

Content Area: History/Social Science	Unit: Contemporary American Society	Lesson: The Immigrant Experience of Lao Americans
Age / Grade:	11 th Grade	
Duration:	1 Class Period @ 47min.	Date: 7/9/2018
Content Standards:	<p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.4: Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.</p> <p>CA HSS Learning Standards:</p> <p>CA HSS.11.11.1: Discuss the reasons for the nation's changing immigration policy, with emphasis on how the Immigration Act of 1965 and successor acts have transformed American society</p>	
Language Standards:	<p>CA ELD Standards:</p> <p>PI.11-12.9: Expressing information and ideas in formal oral presentations on academic topics</p> <p>PI.11-12.12: Selecting and applying varied and precise vocabulary and other language resources to effectively convey ideas</p>	
Objectives:	<p>SWBAT: Explain the main ideas from readings; make a presentation that effectively communicates the Lao immigrant experience, citing facts from in-class video and readings. Students will understand the unique challenges confronting Lao American immigrants and the different groups among them (i.e Lao, Hmong, Iu-Mien, Akha, etc).</p> <p>Students will examine the origins and stages of Lao American immigration and its effect on Lao Americans. Students will learn how the lesser-known immigrants from Laos contributed to greater diversity in American society since the middle of the twentieth century. Students will understand how the Vietnam War changed US immigration policy since 1975.</p>	
Method(s)/ Strategies / Supports	Small group discussion (collaborative learning), graphic organizers, instructor-led discussion, instructor modeling.	

Expected Evidence of Learning (Assessments)	Ability to clearly communicate the main ideas on the Lao immigrant experience in a presentation. Ability to accurately present facts from the video and readings as support. Ability to compare and contrast features unique and common among memoirs in class-wide discussion. Ability to correctly identify the Vietnam War's influence on US immigration policy.
Procedures using Gradual Release of Responsibility [Model, Guided Practice, Independent Work, Assessable product]	<p>Instructor opens the class by giving a brief lecture on the following: At the end of the Vietnam War, the Royal Lao Government was overthrown by the Pathet Lao in a communist revolution. Lao politically aligned with America were allowed entry to the United States with the passage of the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act in 1975. The Refugee Act of 1980 authorized further Lao refugee migration to the US. Between 1975 and 1992 some 230,000 (up to 400,000 by some estimates) Lao, Hmong, Khmu, Iu-Mien, Tai-Dam, Tai Lue, Lua, Akha, Lahu and others from Laos immigrated to the US, especially to California, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Texas.</p> <p>The instructor then shows a short film clip on the Lao immigrant experience ("The Betrayal").</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Individual: Students read packet materials in-class to prepare for student presentations and discussion comparing and contrasting experiences of Lao immigrants, independently organizing information in note-taking guide while viewing video and reading, identifying and evaluating sources in each media format. (Model writing down points on organizer.) 2. Small Group: Students assigned to one memoir/oral history account assemble in individual groups. Students discuss the main ideas and details of the memoir/oral history. They then create a visual display/poster that communicates the immigrant experience (e.g. isolate one quotation for presentation). (Instructor will demonstrate before small group discussion.) 3. Large Group: The class holds a discussion on Immigrant Experience of Lao Americans. Each student shares their response to the discussion. Students compare and contrast the unique and common/general aspects of each memoir/oral history account. 4. Homework: Students write to their local legislator about how Federal/State/Local government policy should be changed to better aid new immigrants in their integration to American society. Or, students may write a defense of why the US government should be responsible to assist migrants from Laos stemming from US involvement in the war in Laos.
Resources / Materials:	<p>-Video [time-stamp] to be shown to class: "The Betrayal" (Nerakhoon)</p> <p>-Packet: (memoir excerpts; see below)</p> <p>-Writing prompt: homework</p>

Learner Background:

The student will expand on previous lesson(s) covering the U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, including the Vietnam War and the US Civil Rights movement, including the Immigration Act of 1965.

Further Resources**General Works:**

Hein, Jeremy, *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: A Refugee Experience in the United States* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1995)

Lee, Jonathan X. and the Center for Lao Studies, *Laotians in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Arcadia Publishing, 2012)

Robinson, W.C., *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (London: Zed Books, 1998)

Lao Immigrant Memoirs:

Bounsang Khamkeo, *I little Slave: A Prison Memoir from Communist Laos* (Eastern Washington University Press, 2007). Interview: www.youtube.com/watch?v=R24i9llqg20

Kao Kalia Yang, *The Late Homecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008)

Kao Kalia Yang, *The Song Poet: A Memoir of My Father* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2016)

Joanna Scott, *Indochina's Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam* (MacFarland Publishing, 1989)

Nakhonkham Bouphanouvong, *Sixteen Years in the Land of Death: Revolution and Reeducation in Laos* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2004)

Sucheng Chan, ed., *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994)

Thavisouk Phrasavath, *Stepped Out of the Womb: A Memoir of a journey to the land where the sun falls* (Lao Century Media, 2010)

Documentary Films and Videos:

The Betrayal (Nerakhoon) Written and directed by Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath, this documentary film follows a Lao family immigrate to USA in aftermath of Secret War. It won the official selection from the Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary. 60 minutes.

6

Coming to America

With the beautiful vision of America in my heart, and great hopes and expectations in mind, coming to America was a dream.

I got great news from the bulletin board at the headquarters of PRPC on May 11, 1982. Again, our T#155286 appeared on the list. As soon as I found this out I made the exciting announcement to my family that we would be leaving PRPC for America within the next two weeks. I remember seeing my mother's tears streaming from the corners of her eyes.

The next morning after the T number had shown up, we had to go into the main PRPC office for our final destination information meeting. We would be getting the name of the sponsorship, the exact date of travel, and medical check ups, which we would all have to have, along with X-rays. Early in the morning we would be standing in line to meet with the official refugee worker to get our package; after we got our complete information package we were sent to another line for our X-rays. Three days after we finished our X-rays we had to go back to meet with a medical official to make sure that we were all healthy and had no contagious diseases such as TB.

If the X-ray of our lungs was clear then the official would approve our travel date. If any one of our family members was having some medical issues then the official would hold the whole family until the medical issue was clear. I had 11 people in my family, and I hoped and prayed that none of them would have any contractible disease or other weird disease. Thank God, all of our X-rays and blood tests were clear. We were all healthy and free to go. Within that week and a half of waiting, every night before I went

STEPPED OUT OF THE WOMB

to bed, I prayed for the safe journey of my family to the new country.

The day of our leaving was May 22, 1982, early in the morning. It was the morning that summed up all of my emotions, the morning of my greatest happiness, sadness, worry and fear. All of our friends and next room neighbors were gathering in front of PRPC headquarters to say good-bye before the convoy of buses came to take us back to Manila. We would be on that same hellish roller coaster highway. I couldn't help but think about the highway.

The more I thought about it, the more I got worried, because this time we would be traveling back to Manila during the daytime. But, from the love and well wishes for my journey from friends and next room neighbors, I was able to encourage myself to compose my heart with peace and calmness throughout the entire trip back to Manila.

By the time we got to Manila International Airport there were only a few people in the rear of the bus who were sick. Everyone in my family was fine. This might have been because we were physically getting a little stronger. The past six months in PRPC were six months of good health, being well fed and being happier by refugee standards.

As we arrived at the airport before we boarded the plane, the Official Refugee Worker was standing at the gate, handing out a big, thick, white plastic bag with large red letters written on it. It read "ICMC" and on the plastic bag was a shield. I had no idea what was in it. Each refugee family that was boarding this plane had an "ICMC" bag in hand along with a small amount of personal belongings. I remember that between my family of eleven people we only had three bags of old, outdated clothes that had been donated by some NGOs and some Christian church organizations. None of us even had shoes; we were wearing flip-flops when we stepped into the airplane.

