

# YELLOW

Where We Can Be



An Anthology of the Asian American Teenagers' Experience



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## **Yellow: Where we can be**

There are many spaces in our lives  
That strengthens and nourish  
Making us astute and strong  
Spaces that cultivate the best in us  
Allowing opportunities to shine

There are spaces where we have no control over  
We are told what to do and where to go  
the answers are usually “no” to all the ifs, ands, and buts  
Our languages, smells, and colors  
Do not easily blend  
We wonder in these spaces  
Can we mix, fix, and belong

There are spaces that are not safe for us  
Where the scars are mental, physical, and emotional  
Where we are repeatedly reminded that we are  
Not good enough  
Surprisingly most of these voices are from those who love us  
And we must fight to stay in the game

And then there are spaces unexpectedly created  
Where equals are found  
Where safety forms and binding ties take shape  
dreams and chances can be explored  
“I have your back and you have mine”

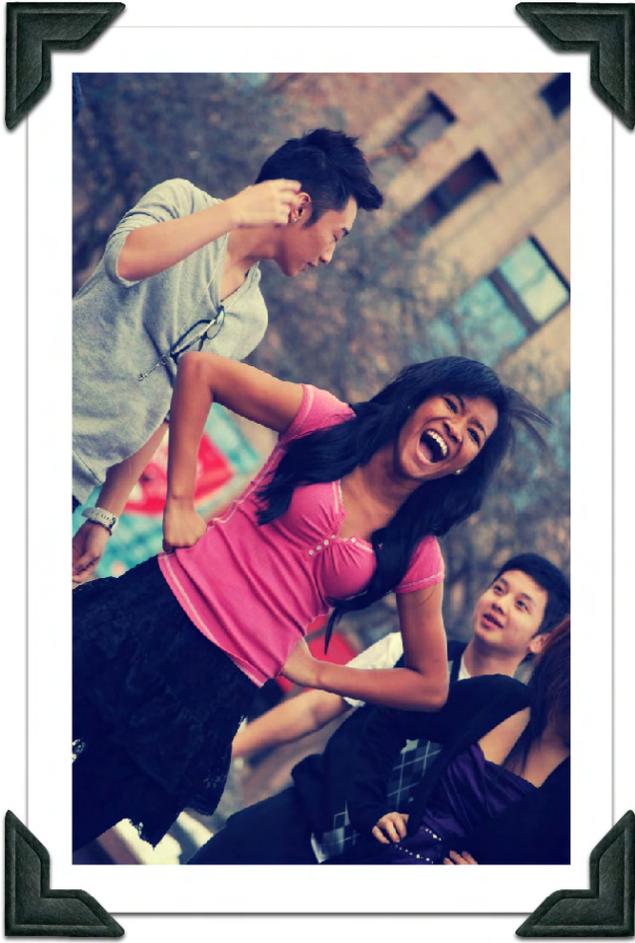
Yellow is the space we have created  
Out of all the spaces in our lives, this one we claim as our own  
Here we are safe and strong, fragile yet invincible  
We encourage and unconditionally support  
We sharpen each other towards our best  
Here is where we can be  
Here is where we belong; here is our home



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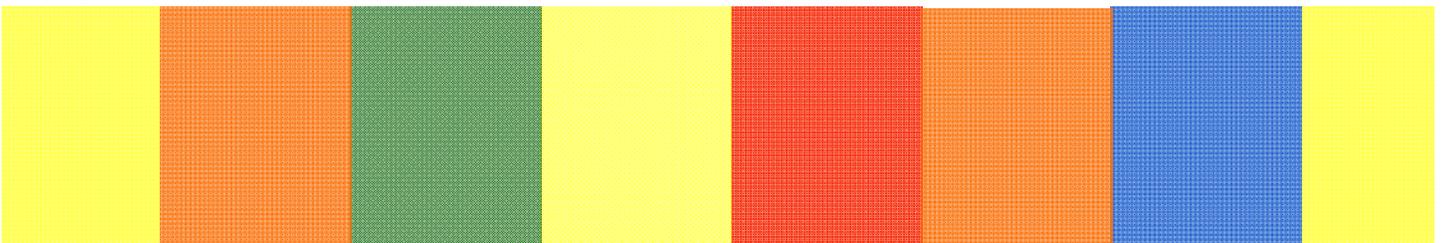
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# PREFACE

The Asian Pacific Youth Council (APYC) is a leadership program of the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans (Council), a state agency created by the legislature. The mission of the APYC is to be the voice of their generation. They want to take courage and speak up for and work on the issues that are impacting their peers and friends. A lofty goal and yet in the short time that I've worked with them, I've seen great results and change.

