



Background *The Hmong (hmông) are an ethnic group from southern China, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. In the 1970s, war and conflict caused many of the Hmong people in Laos to flee to refugee camps in Thailand. Author Kao Kalia Yang (b. 1980) was born in one of these camps. She moved with her family, including her older sister Dawb, to Minnesota in 1987. Four other siblings were born in the United States, where all the Yang children received their educations.*

from

The Latehomecomer

Memoir by Kao Kalia Yang

SETTING A PURPOSE As you read, notice the challenges and the opportunities that life in a new country presents Kao Kalia Yang and her family. How does Yang react to her situation?

We had been in America for almost ten years. I was nearly fifteen, and Dawb had just gotten her driver's license. The children were growing up. We needed a new home—the apartment was too small. There was hardly room to breathe when the scent of jasmine rice and fish steamed with ginger mingled heavily with the scent of freshly baked pepperoni pizza—Dawb's favorite food. We had been looking for a new house for nearly six months.

It was in a poor neighborhood with houses that were ready to collapse—wooden planks falling off, colors chipping away, sloping porches—and huge, old trees. There was a realty sign in the front yard, a small patch of green in front of the white house. It was one story, with a small open patio and a single wide window framed by black panels beside a black door. There was a short driveway that climbed up a

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little hill. No garage. It looked out of place in the east side of St. Paul. In fact, it looked out of time. The house should have been on the prairie, in the early days of Minnesota. It looked like it belonged to Laura and Mary Ingalls and a time
20 when girls wore cotton skirts with little flowers and bonnets to keep the sun away and carried pails with their sandwiches inside. The team of two old trees in the front yard dwarfed the house. From the car, my imagination took flight. I never thought I would get a chance to live in a house that belonged to storybooks.

I asked my mom, "Are you sure this is only \$36,500?"

"It was really \$37,000 on the paper, but Dawb asked the man to lower the price for us, and he agreed."

"It looks like at least \$70,000 to me."

30 I couldn't wait to get out of the car. We had been looking for houses a long time—some we had liked well enough; most we couldn't afford. Now, this one that looked like a real antique, was only \$36,500. The deal was incredible. It felt like a miracle.

Together, we had scoured the city looking for a suitable home. My mother, father, and Dawb in the front, and the rest of us in the back, all our knees touching. We had looked all summer long, driving up and down the avenues, the corridors, the smaller streets, and the busy thoroughfares of St. Paul.
40 On days of fruitless hunting, my father would drive us past the mansions on Summit Avenue for inspiration. We were awed and discussed the merits of owning the structures before us, humongous and intimidating, haunting and invincible. We marveled at the bricks and the green lawns and the ivy climbing up the walls and windows.

Dawb and I posed creative arguments for why owning such behemoths would never work for our family. These were the homes that we saw on television, the ones with the ghosts and the gun dramas, the ones with the 1980s movie stars and their loose-fitting suits. These were the homes with the secret
50 drug addicts and the eating disorders. We'd much rather live in places where men carried beverages in brown bags and walked lopsided up and down the sidewalks and a child could kick an empty beer bottle just as conveniently as a rock. We had fun with our talk, but sometimes Mom and Dad got annoyed. These houses were supposed to inspire us to work extra hard in school.

The small house before us would work. It would be our first piece of America, the first home we would buy with the money our parents earned. We were full of eagerness. Some of our cousins had purchased houses already; others were looking, just like us. It felt like we were joining the future with the past, our dreams and our lives coming together. This would be the home that the children would dream about for years to come.

Up close, we could see that the wood of the house was falling apart in places. White paint had been applied to the parts where the old paint had chipped. The floor of the porch was rotting. The black panels on either side of the window made it look bigger than it was. But that afternoon there was a feeling like the house was special, like it would be ours for a long time. I walked through the front door, into a space that was small, like an elevator. Then I made a left and entered our first home in America: 437 East York Avenue.

