AMERICA HAS ITS OWN GHOSTS

Guest: Kao Kalia Yang
Interviewer: Joshua Dolezal

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JD: Do you live in St. Paul?

KKY: We do.

JD: So, you're kind of right in the thick of things?

KKY: We are. I love this part of St. Paul that we live in. I grew up about a mile away from here, and I always thought growing up that I would leave this place forever whenever I had a job and could earn a little bit of money. But of course, as life would have it, sometimes we choose to return to the places that raise us to do the raising of our own families.

JD: Yeah. I've been curious − we didn't really get to this when we talked last − but I've been curious how much you identify now as a Midwesterner. Minnesota kind of wants to think of itself as the north sometimes, and sort of secede from the Midwest. Do you think of yourself as a Midwesterner?

KKY: I do. It is in the way I talk. Actually, I met a professor years ago, a linguist, and she knew a lot of Hmong folk, so I said, "Do I have a Hmong accent?" And she says to me, "No, but you do have an accent." And I waited for her, thinking she was going to say something very, very cool, and then she looked and she thought about it for a long time, and she says, "It's Minnesotan."

JD: So the Fargo type accent.

KKY: A little bit, I guess.

JD: There have been some discussions, the east coast and the west coast have been fairly indifferent to the Midwest and how it's defined, but in the Midwest we tend to argue about these things sometimes. I wonder how you define the Midwest.

KKY: The Midwest − how do I define the Midwest? For me, before it is anything else, it is home. As a writer from the Midwest, I know that many of the big issues of the land are hardly ever centered in the Midwest. We hear about the fashion of the coast, the food, the writing, the movies. Whenever I go places and I'm introduced as a Midwestern author, everybody does a double take. I think they do so because I am not what they think about when they think about writers from here. My very own life and my presence is a contradiction to people's understanding of what is essentially my home.

JD: Yeah. Do you think − your family −

KKY: Just so you know, I have a voice memo going on my cell phone as well.

JD: Go ahead.

KKY: I wanted to tell you I have a voice memo recording as well, so I can send that to you after our conversation.

JD: Okay, great. I was going to ask about that, and I did send the files to our sound engineer and he's said the voice memo was his preferred file, but if we have two that gives us some good options to work with. I guess while we're on that subject, because we're doing this remotely, I can't really hear your background as well as you can. So, if there's something like an ambulance siren that would be audible to someone with headphones on, I wouldn't be able to hear just through my laptop. Or, if an air conditioner kicks on or anything like that, I'm happy to just wait out some background noise like that. So, if you could kind of be my ears on that end, that would help a little bit with the sound quality.

KKY: Fantastic.

[Short discussion about coffee grinder in background and allowing extra room tone to be recorded at the end of the interview.]

JD: I think we were talking about the Midwest, and I was going to ask what you think some of the most significant changes to the Midwest have been during your lifetime. I would think of your family's story as one of those changes. I don't know if you think of others.

KKY: I was six years old when my family came to the Midwest. I am now 39. I've spent the bulk of my life here in the Midwest. Most of my imagery, most of what I know to be true have happened here. When I look across the street or even listen to the sounds of my neighborhood, I see all of the changes of my life happening around me. When we first came here, Hmong was this tiny population. We had very few storefronts, if any, and definitely no restaurants, no Hmong restaurants, when we came here. We shopped at what were called Oriental markets, and we ate at Vietnamese food places on the very special occasions when we could. When I got a little bit older, the sound and sights of this place shifted entirely. The Midwest is now home to a great deal of refugees from all over the world. From wars of the last 50 years. The Midwest, I think, not only has changed because of these newcomers, but the way the Midwest sees itself and identifies its town has also shifted. I grew up with Garrison Keillor being one of the best things to come forth from the Midwest, and here I'm talking specifically about Minnesota. These days, when we're talking about poets, we're talking about Danez Smith, but here in the Midwest I think we're beginning to see different nuances and layerings of flavors that have never been here before. All of the newspapers will say that Hmong farmers have introduced fruits and vegetables to the Midwest that nobody knew about twenty, thirty years ago. Varieties of eggplants, varieties of mustard, so not only are we changing the way the place looks − we are changing the way the place is fed. At Carleton College, my alma mater, most of the greens actually come from a cooperative of Hmong farmers. They're serving bok choy, they're serving Japanese eggplants, they're serving Thai basil leaves. It's incredible.

