember it as such. Or like—is it a place for people, so I make a comparison in my book, a comparison between Ban Vinai refugee camp and the McDonough Housing projects. Facing a people that looked alike together for the most part, in this place. The space and that place that wasn't bordered by a fence, but there were all of these things holding us in. McDonough Housing project in so many ways was like that. It's an incubator for Hmong lives in America, and I would never take this away. And the poverty of the place was not comparable, but there were some distinct, very real things. I mean, people drove around the McDonough Housing project yelling, 'Go back home.' And I was a kid and I remember. But they scared my mom and dad into dragging us, to like walking really fast on the sidewalk, because they would zoom in their cars like they were going to hit us—as if your legs could outrun tires, right? So mom and dad were trying to rush us along into the snow and the trees—as if snow could protect you, too! It's really funny, but that's the kind of running they had been doing all of their lives. And that's what happened in the camps, too. You get a soldier to shoot a gun, and then you think they're going to kill you, so you're trying to run from bullets, and they've been doing it for years and years and they should know that it doesn't work, but they know that it can work if chance is with you, so they do it again and again—here in America, too. Can a place—is it the place that makes the people? But I remember sliding down the hills of McDonough Housing Project, enjoying—or the playground, enjoying that, playing around broken glass and beer bottles and alcohol, and cigarette smokes, and picking up cigarette stubs and using them to play with. Things like this I remember, and it's a good memory. And this kind of thing happened in Ban Vinai refugee camp, too. The McDonough Housing Project isn't—you're not meant to live there all your life, right? [Laughs] Very much like the camps, but they're made of bricks. They don't break. And so is it the place or the people, or the reality of living? I think human beings get used to so much. It can be such an easy comparison. In college, you think, 'Oh, that dorm is so close to all of the buildings. I want to live in that dorm.' And you draw a number, and it leads you all the way across campus, and that year you make that trek. And in the midst of it you do it, and then after you're like—when you're in that dorm right by the buildings, you go, 'How

did I ever do that?' That's how I think about it. How did we ever do McDonough Housing Project? How did we ever do that moldy house? How did we ever do Ban Vinai refugee camp? How did they ever survive in the jungle? It's all the same. It's hard. And I would never want to compare the experience in the jungle to the experience here, but I think it's a fact of life that for those living within that experience. Human beings are really good at doing what we have to to get by and survive it. And we don't—even like when you're looking back, you're facing all kinds of new struggles, but you realize it. 'It was harder then, wasn't it? And I did it, so I can do it again.' We give ourselves pep talks, and we go on.

(48:54) So you have a grandmother who wants Ban Vinai, in some ways, to be a permanent home. And you have her sons who—well, one uncle who leaves relatively soon and others who will follow. What's that like as a child to sit in the middle of that? I know you reflect on that in your book: that your grandmother is trying desperately to almost make her sons promise that they won't leave her in some way. But what do you remember about observing that happening over a period of years?

Youth is probably the greatest bandage [Laughs] against life. [Interviewer chuckles] 'Cause you know that there is a wound, and it's going to break. You know that. But you know whichever way it breaks, nobody's going to blame you! [Chuckles] Right? There's no pressure. No pressure. Nobody's going to blame you. Whether my dad stays or leaves, grandma's never going to say it's because of Kalia. Whether the camps close or not, nobody's going to say, 'Oh, it's because Kalia wasn't there!' And that kind of freedom from responsibility does so much! Like my father felt like if he left—or my uncle if he leaves and something—if the others follow and this place is horrible, then he would have led them into something big and bad. And my grandma, I think she wanted the camps to last, but she knew that if she stayed, and if the camps closed and if they were taken back to Laos, then her sons were killed before her eyes, that would have been so, so, so much, right? But from the eyes of a kid, you hear all the people talking about all the possibilities, what could happen here and there and then. Because when they're talking, they're so heated, but I'm sitting in their lap and it's just warmth, in a world that was already too warm, anyway. It doesn't feel—it feels like a party.

Hmm!

It does! [Laughs] It feels like a party, and so much is happening. You don't know how to dance, you don't know how to follow the music, but you hear it all, and you know that whichever way it goes, you're going to go with it. And at the end of it, it's your job to make it as best you can. Because already then there was the talk: 'Our children could become educated, our children could become somebody, somebody we've never been. So there's already this kind of pressure, like this kind of futuristic pressure, but within the bandage of youth. I was like, 'Whichever way, you know?' They felt it, they felt tremendous pressure, and it was emotional. So you see people you love—grandma—when grandma cried, I felt so sad; when my dad cried, I felt so sad. It's torn. But it's like a party and it's like a roller coaster, and you don't know which way it's gonna go. But you know whatever happens, you won't be blamed. But if you can do good, you will have delivered on a promise that you don't remember making.

(51:47) Were you largely shielded from the sense that you were in this place that was controlled by the Thai government and that there were these other foreigners who may, at least on some level, have a control over your destiny, or was that something you were aware of on some level as a child?

Well God, right? There were a lot of missionaries!

[Laughs] Right, yes.

There were a lot of missionaries, so they were trying to recruit. They gave candies. Now I was six, I was really protected, I didn't run very fast. You had to run kind of fast to get the candies. They never had enough candies for all of the children, but if you stood really quietly by your mom and the adults—you know, because actually, they give candy to the kid, but they want to talk to the adults. If you stood carefully by the adults, you got candy. [Interviewer laughs] It's horrible how—

You learned the tricks of the trade.

By default, right, because I would see my cousin run, and—‘Oh God, they're eating candy!’ And I would stand there—but eventually they would save a few in their pockets for you, ‘cause you're with the adults. They would give it to you, and then you'd smile and you'd be so happy. Then they'd start talking to the other adults behind you, right?

(52:48) So were these Hmong missionaries? American?

American. We have a picture of like two American missionaries somewhere in our photo book. So they're American missionaries, and they sometimes had Hmong interpreters who tried to interpret; I don't know how good they were with the messages. But we were so—the funny thing was we never felt like we didn't have a belief system in place, so we weren't looking. And that's the thing, even when you're looking for something—we were looking for a home, so when they came, we were more interested in the homes, potentially, on the other side of the ocean, than the actual religions. It wasn't so fruitful for my family. I don't know how it worked for other families, ‘cause I know that a lot of them were recruited and they would ultimately find happiness within Christianity and Catholicism, and all these other faiths. But because we weren't—like my uncle was so funny. We'd talk about religion and—or I'd talk about religion. I'm kind of very circular, as you're picking up. So my uncle and aunt got into a fight. The only way I could leave the camp—leave her behind for a while, because he needed distance, was to become a Buddhist monk for a bit, [Laughs] so he did! And it wasn't a problem, it was a creative way to go about it. So he said, he threatened her, ‘If you're going to fight with me and you're going to break my heart, I'm going to become a Buddhist monk. I'm going to go to the monastery, I'm going to become a Buddhist monk. So she said, ‘Go ahead.’ So he did. And then I would deliver food with her for him. He's a monk, and it's for a month. And it was this magical experience, you know, climbing to this monastery with her, and it was magical for me. And for him, I think it was a totally different way of looking at our world. ‘Cause all of a sudden he was outside of it. For her, these little trips made her miss him more, and it worked out, but that's how it was. You found the things that you needed, and it didn't really matter, because we were always only looking for a home. We weren't lost, virtually. Education we wanted, but we didn't know how to get. And so...

(54:57) Well, as I recall, as you attempted to get an education as a young girl, you couldn't stay awake in school!

No! Sad! Sad truth! [Interviewer laughs]

I see you as a very animated, very imaginative individual, and it's hard for me to see you as this young child who just [slaps his hands to simulate a head hitting a desk] conks out.

Not really! Not if you think about high school!

Well, yes.

A whole—lots of kids, a really hot building, a teacher saying, ‘This is an A and a B and a C,’ and you don't know an A and a B and a C is, and it doesn't mean a thing—because I think imagination only works when you're dealing with things that mean something to you! [Chuckles] And that's the thing that I think that the leap into education—because everybody said education is going to mean something to me. Nobody said education is going to be (***) letters on a board that make no sense! And so for me, for the longest time, I would rather dream my time away, and I think—I don't know

if I could help it, because it was really hot, too, but I think maybe I did help it, and I didn't mind sleeping in class. A big admission—my mom and dad! [Laughs]

Well, we'll return to that theme of education when we talk about your life here, but I thought that was interesting.

Mm-hmm.

(56:01) What do you remember about what was happening in your family that led to your parents ultimately deciding, 'OK, we're going to America.'

'OK, we're going to America.' It was 1987, I was six, my sister was eight. They had had six miscarriages in between me being six and whatever, right? So my mom and dad were—they said they had given up: no more trying. So for like the last year they weren't trying to have children. And that, in some ways, was a giving up, and then if they weren't having any more children, the pressure to re-marry was there. And so I think he knew and she knew that if they stayed there for longer—I mean, there wasn't very much to do in the camp. Looking for a wife is a pastime, whatever it could mean. Like she was always selling these things by the road so she could buy me these dresses. But for him, I think they left for their marriage; I think they left for us, 'cause we were girls, and [Pauses] how far could a future stretch in a place like that? My father had seen my cousins getting married in the camp. He knew that that then was a separation forever. He didn't want that fate to happen to us. So he took a chance and they left. But everybody knew by then—not everybody; that wouldn't be accurate. Most people knew by then that the camps had to close—that Ban Vinai refugee camp had to close. The food was getting worse, the resources were getting—the Thai people were getting meaner. They were hurting more and more Hmong people. It wasn't that they were getting used to us, but their temper was getting shorter.

(57:54) Well, and there was an actual policy which you may or may not know of, where they finally said, 'Well, we're going to cut down on resources, we're going to make camp life more unpleasant,' not only to make you think about leaving, but to try to keep others—

—from coming.

--from Laos.

Years and years later, 2000-something, I would read about that policy, but there and then, all we knew was that life was getting worse. It was working—the policy was working. Life was getting harder. And really, I wasn't even in school yet. I was six—not that that had much of an influence, I think, because my dad wasn't worried about my intelligence. But we had to leave for them to stay together, and for us to actually—they were going crazy, too, let's just—you know, I think they were all going crazy. Because I was beginning to question all the stories and the dreams around me. And I was the first generation to be born within the camps, and I was six, and all of a sudden I wanted to know why there was a red cross on the only car in town, why all these things were happening. The questions were becoming more complicated. And we couldn't just live in the stories anymore.

[Interviewer checks recorder]

(59:15) What do you remember about the actual process of beginning application, or taking the bus out or flying or any of those things that ultimately led you to this country?

I remember that my dad and my uncles checked a wall, a cement wall, with printed out names almost every day to see if our names were on that wall. I remember the bus, the orange bus—Mercedes! The first Mercedes that I ever saw!

You remember that symbol?

Mm-hmm! And when I see that symbol again, I'm like, 'Oh my God! I rolled out of that place in a Mercedes!' which sounds kind of incredible. I guess they made tough buses. That Mercedes that I came to America on, the airplane. I remember the UN bag, the blue UN bag with a world on it that everybody held. I didn't know it was a world, but I wondered what it was. I remember Phanat Nikhom, 'cause you had to go to the transition camp before you can come to America. Now Phanat Nikhom was actually called Phanat Nikhom Processing Center. It's a processing center. But I remember like a transition camp. So they take you to this place, all the doors had no real doors, so they were just door frames; so everything was kind of open in this way. Families slept in like long houses. The women laid out cloth to separate sleeping areas, so the 'walls' were glowing in the night, which is kind of beautiful. I remember electricity for the first time at night, every night. I remember the adults going to school and trying to learn about America. [Chuckles] There's a photo of my father and all of his classmates tying strings around their waists preparing for the airplane ride. Fascinating stuff.

(1:01:01) Around their waist?

Around their waist.

Why around their waist? [Interviewer is thinking of string-tying around the wrists for Hmong ceremonies]

For the practice of seat belts.

Oh, OK!

Right? So they were practicing wearing seat belts and stuff. There was like a toilet, and it was only for demonstration purposes. So my mom talked about a toilet, and I could imagine it, but I saw that it was white, and I didn't quite know the purpose. But it was in a (***)—an appliance, I thought of it, in America. So all of these ideas began coming in. But the most interesting thing that the adults talked about and that really stuck out in my head—I didn't talk about it at all in my book—the teachers. For the first time it was Bangkok Thai teachers, not just the ones—you know, missionary workers in the camp. These people were thinking they were—I mean, they were there because they cared. And they were from the big city, so they were volunteering to work with this population. And they came with the real world behind them—a world that they were allowing the adults to see and to—they wear shorts, for example—white shorts. In a world where white gets dirty so quickly, and in a world where not many women wear shorts at all, these teachers are wearing shorts. And there were accessories, not like the accessories you've always known: earrings and necklaces and heavy turbans, but like bobby pins and—oh, something more elaborate, like a flower in the hair or something. And my mom, who a long time ago, before America, she really believed in looking very nice. And she really loved very pretty things—you know, it was a visit back, a throwback to the little girl that she could have been. Don't think she missed who she could have been in Ban Vinai refugee camp, 'cause it was the only way to be, but in Phanat Nikhom transition camp, she missed the life that she could have had for the first time—a world that was beyond the one she'd always known. And my father got challenged, because in Laos he always thought he wanted to have a farm. Now he knew the farm would now almost never be possible again. And so they were so busy with all of these realizations, I think. And there I was, in talk about America. There was the health clinic where we had to go [get] shots, lots of shots. Candy after the shots, but only if that was a smooth process! [Interviewer laughs] There was all of these new things and so America, an idea of America was born: America didn't want illness, America didn't want disease, America didn't want sickness. You got candy for going through the painful stuff, if you went through it quietly, without protest. It was affirming all of these things that my mom and dad had learned when they became refugees. When you were leaving a place you had to prepare for a place with new rules, where obedience was the law—it was the only key to getting by. And so in schools where you were taught to sit in a row

and obey, and all of this was so new for me, because in the camp there was freedom for me. But all of these new rules came crashing in. So the process to America was the process of learning about rules.