Asian American youth are awesome. It has been my pleasure to see them grow and accept this simple yet profound statement. I've worked with youth for the past 20 years. I've been a champion, mentor, organizer, advisor, critic, friend, and ear to many. They exude such innocent wisdom and hopefulness that when I work with them I do believe that indeed together we can change the world and improve the human condition.

The idea for this book started with a simple question: Where are the stories of Asian America youth among the vastness of American literature? Mixed into this query was the thirst to know more about themselves and a deep desire for others to know of them. Indeed, stories about them were far and few in between and rarer still were stories that were written by them. They realized that something was wrong for here they are, in America, living and breathing as Americans. And yet, their faces and stories were not a part of the images they saw every day in the media and or much less reflected back in the books and lesson plans they had in school, the place of learning and knowledge where they spent their days. They determined that if no one was going to write their stories then they would write them and share them with world. The results of their determination are held within this book.

Asian American Minnesotans are young with a median age of 24.5. In the Hmong community, the median age is 16. Over half of Hmong in Minneapolis and St. Paul are children. In my work with youth, I've spent time talking with them about how they can be successful in school and life. One of the subjects we kept on discussing over and over again revolved around resources. Students were in desperate need of resources that they could use to tell their stories to themselves and others. For example, messages produced by youth who looked like them and who had overcome the issues they are facing might be helpful in peer to peer mentoring and education.

Research shows that the most effective way to reach and influence youth is through messaging from other youth. Youth are willing and ready to talk to each other. They see the tough issues and are ready to tackle them. Often times, institutions, families, and communities do not know how or when to support them. So when youth speak out and tell of what they need, we best heed and help them in any way we can.

The APYC is a response to what we heard from youth. We called out for the best and brightest of this generation to come together to address the issues that will define their generation. I count myself lucky to have this opportunity to work with them. They've kept me young at heart and more informed about what moves their generation. And finally, I am happy to know them and am so enthusiastic for them. For in the work that they have produced, I have no doubt they will be the leaders for their generation.



Kao Ly Ilean Her  
Executive Director  
Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans

# Introduction

In today's world, some people observe and argue that Asian Americans youth are losing their voice and giving up their culture and replacing it with the standard-issued culture of western society. That they are giving up what makes them unique and blending in with the majority. From our experiences working together as the Asian Pacific Youth Council, we have seen otherwise. We value our Asian ancestry and want to preserve and learn as much as we can about it. At the same time, we embrace being Americans and everything in pop and youth culture. We believe that we can balance the duality of our cultural heritage.

Asian American youth realize that we are a minority - our race and ethnicity making us different. Our cultural heritage, religion, and home languages vary from the majority. All these things lead some Asian American youth to deny their ethnicity just to be a part of the majority; some wished they weren't even Asian at all. It would be so much easier to just learn, master, and speak English instead of English and Chinese, Hmong, Lao, Khmer or any other language that is spoken in our homes.

If given the chance to change our ethnicity; the majority of us would not change. It's a big part of who we are. To think about our ethnicity not being a part of who we are is incomprehensible. We are happy and well adjusted. We see the benefits outweighing any possible negatives and challenges faced or to be faced. We do encounter discrimination, but we don't let that stop or get us down. We would rather fight for the right and work to create places where we can flourish and be our whole selves.

The APYC is such a place and so is this book. In putting this book together, we sought to capture the experiences of Asian American teenagers. We asked APYC members to write about themselves and to share anything they wanted others to know about them. The stories they wrote went beyond our expectations! They are poignant, powerful, and in many ways similar demonstrating that we are not alone. Major themes are 1) the cultural expectation of parents for youth and the balancing act that must be created; 2) identity and self-discovery; 3) experiences of discrimination; and 4) the love of family and friends.

We realize that words are powerful and have the potential to either inflict great pain or bring about great things and change. Through our book, we have chosen to use words for good. Our book provides a small glimpse into the mind and reality of Asian American youth. Many other stories are not included. But we hope that our book will be received in the vein in which it was created: an honest and open telling of the many stories of our lives. Finally, we hope that our book will provide understanding and be a source of information for many on the lives and experiences of today's Asian American youth. May readers grow to understand, appreciate, and value the youth in their lives.

