

Resilience

A WORLD OF SURVIVORS

Another name for survival might be *resilience*. At its core, resilience designates the capacities to withstand change, instability, or destruction. By definition, resilience is to cope through crisis and then bounce back. To survive war is already a resilient act (some may call this simply good luck or good fortune). But refugee resilience is a specific kind of survival, not just to live and exist, but to do so *out of and with loss*. That is to say, refugee resilience is dialectically related to loss, possible only within losses that are often finite and unrecoverable. Refugee resilience is not a bouncing “back” to a prior state of being but a bouncing away, a bouncing around in time and space.

For how does one “go back” when the city has been bombed to the ground, the country is no longer on the map, and the kin are long buried? Yet a melancholic or nostalgic backward glance—a psychic attachment to the past—often “afflicts” the migrant or diasporic subject. Thu-Hương Nguyễn-Võ writes that the “mode of expression” for Vietnamese refugees is “mournful of loss and evocative of trauma.”¹ This can be applied more broadly, I think, to any refugee group displaced by war. If loss and mourning are prominent cultural forms for diasporic refugee communities, then the resilience of these communities is intimately tied to the presence of loss. Bouncing back means a confrontation with what has been lost, and inhabiting the world of survivors involves naming loss, because the possibility of living assumes perseverance in and after destruction. Rather than being pathological or regressive, attachments to loss might be understood as a way for refugee survivors to mark that they are, in fact, still here.²

Because loss is the world that remains for refugees, it is a constitutive experience of being in refuge. This explains why loss has been and remains a dominant interpretive lens for understanding refugee lives. It powerfully gives shape to the traumas and difficulties of living on, providing an embodied framework for

the experience of suffering in the wake of war and migration. But there is always more than loss, more experiences of persistence and mundaneness that loss is entangled with, and resilience can point us to this wider horizon without leaving loss behind.

Acts of refugee resilience, I argue, are refusals to be wholly defined by such loss without canceling or overriding its existence. Resilience is a reckoning with loss by way of understanding presence. It is through resilience that refugee presence, or the many ways to be present, can be examined. Accordingly, we might ask how presence makes itself known, or what resilience looks like as an effect of refuge. This inquiry returns squarely to the driving question of this book: How is refuge experienced? I have tried to address this question with an exploration of gratitude and resentment, wrestling with the shaping forces of sanctioned ways of being and with how, within these forces, there is always room for a redefinition of refuge.

The dyad of gratitude and resentment that precedes this chapter points to the refugee's multiform relationships with the nation-state, with the self, and with others. Resilience is similar to gratitude and resentment in its drive for experience and recognition, but its mode of relationality is less expressively emphatic. Success and failure, conventionally tied to gratitude and resentment respectively, operate on a register of spectacularity—they are celebrations or grievances, elations, or disappointments. There is something or nothing to show for them. I have provided accounts of gratitude and resentment, however, that complicate such explicit and spectacular formulations, describing nuanced, ordinary, and deeply embodied versions of these important affective experiences.

The close readings of the previous two chapters could be considered “images” of refugee resilience in that they indicate various ways of trying to survive and build a life in the wake of war. This chapter further nuances resilience as *how to tell* the story of such lives. My focus on resilience here seeks to home in on the deeply intimate, and thus indelibly social, process of storying the survival of refugee life.³ I suggest that such storying is a distinct way of engaging loss. If gratitude and resentment are already, at a basic level, proof of resilient presence, then refugee resilience might be more specifically understood as ways of making presence that is not the inverse of loss.

Resilience is a relation of narration—of exchange and sharing, or ways of (re)connecting and extending toward—as much as it is about the content of refugee lives. It is *how* refugee subjects see themselves and others who live with loss, and the stories that continue to have some kind of life in the world. Resilience is a real and fictive life story that preserves presence, that tries to make meaning from the ruins of various losses. This act of meaning making, whether it be through poetry, fiction, or memoir, is one in which we may consider the intricacies and intimacies of lives, material and discursive, which pass through war and then emerge in refuge.

Refugee resilience clarifies for us that loss, although prominent and defining, is but one experience in the duration of refuge. Moreover, living with loss means that life is also simultaneously filled with pleasures, desires, and delights. This commingling of seemingly contradictory and disparate experiences is actually the indiscrete ordinary of resilience. The practices of writing a story can give us a glimpse into this resilience. Musing on Souvankham Thammavongsa's book of poems *Found*, Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, and Kao Kalia Yang's memoir *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, I conceptualize resilience as loss complexly experienced through narrative presence.

For refugee subjects, resilience can develop as attempts to tell stories and to bring a version of history into the present. Often, these are reckonings with a familial past deeply embedded in the historical fate of a country, a people, and a war. The unfoldings of resilience I contemplate in this chapter can be understood through the trope of intergenerationality. I approach the tension between presence and loss through how (grand)daughters and (grand)sons attempt to story experiences with and of previous generations. Such familial relations profoundly index questions of (dis)continuity, inheritance, and reproduction. While they are focalized in family, these questions are neither private nor individual; instead, they rehearse epistemological concerns about social life—what it is, how it is lived, and how it may continue in refuge.

In what follows, I focus on how individuals try to reconstruct experience for themselves and for those they cannot (or can no longer) reach. This kind of resilience occurs through narrative acts that seek meaning and (re)connection—to find a place and a story in the world. Resilience as the struggle for meaning in the afterlife of violence diverges from more conventional understandings, which rely on a triumphalist logic of overcoming adversity. I suggest that resilience is not getting over loss, but coming to terms with it. Refugee resilience is to continue living, via storying, in the world loss has created.

CONTINUANCE OF STORIES

The turn to resilience as a concept and praxis that responds to, and potentially ameliorates, the impact of disruptions has taken hold in many aspects of intellectual and public life. In diverse fields such as ecology, self-help psychology, engineering, security, business, sustainability, and governance policy, resilience has emerged as a particularly useful concept for the building and maintenance of equilibrium. It provides a way to understand, anticipate, and manage the unpredictability of modern life, marked as it is by the endless vulnerabilities of capitalist market forces, globalization, war, climate change, and political upheavals. Because it describes how people and systems recover from crisis and how continuity might be reestablished, resilience is a crucial method of working through our existential complexities.⁴

It makes (common) sense, then, to think of refugees and resilience together, for refugees have experienced major disruptions, of both the psychic and physical kinds. How do refugees absorb the shocks of displacement and come out on top? This question, and the condition it seeks to mitigate, is transparently desirable within our volatile global system. But to follow this question's directive is to slip into a neoliberal ideological project of human resilience that naturalizes the "terrifying yet normal state of affairs that suspends us in petrifying awe."⁵ It is to accept the inevitability of violence and, more crucially, to dictate a solution to its problems. The logic of resilience reduces life to survivability, demanding adaptation or death, or life in spite of catastrophe. The resilience imperative, then, is a drive to make failure productive. David Chandler notes that "changing our approach to failure is a central tenet of resilience-thinking," for not only is "failure to be expected in a complex world, but the key point is how we use failure or limits to enable progress."⁶ To progress in this sense is to transform an impediment into an advantage, capitalizing on even the most seemingly uncapitalizable aspects of life.