Once again, the giant eagle took to the skies crossing the Pacific Ocean toward the North American continent. From daylight through moonlight the giant eagle was floating in the air. Through endless sky from one edge of an ocean to another it flew. By the time we landed in Alaska, we were cold and exhausted alongside the giant eagle that also needed to rest for a short while and to be refueled. All the refugees were informed to stay put wherever they sat until our flight resumed.

We were all mumbling and chitchatting among ourselves to kill time. With hearts trembling we knew that our final destination was near. The

feeling of excitement, fear and uncertainty was overwhelming. After two hours of wondering and mind wandering, the belly and gates of the giant eagle were reopened. The flight attendants resumed their intercom, new passengers were boarding and looking for their seats; they were mostly business people. Some were wearing suits and ties, and nice dresses with sparkling jewels. We were shrinking back into our seats trying to hide that we didn't have proper shoes and clothes.

We were not embarrassed by our status, though, because we knew who we were; we were refugees. I assumed from the looks of wonder from the new passengers who had just boarded that Air France flight, that they couldn't help but wonder where all of these poor Eskimos were traveling to.

A few hours after the giant eagle took to the frozen sky and flew over parts of the North Pacific Ocean, we finally approached the border of California. We then landed at Oakland International Airport at about 11:30 a.m. Right after the plane landed, the passengers who were not refugees were rushed out with their carry on luggage, briefcases and overcoats.

As for all of us refugees, we landed and entered America in refugee style; ICMC bag in hand, flip-flops, UNHCR t-shirts, outdated jeans, yellow teeth, pale eyes, many were very skinny and malnourished. Everywhere we moved, we moved in a group—in line like a flock of ducks or herd of sheep.

We were just sitting still; waiting for further instruction. There was a Vietnamese and a Cambodian male official refugee worker and another lady, who was our Lao speaking lifesaver. Their mission was to help us get out of the plane and go through U.S. customs. Then, we went to a small holding place in the airport before we would be shifted out on a convoy of buses to Hamilton Field, which is formally known as Hamilton Army Airfield, before our transition to New York City. This was the Southeast Asian transit center on the U.S. mainland.

At the airport our Lao lady official refugee worker got us through customs and led us to the holding place along with the rest of the Cambodians and Vietnamese. There they gave us warm jackets to wear. I remember mine was blue with three stripes, white, red and yellow. I could see the smiles of satisfaction written on all of our faces. These were the first brand new jackets we had since leaving our home country. The warmth of the jackets comforted us on the bus on our way to Hamilton Field. I thought

about the kindness and generosity of all the American people. What a wonderful way to welcome us to their land. Brand new jackets, "fuck yeah! America—me love you longtime."

The convoy of buses emptied us off at Hamilton Field. We were led by our Lao social worker who gave us instructions in our mother tongue. We were comfortable and even more excited after we were led to our rooms; then they took us to get more clothing in a small warehouse across from the building.

Now, we had new shoes (sneakers) and some extra decent clothing.

We went to a cafeteria with so many kinds of food. There were vegetables, beefsteak, roast pork, steamed and fried rice. The list seemed endless. There were drinks of all kinds. Coke, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, 7-Up, Sunkist, Schweppes Ginger Ale, etc.

At Hamilton Field there was one pivotal moment that I remember. This was my very first time feeling that in life there were many choices, and that I could actually choose between Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Using my pointer finger is freely allowed for communicating my needs, but after being a refugee and living under oppressive authority and in fear of rules and regulations for too long, I actually forgot that I could use my pointer finger to ask for the piece of beefsteak that I desired.

On the day we first arrived, we did nothing except eat and experiment with different kinds of soda until we were hyper. Our entire blood streams were frenzied with caffeine. All night long I could not fall asleep from caffeine agitation, excitement and wondering what would be the outcome tomorrow. I for sure believed that by tomorrow we would all be landing in New York City, and would be welcomed with warmth and open arms by our sponsor.

Life from here should be a good new beginning. We would be settled and no longer displaced. Of course, the curiosity and fear of uncertainty were buried deep in my heart and soul as usual, but I was always optimistic with a positive and patient attitude toward life and reality.

I was able to comfort myself with all that had happened on that one great day we already had in America. Ever since we were in the refugee camp in Thailand, the day we set our goal to seek an opportunity for resettlement in another country, America became my inspiration, hope, dream and possibility. All of this good hope and optimistic expectation got me through the first night in America. Early the next morning one of the Lao official

refugee workers knocked on our door. He had come to tell us that the van would come to pick us up to take us to the San Francisco airport, and we needed to be ready within an hour.

Of course, we were ready within 20 minutes. By that time we were more or less considered "semi-professional" refugees. Whenever we got orders to move, we were ready. On our way to the airport the Lao official refugee worker gave me some tips for traveling through the airport, plane boarding, using the toilet and asking for food and help whenever it was necessary.

I took neat notes in my head. By the time we arrived at the airport in San Francisco I had learned a few new things about America. This was 19 years prior to September 11, 2001. All airport and security personnel were laid back and easygoing. Everyone could accompany his or her friends and relatives all the way to the gate. The Lao brother was very kind as he got us our boarding pass at the counter, walked us through security all the way to the waiting area next to the gate and left us there. Before he left he took a brief moment after looking at our boarding pass. He told me, "When you see people start boarding, all you have to do is just follow the line, then give your boarding pass to the airline official at the gate. When you are inside the plane, look for your seat number. All of your seats should be all the way in the back."

When boarding time came I just followed his instructions and boarded the airplane. Everything went smoothly and the plane was half empty. I didn't know exactly where to sit. When we walked onto the plane the flight attendant wasn't paying attention, so we just went to the back and grabbed a seat. After about four hours into the flight, my mind began to wander and many questions were entering my head. For the rest of the flight I kept asking myself, why does it take so long to just cross one country. This couldn't be right.

The plane landed sometime around 3 p.m. As soon as the plane landed there was only one thing on my mind or on my family's mind. This was our wonderful, white man sponsor, who would be right there at the door of the plane waiting to meet us and perhaps give us a big warm hug welcoming us to America, and take us to his home. When we got the letter of approval in the refugee camp no one really explained to us who exactly was going to be our sponsor. All they told us through the interpreter was—CWS (Church World Service) was our sponsor. What did I know about CWS? I didn't even know what it stood for at the time. All I knew was we were accepted

to be resettled in America, and before we were going to America we had to go to PRPC for our ESL, CO and WO (work orientation) courses.

The reason they sent us to PRPC was because our family was so large that there was no private sponsor who could sponsor all of us. Also, the Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp in Thailand—the place where most refugees from Laos were supposed to have their ESL, CO and WO—was completely jam-packed. We were blessed that we were sent to PRPC.

After the plane landed, all the passengers left the plane. We were the last group of people left on the plane. I was informed that my whole family was to stay put and wait for further instruction, but none of the flight attendants realized that we were the refugees, so they assumed that we knew what to do. After some minutes passed I decided to lead my family out of the plane hoping to see the sponsor outside in the waiting area. So we proceeded.

We walked out of the plane, but no one was there waiting for us. We didn't know where to go; we were just standing right in the middle of the walkway. Many people passed us by. I could see that they were very annoyed and sort of disgusted by our public manners, because we didn't know where to go. We were just stuck in the middle of the crowded human traffic. After one hour passed by, the intensity of the crowd was heated toward us. Some of the people were purposely bumping into us to knock us out of their way. Someone rolled their suitcase over my little sister's toe. We were very confused, anxious and scared. My heart was starting to rage against myself. I began to blame myself that I could have led my family onto the wrong plane when we were boarding. After almost two hours, finally, an Asian man showed up. He asked us if we were the Laotians.