(1:04:13) I also remember—this is a quote that still sticks with me, and that I think is going to show up in my book (properly attributed, of course). But you said that your grandmother said that at Phanat Nikhom it was the first time that she learned to be treated like a child, and that she almost felt useless in a way.

Yup.

What do you remember about that?

I remember—it was horrible for her, because in all our lives together, that was the most quiet time between us. She didn't talk to me. She was lost somewhere in herself. And I think—'cause they didn't prepare old people for America. They didn't go to the classes. They didn't give them the rules. And so everybody was preparing for America, and she wasn't, and she knew it. They all knew it, but they didn't talk to themselves, too, because all of her life she was tied to these children, and these children were learning all these things about this new place where life was perhaps possible for them. But she didn't even know if there would be earth in America. And people said there was concrete and grass, and my grandma loved the earth. And so every day we would sit there on the ground, and she was really quiet, and she was really lonely. And I remember—now I look back and now I wonder why none of the adults noticed that the old people were really lonely—for six months. While I know preparations were in place, no programs were in place for them! Because old people had to go to new countries, too, and that for them it would be the hardest.

(1:06:07) I suppose the assumption was that their children would take care of them, I know.

and that was all they needed to think about.

And there was already so much to think about.

Well, in a way, maybe your parents didn't have this experience, but it's something to think about, anyway. In a way, your parents' generation was getting a preview of how they would feel when you went to school and you learned English, and you, in some ways became more powerful than they because of our quick acquisition of all these things in America.

That is a fact. Right. That's the way history would work up. [Chuckles] Yeah. But there and then, very lonely. A very lonely and very difficult time. Mentally, I think, it was suffocating. She looked out at the hills a lot, and now at this time, there was actually a fence. And everything that we could have was passed through that fence. And the barbed wires between these people, and this idea of a commerce—it was all really strange, because [Pauses] I think I know how a bird feels, and maybe not many people do, and not many people can say they know how a bird feels. But for those six months I think I know how a baby bird feels. Because you couldn't fly, but you could see the sky, there wasn't just the sky, there was a—you know, you looked in a house and there was a glass, and you could see that a world existed beyond that glass, but there was no way you could break that cage. I mean, I saw—and I remember it like a dream. I saw guards beating up a guy. It was night time and I was scared of the dark, so my father and I were sleeping outside, and the guards were beating up a guy who sneaked out of the camp—to steal bananas or something like that. And they were beating him up, and my father turned me away. But I think when you can't help people who are being hurt, because they didn't want to stay in the same cage with you, it's a wonder that birds don't go crazy, because I would have gone crazy if we'd stayed there longer than six months! And I was six years old—resilient, right? Kids are resilient, they say. But if you don't follow the rules, there are a lot of things that happen to you. And so for my grandma and them, they could no longer

run fast enough, and they didn't have the agility to step through the barbed wire fencing. She would have maybe, if she could have. By then, it was just looking at mountains—a lot of that—in the distance. You could see them. We weren't far from Bangkok, and there were mountains in the distance. So we looked at those a lot.

(1:08:51) So...coming to America. Talk to me about that experience, at least through the memories that you have.

Coming to America. Oh! So we're at the Hmong American New Year, just 2000—this year. **2007 [But for the 2008 New Year].**

Uh-huh. And there was a big poster of my book, and I was sitting there handing out postcards and what have you, right? And this deaf man comes and he says—he was flipping through the galley of the book. He was looking at me, and he was trying to talk to me—all of these signals, and I couldn't understand. And then my cousin was sitting beside me, and she goes, 'I get it.' And she said, 'He's telling you that he saw you on the trip to America. You were little, and you were sleeping the whole way, and your nose was bleeding. And your father held you on his lap like a baby the whole time.' And it's all true! [Interviewer laughs] He was saying—and then because he was so scared that I didn't get it, right? And he says, 'I know you, I know you, and I've known you since you were so small!' And so tomorrow he comes back, my mom was sitting there. And he told the whole story again with the same gestures. And that's how it happened. I came to America sleeping, and my nose started bleeding, and my father held me like a baby for most of the trip. But I remember now because he remembered me so well. And I don't know how he remembered me, how he would know it was me, but he was like, 'Your hair was so short it was like a [bob] and you were so small! And that's a strong memory about the trip here.

(1:10:27) Well, if you think about [Pauses] Well, if he had any anxiety at all about what that was like, and I imagine he had plenty, that certainly would have been a memorable experience, and for some reason you must have stood out in his mind.

I know! A little girl with such a bleeding nose! [Interviewer laughs] Uh-huh.

Whatever it was.

But I remember also being in Hong Kong or Tokyo, and I always say 'or', because in the book it's right, and my mom says it's right, but in my head I could be in both places, so why not? We were—the Hmong, we were told to sit along that hallway, not onto chairs, but all along a hallway, and everybody was staring at us. We didn't feel good; I was only a kid, but it didn't feel good to like—'cause in the camps when people come they know they're going to see, for the most part. But in Tokyo or in the airport, everybody was all dressed up in heels, and it was clicky on the pavement. They were all staring at us like we came from a different time, or like we weren't entirely the same as they were, or human in some sense. And they were so curious.

(1:11:37) Certainly not 'modern'.

Certainly not modern, although we were dressed in our finery. And so I remember that. And everything was so bright, it was hard to sleep. So I remember that. I remember landing in California, I remember seeing my first kiss—American kiss. I remember the night we got here. I remember how I didn't understand why the yards in America were fenced. It didn't make sense to me. I remember the big fear was that people would steal us away from our parents, as if we were really valuable—because we wore—the thing is that weren't really valuable, but to our parents we were the most valuable thing they had—and coming to America, so much of the reason for the coming. So they got really scared that people were going to take us. And so we got scared that people were going to take us! [Chuckles] And people were mean, too, sometimes. And in 1987,

people didn't really understand yet. And like you know, right today, some people still don't really understand. And so they told us to go home, and they weren't really kind, and we got really scared.

(1:12:53) Well, I have to tell you, even to these college kids at Gustavus yesterday, there was one Hmong student in there, in a class of about 20 kids, and the rest of them had never heard about who the Hmong were or what happened in Laos. It was a completely new story to them. So even now, yes...

And so even now, you see, so when I was a kid I couldn't explain it. I didn't know how to explain it, really. I could tell them, 'I come from a'—they didn't even know Ban Vinai was a refugee camp, Paul. It was just a place I lived at, and if I got lost, that's where I was supposed to say I came from. So I didn't even know that I was a refugee, or I didn't even know that Hmong was anything beyond what I saw every day.

(1:13:43) Do you remember if your parents or even you had heard rumors about what America was like other than concrete and grass?

Concrete and grass, the land on the yellow giants...

Ah! Yellow giants.

Yellow giants.

Interesting.

Schools, opportunity, education, a place where children could get educated. That's all I remember. Oh, and then you formed your own—shots galore. Anybody could get a shot! [Chuckles] Yeah, I think—we came with less anticipation, or fewer expectations than what most people would have, I think, assumed or thought of. Because we hadn't known how to anticipate Thailand, and by then, after all those years of living in the camp, we didn't know to anticipate America, or how we were going to find our way through.

(1:14:40) Do you remember having any misgivings about getting to America? I mean, certainly you had seen planes fly in the sky, and I'm guessing that you—

I don't remember. I don't remember ever having seen one.

And you said you saw a globe, and you didn't know what it was.

Mm-hmm.

So I'll just quickly relate one story that an old CIA guy told me. He said, 'I was sitting on the hillside with some Hmong, and there was the moon.' And it was about the time that America was sending men to the moon. And they said, 'Well, we can understand that, we can see the moon right there, so you just get a plane, and you make sure there's enough fuel, and you just keep flying until you hit the moon.'

[Laughs]

But when you say you're going to America—you tell us it's on the other side of a globe—we can't see it. How are you supposed to get there?' So did you have any misgivings about taking this trip and going to this place—other than clearly the anxiety of it being very different from your home, which you had been told—but just the means of transportation itself, did you have any concerns about that?

I did, because we were flying—well, my concern was smaller. I thought if we all went to the bathroom a lot, [the plane] would get heavier, and it would fall down and we would die. But because I—I take very badly to pressure, especially in airplane cabins, up to this day. I felt so much pressure hovering around me. All of my thoughts are foggy in a plane, anyway, but I was really worried that if we tried to go to the bathroom too much—cause I thought I was contributing to our eventual death [Interviewer laughs] But it was a small-level fear—you know, a small-level worry.

But the trip to America, it seemed, thinking back, it could be as long as a week. It felt like a week. It feels like a week if I think—and I think it's only because I'm so used to movement, and so it was just the sitting there. Maybe it's just the perspective of a child, but it's—I didn't worry. I worried that we would die if we went to the bathroom a lot, but the idea that it was across the globe, it didn't hit. Honestly, it doesn't feel like Thailand and America are connected at all. So if it bothered me—for all I know, even today for the most part, other than the intellectual stuff and the things you learn, it could be a totally different planet, unconnected by water or land. We lived so strange, so I didn't worry about that. I think my mom and dad were really impressed by how quick—I mean, 'This is so impressive, and we're going so fast, and this is going so high, and we're going to get there—and all this distance.' But to me it wasn't remarkable—no basis for comparison.

(1:17:35) So what do you remember about your initial impressions of where you and your family lived and just how strange and bizarre or maybe even scary and offensive—or fun and exciting this place was?

I think when we came, I liked the fried chicken and the soda pop.

OK.

I remember the fried chicken and the soda pop, the homes, that you—we lived in a really enclosed world. For many years it was just mom and dad trying to protect us from everything. Everything was from TV and the ice cream man. And we had a black and white TV, so everything on TV was outdated. If we looked out the window, it wasn't a match! [Interviewer chuckles] And there was only five channels, you know? And Andy—the Andy Griffith show. I mean, that was—we watched that a lot, and that didn't look like the America we saw! [Both laugh] We saw on the streets, and I couldn't imagine K-Mart on TV, for example. I have no memories of the commercials, except I think in the 1980s there were more food commercials than there are now, like candy commercials for children, 'cause I remember seeing somebody eat something, and then wanting to eat that thing, but being in the store and not knowing what I saw on TV—like making that leap was really hard for me, 'cause that was a connection to an America that I almost couldn't make. It took me a while, sad to admit, to see yogurt and to say, 'Oh, that's yogurt' in the store—or ice cream, even, which I loved. But we saw everything through TV, so much through TV. I learned so much of [Pauses] I don't remember learning the language from the TV or—I remember the kissing culture from TV and then comparing that to the vision of—at the airport. I remember cars. They were like the way that I felt really that we were in America, 'cause nowhere else before did we get cars to ride in. But in America there were cars and lights. I love lights. There were lots of lights in America, which is amazing. Basements—scary. Everybody—you know, the idea was that the dead were buried underground, that people—you know, and I inherited it from my grandmother's fear of death. So I thought 'people go underground to visit where they shouldn't be.' Or 'they're right through those walls. There's something there.' So this fear, almost irrational fear of the basement began. But I wasn't the only one. All my cousins were, too, 'cause it was the same intellectual leap that children make. Even the adults—my mom was scared when she went to the basement, and it wasn't only just because of the dark, 'cause she wasn't scared of the dark. It was because it was under the ground. So those things were really American: the basements, cars, lights, and TV, and the idea of a kissing culture, 'cause in the Hmong culture (I don't know if you know this) we don't kiss, we sniff.

Sniff?

Yes, and Thai, too. Like if you actually watch the dramas and stuff, you don't kiss somebody, you sniff them. So it's like to totally different sensory things, right?—going to somebody and sniffing them or kissing them. And to this day, kissing isn't as intimate as sniffing, to me. And I didn't know intellectually where the marker was, but when I hold a new baby, I sniff them before I kiss

them. Kissing is just something I do because it's American, I think, but sniffing is where you take them in. So it's a very interesting thing, but—so the kiss is very American. So these were like very American things.

Interesting.

I don't know.

(1:21:28) Did you have any observations, as young as you were, about what your parents were going through in this new place?

Yes! That very first night, they began worrying about America. It's like an old conversation. So many kids my generation would become very sick of the talk: how do we survive in America? How do we get by? How do we get our kids educated? How will we still love each other? They were always so scared of that. And it would go on, in my family, for years and years and years and years. And even today, when we have the real, formal gatherings, they always say, 'Thirty years after we've come to America, we're so happy that we can still call everybody together.' And then there's always this thing, 'We're concerned, because we don't need each other as much anymore.' And necessity is really the thing that you can't get away from as human beings. The realization that we need each other as human beings doesn't begin in America until you're already getting old, you're getting frail. That's when you realize you need other people. We can't afford to wait this long. And so the conversations reminded me of America more than living in America reminded me of America!

[Laughs]

That's fair enough.

[Interviewer recalls going to his uncle's 80th birthday party and saying how wonderful and remarkable it was that he and his siblings were still close to all of their cousins and still very much enjoyed being with each other.] It's a wonderful thing.

Isn't it? And it's so rich. You don't realize that until you're in the midst of it in America, which is so weird.

(1:23:09) So how soon—well, sorry. First, when did you come? What time of year?

July 27, 1987.

OK, so you didn't get the shock of showing up in January or something like that.

No, we were prepared for January, but we got here in July. My father had on a jacket, had on a sweater, mm-hmm. Yeah, we were prepared for January, but we got July. [Chuckles]

Well, it was a good thing you were ready, though. [Chuckles]

I know! It did!

It would come in handy later.

Yeah, it did. So true.

(1:23:38) How soon did your parents try to get you and your sister into school?

That fall. That fall we went to—we were taken and... Because then the influx was coming, so now all of the schools are prepared to receive Hmong children. So TOESL classes for all of the necessary ages.

So I'm just guessing, and maybe I'm completely wrong, that you have some fond memories of that July and August before school started and maybe you just had some time as a family to not just prepare for school, which may have been something you were not even anticipating, but had some time in summer, in Minnesota, to maybe make connections with family members who were already here, to maybe start making a little more sense of the

place you were living, Is that just my imagination, or are there things that you remember about that summer?