The house had the simplest design I had ever encountered. After the elevator-sized reception area, there were three bigger rooms all connected, each with a small bedroom to the right. There was a single bathroom in between the second and third bedrooms. The first room was a designated living room. The second was an "anything-you-need-me-to-be" room (that would be used to full capacity as bedroom, playroom, study room, and eating room). The third was a kitchen with enough room in the center for a round dining table (a remnant of the old owners). Off the kitchen there was a door leading to an enclosed porch area that my father liked because there was an old pencil sharpener nailed into the wall. The realtor had said that the sharpener still worked. Also off the kitchen there was a small room with just enough space for a washing and drying machine and the requisite heavy-duty sink. The total area of the house was 950 square feet, and it was built in 1895. It was called a two-and-a-half bedroom house because the middle room had no closet. The entire structure smelled old, like the thrift shops we were frequenting less and less.

My mother and father were in disagreement over the house. My mother kept on hoping for better. My father's position was that we had to make do with what was before us. But they both felt that they could not afford better for us.

My father said, "We can hide from the rain and the snow in here."

requisite
(rĕk'wī-zīt) *adj.*
Something that is
requisite is needed or
essential.

100 "Ah-huh," we answered in various octaves.

"Someday maybe we can do better."

We all knew he was referring to education. Someday when Dawb and I became educated, and the kids grew up and did well in school too, and my mother and father no longer had to work so hard just to get enough food and pay the heating bill. That is the someday my father was waiting for. It was the someday we were all waiting for.

We moved into the house in the fall, my first year of high school. Dawb was already attending Harding High School, an inner-city school where nearly fifty percent
110 of the student body was multicultural—many of whom were Hmong. Naturally, I would attend Harding with her. She had helped me choose my classes; I would take all the International Baccalaureate classes that I could get into, and where I couldn't, I'd take the advanced placement or college prep courses. I had gone to a small junior high school, a math and science magnet, in a white neighborhood with few Hmong kids. There I had done well in my classes; I discovered a formula I thought quite sacred: do the homework, go to class
120 every day, and when in class, follow the teacher with your eyes. I was still whispering in school, but the teachers took it in stride. I felt ready for the life changes that high school would bring my way.

I was feeling a strong push to reinvent myself. Without my realizing, by the time high school began, I had a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I had been on simmer for too long. I wanted to bubble over the top and douse the confusing fire that burned in my belly. Or else I wanted to turn the stove off. I wanted to sit cool on the burners of life, lid on, and
130 steady. I was ready for change, but there was so little in my life that I could adjust. So life took a blurry seat.

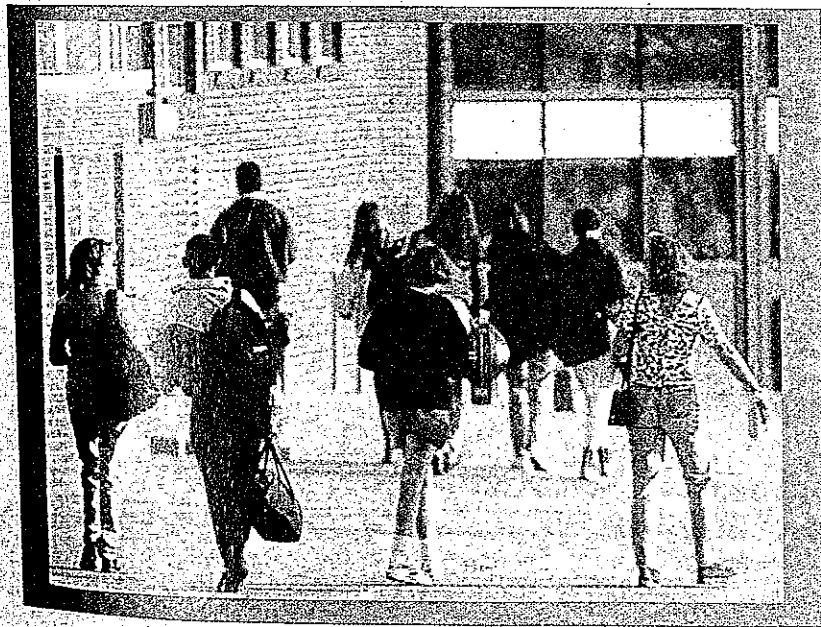
I knew that the parameters of our life would continue, but I pushed against the skin that contained me. There would be school or work during the day and then a return to the children and babysitting. The drama of a changing body had taken me by surprise but had taken care of itself smoothly.
... Dawb drove around the block, often with me beside her in the passenger seat. We were both growing up, we were big sisters, and we took care of the children, and my mother and
140 father were convinced of our status as good daughters with good grades. High school was important because it meant

that we were closer to college. It did not resonate in my family that high school was a time to be young or to be old or that it was a time to sneak peeks into different worlds. Such ideas hit against the closed lids of my consciousness.

resonate
(rēz'ə-nāt') v. When ideas *resonate*, they have a great effect or impact.