Mark Neocleous writes that resilience "comes to form the basis of *subjectively* dealing with the uncertainty and instability of contemporary capitalism as well as the insecurity of the national security state."⁷ Thus, to be trained in resilience is to develop into neoliberal citizenship and become well equipped for the many and endless disasters to come. For refugee subjects, the injunction to, and celebration of, resilience often prescribes certain qualities (resourcefulness, hard work, adaptability) as valuable while masking the often harsh reality and struggles of daily life created by systemic operations. This resilience is the survival of a certain kind of entrepreneurial subject, and while some policy goals and institutions may promote and celebrate this entrepreneurship in refugees, I am interested in another meaning of resilience, one that does not prescribe capitalist resourcefulness as a means to and of life.⁸

Resilience, as I conceptualize it, is akin to Gerald Vizenor's articulation of *survivance*. Writing not about refugee loss but about Indigenous genocide, which includes experiences of displacement, Vizenor theorizes survivance as native cultural practices that produce a sense of "presence and actuality over absence, nihility, and victimry."⁹ Survivance resists colonial dominance, particularly its imposition of erasure, through a "continuance of stories."¹⁰ This continuance of stories is not only an issue of narrative or aesthetics, but inheres in lived customs, collective memory, personal attributes, and worldview. A story here is a whole tradition and way of life. Stories, it must be understood, are crucial to the livelihood of those who are marked for violence, who have undergone systemic and organized imperialist oppression. Dian Million reminds us that "story has always been practical, strategic, and restorative."¹¹ To continue the story is to not only survive, but also practice a wily resilience that evades the capture of the dominant narrative plot.

Refugee resilience is similarly a *continuance of stories*, pointing beyond physical survival to immaterial forms of persistence and inheritance. Building on

Indigenous thinking about stories to understand refugee resilience is not to suggest that their histories and circumstances are commensurate or fungible. Rather, the deep thinking that Indigenous scholars have done in relation to dominant settler discourse and the counter-narratives that offer other cosmologies, epistemologies, and relationalities has much to teach us about surviving state violence.¹² My aim is not to suggest that the specificity of Indigenous storytelling is easily transferable or applicable to non-Indigenous contexts such as refugees. Rather, the practice of Indigenous storying to exceed victimization and erasure *models a path* for others who have also been targets of occupation and displacement. If Indigenous storytelling is about the resilience and survival of Indigenous peoples and cultures, then refugee storying is one practice in which we can perceive and examine how life continues after war, persecution, and resettlement.

A continuance of stories—via intergenerational relations, creative engagements with loss, and autotheoretical impulses—marks Southeast Asian refugee storytelling. In the late 1980s, Maxine Hong Kingston specifically identifies Southeast Asian refugees as the vanguard of storytelling. She writes that “storytelling seems to be dying” and it is only being “revived by the new refugees coming from Asia to the United States.”¹³ By storytelling, Kingston is referring to the practice of “talk-story,” a transformation of stories that challenges “traditional historiography.”¹⁴ Emphasizing stories as a mode of cultural exchange shared within intimate spaces of family, and retold via factuality and fantasy, talk-story describes a distinct Asian American form of storytelling as inheritance, as diasporic transmission of knowledge and experience. It is no coincidence, then, that Kingston singles out refugees as those keeping this practice alive, because refuge requires this relational act of storying—in mundane and exceptional circumstances, formal and informal contexts—to make sense of incredible migratory changes.

Continuance is the time in which the refugee’s story lasts. This is the long duration of living in refuge. In this duration, resilience can be recognized in processes of reproduction, not just in the biological sense, but in the human capacities—as creativity and relations—to project some kind of nonprescriptive presence to an as-yet-unknown future point in time. Continuing the story means that the end is not yet here, and the potential still exists for other plottings or ways of being in the world. Continuing the story means that new ones are told, and old ones may live on in them. Continuing the story means that old stories are told again, taking on new shapes. For the story to go on, resilience shows us, it must find different forms and different modes of expression. Resilience is a proliferation of experience in acts of storytelling, which demonstrate how there is always more than loss.

Walter Benjamin reminds us that storytelling is an “exchange of experience.”¹⁵ The act of telling and the story are ways of relating that evince some kind of presence in the world, and it is through and in them that the work of resilience can be seen. In this way, stories are not just representations of experience, but are integrally part of experience itself. Put differently, stories are how we experience, how

we engage “world-representation and world-building.”¹⁶ The presence of a story is, crucially, the presence of life.

A story indicates resilience because there is someone there to tell it, someone who believes that the story should have a life in the world. A story can also persist beyond the immediacy of our lives, and acts of storytelling such as recovery, recounting, and recording are the actions of resilience. The *re-* prefix that ties them to resilience is a backward movement, a return that paradoxically propels refugees into future existences. These are strategies for being present, holding the past, and entering into the here and now.

Through these activities of resilience, we can comprehend how storytelling is not a luxury or frivolous action contrasted with the necessities of staying alive.¹⁷ Rather, to tell a story is a way into survival, especially in moments when other forces confine refugee subjects to perishing. Moreover, what is crucial to grasping resilience is not the kind of story that is told (such as feel-good stories of defying the odds and overcoming struggles), but rather *how* and *why* they are told. The predicaments that necessitate story, and the techniques or style employed to tell them, lend insight into how refugee subjects create presence. The practice of writing is not “fictional,” and the “story” that I am talking about here exists because of what people have experienced.

Stories are material relations that capture what people have been through and the creative ways these people have devised to make it meaningful for themselves and for others. Storytelling is an ethical relation between subjects that locates refugees within social life and world history. As such, in the images this chapter focuses on, strategies of narration are strategies of living: to make poems out of objects her father had thrown away in *Found*, to write a letter in a language that his mother cannot read in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, and to write a family memoir for a people who have had no written record of their existence in *The Latehomecomer* are practices of resilience. They are not just writing life, which is precisely what these texts are doing, but also raising the question of what a life is and how we can come to know what it has been through.

POETIC RECOVERIES

Resilience is most readily understood as a process of recovery, a return to a prior state of being. To recover is to get past or get over disruption and move on with life as it once was. Following the progressive course of healing, recovery mitigates the devastating effects of injury and loss. It is thus not difficult to see that refuge is a kind of recovery for refugees, who become “human” again, newly reequipped with rights and national community. Accordingly, resilience describes the repossession of political humanity and, with it, the consolidation of a subject with the capacity to move forward in time. Yet there is so much more for refugees to recover—memories, feelings, and experiences. That is, moments from the past sometimes

come back or are found again. A piece of information is revealed and a story emerges. Another life lived in a different time and place makes itself known.

Souvankham Thammavongsa, in *Found*, shows us that to recover is to find something that has been lost or hitherto undiscovered. It is to “get back,” as the root word *recoverer* suggests, what was left behind, taken away, or obscured by war, displacement, and migration. That is, recovery is also a capture, in an illuminating flash, of experience. In refuge, experiences come back, but sometimes these recovered experiences are ones that *belonged to others*.

Found begins with the recovery of an object: the poet finds a discarded scrapbook her father kept while living in a Thai refugee camp. Filled with “doodles, addresses, postage stamps, maps, measurements,” the scrapbook is an archive of experience, a record of how one man spent time, moving from one day to another.¹⁸ Thammavongsa’s poems “recover” this experience by hanging on to and contemplating the scrapbook’s miscellaneous contents. She “took only one thing and looked at it in bits and pieces” to salvage morsels of information, snapshots of a life.¹⁹

But how does one recover what was never one’s own? Are such recoveries possible? And what happens to experience along the way?²⁰ The relational process of writing the scrapbook into poems is one of resilience. It is to carry someone else’s experience and, in doing so, create experience for oneself and for others. In this sense, to recover is to give new form to experience—even, and perhaps especially, experience that is not one’s own. In acquiring new form, experience may continue to occupy time and take on additional life. The father’s act of throwing away the scrapbook might signal that the object has lost its meaning. It might signify a desire to forget or move on, or that the past was just too difficult to keep. While we cannot know for certain why he disposed of the scrapbook, we can recognize that, in the daughter’s poems, the father’s experience assumes a new shape.