JD: How do you get seeds for those varieties? Were they brought with you? Are you able to get them through heirloom seed companies?

KKY: Josh, I love this question. This is something that I have always marvelled at. When we came to America, my mom slipped a few cilantro seeds into the suitcase. My aunts did the same to different varieties. Just a few, in the hopes that maybe they'll grow in new soil. Between my mom and my aunts alone, and this is just on my dad's side, there's like nine different women who brought seeds into the country. Just a few each. But our gardens have flowered because of that.

JD: Wow, that's beautiful.

KKY: Beautiful, but dangerous.

JD: I know from your website that you have a garden. What are some things you're growing in your garden now?

KKY: I'm growing some of the cilantro that came forth from those three seeds my mom crossed the ocean with. They do wonderfully for me, year after year. I am growing Hmong mustard greens. I'm growing varieties of flowers. Definitely cherry tomatoes. I'm a big fan of the special spicy relish dish that Hmong folk have been eating for centuries. Mashed up, grilled green onions, fresh cilantro, chili peppers, little bit of salt, and a little bit of MSG. Lots of that, and then this is where I'm very much the granddaughter of my grandmothers, and also my mom's daughter. We had these Hmong neighbors who had these beautiful plants. We call them earring plants. This past summer, the seeds were just falling down on the ground, so I picked up six. This spring, I planted them, and now I have three little seedlings planted in my lawn of these earring plants. Lots of cool things.

JD: I'm hungry just hearing about it. I wonder if we might back up a little bit. I think of your story as like one of these that was brought over and blossomed or flowered. I'm sure you've had to tell your immigration story to many people. What are some of the different versions that you tell, and where in time did those different versions begin?

KKY: When I was a child, and I was asked, "What are you?" and "Where are you from?" I used to say, "I'm Hmong." And then I perceived the confusion in the faces of the people asking. I'd say "Hmong. We're an ethnic minority. We don't have a home country. But I was born in Thailand." And then of course I had to explain the difference − the fact that I was born in Thailand and yet, not Thai, and that my mom and dad were born in Laos, but they were not Lao. And that my ancestors came from the lowlands of China, but we were not the Chinese. It got very confusing for a time. In the space of my life where I didn't talk much, it became enough to say when people said, "What is Hmong?" I'd just say, "It's a people. My cousin's name is Bruce Lee and his son's name is Brandon Lee." It was enough for the people on the other side. They would laugh, or they would nod, and the question would be done. Now that I'm an adult and now that I've written books about Hmong and where we come from and what we're doing here, my answers have taken on different nuances and different complexities, depending on the audience

that I'm with. For a high school audience, I think it's always so important when I talk about where the Hmong are from to talk about the Vietnam War. But of course, for most American students, the Vietnam War ended in 1975. It's incredibly important for me to point out that for my family, that war did not end until 1979. Until we crossed the raging Mekong River. It's incredibly important to remind them that even today, there are some 800 Hmong families in the jungles of Laos, fleeing from a war that the world has long declared over. There are so many different ways to tell the story, and each time I do it, it's because there's a particular kind of work that needs to be done. Whether I'm interrogating the history as it is written, or whether I'm doing a more literary, creative take on an explanation that people expect to be simple and direct and uncomplicated.

JD: There are so many ways we can talk about that story. The people, the history, the national conflicts that were part of that history. I want to come back to the Vietnam War and how that's taught and what is omitted from that history. But I wonder if we might start with your family and your grandparents in particular. They were all healers, or shamans. So, I'm curious what that Shamanic tradition meant to you as you were growing up.