My first instinct—when you said that—was to say ‘I remember nothing of that summer.’ Now I can work back, ‘cause memory is a landscape we can visit time and again, and remember little things. But there was nothing—like some high point. So I don’t... I remember the TV, looking through the window. I remember these little things, but I don’t—nothing, no happy memories, ‘cause it wasn’t a reunion for me, because I didn’t know a lot of the people in America. It was just strangers for the first time, and I was a shy kid. So for the adults it was talk of reunions left and right, tears and questions and conversations, but for me, it was all new people in a new land.

(1:25:17) Was there any contact that you had with non-Hmong people before school or were these just people that you saw driving or walking by from a distance until school?

My mom and dad went to like the welfare agency and they talked to those people, so I knew they were having interactions, but no, because I couldn’t—I didn’t go with them. Or did I? No, I don’t think I did. So I remember cars, like shopping, seeing those (***) and Barbies, and seeing the blonde hair and then looking at the people and looking for blondes, but there’s all kinds of hair colors and being confused, thinking that everybody else dyed their hair. [Both chuckle] So I remember, but in a very public context, them doing Americans—because even today we call Caucasians ‘Americans’. And so I remember Americans doing the things that they were doing, but I don’t remember them doing anything directly with me. Sometimes you try to say ‘hi’ as a kid. Very hard effort.

(1:21:26) So talk to me about school. This must have been a difficult but ultimately transforming experience for you.

The transformation would take a long time. [Laughs]

Yes.

For me longer than most.

Like I said, ultimately. [Both laugh]

Ultimately. Years and years down the road. But school is [Pauses] It’s that promise I never gave. You know, everybody said ‘You’re going to become an educated person,’ and I don’t remember saying, ‘Yes, I will.’ [Interviewer chuckles] It’s not a choice. There was no choice in the matter. How many kids are given choices when they don’t want to go to school anyway? But my sister was really excited about going to school. It was what she had excelled in in Thailand. So she felt confident that she could replicate the process in America. And she did successfully, immediately. For me, it was so hard, because it was, again, more rules, more structure. And I was really shy, because I was raised by people who understood immediately what my needs were. I never had to communicate. So in school, all my needs were being unmet, because I couldn’t say, and I didn’t know how to say that I needed this or that. So I remember like needing to use the bathroom at 12, and having to wait all the way until I came home to use bathroom because I couldn’t—you know, it’s all of these really simple things that I think another kid could have just said, ‘I need to use the bathroom,’ even in Hmong, but because I never had any of my—people asked me, ‘Do you need to go to the bathroom?’ and I’d say, ‘Yes,’ and they’d take me, because it’s a hole in the ground and they don’t want me to fall down. So it’s all of these things. So I feel like all of my early needs were unmet in school. And letters and stuff didn’t make sense to me. There were people who were kind and people who weren’t kind. But for the longest time I got by with nodding and shaking my head. It’s amazing how much people let people slip by them. Because I could have—somebody could have asked me to say something a long time ago. But nobody did—not successfully, anyway. And because I love pleasing people, it wouldn’t have taken a lot to get me talking. Thinking back, I see

this now. But no, for the first—up until seventh grade or so I got by with just nodding and shaking my head and writing whatever I wanted to write. And so—and I was a good kid. I mean, I wasn't loud and I wasn't—by then I was ready, aware that rules had to be followed, to an extent.

(1:29:00) But you said writing whatever you wanted to write. So where in that process did you—

Learn how to write?

Yes.

I think—well, I have documents from like when I was in second grade, already writing stories. But for me it feels like third grade was when I really understood what writing was, or like I could pick up a book and understand that it was saying something to me, that there was a message or something embedded within those things. They weren't just blank. So third grade was probably the point where language began to make sense. But I wrote stories before then, because I—and I remember, because we went to thrift shops a lot, and we got quarters to spend. We could buy toys, but those were—when you could go a while without toys; it's easy to get tired of toys. They don't hold a lot of appeal, because there are ways that you're supposed to play with a certain toy, so it's more limiting than actually sticks and stones. So toys didn't have that much of a hold for me. Puzzles were OK, but they smelled. The puzzles from thrift stores smelled. And you could always—I don't know, sometimes a piece was missing here or there, and that's frustrating. But books are cheap—ten cents a book, five cents a book, so we bought plenty of book, 'cause my sister was picking up English so much faster than I was, and so she would read these books, and she would turn them into Chinese movies, Chinese dramas for me. [Interviewer chuckles] Now how did this come—'cause in Vinai, there were the movie houses. You could pay a baht and go watch this TV and hey played this drama from China, Hong Kong. It was a—what did they call it?

A Kung Fu movie?

The Kung Fu movies, with the flying swords and daggers. I never had much of an attention for those things, and I was too young, perhaps, to enjoy them fully. 'Cause she told me saw Power Rangers way before America. [Coughs]

She saw what? Oh, Power Rangers. [Laughs]

And so—

Would you like some water or something? I know I'm having you sit here talking all this time...

Could I?

Absolutely.

Thank you. [Interviewer pauses recorder]

(1:31:20) Where were we?

Language.

Language?

Your sister and making books into Chinese movies.

Yes! And everything was a Chinese movie in her head. So she would read Jack and the Beanstalk. Jack was a—it became a Chinese drama. So in my head it was never Jack and the Beanstalk, it was—it wasn't even Jack, it was a Chinese drama, flying around. That beanstalk wasn't a beanstalk, it was a mountain, and he was going to get this beautiful flower that would make his ailing mother live for a hundred years. And this is the kind of introduction I had to books, so we bought a lot of books that she would read and then make into Chinese drama for me, and I never really learned, because I only got the Chinese drama component. [Interviewer laughs] We never—we didn't have a VCR, and some of our cousins had VCRs, especially the ones that had been here for a while, so

they could watch movies and stuff. We were still stuck with TV. Now TV was very white, very middle-of-the-road, black and white television. So the books gave us different images to work with, and different ways of making these dramas take on shape and form in a way that we almost recognized. So she was a VCR for many years. [Chuckles]

(1:32:34) So—I'm sure we'll be talking about this several times, but you know, we historians like to go back and say, 'OK, what were the first or what were some of the early influences on you making the decision to become a writer?'

Oh, OK.

Do you see this as an important component of inspiring you to go in a certain direction: a sister who turns American literature and Western fairy tales into accessible stories for you and sort of brings them to life?

I think she has a big, an important—she was an important influence in that regard. Because I think—well, my sister, she won the spelling bee for North End Elementary as a third grader. We had been in America for two years. I don't know how that happened—or no, a year, a year.

Oh, my!

It was her second, and it happened. I know that she was reading the dictionary for fun, part-time. [Interviewer whistles] But because I wasn't a remarkable student, so words came really easy to her. She loved words, like she loved 'zebra'. Every day she would say 'zebra' because of the way it sounded on her tongue. And she told me that everything in America had an 'S' on it. [Both chuckle] So it was 'zebras' and—everything 'S': 'yellows' and 'pinks' and 'apples' and 'cups'—you know, everything had an 'S'. And so it was just kind of like this attention to language on her part that forced me into silence in some sense, because she lost her accent. She told me that the world had 'S'es everywhere, so I was using 'S'es everywhere, in my whispering self. [Interviewer chuckles] But she lost her accent immediately. It felt like she just slipped right into the language. And so for me, talking became even more of a challenge. She became more intelligent in America, almost overnight, whereas I had always been—people always said I had good intelligence before (When we talk about intelligence, it's really just an easy, chatty mouth. [Interviewer laughs] It's not intelligence, right?) So I was always the—

Well, it helps if you have something to say when you're chatting.

Like I tell my dad, if you say as many things as I do, half of them are bound to be good. [Laughs] The other's fat! It's proportionate, right? But so she took to language immediately, and I did not. But on the page, I could write. It's weird, because I like to speed through. So before I knew how to write 'A, B, C', I was already writing cursive with it, 'cause I wanted to make it beautiful. So that's an early memory of wanting to make language beautiful, make it look beautiful, make it sound beautiful—secret 'S'es everywhere, right? [Interviewer chuckles] And I was writing these stories, and these stories were no longer—they were stories about—like I have the story of the watermelon seed, and you read that in the manuscript about how this watermelon seed would grow up, and she didn't want to be eaten. They weren't Hmong stories, but they weren't American stories, because the kids in the classes were writing about fairy tales, and they were writing about going to Grandma's or uncle this or that, and I didn't know how to translate my Hmong world into something that they would understand, but I knew that they ate watermelon and I ate watermelon. So these connections were beginning to happen very early on. So if I wrote about a watermelon, the wind could all of a sudden take it away. It would be a magical wind in my mind, but in their head the wind could grow strong enough to do it, anyway. So my stories were for everyone, and that was where again—and then, you know, the meaning became—by fourth grade I was reading chapter books, and I was reading about the Boxcar Children and Nancy Drew and all of these really mainstream books, because the library was one of the places—so we didn't know how to have fun. We couldn't—

everything cost money, and we didn't have money, 'cause we were on welfare and my mom was going to school and so was my dad. And once all the bills were paid we only had like \$93 or something for everything else, so everything was so tight. So every year we had a Yang picnic, and that was—you know, we'd go to the park, everybody could sit—they were pretty big then. And we had World Wrestling Federation matches that we adored, and that we thought were real for the longest time. And it was so sad when people started questioning, 'I don't think it's real anymore.' We could hear that in the family conversation, so it was really tragic. But we had those for fun, and then we had the library for us. And now, in the McDonough Housing Project there was a bookmobile. That bookmobile was parked up near the Rec Center, and we lived on 1407 Timberlake Road, so we were a little down. So we would hold hands and we would go, and we wouldn't have to talk to the librarian; we could just check out the books. So reading became big in our house, because we didn't have a VCR. If we would have had a VCR, I would have been something else, maybe. 'Cause we didn't have a VCR and the TV wasn't amusing—because I held a magnet to it, so the black and white was destroyed forever, because there was a patch of pink, but it was always in the wrong place. [Interviewer laughs] So the TV lost its hold, and so there were books. And so when you ask me where the seeds of writing began, I think [Pauses] I think it began in the silence, 'cause you still had to communicate somehow. And you still had to make sense of the world some way. And I think I've always liked to share. I'm very good about sharing and talking to people, and just being very receptive to the fact that people would be [Pauses] that people would care about each other enough. Because when the teachers are talking in English, I could understand. So when they were sharing, all my classmates were sharing things, I could get it, but they never got me, because I never spoke. So I thought it was only fair to write these stories. [Chuckles] It was only fair to write these stories for the teachers, if nobody else. So maybe that was that—it was my sense of justice. I couldn't be silent.

(1:38:40) Did you have much knowledge of say the Chao Fa script or the Hmong RPA or this sense that there might be a way, if not right away, to also write in your native tongue, or was that not really a concern because of all this energy that had to be put into learning English and being a student in America?

It wasn't a concern for my parents. If it would have been a priority early on, I would have learned easily, 'cause they both knew it. But it wasn't for them. I would have to say it would be after high school, during college when I would say, "Teach me. I want to learn." It was my decision. And then by then they said, 'It's so important, you have to learn.' But before then, it was just, 'Learn English; learn how to speak it, learn how to [write it.]' My mom and dad were really good. They were like, 'Hmong is beautiful. It's the language you were born to. You're not going to forget it, 'cause you're going to use it every day. But I want you to learn English, so you can move fluently within it.' Like my dad advocated reading the dictionary. Never happened on my end. [Laughs] Like the English was the thing they didn't get, so they wanted us to get it as much as possible—which is, I know, in a context of the immigrant experience, it's really the way it's always worked. You want the children to learn the language. But in our home, because there were so many of us, and we used Hmong so much, Hmong was really to learn and to know and to hold on to. And to this day, I can honestly say, on the question of language, Hmong hits my heart harder. And yet it's so much more difficult for me to find the Hmong words to express everything I feel to the depth that I feel it, 'cause Hmong is a language of saying 'I love you,' and it's such a—this way, for me, because I don't have the poetry that my father and my elders do, to really get at the sentiment. It's really kind of sad. But on the everyday level, because I can control the tone of my voice, and it's so distinctly Hmong, people always tell me that I speak Hmong so well, and that I'm so fluent. But I feel and I know that inside of myself I don't know enough Hmong to do everything I want to do within the language.

(1:40:59) Well, that's probably in part because you learned English so well.

Maybe. But I haven't learned English well, Paul. I still get confused.

Well, I think anyone does, because it's such a diverse and inconsistent language, but trust me, you've learned it quite well.

Well, sometimes I hear an accent, and I don't know if it's in the Hmong American accent or...

I think you have a very tiny accent. It's not a noticeable as some, but I think you should hang on to it. I think it's charming and it's certainly nothing you need to worry about.

Well, thank you. [Interviewer chuckles] See? It took me a long time to like it, 'cause my sister has no accent. In fact, she can put on a British accent when she wants to. And so for me it's always been—and for the Hmong people it's always been a caliper of how well you've gone into the culture and the idea of America, right.

Sure.

So for me there's always this whole thing, but now—

That's sort of a double-edged sword for Hmong parents, isn't it? They want their children to be successful, but they certainly don't, in the process, want to see their children lose any part of their Hmong identity.

Exactly. It's like that promise that I never made all over again. I think they made these promises to themselves, and the children never made them. And they sell—so you grow up, and they try to sell you on this promise that you never made. And if you're an obedient daughter, which I think I am, in the end, then you buy it. But there are some who don't buy it, and they rebel. And that's when we have the real sadness come through, 'cause then we know who the promises belong to, anyway.

(1:42:38) Do you remember being in a school with lots of Hmong kids and seeing them—if not choose different paths, then certainly see their lives turn out differently for any of what could be a wide variety of reasons?