Experience, however, is not easy to apprehend or reproduce. The scrapbook’s archive does not yield uncomplicated meaning to its finder. It exists in a language, Laotian, that the poet cannot read or write, and its contents do not come with explanation. The endeavor to recover is consequently marked by refusals and obstructions that highlight the limits of signification. Moreover, recovery is neither straightforward nor total because the subjective content of experience, what the father thought and felt, remains elusive. The only certainty is that he *did* experience something, and what can be recovered is this fact of experiencing. And so, rather than assign meaning to the objects in the scrapbook, fixing them to epistemological certitude, Thammavongsa gives them different bodies—that of poems—in which they retain something of the original but are also originals themselves.

These new forms do not reveal ethnographic substance, but instead convey a sense of persistence, insisting on the father’s presence in the world. They do not perform the work of fleshing out experience or revealing a biography. Carrie Dawson

sees this as the poems' "refusal of a confessional mode grounded in demonstrable truths and designed to affirm the innocence of its subject and the benevolence of its audience."²¹ As such, the poems in *Found* are not translations or transcriptions of the scrapbook's contents, whereby knowable meaning is transferred from one object to another.²² Instead, they point to breathing and thinking life—consciousness itself. In this function, poetry does not extract meaning or recover truths, but rather keeps the very possibility of meaning alive. Christine Kim compellingly argues that Thammavongsa's poetry creates "intimate minor publics," which open up ways of "seeing and hearing lives rather than political apparatuses, and subjects rather than categories."²³ Resilience, as *Found* shows, is lived experience recovered and transformed in the writing of poetry.

Found sketches a portrait of a man's experience, and while it is tempting to seek a narrative that reconstructs his remarkable life, focusing on how individual poems occupy space allows us to perceive resilience without requiring us to "know" the subject. The poems are "about" the poet's father, but they are also, and more crucially, about what the poet does with his experience. And it is by considering the poems' form and physicality that the remarkable resilience of the refugee in the camp can be seen. The way the poems look on the page, the cluster and arrangement of words, the physical shape they hold, radiate experiential intensities. Resilience inheres in the poems' formal details—it "resides" not only in the human body that survives, but also in the discursive representations that both facilitate and evince life's continuance.²⁴

More specifically, resilience "shimmers" in the figure of the line—straight and curved, written and drawn, physical and metaphorical—that moves through Thammavongsa's book.²⁵ The line embodies a kind of resilience that emphasizes presence without demanding the details (what, how, and why) that surround it. The line is a body, a marking of material recovery in the face of devastation. Tracing the various lines that appear in *Found* brings us closer to grasping the resilience of experience—of poems and fleshed bodies, of life in its essential forms.

The collection begins with an untitled establishing poem that sketches the contours of the physical body: "I took only / bone / built half / your face / left / skull and rib / as they came."²⁶ A body comes into view, but its material form is incomplete, still taking shape and in danger of falling into obscurity. Even as the poem directs us to the possibility of life, it complicates any reach for ontological certainty. The poem goes on to describe the process of piecing together a life with only bones, the barest structural parts—that which remains when feature and flesh (and accrued meaning) decompose. What emerges is the outline of an individual, of life in its skeletal form. The pieces in *Found* are, in the schematic that the untitled poem sets up, rearranged bones that constellate a body, or more precisely a frame, of experience. This reading understands the volume's immense brevity and the sparseness of individual poems as embodying the brittle quality of bone, of both hardness and fragility. The slender poems and the abundance of open space on the

page are an effect of Thammavongsa's refusal to "dress up" the scrapbook and her father's experience with definitive meaning and explicit explanation.

The creation of poetry, then, does not recover or accumulate meaning, but only seeks to describe living. Poems such as "The Heart" and "The Lung" relay the mechanical function of the bodily organs they reference. The heart, "the real / heart, / is ugly / Nothing / here / can break, / or be broken / And nothing / can come / from here / but blood."²⁷ As Kasim Husain notes, the traditional poetic metaphor of heartbreak is abandoned in order to emphasize the heart's circulatory purpose of maintaining life.²⁸ The lung also supports life, by taking "what it has / always taken / What / work it does / it has done / and has been doing / all these years."²⁹ Foregrounding the vital organs is a way for the poet to convey life in its most basic manifestation, and to make sure the reader is aware that so much—language, poetry, beauty, brutality, consciousness—depends upon the breathing body, with blood and oxygen coursing through its veins.

The shape of written language also gestures to bodily presence. In "My Father's Handwriting," curved and winding lines demonstrate an attempt to make sense of the world and create matter: "He carved / every letter / into / the sound / its / shape made / and every one took / a place / where nothing / stood."³⁰ Yet, in "What I Can't Read," the poet reveals that she cannot decipher these letters, and so must scrutinize their bodies, which gives rise to the body of her own poem: "Each letter / wound / around itself / drawing / a small dark / hole / an / inner ear / tiny / and landlocked."³¹ The tonal structure of the poems, which mimics the Laotian language, further facilitates the rippling of experiential presence, as "each poem begins by using a small set of words, and then the rest of the poem shuffles those words. . . . These arrangements give each small set of words the power to do more, to pull out a bit more meaning from themselves, each other, or the space around them."³² Using words in a way that maximizes their signifying potential by paying attention to how they can be reused throughout the poem and how they interact with elements on the page is a technique that allows experience to resonate and reverberate.

Take, for instance, "International Rescue Committee," which reads: "The exact address of / the International Rescue Committee / He wrote it down twice / the exact address / The first time in pencil / at the front / The second time in pen / in the middle / The second time in pen / he draws a box around it."³³ The repetition of the phrase "the exact address" in the first four lines, and "the second time in pen" in the last four, simulates the double copy of the address in the scrapbook, and the father's need to write it down twice. Emphasis on the "exact" address and a box drawn around it relays the importance of the information, which must be highlighted, reiterated in permanent ink rather than fleeting graphite. We do not know what the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian aid organization, did for the refugees of Laos or the father, but the poem registers a sense of *urgency*—of contacting them, of knowing they exist, of keeping their address. The rearrangement

of words and recurrence of elements in the poem draw out the tension, of hope and passing time, that lurks within it.

Similarly, the poem “Laos” builds its emotional core through force and counterforce, referencing, more explicitly than anywhere else in the collection, the historical context of war that occasioned asylum seeking. Consisting of twenty-one words divided into six couplets, spaced out evenly in a slender vertical column on the page, the poem reads: “When bombs / dropped / here / we buried / the dead / then took / the metal / for stilts / to lift / our homes / above / the ground.”³⁴ The internal narrative of the poem depicts people performing ordinary but life-affirming tasks, burying loved ones and rebuilding their homes in the wake of bombing raids, while its external structure mimics the all-important stilt that supports life. Together, internal and external logics convey a sense of resilience against the terror of the bomb—that life persists despite and through the ever-present threat of death.