Dawb and I had decided long before that when the time came, we would strive for the University of Minnesota. We were hearing of Hmong doctors and lawyers, both men and women, all excelling in America, building successful lives for themselves, their mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers. I had never actually met a Hmong doctor or lawyer, but they had clan names I recognized as clearly as I did my own: Vue, Thao, Vang, Xiong, Lee, Lor, Moua, Cha, Hang, Chang, Khang, Her, Chue, Pha, Kong, and Khue. Dawb and I wanted to add to the success of our clan in this growing list of Hmong people who had made lives for themselves and their families in America. We wanted to make the life journeys of our family worth something. Our ambitions had grown: we contemplated changing not simply our own lives but the lives of poor children all over the world. And the key, we believed, was in school. But how far we could strive in school was unknown. We didn't tell anyone about our secret dreams.

Dawb had teachers who supported her all the way through. She had the kind of intelligence that a teacher could



see (she looked every part the interested learner), could hear (her English had no accent), and could support (she soaked up information and processed it into her world for her use). I was lost, perpetually biting my lower lip: I didn't speak well or easily, and the link between what we were learning from books and living in life was harder for my mind to grasp.

170 In high school, this changed. I met a teacher who changed the way I saw myself in education. Her name was Mrs. Gallentin, and she opened up a possibility that I was special. She taught ninth-grade English, where we read *Romeo and Juliet* and *Nectar in the Sieve*, as well as other literary classics. I sat near the front of the class and absorbed the books. Mrs. Gallentin had a red face and a dry sense of humor. She had little patience for kids who giggled or were fussy in their seats—students who didn't pay close attention to lessons and did not do their assignments on time. I had overly curvy, confident handwriting that was hard to read, and I did not have a computer, so reviewing my work was a slow process. She may have noticed me initially because of this, and her interest was compounded by both my silence and my serious approach to literature.

180 Mrs. Gallentin became impressed with me because I could tell the important parts of a book. I knew how to anticipate the questions on her tests. At first, I was convinced I could read her mind. But after a few thought experiments in class, I realized I was picking up understanding from the books, not from her. It was in this class that I wrote my first real essay in response to the question: Is the story of *Romeo and Juliet* a story of love or lust?

190 It took me all night long to think about the essay. I had no personal experience with love, or lust. Some of my friends said that they were in love, but I was not convinced. The phone conversations they had with their boyfriends were mostly just listening to each other's breathing. After many false beginnings, I wrote about what mattered to me. I wrote about the love I felt I knew: Love is the reason why my mother and father stick together in a hard life when they might each have an easier one apart; love is the reason why you choose a life with someone, and you don't turn back although your heart cries sometimes and your children see you cry and you wish out loud that things were easier. Love is getting up each day and fighting the same fight only to sleep that night in the same

bed beside the same person because long ago, when you were younger and you did not see so clearly, you had chosen them.

210 I wrote that we'll never know if Romeo and Juliet really loved because they never had the chance. I asserted that love only happened in life, not in literature, because life is more complex. As soon as I wrote the essay, I started worrying about it—what if she didn't like it, what if she didn't agree, what if I had it all wrong. That was my first understanding of how writing worked, how it mattered to the writer, personally and profoundly.

220 I had written the essay out by hand first. I stayed up all night typing the essay on our gray typewriter at the dining table (it was the only surface in our house that was steady enough for us to really spread out our books and papers), slowly, with my index fingers (mistakes were costly). The sound of slow keys being clicked, first the right and then the left, eyes looking from keyboard to the page. Flexing careful fingers every few minutes. Trying to find a rhythm and a beat in the clicking of the keys, the mechanical whirl at the end of each line, the changing of paper. It took me a long time to think it through and follow the letters to the words, but the writing calmed something inside of me, it cooled my head: like water over a small burn in the pit of my mind. I watched 230 eagerly as the third then fourth then fifth page filled with typed letters.