Junior high. Elementary was OK. And by sixth grade you had the sense that there was—'cause I grew up in the age of Hmong gangs. There were the 'cool' kids who had been in America longer, so they had the Starter jackets and the shoes. And then there were the kids like me who wore thrift store clothing or Wal-Mart, K-Mart clothing, and who were just quiet and just feeling their way through. And there were some kids who came at the same time that I did, but they somehow had less [Pauses]—I think it's a consciousness of self that keeps me really uptight, because I didn't have any friends. I was really silent, and I was really reflective—who were more comfortable. It was easier for them to become comfortable very quickly. And those were the ones who were really fumbling, and I saw that. So how and why they were fumbling? 'Cause the cool kids were already—they were in groups. Identity wasn't—we didn't talk to them much, but it seemed like they knew what they were doing. And the white kids accepted them, for the most part, as more normal than we were. And then the kids who were, in theory, supposed to be working at the same level that I was, but they had grown comfortable much more easily, they wanted to fit in, and there was a problem of trying to fit in: how to fit in, fights to fit in. So I saw that then, and then in junior high, there was the 'ditching movement.' Every kid wanted to ditch, or a lot of kids—the cool kids were ditching.

School.

School. And they were going out, usually to parks to sit all day and talk about nothing or something. I'm not going to judge, because I never was privy to those conversations—or to talk about life.

Maybe they were going through different issues. And then, because my parents had kids in America, so we would come home and baby-sit immediately. So my schedule was all tied up in the things I had to do. But there was pressure—not pressure, but invitation to ditch if I wanted to, 'cause by

then people knew that I was already—that I could understand English for the most part—and that potentially I could be a fun ditching partner, I guess. [Interviewer chuckles] So there were invitations. And I saw—and the horrible thing was this: I had best friends—I had a best friend who I adored who was a really, really good person—or who was a good person when I knew her. She said, ‘I have to get a boyfriend. Nobody loves me in my life. My mom and dad just work and they just—they expect me to take care of all of the younger kids. And so I’m going to get a boyfriend.’ And so she got herself a boyfriend who also felt the same way: that he needed some kind of support that his family wasn’t giving him. And then they started ditching together, and then they were walking down this path, and I could see that it was really slippery and treacherous. But you can’t tell your friend that they don’t need love. And you can’t tell your friend that just because they were holding hands at the park, that was a bad thing. But I saw that they were choosing a different path than the one I would take. So that’s when it began happening: junior high. And, you know, there were also kids who were really smart, and you knew, ‘OK, those were—they’re really smart, they’re really ambitious, and they’re getting the top grades.’ But by junior high I was already academically fluent enough to get into the harder classes (I went to a math and science magnet) to get into the honors classes and to sit there without talking, and to get the grades that I wanted to get. So I was—I don’t know. I was a little odd in that way, but because I was in the center, there were invitations to ditch that I never took up on, and then there were all of these efforts to fit in that I never did fall into. And by then I was already comfortable being by myself alone, anyway, so the group pressures weren’t there, which I think is what—looking back, I think it was what a lot of the kids slipped up on, and that’s when the slippage happens, because they want to fit in. And at home everybody still said they loved me. When they could, they always said they loved you—‘We love you. So although you don’t talk in school at all and teachers say this is a big problem, we still love you.’ And that’s a lot of support and a lot of love—because I had Der [her sister], too. And Der was—she was a comfortable loner without an accent who studies the dictionary part-time, and that’s fairly strange already.

[Interviewer checks recorder]

(1:47:40) So Der also had really no desire to fit in or wasn't tempted down that path, either?

No, because she always found one or two like herself, because she always had one or two—see, we only had friends during the school years, because during the summer we didn’t need friends because we had cousins.

Ah!

[Chuckles] We had cousins, and we had each other. Plus we lived in the McDonough Housing Projects, and you really didn’t want friends there, ‘cause they’re kind of embarrassing—as kids we thought so, like there was the free lunch at school, and that’s embarrassing, because there was definitely a sense—like the lunch ladies acted differently.

Really?

Yeah. I don’t know if it’s only a kid thing. I try to think back and I try to be very fair, but we couldn’t have been picking up on nothing. And so—

Well, and it may not have been a free lunch kid thing, it may have been a Hmong kid thing.

Oh yeah, but some Hmong kids are working, you see? Or it was that their parents are working already by then. So it was [Pauses] I don’t know. Maybe it was because we felt embarrassed because we felt we were taking handouts. And so we protected an unease that we were picking up on. But I think for the most part the people who worked at North End who were very used to Hmong kids, they were trying very hard to make Hmong kids comfortable. And that’s something that I really do want to communicate. All of the influences then were in school. All of the

American influences were purely educational and library-affiliated. And they were all there because they wanted to be there. The librarians wanted to be there and the teachers wanted to be there, versus like the people on the streets who were still being mean to us. So [Pauses] I am lost. Where is the question?

(1:49:32) I was just asking if Der had any temptations to go down the ‘fitting in’ path, and you said no, ‘cause you had each other and

We had each other, so we weren’t tempted. I mean, sometimes I remember wanting to try out lipstick in eighth grade. But that was a brave move, ‘cause some girls wore lipstick and some didn’t, and I was very much... I’m very much a little girl still in my 27th year, so imagine me then—very much a little girl, shaking with a tube of this lipstick in my hands, right? And I just—I realized that fitting in was more than just a language or a cultural thing. It was like a personal thing. You had to be inclined to fit in to fit in. And I wasn’t particularly inclined to fit in, although I was really lonely. I grew to like being lonely, and I think she did, too. And so we were really lonely by ourselves, so with each other we were entirely not lonely, [Chuckles] and we were not alone in the world.

You were lonely together.

We were lonely together. There you go. We were lonely together. And so that was fine, so we never—it was never tempting. Gangs didn’t want me. I’m not the really swarthy physical, menacing type.

Or the ‘I’ll do anything for my guy’ kind of person, either, I would guess.

Yeah. The loyalty was to family already. If I had a gang, it was my family.

(1:50:59) Well, and it sounds like part of that as well was—well, joy of joys, your parents started having children.

They did! And that took up a lot of time, a lot of responsibility.

But responsibility, it sounds like, you were happy to have, because of what it meant to your parents—at least in part.

In part, yeah.

Certainly there were—

In part. Yeah. I mean, the other thing was I was the baby and I was losing my status, whatever. But I was happy. It was good to have siblings. ‘Cause my father said that our team was getting bigger. And I believed him, and I believe him still. And so we were having children, and the children needed a lot of time. And the wonderful thing about the children was, whatever angst we were having, they weren’t. This is it—this is all they knew. And everything was great, and everything was beautiful, because I always had—my role was always to—people show me things for the first time and I was dazzled. And so I could share that with other people. But the children, everything that I showed them was for the first time, it seemed, ‘cause my mom and dad were working so hard. We had these kids, and so water boiling was so amazing for my brother.

As long as he didn’t put his hand in it!

Yeah, exactly! Which was like—it’s kind of amazing to me, too, if it’s so amazing to him, right? So it was all of this experience and this kind of maturity that was happening, on a level. That really took me away from the kind of culture that would have influenced, I think, my future outcomes. But I felt good people made choices.

(1:52:37) You said that you didn’t necessarily have a desire to fit in, but that you were lonely.
[Yes]

Did you ever have feelings like, ‘If only I could be white?’ or ‘If only I could look like this or behave like this or speak like this?’

I loved bring Hmong, and I have always loved being Hmong, which is interesting, because some people my age don't, and they don't speak Hmong because they had that kind of questioning. But because I feel like I come from such a great people and I've always had—whatever problems I had, I knew that it wasn't because of the way that I looked or the way I had lived my life. The challenges came when in high school, for example, when all my friends could—or other people could join clubs, and things after school and do these things—go to birthday parties, for example, and by cousins for their friends at Christmas, and we didn't have that kind of ability, so I wanted to be [Pauses] How do I phrase this? I wanted to do good things for other people that necessitated the resources I didn't have. And so I wished that we were richer; I wished we had more money. I wished my mom and dad had jobs that paid them a little more. These were the wishes that I had, and I wished that we had a little bit more money, then we could buy one or two hours after school to join the math club or something like that. These are the wishes. And I was so sad for my mom and dad, because I wished I could buy them nicer things. In the first American dream that so many children have is you want to buy your parents a house. And that was done in my dream. And so we had these really impatient hearts, and we wanted to outgrow ourselves to the future, so that we could do all of these things with these resources that we couldn't have. And that for me was the biggest challenge, because it was a [Pauses] You know, so much of America takes money to be nice. And because we are a nice people, we wanted to be nice. And so when we got something nice for Christmas from a friend, we wanted to be able to give something back. But we couldn't; not to that extent. And so it was this kind of challenge. But I think—I always get asked this question, and it's always—I think about it a lot: What's the biggest obstacle that you've come across to being who you are? (Job interviews and everything) There's a thousand things I could cite, but I think the biggest obstacle is always within myself. I fight a lot within me. I fight against the impulses to live a life like so many other people, to have that kind of privilege. And then I also fight because I know that, like my dad says, 'You'd be like everybody else if I raised you like everybody else, if you had everything that everybody else has. This fear of mediocrity, that we would just—that all of this trip, and all of this coming to America would mean nothing, because we would just be like everybody else—because not everybody gives something back to the world that they belong to. There's a big responsibility to give back for Der and I, 'cause my father and my mother say, 'You don't just want to be heavy on the earth. If you're going to weigh on it, then you have to give it something.' And from an early, early age [Pauses] You know, it began in America. We felt like we had to give something back. So we fought to give things back, but we couldn't then. So he would have to sit us down and say, 'Why are you so impatient? Everything happens in time. You have to build the pieces so you can get there and do that. So you're fighting yourself so it's a useless battle.' But the fight has always been, because I wanted to go further than I could have at any given moment in time. It was never (***) loneliness 'cause I think there's a romance to being lonely. You realize it's a luxury and a privilege when you stop becoming lonely. [Chuckles] And then you miss how you were then

**(1:56:37) So you must have thought about people like Emily Dickinson and—
Dickinson.**

why can't I think of her name? Jane Austen.

Jane Austen. In—

Not when you were younger, but certainly as you began to study literature and maybe look at figures who—

In high school, yeah, 'cause I was—my 9th grade English teacher, Mrs. Gallatin, changes the way I see myself and in written—in the language of America—ever, because she told me I was a good writer. She said that there was something that I could do when I was at my best, working very hard,

that I was doing something fundamental, because I was giving a piece of myself to the way something already is in my response to literature and the world around me. And that changes, I think—I remember now, and I remember feeling like, ‘Then I’ll be OK.’ Because I wasn’t meant to become a writer, I was meant to be a doctor or a lawyer, like so many other Hmong people, so many other immigrant children, right? But I thought, ‘I could read a piece of literature.’ And for the longest time—so I had the secret down. I knew that if you go to class and you do your work and you just sit there and listen, then your grades will be fine—‘cause I wasn’t exactly intellectually slow enough so that I wouldn’t pick up the things, and that was the secret to success. But in writing you had to do more than that. You couldn’t just go to class and sit there and take it and generate it. You actually had to go into yourself and find something there. And so that process, it ruined my original secret, but that allowed me into a different kind of way through the world.

(1:58:12) Your ‘original secret’? What do you mean by that?

Well, just that you had to do the work!

OK.

Right? But it was (***) work until you really had to create something. But I discovered in literature—and this is so funny. I don’t know, it’s almost so stereotypical, but I was really lost, and there was a period where I was—everything that I was reading was influencing the way I was writing. And I had no idea that I was going to be a writer, for all that it was, but I was practicing my signature a lot, too. And so American History IB [International Baccalaureate] I would practice my signature, and then in English I would be lost, in writing all of these things from Kissinger, for example. We were reading the—diplomacy from Kissinger, and I was practicing lines from Kissinger and trying to write like him. It was a mess. My teacher gave me [Walt Whitman]—*Leaves of Grass*. He only gave me one page, and I don’t know where it is. I’ve never gone back looking for it, where he says, ‘I’m so lost, and I want to be like everybody else who is great. ‘Cause all I know and all I want to be is something great.’ And so this thing is—for a moment it dawned on me that, ‘Gosh, I’m so insular; my world is so small. Somebody was already here, and he did it. And if it happened to him, it happened to other people. So a connection with human beings happened then and there, that wasn’t there before. ‘Cause I think when you’re a teenager, everything that happens to you happens to you, and the world is like that. And then you realize, ‘It happens to other people,’ and you don’t just want to be them, because they’re already there. But you have to be something else. And so that’s where I was in high school. But by high school because they detract education, it’s kind of controversial. I think about it, and I knew that because I took all of the IB and CP classes, there were privileges I got that other kids didn’t get: attention, books, field trips to the Ordway, for example, or a tour of the Guthrie Theater to see plays. We got extra credit for going to go and see these things. In the classes, there were the same kids almost in every class, and most of them were white kids. We had—I went to Harding High School, and we had black kids, too, but there weren’t many in the classes, and there were Hmong kids. And there was a fair representation—not fair—but there were some, but not a lot. So I knew that the tracking of education allowed me so many privileges and world views that I wouldn’t have gotten that changed me fundamentally forever, because I was in the history IB program, my teacher felt I should apply for the Minnesota Historical Society internship, which I actually did with my best friend, jst to check it out, and I ended up working at the James J. Hill House and seeing all the parties that they hosted there on the weekends. And that was a different world—all the flowers, all of the food, and then just learning the history of the place: this is America and this is what this man did. And then his fireplace, and if you hold the light at an angle you can see a lion’s face. It changes you. And so tracked education has made all of the difference, ‘cause I don’t know how I would have been—but see, I wasn’t special to begin with. I don’t know who selected me for this track, right? Because

there were a lot of kids in the hallway, Hmong kids, black kids, white kids, who weren't tracked, and they slipped through. And so if it could happen for everybody, it's a great thing, but because it didn't happen for everybody, I recognize that somewhere along the way somethi happened, and it changes everything else.

I hear you. And it's a difficult thing, because there's that fine line between students looking for opportunity and students not being given opportunity, and...