In a period of nine years, from 1964 to 1973, bombs weighing a total of 2.1 million tons were dropped on Laos. This was “equivalent to the entire tonnage the United States dropped on industrialized Germany and Japan during the whole of World War II,”³⁵ which averages out to “the astonishing rate of one bombing mission every eight minutes, twenty-four hours a day, for nine years.”³⁶ The air war—one of history’s largest, and conducted mostly in secret by the CIA—mainly targeted villagers, in particular the densely populated and historic region called the Plain of Jars. Fred Branfman writes that “American bombers killed and wounded tens of thousands of Laotians. Countless people were buried alive by high explosives, burnt alive by napalm and white phosphorous, or riddled by antipersonnel bomb pellets.”³⁷ Its legacy continues to this day, for as Branfman further explains, “U.S. leaders have cleaned up only 0.28 percent of the 80 million unexploded cluster bombs they left behind in Laos. As a result, there are probably no people on earth who have been tormented for so long by U.S. war-making.”³⁸

It is within this historical and ongoing context of catastrophic assault by bombs that Thammavongsa’s poem takes shape. The downward trajectory of the bomb and the upward rise of the stilt create a line that joins the poem into a whole. Building through tension—the “dropping” of the bomb and the “lift” of the stilts, the “buried” dead and the homes “above the ground”—the poem relies on force and counterforce to generate life’s resilience. And crucial to the sense of resilience in the poem is the idea of repurposing, making use of that which was meant to destroy in order to further life, subverting the original intent to annihilate. The bombs are designed to kill, but in coming into contact with human life, their metal parts transform into something that can shelter. This example of human resourcefulness and ingenuity is a minor resistance against the impersonal rationality of antipersonnel air warfare.

As the collection progresses, a calendar from the scrapbook becomes the object of focus. Comprising the last third of *Found* is a series of poems with dates as titles.

Beginning with “January, 1978” and ending in “December, 1979,” the roughly two-year period marks the passage of time, of waiting that is not necessarily empty. “January, 1978” reads: “This month / has / X / This / the mark / of / a hurried hand.”³⁹ “February, 1978” begins with three parallel flat lines that “cross out / 7 days / then / / placed / on / the number / of / each day.”⁴⁰ In “January, 1979,” “The first day / here / is / circled / then / / / takes out / the month.”⁴¹ The next seven poems, from February to August 1979, contain a single hand-drawn slash, the same one that adorns the cover of the book. The reproduction of enigmatic slashes does not convey how time was spent. We know that time was experienced because it was marked by horizontal, angled, and crisscrossing lines, and this is all we know. The slashes tell nothing of what the father did in the camp or whether the days and months dragged on or sped by.

The date poems concentrate on the physicality of both the father and his markings. In “November, 1978,” the poet is attentive to the quality of the ink, and the force of the hand, that makes an impression on paper: “In / this month / the blue ink / runs out / The metal ball / digs / a pit / into paper.”⁴² The texture of the imprint, the look of the imperfect lines made over the numbered days of the calendar, declares something crucial, and Thammavongsa relays this immediacy in her poem by relying on drawn figures rather than language. Although the poet and the reader cannot access the father’s experience through the slashes, the certainty that he dug his pen into paper might suggest a number of possibilities: impatience, frustration, boredom, determination. The father’s act of applying pressure to extract the last of the pen’s blue ink, however, attests to a powerful, verifiable moment of living—he existed in this particular moment. In *Found*, the slash signifies that daily living endured in the refugee camp by asking readers to look at a slanted line, to witness living without demanding comprehension in the extractive ways we are conditioned to “read.”

In “September, 1979,” Thammavongsa writes, “This / is the first / month / left unmarked / The ones / after / are / the same.”⁴³ For the next three poems, from October to December 1979, the page is left blank, nothing but an expanse of white space. If the slashes and crossed lines represent the presence of life, then the lack of markings is a significant culmination to the date poem series. Like the discarding of the scrapbook, the cessation of counting time is an ambiguous act, one that does not necessarily reveal an end or a diminishing need to acknowledge time, but instead suspends the examiner’s desire for analysis. The blank page halts analytic and scopic progression. It forces an electrifying recognition of life’s vulnerability. The disappearance of the slash from one page to the next dramatizes the thin line between presence and absence, life and death. Indeed, the final poem of the collection is a brutal reminder of the violence that can be enacted on the body, of how easy it is to take a life. Entitled “Warning,” it reads: “My father took / a pigeon / broke / its hard neck / cut open / its chest / dug out / a handful / and threw back / its body / warning.”⁴⁴ This graphic concluding image of disembowelment

and death stands in sharp contrast to the quiet avowal of life in the rest of the collection.

The gradual movement from words to symbols to blank space in the collection traces Thammavongsa's awareness of the unrepresentability of her father's experience. She asks her readers to contemplate "emptiness" to arrive at a different "truth"—that living cannot be captured in words and that language inevitably fails us.⁴⁵ While the pages at the end of the collection might be interpreted as an abandonment of language, one that is risky for a poet who traffics in words, it is also a statement of fidelity to the father's experience. Leaving the page blank rather than filling it with speculation or imaginings stays close to the father's experience, and closer to him.

In contrast to other immigrant and minority second-generation artists who creatively fill in the gaps of history and identity, Thammavongsa chooses restraint as a form of engagement. To refrain from revealing a way into (his)story is a performance of meaning rather than a rejection of representation. The last third of *Found* moves more deeply into the realm of physical embodiment. At poetry readings, Thammavongsa "reads" the slashes by physically tracing slanted lines into the air with her finger, thereby performing poetry through her materiality—the body must communicate what words alone cannot.

My discussion of *Found* has followed Thammavongsa's lead in deliberately sidestepping a history lesson, or recounting personal and political history as an interpretive frame to better understand the poems. Yet my analysis works on the premise that the collection is so clearly steeped in a history of war and refugee migration that it has historical relevance beyond a personal meditation on an individual's time spent in a refugee camp. What, then, does the collection say about history?⁴⁶ As I have shown, *Found* does not provide an easy or accessible route into the complex historical conditions that affected millions of people in Laos and the rest of Southeast Asia. Thammavongsa does not function as a cultural guide or informant, narrating a misunderstood or elided history for uninformed readers. That is, one does not read the collection to learn about history, but in reading it, one recognizes that history happened, and that a man spent time in a refugee camp, that he wrote and collected, and tallied time, waited and felt something. He survived. The collection models a form of critical engagement without dictating how to engage a refugee life and history.

MONSTROUS RECOUNTINGS

The power of experience is that we can begin again, and then again. Experience offers us another try, a duration in which something else may take place. Ocean Vuong begins *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, an epistolary novel, with the sentence "Let me begin again," which doubles back in order to start once more.⁴⁷ About two-thirds of the way through the book, the narrator begins yet again,

abandoning the letter and the novel form to venture into the amorphous space between prose and verse, trusting the poetic line and free stanza to hold meanings that threaten to burst at the seams of coherence, gathering together the shards of experience—war, trauma, queerness, addiction, art, loss, and pleasure—that comprise what we would call a “narrative.”

Here is a writer (both author and character) experimenting, figuring out a way to write experience. The novel as letter is addressed to the narrator’s mother, who cannot read, and is thus already a negation of itself—an object that can never fulfill its purpose, to do the thing it is supposed to do. The act of writing experience, for refugee subjects, might be an unbridgeable contradiction, an oxymoronic action of reaching out and moving away, coming closer and breaking apart. Indeed, the narrator knows that “each word I put down is one word further from where you are.”⁴⁸

And yet he perseveres anyway, to tell the story again—crafting a queer refugee bildungsroman in which growth and transformation comes from retelling. The narrator, Little Dog, artfully recounts the stories he has lived through and ones passed on to him. In doing so, he reconstructs the presence of those he has lost to death and to distance—his mother, his grandmother, his lover, himself—in the life of epistolary fiction. As Marguerite Nguyen argues, the epistolary form plays a significant role in the formation of the Vietnamese diaspora. The letter is a “creative-critical” act for “establishing a familiar linguistic, emotional, and historical milieu,” which calls “refugee diasporics into being and conversation.”⁴⁹ The epistolary, as Vuong shows, is also a site of relational retelling. The retold story is where he and his people all survive. Recounting is a method that allows the narrator to preserve and regenerate shared experience, or the jagged shape of their lives.