My mother and father came home early in the morning. They had changed their work schedules entirely to the graveyard shift (the nominal increase in their wages was necessary to maintain the new house). They saw my eyes closing over my work and became convinced that I was their hardest working daughter. My heavy eyes followed the way they walked so tired around the kitchen, and I grew confident that I really did know love—that I had always known it. By 240 morning, the exhausting work of writing was done. I turned it in to Mrs. Gallentin.

Mrs. Gallentin caught me in the hall later that day and said that my essay was beautiful. She said that I wrote more than an answer to the question; I was telling her the ways in which questions come from life and end in life. I had never thought of myself as a good writer. I liked stories, and in elementary school I had written gory tales about intestines coming out. I thought I was good at math and science (what my junior high

nominal
(nŏm'ə-nəl) *adj.*
Something that is *nominal* is small or insignificant.

250 school had been good at), but Mrs. Gallentin said that I had talent for literature. I didn't see it, but it pleased me to hear her say this. In the course of a semester, she opened up a real possibility that I could excel in high school and college because they were all about good reading and good writing.

I began to see a truth that my father had been asserting for a long time, long before America. In Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, I had sat on my father's shoulders, my hands secured in his hair, and I listened to him talk about how we might have a brother, how we would become educated, and how our lives would go places far beyond the horizons we saw—in America. 260 I looked at our lives, and how could I not believe? Beyond all the spoken wishes, a dream had even come true: eight years into America and we owned a house of our own. I wanted to recap this journey with Grandma. I waited enthusiastically for her summer visit.

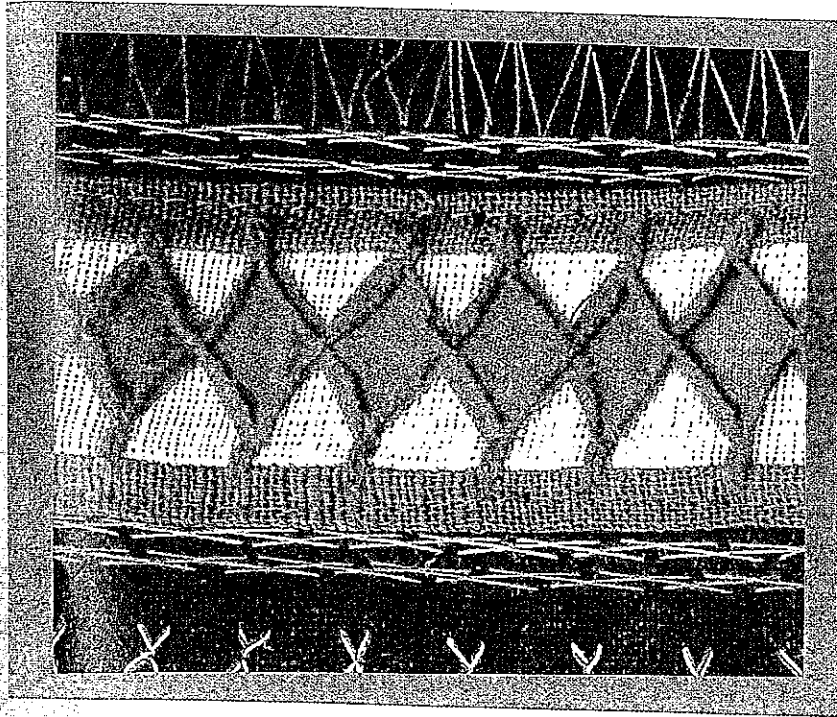
She didn't come.

In 1996, welfare reform was in the news. The program was ending. Families living on welfare had to learn how to work "within the system." This meant that my uncles in California could no longer farm on the side and raise their families with 270 the help of the government. This meant that my grandma's sons were in danger. What's more, she herself could be at risk. She was not a citizen; there was no way she could pass the citizenship test or speak enough English to prove her loyalty, to pledge, "I will fight for America if it were ever in danger." It was fighting that all the Hmong in America had done with the lives that had fallen to the jungle floor, the spirits that had flown high into the clouds again, that had fled life and refused to return—despite all the urgings, the pleas, the crying. But we were refugees in this country, not citizens. It was not our 280 home, only an asylum. All this came crashing down.