Happy reading,

The Editors,  
Alec Spencer, Calvin Her, Gao Ah Lee, & Joua Her





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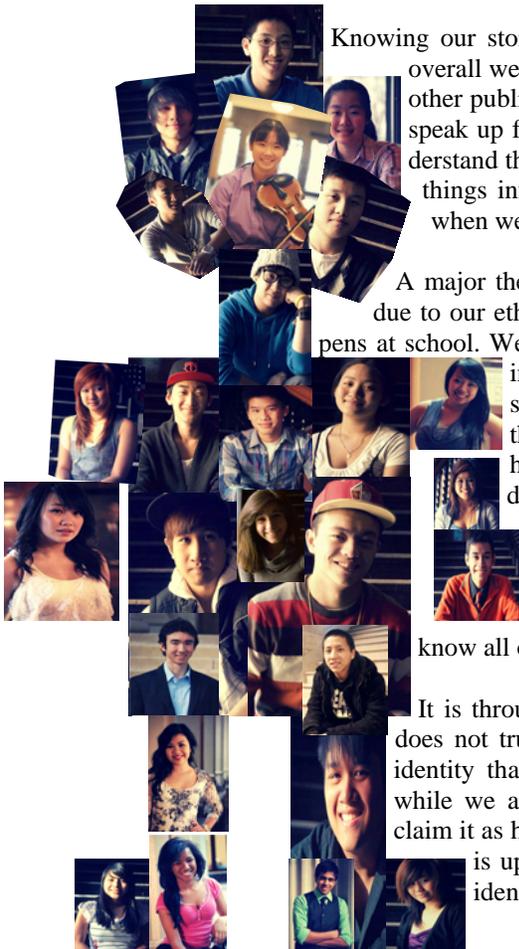


## The Asian American Teenagers' Experience

The term Asian American is a misnomer. It is neither Asian nor American. It is not Asian as there is no single Asian culture, country, or language. For example, everyone calls a pencil a lead pencil, but in fact it is not. The "lead" is in reality graphite. You call us Asian Americans, but we are not. Inside the "Asian" is an ethnicity complete with its own language, culture, history, religion, traditions and norms. And yet, in America this ethnicity disappears and everybody calls us "Asian." We are not "Americans" in the traditional and historical sense: our fathers are not the founding fathers of this country; we are immigrants, but we did not come through the Statute of Liberty; we were present during the Civil War, but we do not know which side our fathers were on; and finally, but not definitely, our image is not the image when the average, wholesome American is called to mind.

Our parents are those who immigrated here to the United States. They witnessed firsthand our culture in action at its original state. Most of us can only imagine with the aid of our parents' stories and the media how our native traditions were practiced. It is ironic how most of us really don't even know much about our "cultures." We can say that we are proud to be Asian, but as long as we don't truly take the time to get to know our stories, our parents' stories, and the stories of our ancestors, we really are not making efforts to enrich as well as immerse ourselves in our cultures.

There are some who deny and are full of bitterness towards their cultural heritage and try to claim others for their own. But they just don't know their stories enough to appreciate them. There are some who don't even know how they got to this country or why they are here. Without knowing our cultures and stories, we are often ashamed of who we are and do not want to answer questions about ourselves. We pretend to be someone we are not and isolate ourselves from family, friends, and those who would help us.



Knowing our stories help us build confidence and increases our self-esteem and overall wellbeing. We are proud to speak our native languages at school and other public spaces and to showcase our cultural knowledge with others. We speak up for our needs and help our communities be better places. We understand that our ethnicity is a part of us, but it's only one piece of us. Many things influence and shape our personhood. We can only love ourselves when we love and understand very aspect of who we are.

A major theme we hear from youth is that we have all faced discrimination due to our ethnicity in one form or another. And that most of the racism happens at school. We deal with this issue in our separate ways, some fight and others internalize. Either way we end up hurting ourselves so we find strength in numbers, some to do bad things, others to do good things. In our group, the Asian Pacific Youth Council (APYC), we have chosen to band together to do good. We acknowledge that discrimination happens and that we've been impacted. But discrimination is the result of fear and ignorance of others. And we believe we can make a difference. Asian American youth comes in all forms: smart, brilliant, athletic, happy, outgoing, struggling, sad, even mysterious. We wish that the world would get to know all of us.

It is through our experiences that we see that the term "Asian American" does not truly or accurately define us and must be transformed into a new identity that has real meaning and represents real experiences. And thus, while we are not thrilled with the term "Asian American" we nonetheless claim it as homage to the land of our ancestors and to the land of our future. It is up to us to breathe true meaning into these words and live out our identity.