To recount is to take stock of these lives, to give an account of experience that pulls writer, character, and reader together within what Ursula K. Le Guin calls the “carrier bag” of the novel.⁵⁰ In this bag, anything can happen. It is a place where more life can be lived and witnessed. And more life, for someone like Little Dog, is another telling of what has already transpired, a reinscribing of the past, in order to get “down so low the world offers a merciful new angle, a larger vision made of small things.”⁵¹ Recounting is a way for the teller to acquire new vision of the story and to provide a moment for ordinary, seemingly unremarkable lives to be held. *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* offers experience as a retelling, and in these retellings something like refuge comes into being. In the do-over of writing, another chance at life is possible for those who have received little mercy in the world.

As a stand-in for Vuong, Little Dog muses on his process as he describes the immense struggle to live and all the ways these refugee, queer, working-class individuals have died. That he decides to write to and about his mother in a form and language she will never access is, I suggest, a relation of resilience.⁵² The seeming futility of the endeavor is precisely what makes it possible. Like Thammavongsa, Little Dog takes the less conventional and more oblique path to “reach” his parent. Resilience is both a complicated chasm between and a bridge to one’s kin. A story

that can only be told, because it cannot be read by the intended reader, defies reason. A life—of the breathing and novelistic kind—unencumbered by its “purpose” is resilient, materializing where and when it should not, refusing the normative course of *bios*.⁵³ Reaching out to his mother by way of an impossibility allows Little Dog to bring the story into being, and for it to continue beyond the immediacy of their lives. Sharing the first time that his lover, Trevor, fucks him, Little Dog writes, “I only have the nerve to tell you what comes after because the chance this letter finds you is slim—the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible.”⁵⁴

Why, then, structure the narrative in this particular way? Why tell all and also tell nothing to the intended receiver? In a “coming out” scene, when the narrator confesses to his mother that he does not like girls (which is to say that he likes boys without having to say so) and she, in turn, reveals that she had given birth to a stillborn, Little Dog comprehends their “exchanging truths” as “cutting one another.”⁵⁵ A story, he knows, can be a dangerous thing, a sharp object that makes those already battered bleed more. It is thus not necessarily the story that he wants to narrate or give to this mother, even if the epistolary address of the novel might indicate otherwise. Rather, it is *through the story* or its telling that she can exist, that he can preserve her and hold her safe from the passage of time, the assault of an unending war, and the daily grind of immigrant life.

He explains: “I never wanted to build a ‘body of work,’ but to preserve these, our bodies, breathing and unaccounted for, inside this work.”⁵⁶ It is thus not the content of the writing that is significant, but what that writing can keep alive, which are the bodies of those whose stories are unexamined, who easily slip away, without a ripple, from the surface of the world. His careful choice to substantiate *these* bodies and *this* work in the very sentence itself directs the reader’s consciousness to the materiality of holding a book, a story, a life. Little Dog knows that the reader is not his mother, but someone who possesses English, and the privilege of reading. And it is through their eyes that he can subsequently reach his mother—which is to say, she and everyone he writes about continue to live in the reader’s reading. As such, it is in being read, and not in reading, that the mother attains a kind of resilient form, a presence in the novel and in the world beyond it.

While the letter-novel is not actually meant for the mother to read, it is *for* her in that it recounts the undeniable presence of her being, and readers are recruited to participate in its recognition. In the letter-novel, they cannot ignore this refugee woman as they could in the life outside its pages, where she is just another salon worker bent over, painting their nails. She is too real—too flawed and tender, violent and yearning, damaged and defiant. Little Dog realizes: “It could be, in writing you here, I am writing to everyone—for how can there be a private space if there is no safe space.”⁵⁷

This crucial awareness of his linguistic endeavor comes after the description of a racist attack in which the narrator, as a young boy, is violently forced to “speak

English” on a school bus. His reaction—to petrify the self in silence—recalls classic scenes of Asian American psychic formation in the face of public shaming and racialization.⁵⁸ Little Dog’s mother chastises him for letting such violence happen, doing nothing to defend himself. She then implores him to “find a way . . . because I don’t have the English to help you. I can’t say nothing to stop them. You find a way.”⁵⁹ This moment dramatizes the ways that the English language has been wielded against these refugee subjects and how the work of survival is learning to use it, to find a way to say something back.⁶⁰

Writing is subsequently how Little Dog finds a way to survive. It is not the way his mother would have imagined responding to racist bullies at school. Rather, it is speaking publicly in a private manner, using English in the most unsafe of spaces, that of the letter-novel, to recount the most intimate of experiences. In the letter-novel, they all “speak.” This is how the narrator uses his “bellyful of English” to say something and mark his family’s resilient presence.⁶¹ Writing is one way out of the margins that the world has confined them to, and the novel is a refuge from, although not a solution to, the forces of racial, hetero, and capitalist violence that slowly wears them down.

And so, in writing, Little Dog preserves and gives form to their lives, even while doing so he exposes them. The novel is neither a private nor a safe space. This is the danger of the story, and to enact resilience is also to risk being shattered. Accordingly, the bodies that are preserved and regenerated through writing in *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* are not romanticized versions of people worthy of sympathy. Instead, they are flawed and vulnerable—the narrator insists on recognizing their unsanitized selves, whether it be the battered face of domestic abuse, the pride of selling one’s body to feed one’s child in wartime, or the shit that comes out from the pressure of anal sex. These bodies in the letter-novel, like the ones off the page, straddle the line between whole and unraveled, monstrosity and humanity.

Little Dog boldly declares that his mother is both a mother and a monster, which is to say that she is singularly human.⁶² This necessary vision comes from recounting, or the resilient work of artistic re-creation. In the letter-novel, she is the woman who leaves bruised welts on Little Dog’s forearm and also paints, with nail polish, the color pink back on his vandalized bike. She is the woman who twirls and moos in order to ask the butchers for “oxtail” to make pho, and who wakes in the middle of the night in absolute terror, dragging her son and mother to a stranger’s house to save her sister from being killed, forgetting that she had moved away years ago. To write his mother in this way, as broken and terrorized, as trying and struggling, never escaping the violence that has gripped her, is to render the proud imperfection of a woman who knows how to speak only “entirely in war.”⁶³

That is to say, he preserves her in all her complexity, revealing the difficult truths and contradictions of a refugee woman for all to see. In doing this, he leaves her open to misinterpretation and moral judgment, which is the danger of all stories

and acts of reading. He risks, in the writing, to make her prey, to expose her to the prying eyes of the public, or to readers who might never understand a complicated refugee subject like her. For Little Dog, writing is a monstrous act and the writer too is a monster, someone who has to navigate the treacherous zone between the private and public, the personal and social.