KKY: Like most kids, I have at least four grandparents. But I've only ever known one. Both my maternal and paternal grandfathers died when my parents were just kids. My dad was two. My mother was eight. My mom's mom was left behind in Laos when my mother was sixteen, shortly after she met my father. She said she went on a walk with them, and that walk took her too far from home to return. Growing up, I only had the one grandma. But I know that all of my grandparents were shamans, quite respected. They were all healers. They were all medicine people. I come from a long line of healers. You don't just choose to become a shaman. Shamanism is a calling. In the cases of all four of my grandparents, they all got incredibly sick. Nothing else would do, so when they met with their shaman teachers, they were told that they had to become shamans. To become a shaman is a hard life. It is a life where you're communal property in so many ways. You respond to the needs of your community, whether people have money or not is not a consideration. If they're spirits need healing, if they're spirits are lost, if they're bodies need a calling. I come from healers, and I'm really proud of this fact. In many ways, I think I'm continuing that tradition here in America through my writing. I made a promise to myself, very very early on, that if I were going to use words at all, whether it's spoken or written, that I would use words to heal, not to hurt. It is too valuable of a gift to be spent that way.

JD: Your father is a gifted song poet. Do you see a relation between that shamanic tradition and his song poetry? This language of healing that you're describing?

KKY: I do. When my father sings, he doesn't write down his compositions. It comes from his heart. He says he stores them in his heart. When my father is singing, it feels to me as if he is a vessel for something else. Yes, it's my dad standing there. It is his voice that I recognize. But the places where the words come from feel much further to me than the space in between my father and myself. I think that is, as a writer and public speaker, I find in my best moments that is also true. When I'm working on the page, when I'm standing in front of a people, an audience

with no words before me, that the words I'm speaking come from a different place. That different place, I think is a birthplace of hope and of healing. That, I think, can only be in so many ways the land of the ancestors. The spiritual realms that we wander through and walk around.

JD: And you feel like you still have access to that.

KKY: Yes. Not all the time, but I can. I know how.

JD: Well, I think of you and your father, as you were saying, as forms that the Midwest takes now or contributors to the Midwest that have only recently been acknowledged and celebrated, perhaps, and I'm curious − for you and your family, what are some of the biggest misconceptions that people in the Midwest have had, or in the United States more broadly, about the Hmong community. I know you kind of waved this off with your Bruce Lee anecdote earlier, which is a joke that's really on whoever's asking the question, but what are some of those biggest misconceptions that people in the Midwest have of the Hmong community?

KKY: Growing up, I saw this documentary, and I still teach it whenever I teach anything related to the Hmong story. It's a documentary called *Becoming America*. It was made on the coast somewhere about Hmong refugees, new refugees entering into the country. At the end of this documentary, there is an anthropologist. And the anthropologist poses a question: Where will the Hmong be in 40 years? Something to this effect − when a small traditional, backwards group such as the Hmong meet up with the majority that is so much more technologically advanced and culturally, they will be wiped out. I teach that documentary some 40 years after its making. I teach it as a Hmong scholar, as a Hmong professor, as a Hmong writer. It is incredibly moving to me, because even 40 years after the fact, when we've proven our survival once again to the world, we are still so often cast in the light of the traditional. Traditional as backwards, without the positive connotations of that word. There is very little understanding, locally, nationally, internationally, that the Hmong is − there is very little understanding of our ability, of our understanding and aptitude for progress. We are an ethnic minority that have had to survive against a much more powerful mainstream in every single part of the world we have existed. We are now a population dispersed around the globe and yet, somehow without a country we remain intact as a people. Very few people are willing to look into that model of citizenship, that model of belonging, to see how such a thing can be possible without all these markers of power. I think people can see the power of the Hmong, the power of the Hmong identity, the power of an undocumented history. I love the deep, deep love we have for each other. For our tattered history. For our poverty.

JD: As you've said, Hmong history has been largely an undocumented history, and I know your writing has been driven by the need to fill that silence. At the very end of your first book, *The Latehomecomer*, in the epilogue, you're taking a drive with your father, and he's insisting or emphasizing the need for you to tell the story correctly. Would you mind reading a bit of that?