And opportunities finding students who didn't know how to look, like me, you know? And so...

(2:02:24) So in the midst of all these things that are going on, and especially as you look now at this book that you've written, do you feel like there were almost times when you felt badly that just—not that you weren't with your grandmother, but maybe that you didn't think about her as often as you used to when you were with her all the time?

So when I was with her all the time, and then in the beginning, I missed her. And then I got used to the missing her. And then when she came for the summers, I got used to that time with her, and we always had—I always looked forward to it, and it was a really special time. But I never regretted, because every time that I was with her, it was time so well spent. And so I figured and I accepted that it was a part of our life. But like the whole education tracking thing, you realize that certain things are privileges, and so I always felt like—OK, I wanted to be kind of a small—I had a small understanding that I had to struggle and do some things. But in the IB and CP programs, I realized. 'I'm privileged.' And so I see the way that I'm living, my everyday—a lot of people are living harder struggles within the same institution. And the same became true of my grandma. I knew that I missed her, but some kids spend their whole lives missing their grandmothers. You know? And so I got to see her during the summer, and I tried to make those times special. And I think that's when there was a social—how do I want to say it? It's not a social consciousness, really, that's almost too broad, but feeling like I had to do something back. So ever since I was a 12-year-old kid, I started tutoring women in Mt. Airy home—Vietnamese women—English as a second language. And I sucked and they sucked and we sucked together! [Both laugh] And that's the truth of it, but they were so desperate for a tutor, and so they allowed this little kid in to tutor these seven Vietnamese women every Thursday night, and it was just horrendous, but it was a horrendously wealthy and rich experience for me and them. So beginning from that point on—because then I realized that I had certain privileges and that I had an obligation [Pause]—a wanting to; less an obligation than a wanting to—

A desire, yeah.

—to share. Yeah. So I began doing these little things on the side that I thought were good. So like in class, when I was in these CP and IB classes, I would volunteer to go to the ESL classes so I could teach these lessons that I had learned previously. And so teaching began early on as a way of sharing all that I was learning. [Chuckles] More than anything else, with people that needed it. So by the end of high school I knew that I was a lucky, lucky girl. It takes a long time. It took me a long time—I had suspicions that I was really lucky, but by high school, it was cemented in my head that of all of the people I knew, I was one of the luckiest—including Der. I'm luckier than her.

Mmm!

I know—which is a weird thing to say, but I'm luckier than her. People are nicer to me than her. She has to fight for everything. And sometimes I don't have to fight for them. Sometimes you're pre-selected in some sense by a selection process that may or may not have been fair. [Pauses] So there you go. [Chuckles] Up to 12th grade.

(2:06:19) I have to ask you about the haunted house, because it's that part of the book that will make people think, 'Mmm, what's this all about, and where does this fit into the story?'

or even ‘Is she making this up?’ But obviously one of the benefits of your parents working so hard and studying so hard was that ultimately you did move out of McDonough Homes and one of the places that you went to was this house that you wrote about in your book.

Section Eight housing. Now the very important point, why I chose to include that story—it really did happen, but why I chose to include it was that so many other people living in Section Eight housing had stories of ghosts. They all—you know, all my cousins and my aunts and uncles all had experiences and encounters. Section Eight housing is a program, a government program for low-income families, subsidized housing. And these houses are sometimes left behind or they’re foreclosed or for whatever reason they end up in the hands of the government.

[Marlin Heise comes through and remarks, ‘My, but they talk a long time’.]

We do!

We are good.

We can’t help ourselves.

We’ve been talking [Chuckles]. So already there is—consciously there is a rich possibility for what could have happened in these houses to get them here and now in our hands. But all of these cousins have stories about little babies crying where there are none, and stuff like that. So I thought it was true to our experience to include the stories, because it wasn’t just us; it wasn’t just a singular experience out of the blue.

Do you say that in the book, by the way—that this is a story that you heard from lots of other families?

[No.]

OK.

So in that way I felt like I had a duty to tell it the way it was, because it kind of makes me sound [pauses] You fight so hard for credibility, and in a chapter like that, you can really lose it. But because I think it’s so true to our experience, I had to be honest in that part, but if I really want the book to matter to me, I have to put a piece of myself out there. So it’s one of those parts. But it’s weird. I think back, and I think about that first time I ran into that room to get the diaper, and I see a slashing movement, and I turn back. And a boy in a striped shirt jumps into the closet! And I felt fear that I feel, and I wasn’t anticipating it, so it’s a very strange, strange occurrence. And it’s an experience that would replicate itself. It happened to different members of my family in difference ways. But in this part, two years ago, we went to the soccer tournament, July 4th. And the house is 1259 St. Albans. It’s right near Como Elementary School at Como Lake. So we drove past the house for old time’s sake. And there’s five of us in the car. I was sitting in the front, we were looking out the car, and the little boy in the striped shirt pulled up half the curtain and he looked at us. [Interviewer laughs] And now I knew that I had seen, but I didn’t say anything, and a little further down you see the little boy. And my brother and one of my sisters said they saw, but because there were six of us, three of them didn’t see. Three of them said nothing lifted, that it was just the house with the curtains and that was it. But three of us saw. And so [Pauses] I don’t know how to explain it for all that it happened to us that way. It happened that way. It’s scary, ‘cause it links it up with death so immediately. But in terms of ‘threatening’, I don’t see it as such. I believe that such things are possible and that the human mind is so strong, it can create so many things. But to think that my mind is that strong, that it could influence two other minds to think the same thing at the same time is a little bit egotistical. [Both laugh] So there must be another explanation, another bigger idea of a world that I don’t really fully understand yet. And that’s fine with me. I know there’s a lot of things that I don’t know, and that’s why I have a lot longer to live, I hope.

(2:10:27) So when you graduated from high school, were you already thinking, ‘I’m going to study English, I’m going to study writing,’ or was this just something that you’d been encouraged in, that you knew, at least on some level, that you were good at and maybe would fit in your college plan somewhere along the way?

So before college something really important happened: 1986 Welfare reform.

Ah, yes.

My grandma came, and my uncles migrated, along with some of the other Hmong families, to Minnesota, ‘cause we were softer on the reforms. And that was when citizenship became a really big issue for my family. We didn’t want to be citizens *per se*. It would be fun to have a passport, because then the homemade videos from Laos were coming in, and there were a lot of tears. For the first time they saw the trees, you know? In the beginning it was so novel. So it would be fun to have a passport, and it was hard to get a passport if you didn’t have citizenship in the country. But 1986 forced a decision. We had to become citizens. Because we had to evaluate that by then so many kids had been born here. Is this more home to the Hmong than any other home we’ve ever known since Laos? There’s no way back? So for my family, because we were less political than some [Pauses] ‘cause politics hadn’t done so well by us, so [Chuckles] in my family it’s worked out this way. But we decided that we would try for citizenship. But for me it was a horrible time, because I became sick, and I think it’s all connected and my aunts and uncles were trying and they were failing. ‘Cause those hundred questions, for somebody who doesn’t speak English, nearly impossible. So lots of low self-esteem and lots of considerations of ‘Are we fit to become American citizens? Are we good enough?’ For the first time we asked ourselves, ‘Are we good enough in the eyes of the country?’ And so 1986 was really important. And it changes me, because I realize then, because I have been so afraid of death and I still kind of am, but I realized that we all die eventually. Because the only way I wasn’t getting better by getting sick; I wasn’t getting better by feeling sick. I realized that if I wanted to be [Pauses] that I could die crossing the street, I could die tomorrow, but the best thing to die would be to die for something I believed in, to die with people thinking that, ‘Oh my god, Kalia had been a good person. She hadn’t done anything bad yet, and she just died,’ right? So there was my big life mission, Paul, I didn’t go to college thinking I would become something in j—my mom and dad wanted me to become a doctor, and I was OK with the idea, ‘cause it would allow me to help people. ‘Cause I have a good heart. I realized I had a good heart because I could handle the badness in the world and other people, ‘cause that would just make me cry. So I realized I had a good heart. I realized that—‘cause I went to this junior high that was a math and science magnet; I was good at that, I had strong foundations. In high school I didn’t slack, so I did well enough to keep that possibility open. But this 1986 and what that suggested to me was it gave me an understanding—if I wanted to die—I mean, we all would die, and it didn’t matter if I wanted to die or not, one day I would die. In the pursuit of that, before that space I would do something worthwhile with my life. So I went in college, and I remember writing—because we didn’t have a computer—going to my uncle’s house and sitting in my cousin’s—my cousin has a green mural bedroom. Everything is green, the walls are green. There is like fake leaves and there’s fake green birds, and there was like a fake mango tree, and everything is green. And I’m sitting in this green bedroom writing in the dark, the night before the applications are due, thinking that I was going to go to the University of Minnesota potentially, because I was a minority encouragement scholarship student, and they would fund me entirely, and also thinking that I could also do Macalester, because it was in the Cities, I heard that it was good. I never visited, but I heard that it was good—and then Carleton, because one day they came to talk at school, and that was the science—my Spanish test, an I didn’t feel quite prepared. So I went in to sit down with the spokesperson from Carleton, but they weren’t talking to me, because... So I ranked number two in my—or I tied for number one or something like freshman year—you know, really high on the ranks, and I did really well, and then I

did really well, and then I got really sick and I fell all the way to 17 or something like that. So by the time I was nearing graduation, I was like at number 11 or 12, right on the border. Whatever the semester turned out to be, I could probably be on the top ten or not. So the lady from Carleton came. Her name is Julie, and I still remember her. She wasn't interested in me, *per se*, and I wasn't interested in her, too, because I didn't really think I was interested in Carleton. And I went, and they talked about a swimming requirement, and I never—"Swimming? No, I don't do that; I've never done it!" [Chuckles] I wish I knew how, but it wasn't interesting to me, so... But then I visited because one of my friends' sisters went to Carleton, and she said that it was a great school. And so I visited just to see what a great school looked like, which is funny, but I didn't know! [Laughs] And so I remember being there and hearing the choir sing, and I'd never heard it before, and it was amazing. But they were singing and they were so angelic, and it was what I saw on TV at like east coast schools—you know, those early college movies where people go to college, and that's what it was like, and then walking through the campus and imagining, "Can I see myself here?" 'Cause it was such a quiet—it was winter term, and it was such a quiet place, and everybody was walking alone. I figured, "This would be a good place for loners!" [Interviewer laughs] And so that's where the idea took root.

OK.

But I remember sitting in my cousin's bedroom trying to write—"cause Carleton has three essays—what I wanted to be, what I wanted to do with my life, and what I felt would prepare me to succeed there. And I couldn't, because I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I remember writing—"cause I remember it was a last-minute thing—promising that I would do something. It was a promise: I wanted to do something great. I wanted to be somebody good, that before I knew anything I knew I wanted to be a good person, because there were so few of those in the world. And that was it, and that's the promise I made to Carleton, and that's the promise I made to myself, that I would be a good person, and that it wouldn't be a waste of experience. I know I'm not the smartest person, 'cause I'm not interested in intelligence, but I knew that I could do well in academics if I had the opportunity. And I didn't know what the public school system had prepared me for this academically rigorous thing that they're talking about. My ACT scores were respectable, and I would go and I would try my best, and I wouldn't embarrass them. I don't know where—you know, you're 18 and you say you won't embarrass a school! [Both laugh] 'Cause I was thinking, because my dad was saying, 'If you go to this school, which is—we hear it's a good school, and you fail out, then you would really embarrass the school, and embarrass yourself. But the school would be embarrassed for selecting you in and?'—right? 'And you have to think about these things, and?'—'cause he didn't want me to go far away from home, which—he would rather I go to Macalester, if anything, 'cause it would be right close by. So I remember making a promise that I wouldn't embarrass anyone—all four years, I wouldn't embarrass anyone, [Chuckles] which was kind of [Pauses] very ambitious. It was a big leap. 'Cause my sister went to Hamline University, and it was a big leap already, and so I was really intimidated. And I went there with this promise that I would do some good, thinking that math and sciences, doctoring was an OK choice. So they took me into this like pre-college program for math and science students, and I went in there for a month, didn't really like the sciences much. I remember writing a paper for biology, like the biology of cancer, saying that the prostate gland was like the size of a chestnut or something like that, and the teacher was laughing her head off, because it was so unscientific. [Interviewer laughs] But I don't remember [Pauses] But I went in on the math and science track, and I didn't declare a major until two years later. It's such a big culture shock, which I think is important. There were—by the time I went there, there were seven or eight Hmong kids. In my year there were like four of us and one would drop out. And so there were three, and one would leave, and there were—no, there were five, so there would be three left—all girls. But there were more girls there than boys—Hmong, and