"Are you Laotian?" he asked.

I said, "Yes. Laotian!" Because that was only one of the few words I knew in English—LAOTIAN.

He gave me a hand gesture to follow him. Then he put us in a van and we headed to Brooklyn, New York. When we got to Flatbush Avenue, my family and I started to panic. We thought that we had definitely gotten on the wrong plane and landed on the wrong continent. We were sure that we were somewhere in Africa. This was because back in our home country, I had learned that black men lived in Africa and white men lived in Europe and America.

I never realized what America was all about; how America was such a big melting pot with people of all races. It was totally unexpected. Suddenly

the van stopped, and the man pointed out this old, crumbled down building. I remember the address was 420 East 21st Street. Then the Asian man signaled us to get out of the van and follow him. He took us into a hallway. The hallway was so dark; there was hardly any light. Most of the light bulbs were either dead or broken.

There were people hanging around in the hallway. They were smoking, drinking, listening and singing along with this weird kind of music from their boom boxes. The way they dressed and carried themselves was out of this world. They all were very dark, but I still could see the sparkling light in their eyes and teeth. They were looking at us with their eyes glazed over, and it seemed like they were all a distant star away.

I asked myself how could we possibly live here? What is this place?

The apartment was very small, and there were only two rooms. A Cambodian family of six, who had just come a few weeks before us, already occupied one room. There was also a Vietnamese guy, and now my family of eleven. So, there were Laotians, Cambodians, and Vietnamese, the three Southeast Asian ethnicities who were not always friendly to one another in the past. Now, here we were, in the middle of New York City next door to a crack house.

The Asian man who worked for the agency left us in this hellhole with \$40 in food stamps, a bag of Wonder Bread, some hotdogs and a bag of Jasmine rice. From what we had, we managed to live and survive through our first two weeks. This was an immense achievement. Our Cambodian next-room neighbor was the greatest help in getting us through that two-week period. Every time he cooked his food, I watched to see how he lit the gas stove with matches, turned on the toaster oven and electric water pot. Every time I needed help with anything, he was always there to help even though we had no way of understanding each other's language. We used sign language to communicate, hand gestures, body language and smiles. He was so helpful to us.

Every one of us who was dumped in that apartment, was a resettler with the same sponsor. We were trapped there together; we had no choice but to help each other in whatever way we could. On our first few nights a group of angry, drug-addicted people were knocking at our door and trying to break into our apartment in the middle of the night. There was no telephone in the apartment. Even if we had one, it might not have meant anything, because we didn't know how to speak English and we had no

one to call.

None of us knew who our sponsor was, who was working for the agency, or who was in charge of taking care of us. We were all scared to death. All we could do was move chairs, pieces of wood and metal, and whatever else we could find in the apartment to reinforce the main door. This was needed even though the main door already had at least four locks on it. During the night there was constant pounding on our door. This happened almost every night. We all were very frightened of nightfall, as if we were living in the land of the vampire.

To secure our families' safety all of the male adults would eat and sleep during the day, and stay up all night to make sure our door was guarded with our lives. After a week and a half, the same Asian man who had picked us up from the airport, took my family and a few other smaller families of Vietnamese and Cambodians to apply for food stamps, welfare, Medicaid and social security cards.

He took us to midtown Manhattan in his van. There we met a very wonderful Laotian lady. She told us that she worked as a social worker for the IRC (International Rescue Committee), but she had come to help out because there was no Lao translator working for the CWS, the organization that had sponsored us to come to the U.S. She gave us much insightful information regarding where the other Laotians who had come with the same agency were located. She also told us that she knew all of them, and she was willing to introduce us to them. I was so pleased to know that there was another small group of Laotian in the middle of New York City.

Through her connection we were able to make new friends, and luckily, one of the families who had come eight months before us, lived just two blocks away. That family became our immediate adopted family. They were the ones who helped us learn the basic way of life in NYC. They taught us how to ride the bus and subway, to get to an Asian grocery store in Chinatown. They showed us around the neighborhood; they showed us how to use our food stamps, and where to cash our welfare checks.

Now that we knew someone who was Lao, they would come to visit us at our hellhole apartment. Every time they came, they would gather all of their brothers and sisters to come with them, because they were very afraid of walking through the hallways from hell. We felt so much better by that time; now our life wasn't as lonely.

I was brave enough now to walk around the neighborhood. Every time

I walked around, checking out new territory, I was consistently harassed. At the time, however, regardless of what they said, it didn't matter because I didn't understand English. Through their body language I could tell that they were making fun of my crooked teeth and slanted eyes. Whatever they did, I just didn't pay any attention to them so they wouldn't have the satisfaction of knowing that they were annoying me. Even if I did, I kept it in my heart and hoped someday they would come to know the true reason of why I am here in the United States.

As every other immigrant before me, I set my feet in this great nation—America. I had hopes, expectations and—most important of all—the American Dream. Upon arrival in my so-called paradise and dream place, America, my dreams were immediately turned into nightmares. Despite this, my American Dream didn't just drop dead right on the spot, instead it became the core of my inspiration and ultimate goal for me to achieve. I was very blessed when I stepped foot in this country; for some reason I almost automatically knew that all my dreams and my ultimate goal could only be achieved by creating my own opportunities. I would have to create my own path and trails and pave my own road to glory. I knew it wouldn't be easy because there was a thick and chaotic jungle full of hatred and prejudice. When I first arrived in America, the public was so unaware of what really happened to Southeast Asian countries that were part of the Vietnam War—especially Laos.

Who is a Laotian?

Where is Laos?

Why are the Laotians suddenly flooding this country?

Being told to go home and being called "Chink" became my greatest inspiration. I discovered my duty and obligation. As a citizen of this country I realized that I had a responsibility. It was to be an activist, and create awareness regarding the subject matter that meant the most to my life including the condition of my environment. My goal became educating and communicating with other people and communities—opening up and making myself available to be accepted by others, as well as being ready to accept them.

It was a basic principle that I believed was the key to moving forward in unselfish ways in American society where individualism existed in the majority of the population. One thing I had to always keep in mind in this vast ocean was that I would have to widen my mind, to think big and dream

big. Besides having the ability to think big and dream big, I also have to stay alive. I had to always remember an old Lao proverb:

"Falling in with the group of eagles you must be an eagle.

Falling in with the group of crows you must be a crow."

Through the words of this proverb I derived the intellectual strength and wisdom of this survival principle:

Flexibility and extreme adaptation are the true methods for surviving.

I eat whatever food I can find or whatever is provided for me.

I sleep wherever I can stretch out, flat on my back, straight on the floor.

I work at whatever job pays a little or more.

Not So Wonderful Was That Time

Khamsamong Somvong

Khamsamong is a gentle man with straight black hair brushed down over one side of his forehead, one discolored front tooth and, these days, a comfortable bulge over the belt. Although he looks sad much of the time, his face lights up and glows when he smiles.

He always met me, beaming, with the standard Lao greeting — hands raised almost to the forehead, templed as if in prayer. After the first few times of putting my hand out to him I found myself using the same greeting. I was in his territory and the Western handshake somehow seemed gauche.

My meetings with Khamsamong were interrupted by the Philippine revolution. During this time American officials living in Manila were asked not to travel out of the city for fear of getting into trouble and tying up valuable security staff. When I finally got to see him after the furor had died down and the streets outside Camp Crame and Camp Aguinaldo were clear of people and debris, allowing me access to the highway to Clark Air Base and on to Bataan, I asked, "Well, what do you think of the revolution here?"