He thus contemplates the meaning of *monster* in order to theorize the work of writing: "From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once."⁶⁴ A monster protects while heralding danger, it gathers lives and directs them to a time when the threat of destruction looms. This is the work of the writer, the reteller of refugee stories. The narrator puts bodies into the eyes—what he calls God's "loneliest creation"—of readers so that they may be seen, examined, and remembered. But this eye, as he explains, is "hungry" and "empty," a shelter that is also a feeding cage.⁶⁵

To live inside the story is to be at peril, because while it provides a moment for bodies to exist, there are no guarantees as to how they exist or what will be done to them. Survival, he tells us, "exists only on the verge of its own disappearing."⁶⁶ That is to say, the survived life is always one moment away from falling into oblivion, and resilience can quickly slip into literal and discursive death. Vuong presents us with an understanding of resilience in which life is lived perching on a cliff. Its proximity to loss is what defines a resilient life. Survival has meaning, then, because presence is always subjected to the imminent actuality of absence.

If a story is a practice of resilience, then it can simultaneously be a moment when bodies get devoured—"A story, after all, is a kind of swallowing."⁶⁷ This is another way in which writing is a monstrous act. The story holds bodies by way of ingestion, consuming the very lives it preserves. The eyes and mouth, as mechanisms of sensory perception, recognize the existence of life through cannibalistic incorporation. Little Dog knows that "to open a mouth, in speech, is to leave only the bones, which remain untold."⁶⁸ This act of telling—to spit out bones—offers not a "pure" or unadulterated body, but a digested version of life, a story that the writer has already dissected and pieced back together or left in incomplete fragments.

The experience contained in *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is, then, not so much a reconstruction, but a deconstruction that seeks to keep the interval between absence and presence open. He writes, "I'm breaking us apart again so that I might carry us somewhere else—where, exactly, I'm not sure."⁶⁹ By "breaking apart" he means, first, that writing is a distancer and, second, that it is a kind of disassembling. Writing is not meant to provide clarity or certainty, but rather to signal the existence of a life and the impending destruction it faces. The first predator is the narrator-son himself.

Thus, Little Dog understands writing as marring the body—"I change, embellish, and preserve you all at once."⁷⁰ The preserved refugee subject is also one who

is scarred and tarnished, but also adorned and dressed up—a mother and a monster. If Thammavongsa attempts to recover and reproduce her father's experience in a refugee camp by way of restraint, then Vuong, via Little Dog, tries to know his mother's war-ravaged but undefeated body by amassing words, recounting her over and over again. To continue to do so, to be aware that telling is a dangerous enterprise in which one must reveal and then mar the most treasured parts of one's self, and to go on telling the story, is resilience. Recounting experience at the cost of altering it—to possibly lose the "originality" of the experience—is to "insist that our being alive is beautiful enough to be worthy of replication."⁷¹

Storytelling is therefore the replication of being. This replication is not a copy but a continuance. It allows life to have more life, even if that life is not an exact or faithful replica of what it seeks to replicate. The resilience of writing is that life transforms on another plane of existence, not completely confined to or constrained by the fate that war, race, capitalism, and physics have determined for it. This does not mean that Little Dog can imagine a different ending or happy resolution for them (Lan, his grandmother, dies of bone cancer; Trevor, his lover, dies of an overdose, and he and his mother, in the end, have more pain to endure). Rather, replication of life in the letter-novel allows the narrator to gain insight into, and then declare, the value of their lives: "All this time I told myself we were born from war—but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty. Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it."⁷² Recounting these lives in the time-space of epistolary fiction unequivocally describes how they are unspoiled. Their liveliness, even as they perish, permeates the world of the letter-novel occurring in the eyes of the reader, over and over again as it is read. Little Dog knows this—it is his relational act of resilience in collaboration with readers. He rhetorically inquires: "So what if all I ever made of my life was more of it?"⁷³

This question is not an insignificant statement about the form and function of the letter-novel, for it is precisely what Little Dog does from beginning to end—create more and more life. He recounts how they are gorgeous, and that this gorgeousness is only brief because "to be gorgeous, you must first be seen, but to be seen allows you to be hunted."⁷⁴ Such is the price of life and resilience, the cost of writing and being written. The condition of being "briefly gorgeous" that gives the letter-novel its title is the intimate and contiguous existence of life and death, love and loss, violence and beauty. Nowhere in the letter-novel is this condition more poignantly conveyed than in the juxtaposition of Lan's death with Little Dog's first anal penetration.

Recounting allows these two disparate events to be brought together in time, to dramatize the thin line between annihilation and pleasure, loss and tenderness. As Lan's body is deteriorating from stage 4 bone cancer, "shriveled and striated," Little Dog's body is "deeply broken" and "inside out" from the force and pressure of penetration.⁷⁵ Both moments describe a vulnerable body escaping the limits

of its physical self. In one, a body is returning to a bare and singular state, and in the other a body is discovering its capacity for communion with another body. In both, bodies are tended to and cared for: Little Dog's family fanning, feeding, and cleaning the dying one, and Trevor cleaning, with his mouth, the other's anus that has just soiled itself.

Braiding together the narrative of a war survivor's death and a narrative of gay sex performs resilience as the possibility of pleasure and mercy in and with moments of loss. The letter-novel suggests that life is always thick and layered in this way, impure in how affective experiences commingle and imbricate. The story is a moment of experiential impurity in which people and events come together, collide, blend, and then something else becomes possible—life skirts death, the past is drawn into the present, and the present is ignited.⁷⁶ This is how a writer creates more life for everyone else to witness. Describing his grandmother's style of narration, one that Little Dog himself employs in the letter-novel, he writes: "Shifts in narrative would occur—the past never a fixed and dormant landscape but one that is re-seen. Whether we want to or not, we are traveling in a spiral, we are creating something new from what is gone."⁷⁷ Writing is to re-see the past and to travel in this spiral of time, bringing people and experiences along in the winding journey of the unending story. Without a retelling, we lose vision. To re-see and be re-seen is a relation of resilience, holding what is gone, not known or not knowable. In the end, Little Dog knows that to tell a story is to "feed yourself sugar on the cusp of danger."⁷⁸ In the mouth and on the longing tongue, the taste of a story can only ever be bittersweet.

RECORD OF REFUGE

Recovering and recounting experience in ways that extend presence and the possibility of meaning, as Thammavongsa and Vuong do, is about producing a *record* of life. Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* further evidences the social and historical importance of narrative record for refugee subjects, particularly for a stateless people who have, until recently, not anchored themselves in the written language.⁷⁹ The memoir, which is an expansive familial and cultural history, assumes the task of recording the lives of Hmong people who were recruited by the CIA to fight a "secret war" from 1955 to 1974 and then scattered as refugees in its wake.⁸⁰ Such a narrative record is crucial, given the instrumental way in which official files have documented them. Yang tells us that "for many of the Hmong, their lives on paper began on the day the UN registered them as refugees of war."⁸¹ Yang's observation shows how Hmongs of the wars in Southeast Asia entered written history and Western consciousness as refugees—how the written word has the power to call them forth as such. The bureaucratic process of juridical-political refuge interpellated them into a legal category of being, and refugee status conferred not just political subjectivity, but also a kind of discursive

life in the turbulent narrative of Western modernity. The official record of their lives coincided with the recognition of their statelessness and lack of protection. Their written story began, according to this record, in the moment of transnational refuge seeking.

This record belongs to the bureaucratic moment, the progressive time of dominant history, and it crucially frames the actual existence—the possibilities and limits—of refugee lives. If documentation of Hmong presence occurs through official registration, then the memoir offers a different way to participate in the making of history. That is to say, the memoir is an alternate record of experience, one that scrambles the rationality of institutional capture as seen in a legal document. While the official record inscribed “their names on paper” and “gave them numbers that would replace their names,” the memoir seeks to record the experiences that numbers cannot fill, bringing back names and the lives that fit on the page.⁸² To record and make a record of life, Yang’s memoir shows, is a resilient act that offers expanded time for the recognition of human experience.