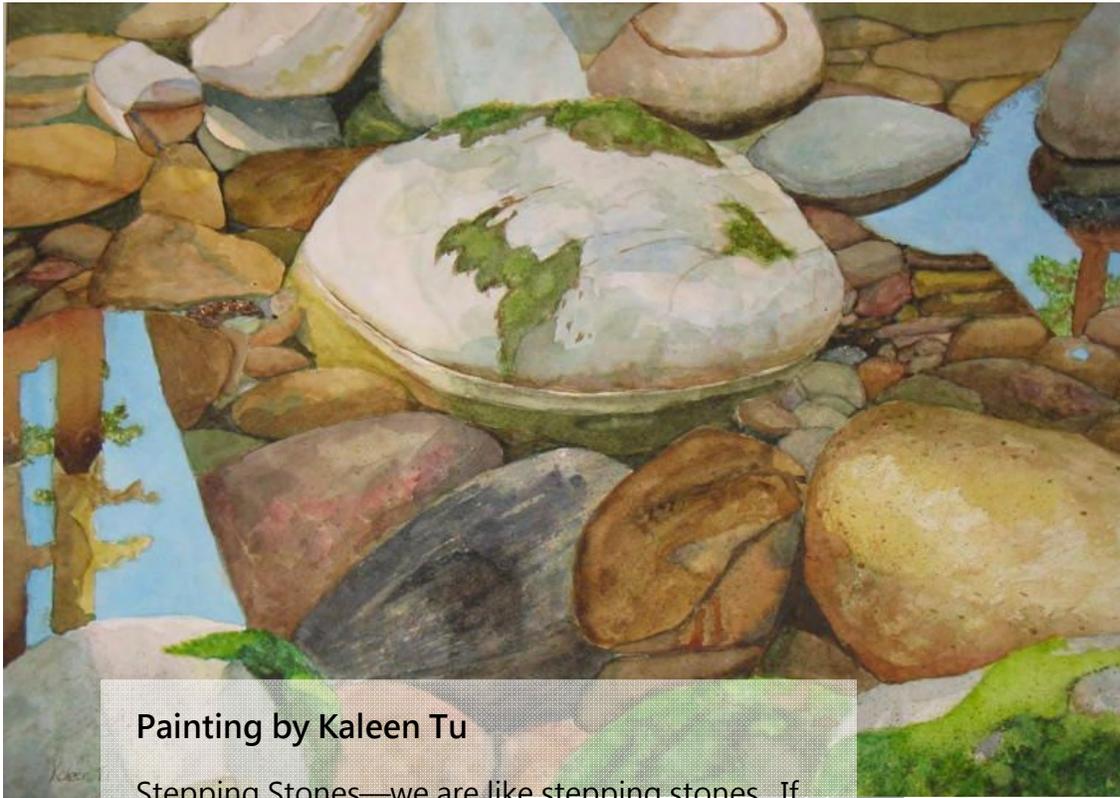


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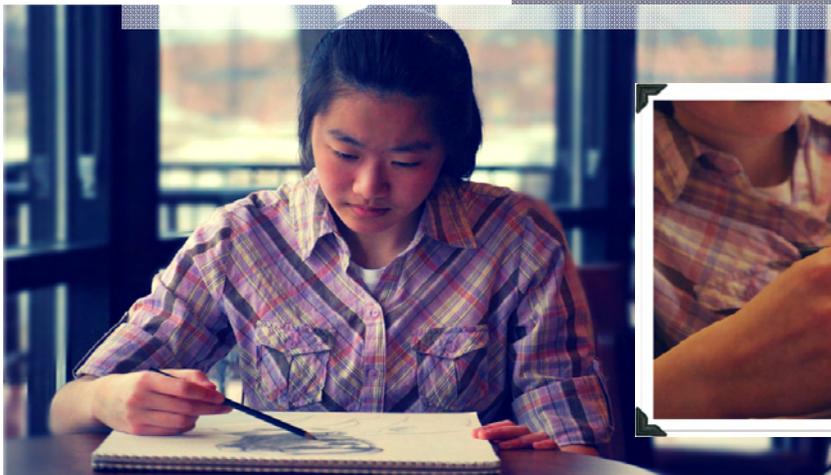


# Breathe *art...*



Painting by Kaleen Tu

Stepping Stones—we are like stepping stones. If we live our lives well and with intention we can help to build the path for others to follow. We have the ability to use our lives and experiences to help others figure out their lives. We all face struggles, but we don't have to face them alone. Together we can build a strong future and a strong community.





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# rom Us to You

I am from the famous and the fabulous, or so I like to call it, rice.