He looked solemn. "Ma'am, I saw it before also in my own country. After the new government all the people were so happy, so happy. But then the Communists tricked us. They said they wanted a coalition government but they tricked us. And then they killed us. Do not trust them, ma'am. Do not ever trust the Communists."

Asking around the camp I found that, even though the refugees were not fully aware of all that had happened in Manila, the knowledge that a revolution was under way had brought terror to many hearts. Some were near panic, thinking that they had escaped, only to fall into the same situation again.

I am a civilian but I used to be in the military. I was a first lieutenant and a graduate from the Military Academy of Laos. I attended a leadership course in Fort Knox, Kentucky, and a Ranger Airborne course in Fort Benning, Georgia, graduating in 1972.

I came back from the United States in 1973 to a very mixed-up situation in Laos. There were three main conflicting political groups—the rightists who were loyal to the royal government, the leftists or Pathet Lao who were supported by the Vietnamese Communists and the neutralists who were a military faction originally headed by General Kong Le. (General Kong Le went to Thailand on official business in 1967. While he was there, Colonel Somphet took the opportunity to prevent him from coming back to his old position. On his return, Kong Le went to the Indonesian Embassy in Vientiane for help and they took him to Indonesia. About two years later he went on to France, where he still is.)

The leftists were headed by Souphanouvong and Kaisone Phommavhane, the rightists by Souvanna Phouma. The power of the leftists became greater than that of the neutralists and loyalists. They spread propaganda among the students and the civil servants and even some of the military in order to make them disobey the orders of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma.

Then a convention was held in Paris for peace talks. Henry Kissinger was there and Le Duc Tho of Vietnam. Le Duc Tho promised a cease-fire in Laos and, on February 21, 1973, an agreement was reached between the rightists, the leftists and the neutralists that a coalition government would be formed between the three groups.* It was also agreed that Vientiane and Luang

*The agreement referred to is the Agreement on Restoring Peace and Achieving National Concord in Laos, also referred to as "The Vientiane Agreement." It was signed in Vientiane by Pheng Phongsavanh for the Vientiane Government and Phoumi Vongvichit for the Laotian Patriotic Forces.—J.S.



Khamamong Somvong.

Prabang cities were to be neutral territory so that the three groups could come together to work out a plan.

In September of that year a sub-convention was held in Vientiane City and the National Political Coalition Council was formed to implement the Vientiane Agreement. This council was composed of sixteen leftists, sixteen rightists and ten neutralists, forty-two members in all. Five of the neutralists were nominated by the leftists and five by the rightists.

Then, in May of 1974, the National Political Coalition Council met in Vientiane City. Eighteen political resolutions were

issued [see page 173]. On paper they looked very good for the future of Laos. But not so wonderful was that time.

The political situation was still very mixed up and very confused. General Vang Pao continued airborne bombing of the leftist area and it was not to be until May of 1975 that the Royal Lao Army would disarm. (The only Hmong general in the Lao Army, General Vang Pao was Commander of the Second Military Region, Xieng Khouang Province. He now lives in California.)

Once they had got themselves into power, the Pathet Lao ignored the eighteen political resolutions. It had all been a ploy to allay the fears of the people and bluff the international community. And the agreement to the neutrality of Vientiane and Luang Prabang was just to enable them to bring Pathet Lao troops into those cities so that they could follow their plan to take over full control of the government.

Then the Pathet Lao set about breaking up the Lao military by separating out the higher ranks—the generals, the senior officers, the junior officers, the noncommissioned officers—to keep us from forming groups to fight against them.

In the Vang Vieng area of Vientiane Province the Pathet Lao gathered approximately four hundred junior officers. I was one of them. We waited there going through a political orientation of the Communists. They taught some very good things like independence, economic development, freedom of speech, respect for the individual and so on.

And we were waiting, waiting, and undergoing this political orientation until the king of Laos fell down. It happened like this:

Most of the Lao people didn't understand what the Communists were up to. They were just anxious to see peace in their time and no more war in their country. They were still loyal to the king, but they were also swayed by the Pathet Lao. They didn't understand. But the Pathet Lao did and on October 11, 1975, they decided to exploit the people's divided loyalties to bring about the downfall of the coalition.

They gathered together a great crowd of people under the pretext of denouncing the rightists and congratulating the National Political Coalition Council.

These people moved through Luang Prabang City and when they came to the Provincial Office, Pathet Lao soldiers gave them posters demonstrating against King Sri Savang Vatthana.

When the people saw the posters, they realized the cunning of the Pathet Lao. They wanted to disperse but they could not. It was too late. The Pathet Lao had set up armed troops everywhere and the people were in a tumult. They cried to the king to resign from his throne and he agreed. They had not intended to do this. They had not understood where their actions would lead.

By December 2, 1975, the Pathet Lao were full of power. They had organized their forces—tanks, anti-aircraft guns, infantry battalions—ready to take over the whole country. Then they commanded Crown Prince Vongsavang to read the King's official resignation from the throne and declared the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Prince Souphanouvong, who had been the official leader of the leftists before the coalition, became president and speaker of the Supreme People's Council, with the king designated as his advisor. Kaisone Phomvihane, who had plotted with Souphanouvong from the outside, became prime minister. He was the puppet of the Vietnamese Communists. Prince Souvanna Phouma was made a government advisor and Crown Prince Vongsavang a member of the Supreme People's Council.

The seven persons making up the Lao Politburo were now members of the Supreme People's Council. This meant the end of the Kingdom of Laos. The leftists had full power and would rule the people in the ways of Marx and Lenin.

And then they sent us to reeducation ["seminar"] camps. Laos has many, many camps—in the Viengxay area in the north, in Xieng Khouang Province, in Saravanh province and in many other places.

On December 31, 1975, I was moved to Xieng Khouang Province with the rest of the four hundred junior officers who had been taken with me. We were moved by a convoy of trucks and the Pathet Lao held guns on us. We didn't have any way to fight back. No, no, we didn't have any way. We were thinking and thinking about how to escape but we didn't know how. We were surrounded

by Vietnamese soldiers and under the gun. And so we came to Xieng Khouang.

When I first arrived in Xieng Khouang I was completely surprised. I didn't see any houses there. I saw only bomb craters. There were so many in that area. Then a meeting was called and a voice came to us in a monotone—it was some officer of the Pathet Lao. He said he wasn't afraid of anybody there and we must respect the regulations of the Pathet Lao. He also told us not to talk to the local people and not to go far away without permission.

Later in the day they gave us some rice. That first time they gave us plenty to feed ourselves well but after that they cut off a little bit, a little bit each time.

We were supposed to be there three or four months while each person wrote a short biography for verification by the Pathet Lao officers. We were afraid to tell the truth. For example, I had just graduated from Fort Benning. If I said so I would be caught and accused of being an American spy.

It was hard to live there. In the morning we were delivered to a job site far away from the camp to chop wood to build houses. And everybody there got sick and sick. There was no medical help and we weren't allowed to talk with the people around the camp. So we were thinking, all the time thinking about trying to escape.

The first group of my friends—maybe eight or ten people—decided to escape from Xieng Khouang by walking and they made it safely. They are still in the resistance in Thailand along the border of the Mekong River, but they are safe.

After this experience the Pathet Lao guarded us even more closely and wouldn't allow us to go anywhere at all alone. When a second group of my friends decided to escape—sixteen of them—they were killed, all but one person. After that they started to get in the results of their checks on the biographies we had written and many were killed and many were put in jail and let die just shortly and shortly.