My discussion of Thammavongsa and Vuong has focused on the writing process as a mediating relation, one in which refugee resilience could be *described* and also (*re*)*produced*. Yang’s book, the first nationally distributed Hmong memoir in the United States, highlights how writing can generate the historical presence of people who have hitherto not been part of written world history or were indexed in that history only as a legal byproduct of war. Registration numbers conferred the possibility of political protection, but writing is the duration when refuge is being sought and might eventually be found.

There is a long and rich tradition of Hmong cultural expression in artistic objects such as story cloths (*paj ntaub*), tools, instruments, and other everyday items. Yet, since history has intervened—though the introduction of modern written language into Hmong culture via colonial missionary work in the 1950s as well as migrations to the Global North in the late 1970s and ’80s—“without written texts, Hmong voices are over-looked or non-existent.”⁸³ For this reason, critics have identified writing, and life-writing in particular, as an important contemporary and diasporic means of Hmong cultural renewal, an opportunity for Hmong subjects to exercise agency in shaping their own history.⁸⁴

In this context, writing is not just a discursive or symbolic act removed from the material realities of how people live. For Yang, it is clearly tied to the existence and cultural survival of a people who have no state or physical nation to unite them. She thus understands memoir writing not just as a vehicle for self-reflection or discovery, but also and more crucially as a means of seeking refuge. Ma Vang suggests that Hmong writing is mobile, always “on the run” as it navigates the tensions of home, history, place, and language.⁸⁵ This mobility is its refuge-seeking function, and Yang concludes her memoir with a hopeful rallying call: “Our dreams are coming true, my Hmong brothers and sisters. . . . We, seekers of refuge, will find it: if not in the world, then in each other. If not in life, then surely in books.”⁸⁶

For her, this dream of refuge, so elusive for many Hmong for so long, is being realized within textuality, between the covers of a book, and *The Latehomecomer* is one realization of its promise.⁸⁷ Seeking refuge in a book does not merely refer to the escapist function of literature. Rather, the book is itself a *literal* time-space of refuge, a *moment of actual time* for lives to exist when other modes of existence may be more fleeting or inhospitable. As a material document to be read, circulated, and debated, a book houses experience in ways that give displaced lives social presence, acting as a container of living for those who know that no physical space is a foregone conclusion, a safe and permanent “home.”

Chia Youyee Vang writes: “Although they have never had a nation as we know nation-states today, Hmong nation-building efforts have been an integral part of their modern history.”⁸⁸ Because this history has been marked by multiple displacements as well as by the absence of autonomous sovereignty over a geographic area, they must turn to different sites, both material and discursive, to establish nationhood.⁸⁹ Yang suggests that a “family memoir,” through a relational approach that connects an individual story to a collective history, offers a means for the work of imagining diasporic national community.⁹⁰ Perhaps the act of writing offers a more radical and complete notion of refuge than the rights and citizenship provided by juridical-political refuge, and thus the memoir is a different route *into* refuge, a dwelling on and for experience.

Yang, accordingly, narrates Hmong history as personal and familial experience. Filtered through an individual lens, this history is inevitably peculiar but certainly not unique. Specificity of experience is not a limitation, but an opportunity or catalyst for relational dialogue, for the meeting of past and present, individual and history, self and other. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that in the experience of dialogue, individual thoughts are “inter-woven into a single fabric,” a story cloth if you will.⁹¹ The weaving together of multiple voices, perspectives, and experiences in *The Latehomecomer* might be understood as an introduction of “the impersonal into the heart of subjectivity,” whereby the “individuality of perspectives” is blurred and dissolved into something like collaboration.⁹² Beginning with the stories of her family in the mountains of Laos and ending with the tales of the Yang family matriarch, the memoir dislodges the individual writing subject as the central locus of a life.

The refuge found in words is a resilient continuance of life, one that allows subjects situated differently in time to encounter one another. The story, at its most powerful, is active and expanded time. The writing in *The Latehomecomer* offers a duration in which experience may be exchanged and shared across generations, between people who may not have had the means or opportunity to meet. This is signaled in the book’s dedication, which reads: “*For my grandmother, Youa Lee, who never learned how to write. To my baby brother, Maxwell Hwm Yang, who will read the things she never wrote.*”⁹³ The two subjects named represent the bookends of the extended Yang family: the late matriarch from the mountains of Laos and her young, American-born descendant.

Delineated here is a familial lineage, and somewhere in the vast distance between the generations is the emergence of writing. Even though writing was not a part of the grandmother's world, her grandchild will nonetheless read "the things she never wrote." The contradiction posed is a self-referential declaration of the archival function of Yang's memoir—the things that were never written exist in *The Latehomecomer*. Situated in and mediating the relationship between grandmother and grandchild, Yang's writing preserves the former's stories and transmits them to the latter. This work of writing is monumental in the context of ongoing historical erasure, transformative migrations, and unwitnessed deaths. The book's building of refuge links generations by creating family through memoir. In it, the story continues, transcending the strict spatiotemporal bounds of linear time to offer a long-lasting refuge—to offer experience itself.⁹⁴

The content of this experience is *how* they lived and *how* they were able to go on living. The memoir anchors itself in the potential of the written word to carry the willful materiality of life, the minor triumphs of staying alive. Yang writes that "by documenting our deaths, we were documenting our lives."⁹⁵ This realization occurs because "the Hmong had died too many times, and each time, their deaths had gone unwritten."⁹⁶ Like much of Southeast Asian diasporic cultural production, the memoir is a memorial for the dead and, as such, is simultaneously a record of life. Yet it shows that finding refuge in writing is not simply registering life and death; more crucially, it is documenting the joys and pleasures that flow in between and next to them. It is in these durations, in which loss is a structuring force of life, that resilience is most tenaciously potent. The meaning of life lived may flash through and be perceived in them.

For example, Yang provides us with one of the most eye-opening and unconventional accounts of life in a refugee camp, a portrait that emphasizes togetherness and comfort instead of suffering. Or it may be more precise to say that she gives us a more complex view of the camp, whereby an experience largely characterized as sovereign exception, and as precarious, traumatic, and empty time, is modulated with the simple affections that make life worth living.

After years of fleeing the Lao Pathet and hiding in mountainous jungles as fugitives, Yang's extended family reunited at the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand. She tells us that this was the first, and only, time after the war that the family lived together in one place: "For us, in many ways, the life we had in the camp was ideal. We were surrounded by people who loved us."⁹⁷ Although their arrival at the camp was met with contempt—Yang recounts her parents' memory of "an expression on one man's face," as they walked toward a fenced compound, that said "we were not human, too poor to walk on the earth"—life for the family settled into a rhythm of ordinary contentment and everyday pleasures.⁹⁸ The camp confined them, but it also became a place where they survived and experienced time with kin. In the camp, "the war was in the past," and "that was enough to make the future a busy one, filled with living."⁹⁹

This experience of living in the camp was infused with storytelling. Yang recalls: “Like so many other children, in other parts of the world, in a time of nothing, we heard stories of what was before. There were always people to tell me stories in the camp.”¹⁰⁰ When the family had “nothing,” these stories filled the hours and days, giving quality to experience. In Ban Vinai, refuge was indexed to acts of storytelling, to stories that were exchanged and made available. Yang discovered “the shape of stories, how to remember them, and how to tell them.”¹⁰¹ She would later employ this knowledge to craft *The Latehomecomer* and thus produce another refuge, another way for stories to continue in another time and place.