I am from the deep jungles of Thailand.

I am from a body of creation in which two people  
made me from the loving memories of moments.

I am from the bovine in location only; true descent from across the sea.

I am from the creativity of problem solving, maybe

I' ll be a mathematician or a regular teacher.

I am from the dance studio across the street from Arby' s.

I am from a world, a sleepless machine that doesn' t stop.

I am from a mother that digs too deep to see me not succeed.

I am from the land that seeks opportunity, to leave the  
mayhem and outright scrutiny.

I am from a world of mazes, I lost the right path.

I am the princess of a fairy tale long forgotten.

I am from the blood and tears of my grandpa' s generation.

I am from the academia in which every possibility is  
dreamt and growth of knowledge is like a tree

I am from all over the globe, a Multicultural world is what I live in.

I am from the generation that has the chance  
to live the dream and someday travel to London, Italy or France.

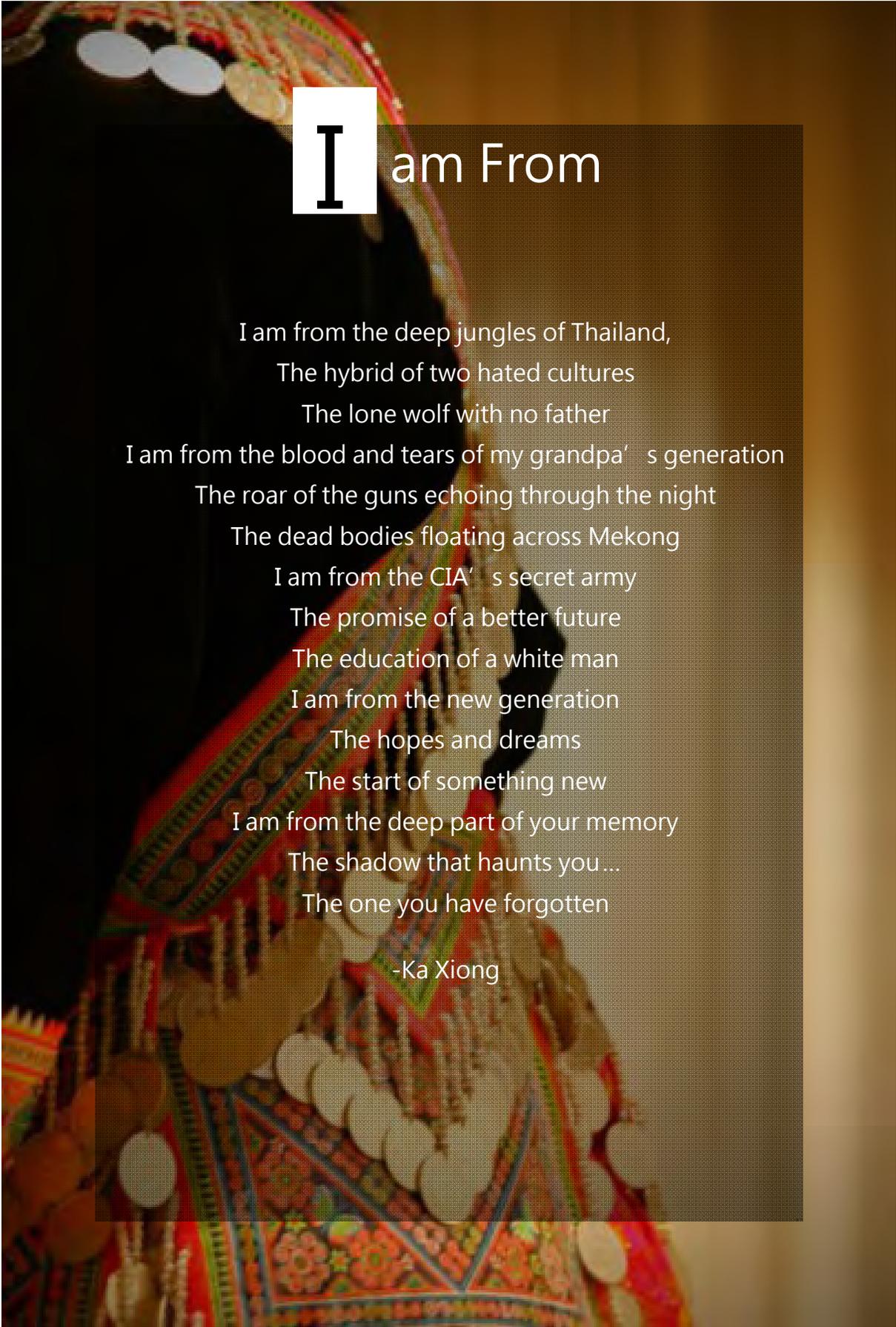
I am from a certain place hidden from the eyes of others,  
where imagination becomes reality.