In American history we learned of the Vietnam War. We read about guerilla warfare and the Vietcong. The Ho Chi Minh Trail and communism and democracy and Americans and Vietnamese. There were no Hmong—as if we hadn't existed at all in America's eyes.¹

¹ In American history . . . in America's eyes: When the United States' war with Vietnam spread to neighboring Laos, Laotian Hmong people fought with the United States. After the war, Hmong people had to flee from the governments of Vietnam and Laos. These governments saw them as enemies.

recap
(rē-kăp') v. To *recap*
an event is to retell or
summarize it.



And yet Hmong were all over America. An exodus from California began. Minnesota was softer in the process of change. Welfare programs would not be terminated as quickly. Measures would be taken to ensure that old people received their benefits. A bill was being considered that would allow veterans of the Vietnam War, Hmong with documents, to apply for citizenship, and take the examination in Hmong. There was crazy studying everywhere. Aunt and Uncle Chue hovered over pages that he read with his French accent as she tried to make out the letters of the alphabet one at a time, through her thick reading glasses.

My own mother and father questioned themselves out loud, "What if we try to become Americans and fail?"

On the phone, Grandma said, "Lasting change cannot be forced, only inspired."

For the Hmong, inspiration came in those that were born in this country, the ready-made Americans in our arms, the little faces of boys and girls who spoke Hmong with American stiffness.

We could not remain just Hmong any longer. For our children, we could not fail. We had to try, no matter what. Even if it meant moving. Thousands of Hmong families moved from the farming lands of California to the job

possibilities in Minnesota companies and factories. Aunt
310 and Uncle Chue, despite their lack of English, studied for
the citizenship exam, took it, failed, despaired, studied some
more, and tried again. Eventually they succeeded, and they
inspired my parents to try for citizenship, too. We had no
more lands to return to. After nearly fifteen years, my family
knew this. The camps in Thailand had closed. Hmong people
there were repatriated, sometimes without knowledge, back
into Laos. Families went missing in the process. Lives were
lost. Children were killed. Ours were only beginning to raise
320 their eyes to a country of peace, where guns at least were
hidden and death did not occur in the scalding of grass or
rains that drizzled death. We could not handle any more
death. In wanting to live, we were willing to try becoming
Hmong Americans.

repatriate
(rē-pā'trē-āt') v. To
repatriate people is
to return them to the
country in which they
were born.

A new chapter of our lives unfolded as we strived to
become Americans. We sank our roots deep into the land,
took stake in the ground, and prayed to the moon that one day
the wind would carry us away from our old moldy house, into
a new stronger home that could not be taken away, that would
not fall down on us, that would hold us safe and warm.

330 Grandma and the uncles from California came to live with
us in Minnesota. I felt caught in the larger context of being
Hmong. We were only one family in the over two hundred
thousand that lived in America. We all came from the same
history. I burned for our stories, our poverty, and our cause.
I was only in high school, and there was very little I could do.
My father chided my impatient heart.

chide
(chīd) v. To *chide* is
to scold or correct in
some way.

He said, "Patience is the slow road to success."

My father was a poet, and had a poet's heart. He carried
love songs about the falling apart of a country. He made music
340 of the loneliness in Thailand. He sang traditional song poetry
about the earth grumbling and the sky crumbling, the leaves
of the human heart fluttering all the while. I was his daughter,
and I could not see poetry in the mold that grew wild on our
walls—no matter how much my mother, Dawb, or I scrubbed,
it never stopped, no matter how many layers of paint we
applied. I couldn't understand why the Hmong people had
to run for their children, how their children had to make
lives, again and again, in different soils, to know belonging.
Why it was that our house, so cute on the outside, rotted on
350 the inside.

repatriate
(rē-pā'trē-āt') v. To repatriate people is to return them to the country in which they were born.

chide
(chīd) v. To chide is to scold or correct in some way.