The refugee camp is the backdrop for this telling of refuge, of how Yang’s grandmother ran a little shop selling yams and herbal medicine; how her aunts, uncles, and older cousins doted on and protected her; how they all “ate from the same white enamel-covered bowls, with little cracks where the metal peaked through, used the same steel spoons, wore the same brands of cockatoo flip-flops, dreamed the same dreams.”¹⁰² Even when she knows that “safety in the camp was an illusion,” the experiences created (and retold) there cannot be discounted as unreal or insignificant.¹⁰³ It is, undeniably, an affective experience of resilience, of survival without spectacularity—people trying to live together. For Yang, the refugee camp “is people I love living around me. The world of our lives then was contained in a way that life would never be again.”¹⁰⁴

Once the family resettled in the United States, life indeed was not the same. Yang poignantly reveals that “for me, the hardness in life began in America. We are so lucky to be in this country, the adults said. Watching them struggle belied this fact.”¹⁰⁵ Even as the Yang family found work, achieved education, and grew in size, the lack of material resources became “the nightmare that kept love apart in America.”¹⁰⁶ Initially scattered across the United States as a result of the government’s sponsorship and resettlement program, the biggest challenge the Yang clan faced was how to “survive in America and still love each other as we had in Laos.”¹⁰⁷

The separation that characterized much of the early years in the United States stands in sharp contrast to Yang’s description of life in the Ban Vinai refugee camp. Resettlement did not live up to its promise of a “dream,” for “we were refugees in this country, not citizens. It was not our home, only an asylum.”¹⁰⁸ This recognition is what makes memoir so necessary as a different means of finding home. The “hardness” of life, experienced by Yang as racialized isolation, disconnect, and silence, required the telling of stories to open up the world and to find a distinct voice in it. In the United States, stories once again become a refuge, not a turn away from the difficulties of life, but a counsel on how to forge one and live squarely within it.

The source of these stories is Yang’s late grandmother, and the entire final section of the memoir is reserved for her narratives of jealous witches; women who turn into tigers; struggles to raise orphan siblings; and marriages, births, and deaths. Told through her voice, these stories are kept alive for others to engage at another moment in time. If the grandmother is a figure of storytelling, a holder of

family and Hmong history, then the book picks up and carries on her work: “The witnesses [to life and death] grew old, and they died, and life continued, as if they had never lived. I didn’t want this [to] happen to my grandma, to this woman I adored, whom I could not imagine not loving forever.”¹⁰⁹ In the memoir, Yang’s grandmother leaves behind an inheritance of experiences. Her life itself—the upheavals, heartbreaks, and joys she endured—is a lesson in continuing the story.

A final image of the grandmother, Youa Lee, captured from a homemade video shown at her funeral, conveys with crystal clarity the purpose and method of storytelling that the memoir develops in its pages. Recorded by Yang’s uncle, the video shows her grandmother “alive on the screen,” seated on a swing with kin, not smiling but “looking at the camera directly.”¹¹⁰ Her grandchildren are pushing the swing, enjoying the day out at a park. This ordinary image, however, is spliced with images of “airplanes zooming across the sky, bombs being dropped,” from “a documentary of the Vietnam War in Laos.”¹¹¹ The remarkable juxtaposition of life and destruction, the ordinary and the spectacular, is a reminder of what refugee life has lived through, intertwining geopolitical events and intimate experience. It shows us how a refugee memoir or biography should be told. Aline Lo argues that this final section offers a more complex picture of the grandmother—and ultimately of Hmong refugees—as a subject defined by, but not confined to, a history of war.¹¹² The story does not, and cannot, erase the violence; in fact, it needs to bring that violence in so that the human life can be illuminated in its most quiet and meaningful moments.

What this seemingly jarring montage evokes for Yang is not the tragedy or trauma of her grandmother’s life, but its ordinary resilience: “The last thing I saw was my grandmother’s back moving away from my field of vision. I could tell it was her because the gait was uneven, lopsided. On her back, she carried a makeshift basket. Her flip-flops kicked up dust from the dirt path.”¹¹³ What emerges from the dropped bombs is a Hmong grandmother sitting on a swing with her descendant. The image of Yang’s grandmother with her arm around a smiling grandchild, squinting at the brightness of the sun, and the sight of her walking down a dirt path with a basket at her hip, are small everyday moments that neutralize the power of the bomb and the terror of war. There is annihilation, there is death, there is loss, but in their midst life also goes on, surely, quietly, resiliently. This is a record that no official designation or bureaucratic narrative can either capture or erase.

WITH LOSS

In these works by Thammavongsa, Vuong, and Yang, practices of narration, which are practices of relating, point to resilience as a creative reckoning with loss. The methods these individuals devise in order to continue the story—which is to access, create, and transform experience—engage loss without centering trauma. Instead, they critically describe the kinds of life that, as Vuong articulates, violence

has failed to spoil. These works story survival and persisting forms of life without leaving loss behind, revealing the generative and vexed potential of meaning. As David L. Eng and David Kazanjian remind us, loss is “inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained.”¹¹⁴ What remains is a relation of resilience in which remains are recovered, recounted, and recorded in highly particular but deeply resonant stories of continuance. Refugee resilience, as I have argued, is what refugee subjects *do* with loss in the duration of refuge. This doing is the making of refuge by refusing the end of the story, by insisting that the absence of documentation or the narrative gaps cannot be the only existence. At the same time, they stay with these absences and gaps, knowing that there has to be something else there. Recalling Vizenor’s notion of survivance, we might understand resilience not as “a mere reaction” to loss, but as an action of living with and holding loss in unfolding time.¹¹⁵

The readings I have provided focalize intergenerational relations between refugee subjects and their kin. As a “site” for thinking through resilience, the family indexes how reproduction—biological, social, discursive—is complicated by war, migration, and refuge seeking. That is, if the family is how normative structures are proliferated, then examining them is how we can understand the kinds of obstructions (and possibilities) that war and refuge pose for social survival. The family is often where loss is most profoundly felt, and where life gets passed on and continues. It is also where the breakdown of such processes compels renegotiations and innovations.

In her influential essay “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity,” Lisa Lowe warns us against reading Asian American culture through the trope of intergenerational conflict.¹¹⁶ Such readings obscure difference and heterogeneity by localizing deeply social issues in the private drama of familial conflict. While this danger remains true in the decades since Lowe first articulated it, I return to intergenerational relations in this chapter to explore the difficult labor of refuge making for Southeast Asian refugee subjects. Instead of staging the tensions between “nativism” and “assimilation,” refugee intergenerationality is a crucible where profound historical and social disruptions imprint themselves on people’s lives. It is through the relationships between sons and daughters and their parents and grandparents that we can identify and comprehend, with deep, embodied detail, the impact of war and the experience of refuge.

Moreover, as I have demonstrated, these relations illuminate resilience and survival not as triumph over disaster or neoliberal progress, but as a difficult coming-to-terms with loss. They occur through acts of storying, which test different forms of intimate, social, and historical presence. Refugee storying—in particular recovering, recounting, and recording—take loss and what remains as what might become possible. The consequence of such processes is not some

kind of overcoming of loss or reconciliation. Instead, creative reengagements with experience are at the heart of the notion of lived refuge I have attempted to articulate in this book. These *re-* acts—denoting a repetition or a turning back—bring into view the nonlinear and ongoing time of refuge. It is at this foundational level that we can perceive refugee resilience as life and story persisting in expanded time.