I am from outer space like star lights.

I am from peace, so please don' t fight.

I am from the notes that stick in the heart and mind, rather  
than written on paper.

To really know where I am from...look into my heart.



# I am From

I am from the deep jungles of Thailand,  
The hybrid of two hated cultures  
The lone wolf with no father  
I am from the blood and tears of my grandpa' s generation  
The roar of the guns echoing through the night  
The dead bodies floating across Mekong  
I am from the CIA' s secret army  
The promise of a better future  
The education of a white man  
I am from the new generation  
The hopes and dreams  
The start of something new  
I am from the deep part of your memory  
The shadow that haunts you ...  
The one you have forgotten

-Ka Xiong



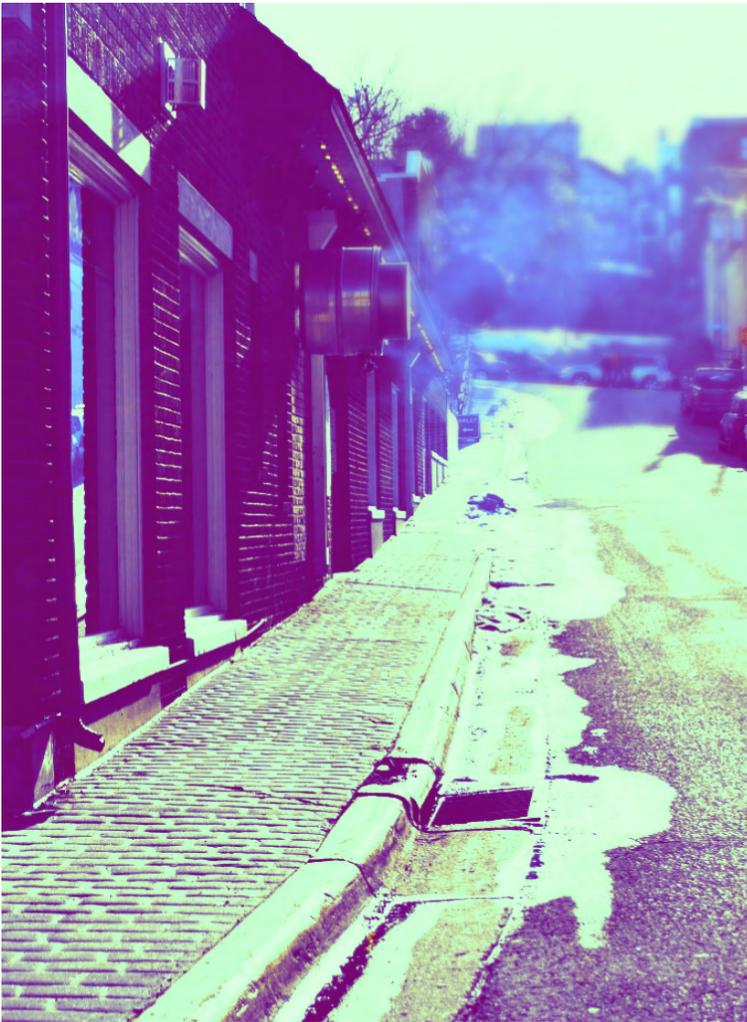
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# LETTERS





Dear Mom,

I hope that you know that I love you. In all that I've done, I've always kept you in the back of my mind. I know you think I'm rebellious, but I'm just trying to stay true to myself. I could never play the good Asian girl role not even to please you for a moment or a day. You get mad at me for the things I do. I won't lie to you, I choose to tell you the truth – I'm dying my hair yellow, going to school in California, acting in a play, dating someone who is not Asian. I know telling you these things hurt you, but I want you to know me, your real daughter. We are at that point where you are so fed up with me and my way of life that I fear you will give up on me. I hope you see that the strength I have to make these decisions, to live the life I've always dreamed of, stems from the love and lessons you've given me. Don't give up on me mom, I need you and your love more than ever.