KKY: I would be delighted. "If my grandmother were alive, she would make herbal drinks for my father. She would call his sick spirit home with incense sticks, and an egg, and a chicken. If she were alive, she would be in the drive with us, sitting in the passenger seat. If she were alive, my

father would be driving, and I would be in the middle of the backseat, leaning in between Grandma and Daddy, chattering away. I would be like a kid still, but all that is a long time ago. I'm driving today. Daddy is tired. My grandma is no longer here to take care of my father. I do not know how to boil herbs, how to plant them, how to prepare them, how to have him drink them. But I look at my father and I see the fragility of love. I see the thinning hair, the heavy movements, the hesitance of approaching time. I miss my grandma today like I missed her yesterday and the day before. I miss that she isn't here to love my father with me. I close my eyes, miles away from my father now, and I see him sitting beside me in the Honda, the miles of open road before us. And I hear him telling me to slow down, to pace to long drive, and to add one more thing to this book I'd written. He says, "It is very important that you tell this part of our story. The Hmong came to America without a homeland. Even in the very beginning, we knew that we were looking for a home. Other people in moments of sadness and despair can look to a place in the world where they might belong. We are not like that. I knew that our chances here, a chance to share in a new palace, in a new home. This is so important to our story. You must think about it and tell it the way it is." I must tell it the way it is. It is over 30 years after the first Hmong families arrived in Minnesota in the winter of 1976. In a documentary of Hmong and their Minnesotan neighbors, the first Hmong man to come to Minnesota talked of how they'd seen the trees without leaves in the depths of cold winters. The American woman who welcomed them had explained the changing seasons. How trees without leaves would get all dressed up again in the warmth of summer. The group hadn't believed her. They thought it was the chemical rains, the government killing the people. All at one time. All over again. What happened to the Hmong happened before us and happened again after us. It is one group and then another. We were afraid. Now, we are beyond the fear. Today will be warm. The earth will heat up. The grass will stay green, and I wonder how many Hmong people will be buried as Americans today." That's from *The Latehomecomer.*

JD: That's beautiful. Thank you.

KKY: Thank you.

JD: After reading your memoir and feeling the healing power of that language, realizing that I'd missed this story − I've lived in Pella, Iowa, for a little over fifteen years now. I know there's a Hmong population here. I know them mostly through the farmer's market. That history was a silence for me, and your book helped fill it. I'm just wondering why it took me so long to hear that story, why you think American schools omit the Hmong story from the history of the Vietnam War, and maybe how you would teach that particular history differently.

KKY: The American school system cannot teach something that the American government has yet to make public. We were America's secret war. We were expected to be a secret war because the expectation was that we would all die in that hot, humid jungle. And that when the war was over, America would come back and life here would resume as if the Hmong had never lived. And yet against all odds, we are here. We are reading things that were never intended for us to read. We're living lives that were never intended for us. We are the unimagined in the land of the imagination here, the American imagination. It's not what I would teach, it's what I have

taught. In order to teach Hmong history, it's incredibly important to ask what other kinds of histories are not being taught in our schools. We don't learn very much about the history about the mentally and physically disabled in our school system. We don't learn very much about the Native American experience beyond the fact that this land was taken from them. If the history books were being honest, the horrific and tragic ways, we don't learn much about many other populations in America. History, as many have observed, and as it has been written, is oftentimes documented by the winners. The Hmong are not winners by any light. We've had a hard run across history and across time. Whenever I teach the Hmong, I have to situate the fact that it is a tradition in this country to omit and silence the history of many other people. Once that is established, I can go into the particulars of where I'm positioned in this particular history as a Hmong writer. Why has it taken so long? Because when you're beginning from so very little, it takes that long. I think about my own history. I was born at the tail end of '80 in a refugee camp. In a place where suicide was the number one cause of death. My family somehow made it out from that place with my life intact. It took me how many years to garner an education to learn how to speak English, to learn how to write in it? To garner the kind of academic pedigree where people might look at it once or twice? And then when that book came out, to be a writer from a community with so few writers? And then I had to somehow make my way through. I've been at this since I was 22, professionally pursuing the arts. The fact that you, Josh, are just beginning to learn about my work tells you how much further I have to get. The road is so very far. There are so few walking it, and in many ways we have to walk in different directions. Senator Mee Moua, the first elected Hmong senator in the U.S., it took her that long to become who she was, who she is. I think about Sophia Vuelo, who is the first female Hmong judge in the country, how long did it take her? And then of course, I'm doing the work in the writing landscape. The road is so very far, and it takes so very much to roll a boulder up a hill. A task before all of us.