We had no medical care. We hadn't enough rice to eat. We were just working and working. We had to try to grow vegetables, to raise chickens in order to eat. Only about one meal a month did I manage to get enough to eat. Otherwise no more, no more. And

I kept thinking about finding a way to escape. But I couldn't, I couldn't find a way because although the first group escaped safely, the second group was killed, all but one of them. He was my friend. But he is dead now too. His name was Khamstout. He was a first lieutenant. He was filled with sorrow, deep sorrow, but he escaped in order to fight the Pathet Lao. He joined the resistance and died fighting in the Vang Vieng area.

We wanted to fight too but the area was surrounded by North Vietnamese troops and we couldn't fight them. And the people in the area didn't understand us. The Pathet Lao told them that we were American soldiers so they mustn't talk to us and they mustn't give us food. It was not safe to try to go into the village—we would be killed by the Defense Authority.

So we just worked and worked. I was based in Ban Ngoa seminar camp with the rest of my battalion, Battalion 522, and I worked around Xieng Khouang province. Pathet Lao officers would deliver us to the work site and we would build houses, fix roads and cut wood to make hospitals. We were very unhappy there with no rice and yet working, working hard. The people became weaker and weaker and some people died and some were killed.

One day some UNHCR officials were in the area and I heard them talking. They had come to Xieng Khouang to Pathet Lao headquarters to find out how many people had died in the seminar camps. But they wouldn't allow them to know something like that.

The situation for us became worse and worse and we didn't have a way to talk with anybody or find a way to escape. We thought about escaping all the time but we couldn't find a way. The people in the camp had to keep their eyes closed, keep their ears closed, keep their mouths closed. Otherwise they would be killed. If a Pathet Lao officer delivered a job to you and you said it was hard to do, you would be killed or put in jail. And so the people became stupid, stupid because they kept their eyes closed, their ears closed, their mouths closed. We didn't have any kind of freedom. We didn't have any kind of respect for religion. No religion any more. Just attacks on the old regime—bad words, bad words. And no more religion.

The economic situation was bad everywhere. The people didn't have enough rice to eat. They didn't have medical care in the hospitals. They had fallen into a bad economic crisis.

As things got worse, the Vietnamese soldiers came more and more often into the camp looking for food from us. Even they didn't have enough rice to eat so they came to us to ask for something to eat. And they would kill us if they thought we were wandering too far away or if they found us saying prayers. The life we lived in seminar camp was very dangerous.

The political situation was also very dangerous and the people didn't believe in the Kaisone regime any more. As for the social situation, they just made orders. Obey this order, obey that order. Respect only the Party. And if you don't obey, you will be punished—that means to be killed or put in prison.

In the seminar camp there were a few men who were Communists. They were there to execute the policy of the Politburo. And it was they who decided who should be killed in the camp. We were supposed to respect the Party only. If one of the Communists said, "This is red," we had to say, "Yes, this is red." If we said "No, this is black," we would be killed.

So I lived a very hard life in there. I saw many people killed before me. And I got sick. I went to the hospital but I didn't get any kind of medicine. Just local medicine—some kind of wood to boil and drink the water. There was only a little rice to eat and so I became thinner and thinner. And still I couldn't find a way to fight back or escape.

They wouldn't allow my wife to visit me because they found out that I had graduated from the United States. So I just tried to stay alive there, to keep my mouth shut.

While I was there, there was political trouble in Luang Prabang City. In March of 1977 the Communists accused King Sri Savang Vatthana of opposing their policies and arrested him along with the Queen, Crown Prince Vongsavang, Tchiao Tod, Tchiao Bouavone, Tchiao Khamsouk, Tchiao Souphantharangsy and Tchiao Keua.* They sent them to Viengxay in Sam Neua

*Tchiao Keua was the Prince's nickname. I do not know his full name. He

Province in northeastern Laos, close to the Vietnamese border. When they got there they were separated and sent to different places around Viengxay. Later, all of them were killed.

Late in 1983 I finally found a way to contact my wife and escape from seminar camp. It happened like this: In the Xieng Khouang area the situation was becoming very bad because of the economic crisis and the Pathet Lao officers wanted to get money to feed themselves. Many private trucks were carrying goods from Thailand via Vientiane to Xieng Khouang Province and they went by the camp. These trucks belonged to very small private businesses or to collective businesses.

The Pathet Lao officers saw these goods. And when they saw them they wanted them. They wanted food and money for themselves and for their children also. They wanted to get things—bicycles or food—to make it easier, to make it more comfortable for them.

It was because of the economic crisis that I started to think that there were now ways to escape. The first way was to escape directly from the camp but that was very dangerous and fifteen people had been killed trying.

The second way was to write a letter to my family asking them to bribe the officials at headquarters in Vientiane to sign permission papers for travel from Xieng Khouang Province to Vientiane City and have the letter carried by someone in a private truck. It is a long way from Xieng Khouang Province to Vientiane City, approximately six hundred kilometers. If we tried to go without permission papers we would be caught at one of the many checkpoints along the way.

The third way was to make contact with a truck driver going between Vientiane and Xieng Khouang and pay him to add an

was Crown Prince Vongsavang's brother. It was the custom for the king to have many wives. I don't know exactly how many he had but it must have been more than ten. Prince Tchiao Bouavone, Prince Tchiao Khamsouk and Prince Tchiao Souphantharangsy were also the king's sons, all by different mothers. Prince Tchiao Souphantharangsy was chief of the Royal Chamber. He was like a royal secretary and controlled all the paperwork going to the king. Tchiao Tod was the king's nephew.—Speaker.

extra name to his passenger list. The truck driver had to have approval for any people travelling with him. He would make a list and have a paper signed in Vientiane and he would show this paper at the checkpoints. Then he could pick up an extra passenger along the way and the name would already be on the list. But it would be hard to get on the truck without being seen by the Pathet Lao.

The fourth way was to give a bribe directly to a Pathet Lao officer. And this is what I did.

I got two bars of gold from my wife. She sent them by one of the private businessmen. With these I bought some cows for the Pathet Lao officers and some other goods for their children. Then I spoke openly to them. "I would like to go to see my family after this long time." And they said, "No. You cannot have permission." So I gave them some money and they gave me permission to go to Vientiane.

From the time I was taken to Xieng Khouang until I found a way to escape in late 1983, it was eight and a half years. I was in seminar camp from May 9, 1975, until December 1983.

When I reached Vientiane my family was very happy but my body was very, very frail. So I fed myself in Vientiane and I thought and thought and decided I would like to escape from Laos. I would try to find a place to go across the River Mekong to the Thai border. But it was not until February 1984 that I found the place. Until then I stayed with my family and I hid myself around Vientiane City. They had given me about fifteen days to be away from the camp—just temporary. So I was hiding around and going from place to place that I thought would be safe.

At that time Vientiane City was not the same as before. Everything had become dirty and there were no goods to be bought. And even if we had money we were not always able to buy rice. So life was very hard in the city and many people starved and little children too.

In February of 1984 I was spotted by a policeman and he filed my name as one to catch and send back to the seminar camp. One of my friends ran and told me, "You should go away right now. Otherwise you will be arrested by the Pathet Lao."

But I didn't know how to do it. I told my wife I would like to go by myself and swim across the river. But my wife said, "You just stay calm," and she went and found out about a bus from Vientiane to Khammouane Province. That was on Saturday evening.

On Sunday morning at four o'clock the bus was to leave Vientiane for Khammouane Province in the middle part of Laos. I was worried about being caught at one of the checkpoints but my wife told me there was only one checkpoint—just at the border of Vientiane City. I would have to pass that before getting on the bus. I must disguise myself as a farmer with the baggy black pants and the big hat.

So, early in the morning—about four o'clock—my brother carried me with my wife and little baby by motorcycle out of Vientiane City about five kilometers into Vientiane Province. There we waited and at about five o'clock the bus came along and we got on. We went along a difficult road for a long time and reached Khammouane Province at about ten o'clock in the evening. I thought, "I am safe now. I have avoided being arrested by the Communists."