-Your daughter

Dear Mom,

I just wanted to tell you that you're a great mother. You raised me right and I really appreciate your concerns for me. Yes, I don't know how it feels to lose a mother at a young age like you did. I don't know how it is to move from one place to another knowing that no one cared for me. I wouldn't know how to be independent and take responsibility as a parent at a young age. I don't know how it feels like to be you. What I do know is that you acted the way you did due to your childhood. It was not what you expected. You lost yourself because of what happened. Married someone that didn't love you, but it was a better decision than becoming a second wife.

I don't understand how you can stay with someone who doesn't love you back. You lost two daughters back in Laos because of the war and sickness. I know you look at that picture of my oldest sister and cry with no sounds on your bed. Mom, please know that even through all of this you can still learn to be a great mother, you made it this far, giving birth to all fifteen of us. Look how far we've reached because of you. Look at yourself, the person with no mother or father and look at what you've passed down to us. Never take anything for granted because in the end it will be special.

I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm sorry for not understanding. I'm sorry I don't know how it felt like to be you. I know you struggle everyday with this pain, but we simply ignore the signs. You put a smile on each and every day just to show that you are strong. I'm glad that you had me. I know all you want to hear is for me to say "I love you". I want to say it, but I'm so terrible at speaking in Hmong, you wouldn't understand me. I'm speaking for most of us children when I say it's hard for us physically to say these words because of the way we were raised.

So I write these words. I love you mommy, I really do. I want you to live a long time so you'll be able to see all your grandchildren. I want them to know how great of a mother you are. I don't want to ever lose you. I love you, I really do.

-Your Youngest Daughter

Dear Mom,

I hate sleeping in the same bed with you because you have such an annoying snore that it makes me want to cover my ears with a thousand ear plugs. But even so, I love you very much, and I wouldn't ask for any other woman with a horrible snoring habit. I want you to know that I appreciate everything you do for me and my siblings. You have worked so hard for so long for us children. I know it was a struggle for you to care for seven children all by yourself without dad's help. Mom, you've done a great job raising us all.

For years, you woke up every morning at 5am to take my older siblings to a school thirty minutes away from home. You dropped them off and picked them up every day because you wanted a better education for them. You worked two jobs to support us all. We couldn't have asked for a better mom. You went to the extremes to fill our happiness, Mom. Like you always said, you were both our mom and dad. Since dad wasn't able to play the father role in our lives, you were there. I want you to know that I am so happy that I was born into this world to such a great woman as you. I can't ask for any better person to be my mom. There is no other person in this world who will ever be able to replace you, ever.

I remember the day that my sister and I tried to teach you how to ride a two wheeled bike. It was an experience that changed the way I looked at mother and daughter relationships forever. That day, you learned how to balance and ride the bike all by yourself, but sadly you didn't know how to stop.



My sister was riding up from behind you and warned you that she was coming and for you not to be scared, but even so, you panicked and sent yourself flying in the air onto the ground. Even though the accident was awful; it was funny, it really was! And we laughed and laughed. I learned then, Mom that you can and you should rely on me as I've always relied on you.

Mom, I love you. I wish I was able to express to you how much I love you, miss you, need you, and how great it is to have you in my life. Mom, you truly are a wonderful person and I love you with all the love I've got in my heart.