JD: You mentioned the refugee camp where you were born. Suicide was the number one cause of death. I don't have a good way of asking this, but having escaped from the threat of death in the jungles of Laos, what was it in the refugee camps that led people to despair, having crossed the Mekong River, having seemingly succeeded in fleeing that imminent threat of death, what was it that caused so many people to take their own lives in a camp that was apparently designed to protect them?

KKY: Because the camp was never designed for so many. Early on, when the first refugees started flooding into the camp − this is all very recent. I just read a testimony from an American woman who had visited the camp for three months in 1980, just a few months before I was born. By the time my family came into the camp, the camp was overcrowded. The river of my youth was nothing more than a sewage canal. The camp was on more than 400 acres. There were 40,000 of us in that place. The schools were overcrowded. There was no medication to treat all the illnesses. The mental health, PTSD from the war. In a camp, you can't just leave. You can't walk freely. There are men with guns. Soldiers in fatigues watching you. When women and girls left the camp to forage for food because Hmong people got food only three days out of the week. So often, they came back with blood seeping in between their legs, hair in their faces,

crawling on the ground. Men and boys, some of them left and never returned. In that place beneath the hot sun, there were atrocities against my people. Not even I, a child, could close my eyes and forget. To unsee what I'd seen. To unknow what I knew to be true. In that place where there were still memories of our time before, our freedom, of wide open spaces and tall mountains, those people who remembered, who yearned for return, could not find a place out. Many chose death. Hard question. My mother had six miscarriages after me in the refugee camp because every time I looked at her, she gave me the food in her hands, the food in her mouth. She didn't have enough strength in her to nurture all those little babies to life. Some point in between all those miscarriages, my mom attempted suicide. I wrote a book recently, I co-edited a collection called *What God is Honored Here?* Writings on miscarriage and infant loss of native women and women of color. In there, I write my mother's story and my own. When I ask my mother for her story of miscarriage, I didn't expect to hear a story about how she tried to visit the children on the other side. My mom has seven living and seven dead now. Equal numbers in each world. I did not expect to hear the story about how she tried to kill herself. How she almost succeeded. That is a reality of a refugee camp. That is a reality of a place like that.

JD: It sounds more like a prison, or worse even than a prison.

KKY: In many ways, yes. Children were in there, so the elders could see the young ones suffer, running around in circles. Running to each other. My mom and my dad and my grandma, my aunts, uncles, they would tell me stories. All the time, as a child. I couldn't go to the schools because the schools were crowded. There are arbitrary rules. And because I couldn't reach over my head to touch either sides of my ears, even though I turned six in the camp, I couldn't go to school. So I sit around, and they would tell me stories. It took me so long to realize why. They wanted me to know that there was a world before the camp. They wanted me to begin to imagine a world after the camp. They did not want me to settle into the camp as the only place I would ever know to be my world.

JD: It was the second camp where your father would carry you to the tops of trees for the same purpose?

KKY: No, it was actually the first camp. Phanat Nikhom was where I believed I was followed by the spirit of a dead woman. That was a horrific time in my life. In Ban Vinai my dad, who is a song poet in the Hmong tradition, used to carry me to the tops of the trees so I could see a bigger world. A world beyond the barbed wire fence and the men with the guns. Beyond the hunger and the hungry dogs. My father, he would carry me on top of his shoulder. There were no bikes or anything like that. I would ride around the camp on his shoulders. We would walk beneath the trees and the sun would shine from its place in the sky, filter through the leaves, and it would dance on my skin. My dad used to point to my arms and tell me, "The sun is dancing on your skin because it loves you so very much." Every time there was a litter of puppies being born, my father would say, "Do you know why they can't open their eyes?" And I'd say, "Why?" He'd go, "It's because your world is so bright, sweetheart." My dad kept on

saying I was not a child of poverty, war, and despair. I was hope being born. I would become the captain to a more beautiful future.

JD: As a parent myself, I can't imagine the courage and resilience it took for him to keep that hope alive for you.

KKY: That is one of the blessings of many when I chose − in Hmong we choose our parents. Before babies are born, they live in the sky but the fly among the clouds. We could see the course of rivers and the trajectory of the mountains. Evidently I saw a young man and young woman walking without shoes in the hot jungles of Laos and I chose to come down to them. When I came down, I think I came down, as my mom and dad would say, into an ocean of love so big that my hands would never touch the sides. So deep that my feet would never touch the bottom.