the Hmong girls had an easier time than the Hmong boys. And I realized that immediately. I didn't really know, why, because it seemed like everything was pretty much the same, but they were having a harder time staying, and they were having a more challenging time while being there. And everything was kind of [Pauses] I felt like they had more pressure, because they talked about how Carleton was a good school, and to me it didn't matter if it was a good school or not, because it was a good place to be a loner. But they talked about how it was a good school, and they felt that kind of pressure, and I didn't. But I didn't know how to use e-mail, and everybody knew e-mail. And I got my first e-mail as a gift for going there, and so everything was so new, and the public school system, Harding High School tried to prepare me as best it knew how, but not for the wealth and the breadth of experience that my class would have coming to those things, 'cause we would talk about Egypt, and somebody had been to Egypt. We would talk about politics and somebody had personal experience with politicians. In Harding High School, I didn't have that kind of credibility or authority. So I grew quiet again, 'cause I couldn't say—and then when we talked about race or [Pauses] We didn't talk about the Hmong experience, and we talked about a race I didn't know—it was black and white race. And so that was still so much the culture. And so to say, 'We're here, too,' was kind of weird, and it was a very strange dynamic. Carleton wasn't great for me on this level, but it was phenomenal for me in understanding what an authentic experience can do in shaping perspective and authority. 'Cause these kids can talk with authority. When you talk about DC, they interned in DC. And because they were privileged they had all kinds of things that they could bring to the table, and I learned so much about what experience can do in backing up academic positions and stuff like that, 'cause there was a line where theory ended and where life began. And my life had nothing to do with theories; I couldn't see a link yet. But Carleton challenged that. You know, I was like a shy kid, all right? So if I was in your class, I'd be really shy, at the back of the class and hear you talking trying to give us the full picture of something. And then I wouldn't ask questions. But by the end of the semester, if there was a really big thing, I garnered enough confidence to say, 'Explain this to me one more time.' I didn't challenge it, but I could say, 'Explain this to me one more time.' And it was really slow processing that way, but I had more alone time than I ever had in my life, to think about everything in my life from a different—from a distance. Now when I came home, people said I was becoming more Americanized. My cousins and my family were saying, 'You're becoming more Americanized, because you eat according to different times and all these'—they were noticing all of these little changes. They were saying, 'You are becoming less Hmong.' And I didn't get it, 'cause I was just becoming more lonely, more of a loner. I wasn't becoming more 'Carleton' in that way. I didn't go around hiding the philosopher's head, which is a big deal over there, or streaking, or any of that college drinking environment. I was just becoming more of a loner, but they were saying I was becoming more different from them, and that was hard. I remember being frustrated. I remember reading Rodriguez. My sister read Rodriguez to me before I went—the essay about how education became the distance between himself and his parents that he couldn't leap; how one day he no longer had the ability to translate all of these things that he was learning into his home life, and how this great gift that his father had wanted for him would be the thing that would push him away from them. So I went to college in tears, and all throughout my four years that rang in my head. And every time we talked on the phone, I tried to explain Jane Austen, I tried to explain Emily Dickinson, I tried to explain all of these things. But I went on to college and I ended up being very true to myself, studying all of the things that were interesting to me, which turned out to be American Studies, Cross-Cultural Studies and Women and Gender Studies: all three interdisciplinary things. The classes were so overlapped that I could get credits for all of them, which was intelligent, right? And I got in the math and science credits on the side, because that was my—that was going to be the promise, the delivery of the promise. But by my junior year, because of

everything else that was going on, I became—I worked in a program called the Trio Student Support Services, which is a federal program.

(2:24:27) Trio?

[Yes] Which is a federal program which supports low-income, first-generation, and disabled students. And Carleton is the only college in its tier with that program. But I worked for them immediately, because they had a lending library, and I remember that summer when I went there, I knew that I didn't have money to buy the books, that my mom and dad didn't have the money to buy the books for me. So I was going to do work study, but even that wasn't going to be enough. So I asked the lady there about their lending library, and she says—and then she requested—and this is where I say 'I'm privileged, because somebody pre-selected my work study so I would be with them for four years. And in doing these things, they were looking for peer leaders, student leaders to bring up class issues at Carleton, because when you looked at it—race and all these other demographics—it didn't hit as hard as class did. 'Cause people didn't talk about money, because there was an assumption that people had money. And so my work was to bring up these class issues—very hard for a very silent girl who never speaks, but who really feels for these things. And so after two, three years, I needed a break, and that's when I went to Thailand, thinking that I would go find that little girl in the camp, some of the magic that was lost. I needed that trip. So I went for a semester. My journey into Hmongness almost happened, but it didn't. I came back, because in Thailand, then, everybody said I was a Hmong. They would say, 'What are you?' and I would say I was Hmong, and they would say, 'No, you're Japanese or something. You just don't understand English. 'Cause Hmong doesn't look like that' or 'A Hmong doesn't come from America and look like that.' So my idea of who I was—and then I went to see what Hmong people looked like, and in the universities they had Thai last names, and they didn't want to be affiliated with Hmong people. And then in the villages, they spoke Thai more than they spoke Hmong. And the Hmong people there were looking at me as if I was American. And yet all the Thai people said I wasn't [Pauses] And so this whole thing—a new kind of difference emerges. But I remember coming back feeling like I didn't belong in Thailand, as well. And the camp no longer existed, and everybody at home said I was becoming more Americanized, but I wasn't getting used to the people at Carleton. But coming back with a stronger voice, because of all of these things, I did more writing. And so that's where I got my first good piece: "Daughter of a Pathological Liar." [Interviewer chuckles] And that changed everything for me, 'cause in my heart I knew. It made sense; I'd been keeping all these journals all along the way. I sucked—I'm suicidal with the grammatical structures that govern the English language, and although I teach composition sometimes, it's still one of my big [Pauses] without knowing that thing, (***) says it's like going to battle with only a sword and no shield. But with learning them, as I'm doing them in the process, it's kind of strange, so I had this idea that I would become a writer, so I applied to writing schools. The University of Minnesota didn't want me. I was too rough. They didn't have the time and the resources to train me. But I wrote an essay—I wrote my essay about my father, how he sits in front of our TV and he cries, 'cause he thinks one place is the place where his father is buried, and he thinks it's another. Every day it's a different place. But this video that somebody filmed of the place where he was born. And I think Columbia University, the School of the Arts, they didn't know what Hmong was, but she had an idea that the world might need to know. And it was on this gamble that they took me in. And they offered me—because I didn't have a writing portfolio, so I had to create one very fast. And so it was a non-fiction one, because all of my strongest pieces had been non-fiction. But I thought fiction would be more fun. So I applied to fiction and non-fiction, and fiction didn't want me, but non-fiction said that they would offer me one of their biggest—they only had two writing fellowships for writers, and they would give me one of them on the promise of the work that I

would do. And they would regulate my work there for two years, right? And then the thing would run out, and usually it takes people like five years to get the MFA, because they want that writing time for their thesis, 'cause that's the average germination time for a book, anyway. So I went there knowing that I only had two years to do my work, and knowing that I had to keep the fellowship and write a story that mattered, a story that would deliver on my promise to Carleton and my promise to myself, and this divergence from medical school, that I had to do as much work. [Interviewer chuckles] So that's what I did. It's a lot.

Indeed it is.

No, I mean I said a lot of things. [Laughs]

Well—

It wasn't a lot to do, because—when you only have time, Paul, when you only have time, it's amazing how much work gets done.

(2:29:54) I'm going to backtrack for just a second, because I had forgotten that you got so sick.

Mm-hmm.

And I can't remember if you actually say in the book or maybe you honestly don't know what the cause of that sickness was.

The doctors diagnosed it after months and months of study as Lupus, but “baby” Lupus, because it wasn't deteriorating as fast. Now Lupus is like the ghost disease. Nobody knows how you get it, it happens to pre-teen girls more than any others—or teen girls more than any other population. But it's a [Pauses] it's like a disease that you can't cure. It's an ongoing, lifelong disease. It's the immune system attacking itself. So they placed me on Vioxx and Plaquinol, and Plaquinol took away my eyesight, so now I don't see as well as I used to. And then the Vioxx, there's a lot of issues; there were a lot of lawsuits after the Vioxx deal. But I took it, I stopped in Thailand when I went on that [trip]—I just stopped it one day 'cause I got sick of it, and I just never went back on it. I just came back and everybody sad that all of my blood counts were back to normal, and there was nothing wrong, that the baby Lupus may have been a misdiagnosis.

Hmm! OK.

But I was sick for a long time. And so that was the diagnosis.

(2:31:12) But your health in general is pretty good?

These days?

Yeah.

Yeah.

Excellent.

I know, isn't it weird?

(2:31:21) So talk to me about these two years at Columbia. This was a lot of pressure—I mean, welcome pressure in many ways, because you were given a fellowship and you were given an opportunity that very few people get, but still pressure.

Pressure.

Pressure's not always bad.

Pressure's not always bad, but in addition to the fellowship—'cause that was only half of my tuition—I needed to fund the other half.

[Interviewer gets up to close doors to an adjacent room where some people are talking.]

(2:31:55) So I was saying I still needed a way to fund the thing. I remember a guy getting a flyer one day about a (***) he knew for the Soros Fellowship for New Americans. One night I couldn't sleep, because I didn't know where the money was coming from. And at this point I didn't know if I was getting into writing school, but regardless of where I was going, I needed money. So I stayed up all night and I found this thing that's a fellowship. It gives money primarily to Harvard and Stanford students. So there you go; there was a heavy bias. Most of them were new Americans, and most of them were from South Asia, so most of them were Hindi or India, and they were from these prestigious schools. And then the other half were Europeans from very prestigious schools who were already geniuses in their own right with so many accomplishments under their belts. But I applied anyway thinking I had nothing to lose. Occasionally I feel like I have nothing to lose and I do all of these courageous things that I really had nothing to lose without trying, anyway. But my grandma died near the end of my graduation year. We always talked about how she would go to my graduation. And every time my father dropped me off at Carleton, she would say it was a trip, and she was looking at the country—America. This trip between St. Paul and Northfield was the country, and that she was visiting my garden, she said. She said in America we didn't garden anymore, that Carleton was my garden and she was visiting my garden. And every time I came home from break she would be there at home waiting for me, 'cause I did her laundry, and because I cut her toenails and fingernails, and because she missed me. And so she was getting sick. It was December 25th she fell down. January she was really sick. She would die on February 18th, but in that interim she was really sick, and I was at school doing my dissertation on—or my thesis, we call it our thesis, yeah—on contesting the English language requirement in the citizenship process. You can see where that came from—1986, right?

Yes.

'Cause the person wasn't changing, the person was only growing up, and all these things were still inside and they needed room to come out, so that was my thing. And I was contesting that vigorously, and my grandma was really sick. And I applied for this fellowship that I thought I had no chance of getting. But it was promise to change the landscape of America forever, fundamentally. And I don't see myself as a leader, but it necessitated a definition of leadership, a brand of leadership that people could use. And so I came up with this definition, and I've been shaky about it ever since, but I still hold on to it, that a leader is someone who went somewhere where others would voluntarily and willingly follow, and who left a path wide and generous enough for them to see their way through to wherever you are standing. And so that was my promise to them. And I went to those—they get like thousands of applications, they set up like 80 to go to these interviews. And I was selected to go into them. And I prepped to—I told my family, and then—I keep things fairly private, but I told my family, and so my uncle prepped me. He said—we go to his houses, Uncle Ong—the one who became a monk. He says to me, 'You have to go, and you have to say'—'cause Henry Kissinger was on the board of this fellowship—He says, 'You have to say—you have to speak very loud.' And I'm like, 'Um...' Have you notice how all the old Hmong guys speak really loud, especially with military-types, right? And I say, 'Why?' And he goes, 'Because in the Hmong culture, if we don't speak loud, we've never been heard before. And so you have to go and you have to speak very loudly. All of the men in our family, when they're really angry'—and I'm like, 'Oh, my god!' And then my other uncle says, 'Remember that life in America is like driving. Before you make a turn, you have to signal a long way so people can follow you.' And these were the kinds of advice that they were giving me for this thing that I was saying I didn't know! And it was really all over the place, and I really didn't know how to use this advice! But it was really weird, because we were in this interviews, and they asked me, Warren asked me—Warren is the director of the fellowship, and he asked me—we're at this table, nobody knew what a Hmong was. Nobody from Carleton had ever gone to this fellowship before, so nobody knew. Everybody

was from the big Ivies. We were eating with utensils, and I didn't know which one I should start with. And they were drinking wine and of course I had never been exposed before, and I was wearing my first suit and it didn't fit, because I was too short, obviously. And it was the most uncomfortable situation, and he says, 'Are you thankful to America for fighting in that war? Where would you be now if it had not been for the American influence in the war?' [Pauses] And I was still shaking, and so I speak, and I tried to speak really loud like my uncle said, 'cause I thought, 'OK, now's the time,' right? But it came out like a squeak. And I remember it this way. I remember it this way: I even remember saying, 'I would be in the hills of Laos with a baby on my back and a hoe in my hands going to my life, and feeling like this is the life I belong to.' And so he looks at me for a long time, and he goes, 'Aren't you special at all? I mean, don't think that in Laos by now, after all of these years, after 30 years, that you would be in school somewhere doing something?' And I honestly didn't think so, because I come from a family of farmers. It would have been honorable to farm. There wouldn't have been 1986, and there wouldn't have been the refugee camps. And it would have been all I'd known. And so I was really honest about that. So in the interviews they questioned me so much about Hmongness. 'Are you going to write a Hmong book? You say you want to be a writer. Are you going to write a Hmong book or an American book? And I—and at a point I stopped caring, because this panel of, in some ways, new Americans, questioning me on my Hmongness, not on the American part, but the Hmong part.

Which they knew nothing about.

Which they knew nothing about. And so I didn't care anymore. At a part halfway through the second round—because eight people get to ask you questions, and there's two rounds. I didn't care anymore, so I said, 'It's going to be my book. It's going to be—because I'm Hmong but I live in America. It's going to be the America you know and the Hmong person I am, and that's the book it's going to be. And then they asked me dumb questions about—like 'Why are you a certified child care provider?' and 'Why do you work these jobs?' And I'm like, 'Because I don't have any money. Because I'm poor.' And so I came back thinking I wasn't going to get these fellowships at all, and thinking that because my portfolio was going to be bad, it wasn't going to work—still contesting the English language requirement rigorously, and my grandma was really ill. And I came back, and she died. She died one day, and nothing was completed. And I really was lost. I thought, 'She isn't even going to see my graduation—this garden that I tended that she wasn't even going to—her feet weren't even going to touch the ground, because by then she was already so old that she never really went walking on the campus. She was always in the car. And so it was really sad, and I was really missing her already, and really already scared that I would forget her, and that I wouldn't have the means to remember her, because I still didn't have the resources to do anything. And then on the day that she died and the day that we buried her, I came back home—and this almost seems so silly, 'cause it was a Monday. You bury people on a Monday. And they dropped me off at school on Monday afternoon. Columbia University called, Professor Harris called, and she says, 'We're offering this fellowship. Do you want to take it?' And I'm crying, 'cause it doesn't really matter. It's only half of a thing anyway. And I say, 'It doesn't matter. At this point, I want to do this work, but it doesn't matter, because I don't have the other half.' And sometimes—'cause at the fellowship they were always asking, 'If we don't give you this fellowship, how are you going to do it?' And then I had said, 'Because I want to do it, I'll find a way. And if you don't give me this fellowship, it's going to take me longer, and it will be harder, and maybe by the time I finish the thing will be less pretty, but I'm still going to do it—'cause I don't care.' So then she asked me that, and I said, 'I don't know.' And then I hung up the phone, and the phone rang again—immediately. And I picked it up, and it was this fellowship saying, 'We're going to give you this money. We're going to pay for half of your education costs, and we're going to give you \$20,000 to live on a year. Are you going to take it?' And to me, the day that my grandmother began her life, her journey, I would

ultimately begin mine, and I don't think—I talk about luck, 'cause I really believe in it, Paul. It wasn't because—I'm not special. I would be the first one to say I am not special—honestly, in the heart of me, I know. Every—when I read my journals, my diaries from years back, I know I'm not special. I'm still crying about that zit. There was nothing special in me all along. But somewhere along the way forces, whether alive or dead, whether I know them or not, people have made all of the difference. And they—I'm very privileged and I'm very lucky, 'cause they choose me.