We stayed there with my wife's parents for two days while I looked for a way to cross the River Mekong in Khammouane Province. There were soldiers on the river watching but I found a place in the forest where we could cross by boat and pay them some money to guide us. We pretended we were going camping and some of the guards who had a boat for fishing along the River Mekong took me and my wife and my little baby across the River Mekong and safely to Thailand.

I was a refugee in Thailand for a year and a half in the Na Pho camp. It was good there but very crowded, very crowded. And so many types of people were mixed up together—civil servants, military, farmers—they found it hard to get on together.

I arrived here in the Philippines on September 14, 1985. My family needs to study more English, maybe for six months. As for me, I will wait for them but I don't need so much study because I knew English before. I just need some practice because eight and nine years in seminar camp has made me stupid. I have forgotten many words and my intonation is not so good.

I will go to Portland in Oregon to join my old mother and my younger sister. I have no plans yet. I will try to find work as soon as I arrive and I will work hard to earn my living. If it is possible I would like to study at the same time. I think that I would like to be an engineer. And now I have told you my real story.

* * *

Now I want to tell you what I just heard but didn't see for myself. I heard that there were many bad things happening in the Viengxay area. Many generals and senior officers had been taken there and separated into different seminar camps, like Camp 04, Camp 05 and Camp 06. These were very hard camps, harder even than the others and many died.

The supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Lao Army, General Bounpone, was killed there and many other generals also. The king and queen and Crown Prince Vongsavang died in that same area.

But I think that right now the Communist Party in Laos is not very strong and so the Communists are trying to organize an army and to drive people into it to train.

We have 60,000 Vietnamese troops along the Mekong border between Laos and Thailand. If we could get some help to fight only 60,000 Vietnamese troops I think they would not be strong enough and maybe the Communist Party wouldn't remain.

I remember that when I was in Vientiane City I overheard a dispute between some Pathet Lao officers. They were arguing over where they could find rice to feed themselves and their families. They would often fight among themselves because the economic crisis was very bad for them too. Some of them deserted and ran away. Some of them just hid around Vientiane City and some left the country.

They were too young to remember what it was like before Communism. They had been like blind men. They had just followed the Party and the regulations of the Party. But they could see what it was like in Vientiane now. And then some people started going to Thailand and coming back and telling about the comfortable life there, so they wanted to go also.

Right now there are many Pathet Lao soldiers who have become refugees in Na Pho Camp in Thailand. They can't go any farther. They are just being held there. They want to go to the United States but they can't. The United States doesn't like letting Communist soldiers into their country.

There are also some Pathet Lao who joined the resistance and are fighting against the Vietnamese and Red Lao troops.

When I was in Thailand I was thinking and thinking about running back to Laos to join the resistance but I couldn't find a way. I completely don't want the Communists there. And even themselves also, they try to escape but they can't find a way.

And so I think that the Communists are not so strong. If we could just have some help I think that we could take back Laos.

* * *

THE EIGHTEEN POLITICAL RESOLUTIONS OF THE COALITION GOVERNMENT

These are as recalled by Khamsamong Somvong from indoctrination sessions in seminar camp. He wrote them in Lao and together we figured out a translation. They are not word-for-word but the order and essential content parallel May 30, 1974, Vientiane radio reports:

Domestic Policy

- (1) All Lao ethnic groups to be united as one country.
- (2) Economic and social equality.
- (3) Democracy.
- (4) Election of the coalition government by democratic polls held at all levels, from the village to the parliament.
- (5) Freedom of religion.
- (6) Equality of the sexes.
- (7) Economic and social development for national self-sufficiency.

CHAPTER 8

BEFORE THE BABIES



The McDonough townhouses had been built after World War II for returning soldiers and their families. The first low-income housing units in the state of Minnesota, the buildings were made of concrete. Everything was cold and strong, meant to last a long time. And so they had, and they had waited for us, soldiers from a different war, not returning to families but to remnants of them.

Located in St. Paul, the John J. McDonough Housing Project housed many Hmong families. The housing project was smaller than Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, but it was on high ground, and in this way it recalled the other places the Hmong had lived on, cried on, and died on. When imagination struck, I fancied that the grass hills were really mountains, the resting place of our ancestors. In the silent moments when my hands and feet weren't busy, I knew our townhouse was different from the homes of the American children on television and along the highways.

All the buildings in the project were rectangular and made of cement, all were the same shade of tan with brown roofs and had small windows covered with steel screens. The symmetry of the place was similar to the sameness of our lives, each family caught up in school and English, each family visiting thrift stores and

driving used cars, living on the monthly welfare and disability checks from the government. The truth was dawning: the lives we were living in America were far from the life that the adults had imagined from the camps in Thailand.

My family lived at 1475 Timberlake Road, Apartment C. It was a small unit for families with few children. Our segment of the townhouse consisted of two bedrooms, one bathroom, a small living room, a kitchen, and a bare, cold, concrete basement. The bedrooms had no closets, just spaces pushed into the walls with a rod across the front. Onto thin, rusty wire hangers my mother hung our better clothes from Thailand. Into plastic hampers she folded our pants and the few pieces of everyday clothes we'd gotten from church basements. The bathroom was tiny and the site of perfect showers, but otherwise uninteresting. The living room was my favorite room. It held a black-and-white television and two couches from the early 1970s, one a dark forest green that smelled of cigarettes and the other a musty orange with cat and dog hair embedded in the tough fibers. The kitchen belonged to my mother, who stood often at the sink or the stove. It held our first American-bought appliance, a rice cooker from Japan that we got from an oriental store. The basement belonged to no one. It was dark and empty. Sometimes I stood in the open doorway, looking down the shadows that cloaked the stairs, feeling the cold air seeping up and into the pores of my skin, shivering before the darkness, challenging and shirking away from its unhesitating reach. Each time I stood at the top of the stairwell and looked down, I wondered: why were rooms made to hold darkness in America when lights could be shined on everything?

It was as if our time in Thailand—the way we had lived and played and waited—had not been a part of the world.

My family was part of the biggest wave of Hmong refugees to enter the country; many of us were settling into California,

Wisconsin, or Minnesota. In 1980, the U.S. Census recorded 5,204 Hmong in America. By 1990, that number would grow to a substantial 90,082. But the story of the Hmong lives in America hadn't changed very much by 1987. On October 20, 1980, the *St. Paul Dispatch* published a story titled "Hostility Grows Toward Hmong." On June 11, 1987, the headlines read similarly, "Hmong Gardens Vandalized for the Third Time This Spring." My family arrived in July; we were just beginning. On the streets, sometimes people yelled for us to go home. Next to waves of hello, we received the middle finger.

My mother and father told us not to look at the Americans. If we saw them, they would see us. For the first year and a half, we wanted to be invisible. Everywhere we went beyond the McDonough Housing Project, we were looked at, and we felt exposed. We were dealing with a widespread realization that all Hmong people must do one of two things to survive in America: grow up or grow old. In the case of the noticeably young, the decision was made for us. For those who were older, the case was also easy to figure. Those marred by the war, impaired by the years of fighting, social security and disability were options. For my mother and father, already adults who had waited on life long before it was their time, the government stepped in and told them: the welfare clock was ticking. She was twenty-five. He was twenty-eight. They knew they wanted a chance to work, but they did not know how to keep that chance safe, so on the streets, before the slanted brows of mostly white men, they held us close for security.