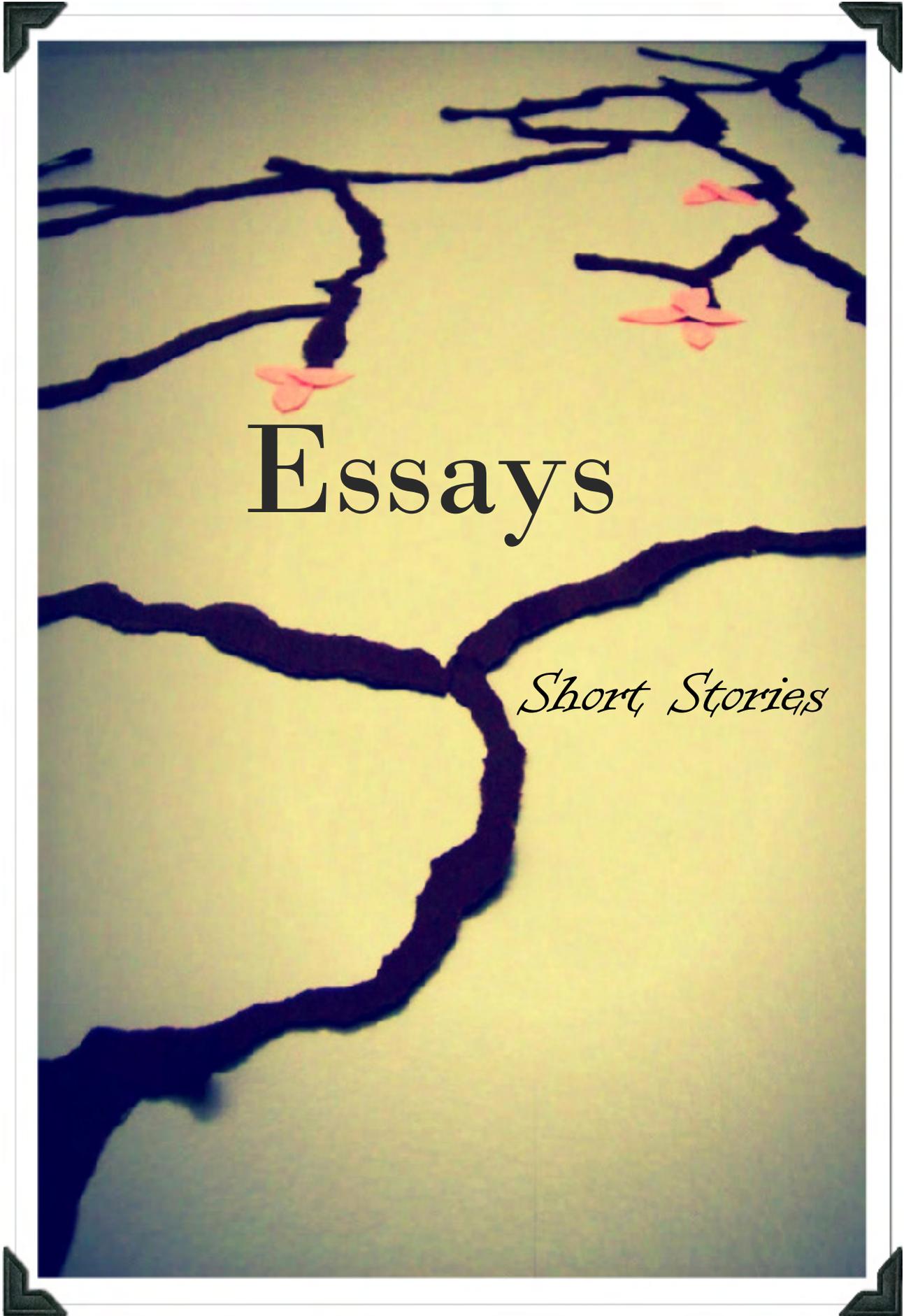
Your Daughter



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# Essays

*Short Stories*

# THIS I BELIEVE

Gao Ah Lee

My mother constantly asks, "If I don't live anymore how are you going to make a living, and who's going to love you?" My mother's questioning makes me wonder how my life would be like without her. And I have to be honest, I'm not sure how my life will be like without her. And I think that's her point, her own way of telling me to grow up and not take things for granted.

Everything I eat, everything I do, everything else I can think of, they always connect to my mother. Whenever she gets her checks, she gives me a certain amount of money. She says it makes her happy. She says she wants my life to be satisfying, she wants me to get what I want. She does so much for us kids, but sometimes I want to ask her what are the things that make her happy. She should do those things, and most important, take care of herself.

My mother pays for land around Minnesota and Wisconsin for gardening. She spends summer growing fruits and vegetables. She spends all her free time tending them. She says the garden is for us. The garden helps her save money on grocery bills so she can give more money to us. She doesn't care for herself. Right now she has back problems and she is still willing to forget about them and work on her garden all because she cares for us. That is how we usually get most of our fruits and vegetables not just because of hard work, because of a mother's loving care.



I used to yell at my mother to stop working so hard to give us money and to just spend more time with us. But then one day, my aunt revealed to me that for the Hmong people of my mother's generation, money was the most important thing in the world. And that to have money was to have life. She shared that during the war, the Hmong's way of life was disrupted and they couldn't farm or work so they never had money. Without money, many families couldn't buy food or the basic necessities to provide for their children. My mother witnessed many families losing their children. That was her generation.

From my mother's actions, I've learned that she would do anything to help her children make it through a rough day. She likes to put a smile on our faces and make us forget about the bad things that have happened. My mother does all the hard work and makes the tough decisions. She hates to discipline us and make us feel sad when all she wants is for us to be happy. Knowing this about her, I believe her when I say, disciplining hurts her more than it hurts us.

My mother does not tell me that she loves me. And I don't need her to tell me because every day I see her living out her love for me and my siblings by the things she does for us. A mother's love is strong, and she would risk everything in her life for her children. This I know because my mother shows me everyday.





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