Why couldn't Grandma live with us now that we were all in one state? Why couldn't she live with any of her sons permanently? Because their homes were small. Because at one home, her heart yearned for another, and because all their homes together could never be like the country of her home in Laos, in the imagination and the stories she told all of us. In the world we lived in, our grandma carried her bags from one house to the next, sharing all our beds.

360 All this made me sick. My stomach cramped, and I could no longer eat. My bones hurt. I was tired. In the night, my heart squeezed itself, and I woke up incapable of crying the pain away. I remember one night, falling asleep looking at how the car lights from the street reflected on my wall. I could hear the pounding of my heart in my ears, very loud and deep, like a hollow cry from my chest. I felt like needles were twisting their way into my chest. I remember thinking that the pain was teasing me but realizing soon that it wasn't a joke. The air in my lungs caught in my throat. I struggled for escape, my hands reaching for my heart, beating frantically
370 within me. I remember trying to cry out but finding a lack of air, a thickening tongue. I kicked desperately on the hard wall. First one, then a sad two, a final three: thinking in red: Mom and Dad, help me, I'm dying. I'm Hmong and I'm your daughter and I'm dying in the room beside yours. The thoughts were on repeat. Sweat. I could feel it breaking out on my forehead. Skin: I could feel the cold settling in. Heaving inside of myself. My eyes growing tight in the darkness, light streaming in. The door opened, slamming with force against the wall. My mom and dad rushed to my side, and I remember
380 seeing myself twisting and turning, all out of color and out of breath, but still moving with nervous life. My father tried to hold me and I could hear my mom's voice panicking and Dawb running for the phone, and then I felt expiration come. I stilled. Air flowed in. My vision cleared. It was slowly over.

No ambulance was called. It was too fast. What seemed like forever was little more than five minutes on a dark Minnesota night. No one knew what happened. In the doctor's office, days later, I said: perhaps it was a heart attack. The doctor didn't think so: I was too young for a heart attack.
390 My mom and dad were eager to believe the doctor. We didn't want to pursue the idea, and so we came home happy that it was all over.

expiration
(ēk'spə-rā'shən) n.
Expiration is the act of exhaling or breathing out.

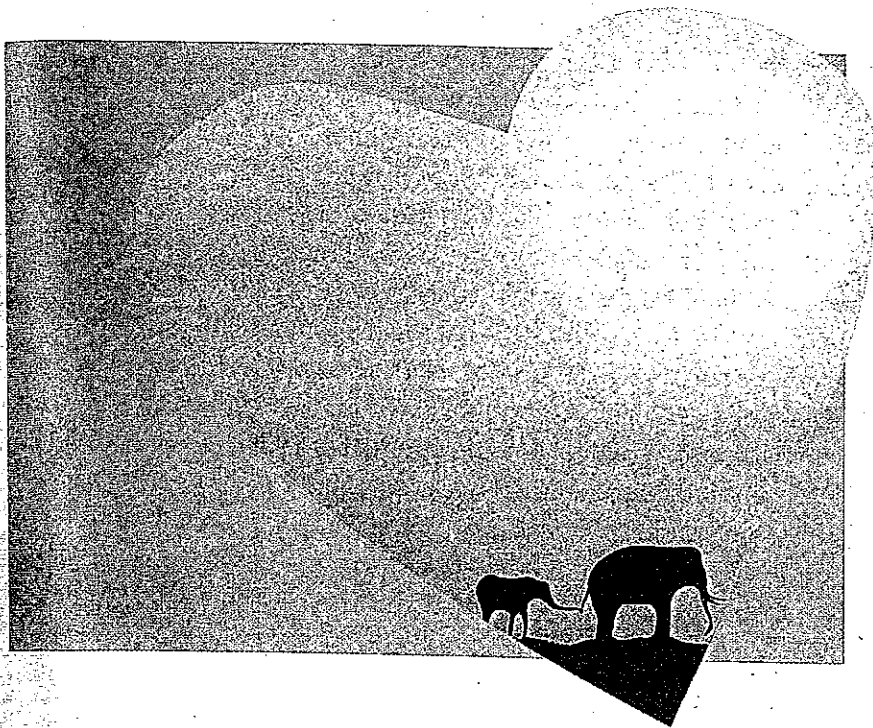
In the month that followed, I lost twenty pounds. The doctors didn't know what was wrong. My mother and father hovered over me. My siblings watched me grow pale and weak; the bones on my hips jutted out, and the bags under my eyes took permanent residence.