On the hills of the McDonough Housing Project, the sun high in the summer sky, Hmong people practiced walking in America, children struggling with their parents holding on to them harder than ever. Dawb and I could no longer walk as we always had. The hands holding ours were more determined than

before, and also full of pressure. When I skipped, my mother told me falling on the pavement would hurt, so I struggled to match her rapid nervous gait. When Dawb limped, my father placed himself before her, protecting her with his body, and I watched her learn to stand strong for him. At night, the children looked at the white ceilings and remembered how it had been long ago and far away. We wondered if our parents, on the high mountains of Laos, had to relearn the basics of walking when they were our age, when the bombs fell and the craters broke into the earth, the paths of their lives shattered forever.

That very first summer, I encountered the challenge of not getting what I wanted most: to see my grandma in California. I also wanted her to sit with me on our small front porch, talk with me from the windows of the townhouse, and tell me about how it had been when we were still together. Money, something that I had begged like a monk for, in the dress of innocence, became a stumbling block. She'd arrived in America in late August with Uncle Hue's family. On the phone, her voice trilled in the distance, and though I could not see her tears, I felt them on my own face. Dawb clamored with me for this thing that we both dearly wanted: please let us all go see Grandma. Our mother and father shook their heads. It was not an explanation—it was a new fact in our lives. We did not have enough money.

Facts are not enough for children. We asked questions.

They tried to explain facts: "Money is not something the heart makes."

We were not convinced, but we knew that they wanted to see Grandma, too, so we accepted it. On the telephone, with Grandma's tears in her voice, our tears on our faces, we promised each other a future in America.

We said, "One day, we'll find our way to you. This country is big. But it is not as big as our love for you."

She cried. We could not hear what she was trying to say. We cried with her. I got teardrops on the receiver. I wanted to believe that the tears would reach her, but I knew they wouldn't. Only human beings can reach each other; tears are just water; salty water that I cannot control, so they slip out of my eyes, down my cheeks, to my lips, to the tip of my tongue, until I wipe them away on my sleeve.

I started dreaming about money, dollar bills that folded into cylinders, looked like trashcans, and rolled around in my head, loud and angry, smooth and gentle. After my dreams, I made decisions. When I grow up, I'm going to have money. When I grow up, I'm going to never need money. When I grow up, I'm going to treat money so well that it will always want to stay with me. When I grow up, I'm going to hate money so much that it will be afraid of me and stay away from me. Money was like a person I had never known or a wall I had never breached before: it kept me away from my grandma. I saw no way to climb this wall. Sometimes I thought so much about money that I couldn't sleep. Money was not bills and coins or a check from welfare. In my imagination, it was much more: it was the nightmare that kept love apart in America.

The welfare check arrived in our mailbox near the first of the month. We were a family of four, so we got \$605 a month. Rent was \$250, and our sponsor was teaching my father how to drive because a family cannot survive without a car in America. My parents had bought an old brown Subaru on monthly payments. After we paid for the car insurance, electricity, and natural gas, we were left with only \$150 to spend on gas for the car, on Dial soap and Pert Plus shampoo, on extra lightbulbs and vacuum bags for the old Eureka we received from a church basement, on Vaseline lotion and powder detergent so my mother could wash our clothes in the bathtub. Then there was the money we had to save to help pay for clan dinners to talk about life in America and for emergencies like sickness or death. We'd learned a lesson

from our history: hard times were inescapable, but when they came, Hmong people would have to help Hmong people survive.

In our new life of not looking closely at Americans, of walking carefully on paved streets, of living without money, my family sat in front of the black-and-white television and watched soap operas. My cousin's wife, who did not know English well, came over with her children and translated the dramas for us. The American people on television kissed and kissed and kissed, and I slipped my hands over my eyes and then carefully spaced my fingers apart and looked between them. My cousin and his wife had young children that cried all the time and drank bottles of cow milk; I worried that they would become like cow children. I watched the television, and the days passed, one after another.

At night, the families gathered for long conversations, which were always about surviving in America, the same topic that the adults in my family started the first night we arrived in the country. It was a conversation that would continue for the next twenty years. How do we survive in America and still love each other as we had in Laos? We must have yearly family picnics to discuss our problems and progress. What are safe things a family can do to save money? If a family purchases a one-hundred-pound bag of Kokuho Rice from a Hmong store (only around twenty dollars then) and goes to Long Cheng's Butchering Complex to buy a pig for one hundred dollars to put in the freezer, the family will not starve. Which program was the best one to help a man find a job, the Lao Family Organization, formed by General Vang Pao, or the Hmong American Partnership, led by Hmong men who were on their way to being established already? Go to Hmong American Partnership, because they are less political than Lao Family. Politics had destroyed our lives too many times. To make lives in America, let us all try and focus on the things we can control: ourselves. I grew drowsy during these conversations."

Life without money became more than the things we wanted or could not do. It became the things I smelled and touched, the people I loved. We shopped from secondhand stores. Together, we discovered the aisles of Goodwill and Savers. We learned about church basements. The piles of badly folded clothes and the smell that hung in the air, dust and mold mingling in dry places that had not seen sunlight or fresh air for a long time. Instead of colorful skirts, my mother wore solid-colored pants, and instead of soft-fabric pants, my father wore jeans. My fingers crumpled the fabric of their changing wardrobe, and my eyes noted the absence of color.

Amid all this, my mother and father tried to protect our visions of America. They said the used clothes were road maps of successful paths out of being poor, signs toward our happy futures in this country. They said watching television was a luxury. We should pay attention and learn something. Their smiles and laughter were for us, to cover up the nothing in our lives.

I missed my grandma, and I saw the used clothes on my parents. I felt the weight of the road before us. The only road signs I liked were the red ones put out by the ice cream trucks when children came answering its melody. When the ice cream truck started calling the children, my mother gave Dawb and me quarters to buy the sweet treats. We handed the man in white clothes our quarters and he handed us Kemps banana-flavored popsicles—cold in the palms of our hands, in the hold of our eager fingers. Every day the ice cream man came with his song and his road sign. Every day I waited eagerly.

One day, I asked my mother how it was that we did not have money to visit Grandma in California, but she had quarters for ice cream.

She answered me flatly, "Because I do not like to see you watching other children run to the truck. Because even from the window, a child can taste the sweetness of sugar. Your throat swallows when other children lick their ice cream."

The truck came every day, and then the days got a little cooler and the call for ice cream became less frequent. The only road sign that I liked in America went away as summer became fall.

I have an image of my mother and father on a bridge over a highway. They are looking down at the busy people on the road, but they have nowhere to go. The sky is a rumbling gray, perhaps in anticipation of the fall rain. They are little more than two outlines, standing together, not touching, facing the same direction, standing still. In their thin jackets, the sizes all wrong, too big and too long, they watch people with work to do and places to go, young children buckled safely in back seats. That first year, and for many years after, my parents spent a lot of time yearning to be strangers. I felt it then, and I feel it now. It is hardly ever enough to simply be alive. This image, played time and again that entire first year in America, is how my father learned about the types of cars that didn't leave families behind on the road, which cars, even when old, ran strong. This is how he became an advocate of the Toyota and Honda brands. This is how my mom's fear of driving began. Everybody was so trained, so fast, trusting one another, but things could go wrong—the sound of far-off ambulances and police sirens. I watched my mom and dad stand on the highway bridge from a distance, safe on the sidewalk of my youth.

When the days and nights grew colder, and summer changed to fall, my parents began talking about Dawb and me becoming educated people. They stopped talking about money almost entirely. They became hopeful. For my mother, the thinking was simple: we all had to go to school so we could all learn about America. For my father, the thinking was more complicated, snagging more emotions and giving rise to more questions than answers. He said we could no longer wait. We could no longer play all the time—even if it was just in our heads. We had to practice growing up to

be good people. The Hmong had traveled farther to America than we had to any other land. We would live here longer than we've ever lived in another country. The only way to live in America was to learn of its possibilities, and the way to do that was school.