(2:41:39) But they choose you for a reason.

I don't—sometimes I think we gamble. Life is a gamble and we gamble on these things, and we gamble on people.

I know what you're saying, because I feel very much the same way when people say, 'Oh, you've done this well.' You want to sort of deflect that and say, 'No, no, no, you don't understand. It's about something bigger and it's about a larger group of people.' So I understand completely—well, not completely, but I have a good idea of what you're trying to say.

And it's not the person, it's the work, if that makes sense. All these people are looking for a certain kind of work to be done in the world. And they're looking for somebody who wants to do it. And I think I've always the kind of work that I wanted to do. And I've always met enough people who believed in it to allow me to do it. And that's what it comes down to. So I think in that way I'm really lucky, because some people live their whole life trying to do work that matters, or trying to find work that matters to them. And I've always known, because the work that I feel I have to do and need to do and want to do needed to be done way before I was born, if that makes sense.

I know what you—well, OK, again, I think I—

You know what I mean.

I think I know what you mean.

Yes, you do. You do the same thing I your own field.

(2:43:06) Talk to me—'cause this is still something that I only partly grasp, and I'd like to understand better, but... Talk to me about your grandmother's funeral, and as much as you can, speak to me as an outsider in the community about what that ceremony means to you, and about the parts of it that help send your grandmother on her journey.

That's such a good question. You know, you are so generous about these questions, 'cause I have to think about them, anyway. [Interviewer laughs] And you're so giving in your practice. Thank you.

I appreciate that very much.

It's my pleasure.

You're so good. But the funeral, my grandmother's funeral, was our first time—the first time in our family that anybody died a natural death. So all of our lives we have been fighting—it seems all of our lives we've been fighting to die a natural death. [Both chuckle wistfully] And it sounds so funny, but when it came time to, we weren't ready for her, and we realized there was no way we could be. So we tried to fight the medical system when they said there was nothing else they could do for my grandma, and that she was just slowly starving to death. We tried to fight, but we didn't have the ammunition. And then they said, 'Your grandma is dead.' And we knew. And they took her away in a car, a black car. And then when I saw her again, a month later—'cause in this country, in 2003, there were only three Hmong funeral homes, and the line was so long that year. In my family alone there were like five deaths, and so she had to wait for a month in the refrigerator. So when I saw her again, she didn't look like the person I knew. I don't know what happened, but something happened. All her wrinkles went away, and she became the color of clay. And all the bones and everything I knew was gone. Her mouth was sealed, so I couldn't see the one tooth, and

there was this woman—the only thing on her that looked like the woman I loved were her fingers. They were still straight, and they were still strong. And so it was the first time—so we all knew it was the first time we get to say goodbye the Hmong way. ‘Cause although there had been so many deaths in the jungle and in Thailand, we couldn’t really say goodbye the Hmong way. We had to say goodbye the refugee way, very fast. So it was our first time to say goodbye to our mother the Hmong way. What did this entail? It used to be that my grandfather got seven days because he was so respected. And in the old country my grandmother would have gotten many days as well, but here in America everybody works, so you only get Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday is the burial. And that was enough time—to say that that was enough time to say goodbye to someone you really love is really harsh, but the body lying there wasn’t the woman I knew. So that was enough time. But we had to say goodbye, and all the preparations, all the cows that had to be killed—slaughtered, like the gravestone. So in the Hmong tradition you can’t be buried—well, it’s bad luck to be buried in a casket if there’s metal. Now all of the funerals I’d been to before had metal caskets. But for my grandmother, there was somebody who had imported wood from Laos, this special tree that supposedly will hold out all kinds of insects and all kinds of bad things forever. And he was making a casket, and it was really pricey. But my grandmother had nine children—nine surviving children. So everybody pooled all of their money together. They got like \$70,000 together, money that they didn’t have, and borrowed from someplace else. Each of them put money on the thing. And we bought her this casket. It was a sliding door—no metal. It was all glue and wooden [pegs]. It was really deep so that all of the people who had known her in her life could buy her something for her new life. And we would use that as padding, instead of the satin that you would see in the cushioning. And I’d never seen a dead body so close up before, but I sat at my grandma’s side on the ground, ‘cause we were telling her the way back to the place she was born. And they were walking with her through every piece of little land that she’d ever been on, and all of the homes, and saying goodbye and thanking the land and the spirits for holding her safe. And they didn’t call her by her maiden name, Youa Lee, they called her ‘Grandma **Nao Lo**’, which is my grandpa’s name. And it was ironic to me, ‘cause I was sitting there and I was so sad, and you couldn’t cry, because if your tears touched their body, then their hearts would linger, and they would have a hard walk. So I had like Kleenex stuffed over my eyes and I was crying, and in my head I was, ‘How are her parents going to know her? They didn’t know her before she married my grandfather!’ Technical questions, right? And I was thinking, ‘She only likes flip-flops’, so she wore flip-flops, and I imagining this journey that she was going on and I was thinking about all of these questions, kind of to find the emotions that I was going through. But it feels like a dream, because there were so many flowers and you [Pauses] We wanted to make it very big and very beautiful for her, not because she said she wanted it, although I thin she would have liked it—her unspoken wishes. But because I think it was our first time, and a piece of me was scared that it would be the last time that we could say goodbye as one unit, because she was the woman who was holding all of us together, year in, year out, going from one house to the next. So if she died, what is left? So I think—I feel like everybody knew, and everybody was thinking along these same lines. So it was the biggest joint effort that my family had ever done. Since the camp, we were all together and we were all doing the same thing for this woman that we all loved in our own ways, as strongly as we knew how. And I really feel like she would have been really happy, and because there are so many people together, first in the house, in my Uncle Ong’s house—because you have to warm the house up when the death has happened—and then at the funeral home. There were little children, and they—for the first time they get to see cousins they’ve never seen before, so it was like a party. The children were partying. Everybody, it was kind of [Pauses] We’re doing all this work, but all the work is just food and making things beautiful, and—because not everybody knew the traditions, you had to go into the community and ask them special. All the sons, like my father’s **fear**—had to go

and ask these men who knew all the ceremonial rites that would take my grandma back to the land of the ancestors. And there were these chants—the last night of the funeral is the most powerful, the [most] poignantly beautiful, ‘cause it’s really poetic. And we’re sitting there on the ground, everybody, including all of my fathers and some of my uncles. And some of them have diabetes and health conditions, but everybody who is a child of grandma had to sit on the ground. So imagine a room of people sitting on the ground, and this man walking before a casket **that night**, saying goodbye. ‘This is what your mother would have said,’ or ‘This is what she said when I stopped her on the road to the land of the dead—for you.’ It’s about you living a good life and doing well and stuff, but it was really [Pauses] because it’s poetry, it didn’t immediately enter my mind, and I didn’t understand it until like halfway through. And then by the time I understood it, dawn was coming already. There was a table before that casket, and he had to break the legs of that table. ‘Cause no longer was she going to be eating from the table of the living. So dawn was coming, and I was so scared. We had to open the door, although it was March, and it was a really, really cold day, March 18th. It was frozen. Everything was frozen that day. And there was—I could see dawn coming in, and it feels so humbling because you can’t fight it; you can’t fight the goodbye that had to happen. So when the sun rose he kicked the table and the table fell apart, and all the adults—like they knew it, ‘cause they had—I don’t know how they knew it. Maybe they had seen it before. They ran up to say goodbye. And I was shocked, ‘cause I didn’t expect it. After being in that position for so long, they went to say goodbye, and there was all of this crying and chanting, and I hadn’t heard that since Vinai—all the chanting about why you’re leaving now, and there were even messages, like ‘If you are going to go and you meet my father, please tell him that I will be on my way.’ And so it was all of these weird things, and I just didn’t know how to say goodbye in that way, because right before she died, I feel like I had already said my goodbye already, too, because I told her when she was still alive, when I was forced to go back to Carleton to contest the English language requirement as rigorously as I knew how—but I said my goodbye. And everybody rushed and said goodbye to her, and that was it. Three days of so much food and so much drink, and I don’t remember how any of it tasted like. I knew it was a feast, and a feast and a feast and a feast that too many feasts—feasts staying all together. And the smell of flowers now reminds me of death. And I love flowers, but they do remind me of death. And I touched her on that last day before we hid her under the ground. You don’t say you buried someone, you say you hid them under the ground. And now I go back to visit that place under the tree, and I remember how cold it was that day, and how eager everybody was to find warmth. I don’t remember my life ever feeling so cold, and I don’t know if it was the emotional weight of it all, but I knew that the temperatures were incredibly low, too. You know, we go to that place and I say goodbye to her and I talk to her, but I only talk to her in my head. It’s so hard to just talk out loud [Pauses] ‘cause that body underneath the ground is a body of the woman I love and everything that I loved is no longer there. It’s a very unique situation, because I talk to her from my bedroom just fine, like right now, if I talk to her in my head, it’s just fine. I’ll ask her for all the things that I want, and all the things that I’m trying to be and do, and for the strength and courage to do it all. I don’t pray, but I talk to her in the way that people pray. And ‘cause—I talk to my grandpa through her, too, but I don’t really know him. So it’s a little stranger. And then I even talk to his first wife, but I don’t know her, so that’s even stranger, right? [Both chuckle] But if I talk to her now it’s more real to me than talking to her there, because it feels a little artificial, ‘cause I feel like where I carry her now is in my heart, versus the ground. And yet my father and my uncles all talk about the place where my [grand]father is buried, and they all talk about the land where our ancestors are buried, and they feel that land.

(2:54:26) Well, and there’s this belief, of course, that there’s a soul that remains over the body of the person who’s left, so that there is, if you will, someone to talk to there.

Yeah. Because they miss that land, too. If I leave America, I think I'll miss it. And I'll say, 'That's where my grandmother was buried.' And something will happen there. Because I'm in America and I can go to Jackson Cemetery whenever I miss her a lot, I feel like I carry her in my heart and not the land. But if I were to leave the land, I would.

(2:55:00) This is one of those personal questions that you can just say, 'I'm not talking about this,' but what kinds of things do you talk to your grandmother about?

Well last night I talked to her, and I talked to her in three weeks, so one in my journal, where just say, 'Grandma,' and then I just write everything like she's here and she knows, or two, I talk to her right before I go to sleep. I ask her to protect everybody in my family and to get us through the night, 'cause I'm scared of the dark. She knows it and I know it. And then I ask her—like in my journal I ask her to help me to find enough money to pay the rent this month so I can finish something I want to do, which is to write some more, and work some more on this other thing. Very practical stuff. It's like the car breaks down and I don't have any money to fix it, I ask her, 'Please help me!' And it's so sad, because these days I'm asking her to help me find the money. I'm going to do everything I can to help me find the money to make this month, meet next month, and to help my mom and dad, alleviate a little bit of their worries in this and that way. Sometimes I ask her to help me become a better person, because I'm still not good enough yet. But I tell her, because I know I've been promising her I'll be a better person forever, but at least I still remember and I'm still trying! [Both laugh] And so it may take me a little longer, but I've never been very fast. So hopefully...

(2:56:19) I think part of the problem, too, is as you get older you understand the broader consequences of what it really means to be a good person, so then the target gets further and further away.

[Chuckles] That is so true! It is so true. And even the things I promise myself I don't always keep. So you say, 'OK, I'm never, ever going to yell at my brother again if he does something irritating,' and I do, and I'm like... [Interviewer laughs] But I talk to her, and it's not always so deep and it's not always so generous, but I'm so honest with her, because I think [Pauses] That's the beauty. We were always honest with each other. When we were angry with each other, we weren't afraid to show it, despite the fact that she was my grandma and there was respect with the elderly and everything else. If she did something and I thought, 'No I don't think that's right,' I would say it. And so that remained—the foundations of our relationship. And I speak of her sometimes in the present tense, which is a little odd, but I think when you really, really miss somebody, and you keep on looking for them everywhere, then sometimes it just slips out that way. But I realize that I can't find her anymore in the world, that I have to find her in the people around me. And as I get older, I'm realizing that our time together is really very short, and that time to be with people is really just opportunity to show them love and to make an unforgettable memory, make the rich memories that are going to be treasured long ago and far away after I've gone, after they've gone. And that's it. So I don't know. It's all about memory-making. What kind of memory do I want to make today? Well, obviously I'll remember today, because I've never spoken so much!

Neither will I.

[Interviewer checks recorder again. New track begins]

You're a professor. Your job is to profess.

[Laughs] Yeah, occupational hazard—talking too much.

Hey it's good. Learned a lot.

(0:08) So you finish your two years at Columbia,

Yes.

And what have you accomplished in those two years?

At Columbia or after?

At Columbia during those two years.

At Columbia. I exposed [Pauses] I went to the Lincoln Center—there's a lot of culture shock when you go from a place like St. Paul to a place where there is really just concrete. You know that America that we talked about long ago where there's no earth? That's New York City, Manhattan, right? But I—

Did you get to Central Park every now and then?