Was I making myself sick? Looking for fundamental changes in my life? I loved the children, and I was happy to
400 take care of them after school. All this time, I had been feeling like I was pushing against my skin: was it possible that I was pushing against my very own heart? The idea was a little preposterous. I didn't really believe it, but it nudged at me. But if indeed my heart did need changing, then what part of it? There was a clear division: the Hmong heart (the part that held the hands of my mom and dad and grandma protectively every time we encountered the outside world, the part that cried because Hmong people didn't have a home, the part
410 that listened to Hmong songs and fluttered about looking for clean air and crisp mountains in flat St. Paul, the part that quickly and effectively forgot all my school friends in the heat of summer) or the American heart (the part that was lonely for the outside world, that stood by and watched the fluency of other parents with their boys and girls—children who lingered in the clubs and sports teams after school waiting to be picked up later by parents who could—the part that wondered if forgetting my best friends to life was normal and necessary). My body was surely whole. The doctors said so. What was broken in me must be something doctors couldn't see.
420 I worried. The more I thought about it, the sicker I became: how does one change what one is becoming?

My grandma worried over me. She tried calling my spirit home. My rebellious, independent spirit hated the moldy house and refused to return. She tried her healing herbs. Their smell and taste took my soul far away to Thailand, to other times and places, but could not locate me in the present. Grandma grew despondent.

Something was wrong inside me, and its location was murky, like the origins of the Hmong home long, long ago and
430 far, far away.

despondent
(dī-spōn'dənt) *adj.*
Someone who is *despondent* feels a loss of hope or confidence.



One day, I lay on the sofa—another day absent from school (my grades were dropping slowly)—looking up at the wall. Grandma and Dawb had gone shopping. My mother was in the kitchen preparing rice porridge for me. I heard the key in the lock. I heard them come in. I turned and saw that my grandmother had a gift for me.

There was something glittery in her hands. Her uneven gait came closer. She presented a thin silver bracelet made of elephants, bigger mother ones and smaller baby ones, circling together, tusks entwined. It was the most beautiful gift anyone had ever gotten me. She told me that the man at the store had taken off a few of the elephants to fit my small wrist. Grandma put the bracelet on me and said, “Elephants protect their babies by forming a circle around them. You are sick, and I cannot protect you. I bought this for you so that the power of the elephants will protect you and make you well again.”

I wore the bracelet every day. I started to eat a little bit of food and took the medicines the doctors gave me (after all of the tests and retests, the doctors said that baby lupus would explain my symptoms). I wore the bracelet and grew stronger in its hold. The idea of a divided heart slowly lost merit: if there was no resolution that I could willingly and happily pick, then why not just live with it? Isn't this how all

despondent
(dī-spŏn'dənt) *adj.*
Someone who is
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confidence.

of life happens anyway? I looked at the glittering bracelet on my wrist and decided that a divided heart can be a good thing. One side can help the other. Why couldn't my chest expand to hold my heart? My father was always telling me that I needed to stiffen the walls of my heart, so it would not waver after the passage of people and places in my life. Maybe the
460 softness of my heart, which I thought would cushion whatever may come, had been my biggest weakness. I had the help of elephants. I wore the bracelet every day and felt better.

One day, the tusks of two elephants lost their hold on each other. I placed the bracelet in a small bag, and I promised myself that I would eventually put the tusks back together again. Or, if that was impossible, I would have another one made, just like it.

I grew well again, but I understood that my body, like every other body in the world, could die. It could be healthy or
470 not. If it carried life, then it could lose it. I was a child of war, and I should have known that we have no choice about when and where we die. When we do, we simply comply as bravely as we can. Getting up in the morning became harder than it had been. But each day, I did get up. That was the point. That had always been the point in the Hmong life, and even the American one. I grew satisfied with myself. Slowly, the sickness eased away.

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION Which of the author's experiences seems to have had the greatest effect on her? With a partner, discuss the reasons for your response. Cite specific evidence from the text to support your ideas.