My parents knew that Dawb had been good at school in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp and Phanat Nikhom Transition Camp to America. They had one strong learner. They were confident that I would do well, too. When they saw me gnawing my lips, contemplating school, they reassured me. I had learned how to speak early. I asked hundreds of questions a day. They told me a story about a cat. I asked: Does the cat in the story have one mouth? Two eyes? Paws for hands and feet? What about a tail? They didn't know education well but they knew it was tied to curious questions. I would do just fine in school.

A cousin took us to register at Battle Creek Elementary first. There was a white woman with curly hair wearing a red turtleneck and a sweater with a reindeer on it. She wore white stockings and black heels. Her skirt was made out of denim. She was the tester, and she told us to say our ABCs. I had to go first. I said, "A, B, C." Then I stopped. She said for me to say my ABCs again and my cousin said for me to say the letters again, so I repeated them again, "A, B, C." The woman tried more times and then she shook her head. She held up cards with different colors and I smiled each time she changed the card. Say the color. I said them in Hmong. She shook her head. She held up numbers, but I didn't know them, so I smiled some more. She shook her head, so my cousin took my hand and pulled me gently to his side, and pushed Dawb before me. Dawb said her ABCs. She said every color was "yellow." She said the numbers in English up to ten, and then she offered to keep on saying the numbers in Hmong and Thai. Battle Creek Elementary let us in. They placed Dawb in second grade and me in first.

We had only been in Battle Creek Elementary for a few days. It was recess time, which we had practiced for in Phanat Nikhom at the child care center, so I knew what to do. I was playing with a ball, a red rubber ball that bounced up and down against the hard concrete. A boy approached me; he had dark hair and was taller than me by at least two heads. He said something, but I didn't know what he wanted. When he pushed me, I knew what he wanted but I was not sure I wanted to give it to him. It was too late. I fell against the cement. I started to cry from the surprise and then because my elbow started to hurt. He picked up the ball and bounced it at my feet.

I didn't see Dawb run up. All I saw was the boy on the ground, flat on his back, and Dawb on top of him, pulling his hair, saying again and again, "Why are you mean to my sister?"

She was speaking in Hmong. My back hurt and my elbows were bleeding. The boy began pulling at Dawb's hair and yelling in English. I didn't know which part of him to hurt first. Dawb had his head. I looked at his feet. He had on white hightop sneakers and was wearing jeans over scrawny legs. I was about to try to step on his leg when the teachers came and blocked me. They grabbed Dawb, and then they turned and grabbed me and took us to the office. Battle Creek Elementary did not want us anymore.

Our sponsor, my father's best friend, had a daughter who was my age. We became kind-of-friends. Because she was born in America and spoke English, we could not become very close friends—I thought the Hmong children who had lived in America for a long time were not as Hmong as us newer kids from the camps—except this didn't matter when we were playing. She went to a school close by, and the adults believed that it was a good school. My cousin took Dawb and me to register there, but they didn't want us because we couldn't speak English well

enough, and they didn't have the special teachers we would need. This is my first memory of feeling embarrassed.

My cousin took us to register at another school, Ames Elementary School, because they were accepting many new Hmong kids, and they had special classes for children who didn't know English. Dawb and I held hands when we went to register, and we were surprised when they didn't even test us—they just said for Dawb to go to second grade and for me to go to first. We weren't at Ames for very long either. I didn't learn a thing. Dawb was learning, but her teacher said that she did not participate enough.

We ended up at North End Elementary School. It was not far from where we lived. Dawb and I were in the same class. The whole classroom was Hmong children from Ban Vinai and Nong Khai refugee camps. The class was a combination of ages. A Hmong man worked with the teacher to help her talk to us all. The teacher wore glasses, had dark hair, and repeated herself softly when we didn't understand. I decided she was a good teacher and was sad when she had to leave to have her baby. The Hmong man explained that we would have a substitute teacher and then a brand-new teacher once one was found. The substitute teacher came to our class for a few days. She read a book for us called *Mrs. Nelson Is Missing*, and the Hmong man translated the story. It was the first book that made me cry.

We had a new teacher who had a rule: no chewing gum in the classroom. Dawb had a pack of gum my mother had gotten for her while we were out shopping for dish soap at Kmart. Dawb decided to share her gum with me in class. I was careful not to move the gum around in my mouth. Dawb was eating hers, moving it around with her tongue, smiling at the sweetness. The teacher saw. Dawb was scared and swallowed her gum by mistake. The teacher jerked Dawb by the arms from her seat and pulled her to the front of the class so quickly and hard that she pulled

Dawb's feet straight out of her winter boots. Dawb didn't cry at all or make a noise, but I knew that it must have hurt her arm and that she had been shamed in front of the other kids.

We came home and we told my mother and father and showed them the bruise. They loved Dawb, but there was nothing to do. We must all follow the rules in this country. They agreed that this was the only way we could protect ourselves and those we loved.

I started hating school a lot more the next day. Dawb was scared of the teacher, and she couldn't learn anymore after the gum trouble. When we had spelling tests, we all waited in a line and when we got to the front of the line, we had to spell "two"; if we passed, we got candy, and if we didn't, we had to go to the back of the line again and then try to remember how to spell it. It was a long line—plenty of time to repeat "t, w, o, t, w, o, t, w, o." When my turn came, I said the letters loudly and passed easily. I didn't know how to spell the word, but I knew how to say "t, w, o." Dawb couldn't spell or say the letters because she was so nervous. Every time she got close to the teacher she got all confused.

I saw Dawb trembling. I saw the way she leaned into her stronger leg, how her body turned higher on the right side. After her third try, I got an idea that I borrowed from my father; I remembered how he had me go to the health examination in Phanat Nikhom instead of Dawb. I got up from my desk and sneaked to Dawb. I whispered the idea to her. She nodded. I gave her my candy, and I took her place in line. There were so many of us, they didn't know the difference even though Dawb had blue boots and wore a blue shirt and I had pink boots and wore a pink shirt. I got to the front, said, "t, w, o," and they gave me a candy. The translator man checked Dawb's name off the piece of paper. It was so funny—we had fooled the teacher. We had broken a rule that she hadn't made, and in this had protected each other. School would not be so bad if Dawb and I stayed together.

At home, we settled into a routine. My mother went to adult evening school. My father had passed the competency test for high school, and the welfare people wanted him to work. They told him that he was a man in America and that a man's job anywhere is to take care of his family. My mother wanted my father to continue going to school. She told him that if he didn't learn more English, he would have to work that one job for the rest of his time in America. She said that we had been poor in Thailand and being poor for a little longer was not impossible to live through. They didn't have young children—just Dawb and me and we were in school. She convinced my father to apply to a community technical college to learn about operating heavy machinery. He called the welfare man.

"I have only two little girls," my father said. "My wife goes to school. I don't know English. We have only just come to this country. I want to work and support my family. You are right. I am a man and I will take care of my family. I ask you for a chance to learn more so that I can get a better job. I am not scared to work. I understand that in life we all work. Please help give me time so that I can take care of my girls as best as I can in America."

I could not hear what the man on the other line was saying, but my father talked in circles for a long time before he said, "Thank you. I will remember this gift that the American government has given my family and me."

After my father hung up the phone, he walked around the house. He walked from the living room to the kitchen, climbed the stairs to the two bedrooms and the bathroom, and then came back down. He went outside and stood in the little yard with the low brown fence, and he looked at the trees on the hill. He looked at the hills of America just as he had once searched the mountains of Thailand, searching for the place where his father was buried in Laos.