I lived so close to it, I did. And yet the park was not as great, because I'm used to St. Paul parks. We have great parks here, and so it's all hyped up, and it's in the movies, but when you're actually there, it's not as great as it would seem to be. But I did a lot of work in that I allowed enough of the culture to get into me to allow me to see a bigger world, but not enough to destroy my appreciation of what Minnesota and the rest of my life has to offer. I missed the smell of people working, I think because I was so alone in New York City, like casual human caring becomes really significant, and moments of warmth are really magnified. But in terms of the writing, I just wrote pieces that meant things to me, or—of course, there were assignments I needed to write, find themes in this life that we've lived. But the question always was from my friends, 'Why do you go to writing school when you haven't lived so much of life already? What story are you looking to tell? And I couldn't tell them about the story I was looking to tell, because I didn't know. I would discover it there. But there was already so much living that hadn't been recorded, period. So that's what I went to do. So now I have so much writing, more writing than will ever show up in that book—pages and pages of writing, and some of them are perhaps, I believe, as strong if not better. But they won't show up ever.

(2:10) Not ever?

Well not—I can't see a way yet. I'm still working on it. But I think—

Are these—I'm sorry.

No, no.

Are these potential short stories, are they just sort of random thoughts? What do you see them as for the most part?

They're like life profiles, versus character profiles. 'Cause I think I focus more on the life than the actual characters. But one is the other in some sense, right. If you do well enough at one, you get at the other. But they're really life profiles, and they're stories—solid, strong, independent stories that can be laced up or not. All of the book began that way, and so when I pulled it together, it was a lot of weaving of these things—lots of writing, lots of exposure. I think for as much as I could, I made New York City—the parts that I knew—I taught them what Hmong people were, and I shared pieces of our story with them, and I learned that they cared, which is really good. They didn't need to know, but once they learned, they cared.

(3:17) Well, if people in a city like New York City can't care, where there are goodness knows how many different people with different human origins in that place, I don't know where else they would.

Very, very true. But in the non-fiction department, still taught mostly by men, mostly by Caucasian men, and the students—because writing is such—it's a school of the arts and there's not much

funding, so most of the people who do it are really passionate about it or they've had exposure to some kind of ability or way of thinking about art or literature and film and theater and so most of it, it's not as diverse as one would hope. It doesn't reflect the city. 'Cause people come from all over the world to do that thing that they do. But once they hear, they care. And I think my professors were really [Pauses] Professors have such an interesting and important job, Paul, 'cause they do what no other job can do. They teach people to believe in the mind, and they say to them, 'The mind can care,' which is a powerful statement, 'cause everywhere else in the world it's the heart and it's the mind, but in the university setting it's the mind that cares. And so [Pauses] my teachers cared, and that mattered, and that shapes so much. And so that feeling—if I were different, if I lived in the 1940s, it would have been my Paris or my Rome, that place or that space where a writer had a time to explore not only themselves, but the life thrumming around them. But I live in 2000-whatever, and we can't do that, especially [Pauses] so you have to buy it, and you have to buy that kind of space, and that's what it was for me. It was purchased time. And I knew that the clock was ticking.

(5:12) Whether from your professors or just from the accumulation of your own personal experiences, whatever the source of this inspiration may have been, what do you think you gained as a writer and as someone who wanted to share this experience as effectively as you could, from those two years in New York?

Craft. I was grammatically suicidal, [Interviewer laughs] and I was—it was horrendous! You know, I speak English sometimes, and sometimes I don't. And I think in English sometimes, and sometimes I don't. And I write in English sometimes, and sometimes I don't. But craft—I did not—the kind of learning that happened at Columbia would have taken so much longer on my own—independently. Because what I learned, more than anything, was people's response to work, when it mattered and when it didn't, within the workshop environment when everybody—and where else do you find ten pairs of eyes who are really going to care about—who are really going to tackle it? It's rare, and it's a very priceless opportunity. And to get reflections—you know, they're like, 'This doesn't work, and this is why I think it doesn't work. And to grow from that kind of environment, that kind of nurturing—nurturing, but definitely not coddling environment was really good. So as a writer, in terms of craft—because I could tell this story—a lot of Hmong people have told stories of experiences, but because they didn't have the privilege—again, it's that luck factor, that benefit of the—for example, Columbia or you could have gone anywhere else with that kind of attention to it. 'Cause I can say independently that [Pauses] How am I going to put this? George Orwell, who I adore (he is one of the big literary influences on my life). He writes of the things that matter, very important stuff. And it's the subject matter, more than the writing that gets you. But then you look at someone like Louise Erdrich, whose prose is very beautiful, and the stories are not always gripping, who in her own right [Pauses] or Nabokov, who in his own right deserves to be acclaimed because of what he does fundamentally and forever to the language. I think what I have accomplished is a subject matter that is so important to me, and I think deserving of attention in the world, and I've also achieved a kind of literary voice that can stand on its own for the beauty of the prose, which I think is the unique thing, because the story can be told, and has been told, but it hasn't gotten the attention it deserves, because of the challenges on the second factor. So what Columbia did was pump in the second factor more than I could have done myself.

(7:58) So did you come straight back to Minnesota from New York?

Mm-hmm. I did. I was offered an opportunity to teach at the Gallatin School at NYU, which would have been interesting, 'cause I had taught at Columbia—workshops to faculty on [Pauses] 'Cause sometimes I think that faculty worry that they're so academic that they're losing out on the

creative side or the literary components. So they came and they were all doing workshops together, so I had gone teaching experience in that regard, and I was offered a teaching position at NYU. But I didn't take it, because I felt like the story needed to end where it began. The idea of that circle, uniting and meeting again—and really, because I had wanted to share it with the Hmong community. 'Cause as much as it is about my story and a memoir of a family, I think it's so much a story of a people, and at a point it becomes selfish to say 'It's just my story', 'cause I know it isn't. When people read it—like Seexeng [Lee], he tells me, 'That's my story. Wow, we're like leading parallel lives.' And then so I think [Pauses] I feel [Pauses] It's not a same sense of being privileged and you feel like you have to give back and do back, and wanting to do so. But I don't know how the overall community is going to respond to the work. So far so much support; the question is always, 'How are you doing?' 'When is it going to be done?' And then I'm so privileged because I meet people like you, and you believe, and you support, and you give me that kind of energy and feedback to do it. I'm so lucky on so many levels.

(9:40) Well...A, thank you very much, but B, I don't think it's a matter of belief, the evidence is right on the page. I don't have to believe in anything. It's all right there. And my goodness, when Anne Fadiman takes the time to read the book and to give you the kind of praise that's now on the lovely little card that's presaging your book, that's got to tell you something. So I think it's wonderful that you've maintained this sense of balance in your life, and this sense of perspective, and that you are still thankful to the people and to the opportunities that you have. That's part of what makes you work, I think, because there are people who find their voice and find—

[Recorder's batteries run out. Interviewer picks up new recorder, new track begins.]

(0:00) Yeah, I don't want to lose any of this. Of course I'm paying attention! [Both laugh] But I just [Pauses] There is that balance you have to find in this area of your life as well. Humility is a wonderful thing. Gratitude is a wonderful thing. Perspective is a wonderful thing. But recognizing your talent is OK, too.

But I think support, like from [Pauses] because you know the history of the Hmong people more than most people, so [Pauses] so when you hear my story, it is so informed, from such an informed perspective, and when you read it, it's from such an informed perspective, and I think that changes it a little bit. It's different from somebody out of the blue reading and saying, 'This is a great story.' 'Cause you know so much around that story, you know?

(0:50) But the great thing is you don't have to know a lot about the Hmong to know this is a great story.

Mm-hmm.

The universality of those themes is part of what makes it work—that we can grab somebody from—I don't know, Lubbock, Texas, who's never heard of a Hmong person and they can read this book and probably come out of it saying, 'Now I want to know more about the Hmong people. So that's a wonderful part of the story as well.

I think I believe—and I'm surrounded by people who believe that the world cares, and that the world [Pauses] you know, that they would recognize. And I think, to get at a place where you're surrounded by people who believe that the world is a good place, and that people are good people, I used to think that it was rare but now I'm realizing that it's really rare, because not everybody believes.

No.

It's hard to come by, that you meet people.

Well, I'm very glad to hear that you are surrounded by people who do, because that's a wonderful thing.

They do.

And especially when you tell me that you're struggling to pay the bills every month. There had better be some payback in other ways. [Chuckles] So I'm glad to hear that.

And there is. Every day I think, 'I'm so excited to get up and see what's going to happen today.' I'm so happy to be alive, I think. It's so weird; I think there are happy people, and then there are people who are like happy sometimes or part-time. But I think I'm happy like 75% of the time.

Wow.

I know, which is high.

Yeah.

Which is high. But because isn't just inside of you, it's around you, which just means that 75% of everything I'm surrounded by is happy—other than the 25% bills. But it says a lot about how powerful bills are. They come in paper format and they control 25% of your happiness.

All right. That will be our next project.

(2:54) So where are you and your parents in this ongoing discussion of whether you're becoming more or less Hmong these days?

These days? I think it's more important that I'm becoming, than anything else. I'm a writer from the Hmong community who sees the world from four feet ten—point five. [Interviewer chuckles] And these are just the facts. I listen to Hmong songs and I listen to country music, and I [Pauses] at a point, I think you grow up and you become of an age where you can look at your mom and dad and say, 'I see where I come from, and that's from you both. So whether I'm Hmong or not is as much a question as whether you are or not.' And in my case I don't really need to say that, because they are realizing that they've changed. They've—it's kind of a scary thing for their generation to realize. It's easy to look at your child and say, 'You're becoming American.' It's hard to look at yourself and say, 'I'm becoming an American.' For my mom, she speaks English sometimes. You know, the words will slip out, and we look at her, and she goes, 'I know.' [Interviewer laughs] And then even my father is concerned, 'cause—he goes, 'If I go back to Laos,' (he really wants to go back to Laos, just to visit) 'I'm really concerned.' I'm like, 'Why?' And he goes, 'I don't know. Because there won't be electricity'—'cause he snores, so he uses that machine.

Oh, OK.

'And I'll snore. In Laos, they don't snore. Snoring is American.' And I'm like, 'Seriously, you've become part of America?' 'Cause in Laos they have fewer weight issues, so less snoring, right? He says, 'They'll think I'm so strange! In America it's normal to snore.' And even in these small ways, right? Problematic ways—they're becoming [Pauses] They realize that their bodies have been here for a long time, and that the body ages and the body changes with the environment, and that the bodies that they have now are less Hmong than the Hmong bodies in Laos. And those bodies are less Hmong than they were many, many years ago. So the question in my family now whether I'm as Hmong or not enough Hmong is now a moot point, because everybody knows that my younger brothers and sisters will be less Hmong than I am! [Interviewer laughs] That's what I tell them.

(5:37) Obviously it's very important for you to tell this story. What do you hope people will gain from this story?

What do I hope people will gain from this story? I hope—there's a lot of hopes. I'm really good at hoping, Paul.

Excellent. I'm really bad at it, so I'm very pleased to know you're good at it. [Chuckles]

Oh, I can help you there. Hoping, Hoping 101. First, I want them to know. I want them to—what did they gain? They gain a brand new literary voice. That’s a part of it too, and so I hope that they will gain that. I hope they will definitely gain an understanding into the Hmong story. It’s so cool, because the Coffee House team [Pauses] It’s like the book is not my book anymore, it’s like all of our book, because they believe in the Hmong story, so I hope—and without having any contact with the Hmong previous to this book. And so I hope that the readers will believe in the Hmong story, because it’s a true story. It’s a story of the Hmong, it’s a story of so many other groups. It’s a story of Americans. And so to not believe is—but there are people who don’t believe in the Holocaust, you know? So there’s margin there, but I hope that they will believe in the Hmong story. And I hope that the lessons of the story that I’ve learned and the realizations that I’ve come to will mean something to each of them individually and personally. I believe, I hope that [Pauses] that it will be on the shelves and that Hmong children and non-Hmong children will pick it up and say, ‘This is a book. This is a story that takes place in America, as much as anywhere else in the world, because there is a connection that I want people to make, and that America isn’t America alone—and it seems repetitive and redundant, but the most beautiful thing that I hope for the book is that it will open up so many doors for so many others besides me, and that it will be so useful for academics and students alike. ‘Cause I think invention—I’ve been thinking a lot about inventions lately. People invent things, and the things that stay on are the most useful things. I think I want this book to be useful. You know, people say that literature and art don’t—that whether it has a purpose beyond art itself is questionable. But I think it needs to in order to survive and to do great work. You’re an academic, so you know that every piece of writing has to do work; it has to be a tool to somebody else or something else, or a different way of looking at the world. I’m hoping that the same thing can be accomplished with the book, that it will be really useful.

(8:34) Well you just made the observation that your younger siblings are going to be less Hmong than you are, and that you’re less Hmong than your parents are. So let’s project out two or three generations from now. And we’ll return to this theme of hope. What do you hope will still be a part of the Hmong community in America after all of the people who lived in Laos and Thailand are gone, and all of those influences of Hmong culture, apart from the internet and movies and these other things are there to shape the Hmong America community? What do you hope will persist?

I hope that the standard of Hmongness will change with them, so that when—200 years from now, somebody will be sitting in my place and somebody will be sitting in your place, and talk, and that person in my place will feel as Hmong as I do now. Whatever language they speak, however they actually live the fundamentals of their life, I hope that their sense of being Hmong will be as strong, as powerful, and as enriching as mine is for me right. That’s really my hope. I think it’s possible. I think we can talk about whether we can hang on to the language and the culture, but if our standards change, and our standards for ourselves evolve, then the real meaning for me is that they will use—whatever Hmong will be, they will feel it entirely, and they will stand beside it proudly.

Well, first of all, I want to say thank you. This has been a delight. I’m very pleased to have met you, however long ago it’s been now, but I’ve really enjoyed—

[Someone else walks into the room, conversation ends, interview concludes]