JD: That's really beautiful. So you went to another camp, which was the transition camp before you came to America. And the kind of safety that your father had helped you feel in the first camp, the sort of cocoon he kept around you seemed to be a little more shaken there. You saw a woman die and that seemed to really give you a fear of death yourself. Can you tell me how that happened?

KKY: I'd seen death before in the refugee camp. As a child, one of my good friends was a younger child and she died. She was a neighboring child. We lived in a longhouse, so we shared the same kitchen, just slept in different rooms. I saw her body after she died. This girl who the day before had just been playing with me, the day after she was all powdered up in a fancy dress against the eastern wall of the longhouse and people were weeping for her. The drums of the dead were being beat. Death was nothing new to me. But in Phanat Nikhom, transition camp to America, we had just left parts of my family behind. I knew that we were leaving each other after that place. But one of my uncles got sick in that place, so we went to the hospital to visit him. Beside him, there was an old woman, and she was stretched out on the bed. I remember her because every time we went, there was the sound of flies. All her intestines were out, it was in some sort of plastic covering. And the flies would buzz around her day and night. When my uncle got better and came home, we heard that she had died. I wanted to see her dead body. She hadn't looked alive to me, even in the hospital, so I wanted to see her dead body. I remember the funeral hut was this open hut with doorways, no doors, doorways in between. My older cousins and my older sister − I was the youngest in the group − we decided we would go and peek. In the Hmong culture, we believe that if you die before the body of a dead person, that the dead person can have your soul and spirit forever. We were all kind of afraid. I think I was the most afraid. But it was my turn. I was the last one to go up to the hut to take a good look at her. I was looking when they called my name. I was down by the side of this body, the shadow of a body on the table. She seemed so big, and I was still absorbing it all in. I heard my name being called so I ran. I didn't see the rock in my way, so I came tumbling down. That night, with this big secret inside me, when everybody in my family was asleep, we had these longhouses where each family had a sleeping part. They were separated by billowing sheets. I saw her standing beside the doorway, by the sheet, staring at me, nearly as tall as the

ceiling. That became my big fear, and my big fear of the dark. My big fear of everything else. For most of those six months, I could not sleep. I lost all ability to sleep during the night. I'd stay up all night, watching out for her, watching out for me. There were nights that my dad, in his infinite love, he would take me outside so we could sleep beneath the stars because I was afraid of the dark. In the openness, there were these big searchlights the camp had installed. We'd sleep underneath them and it was too hot to have a blanket or a sheet, so we'd stare up at the stars together. Countless nights. I could feel the imprint of the rocks in my back. But of course the softness of my father's arm. Lots of horror and lots of beauty mixed together in that place.

JD: Those memories sound so vivid. Do those fears haunt you now? Or have you moved beyond them?

KKY: I've moved with them, Josh. I don't know that you move beyond things. I think I've moved with them, much more gracefully because I've had practice. I wish I could tell you I lived a life that wasn't haunted, but that would not be honest to the Hmong story or to my own. America has its own ghosts. Now she is one of many ghosts. And if it's possible, I think the ghosts check each other as much as they check me. In some ways, the fear is more tracked than it's been in the past. But my grandma, she was a shaman, and she always said to me, "You are gonna make your life because of your faith, not your fears." I've tried to live in the power of those words. Now as a mother, I say to my daughter all the time when she's afraid, "There's so much to be afraid of, but I want you to know something." And she looks up at me and she goes, "What?" And I say, "Everything that you're afraid of is nothing compared to my love for you."

JD: Those are great words to live by. I hope she'll remember them as vividly as you remember your grandmother's words.

KKY: I think she will. I have a feeling she will.

JD: As a parent myself, I don't know how many of those things will stick later on, but we do our best to plant those seeds.

KKY: My dad was on his deathbed and I looked at him and said, "Daddy, I love you so much." And he goes, "And you will. You're gonna love me long after I die. You're gonna love me until the moment you die." I find that very comforting. That yes, we are their parents when we're alive, but even when we're done, so long as they're alive, our parenting continues and our love goes on.

JD: Your family was able to get on a plane and fly first to California and then to Minnesota. And you settled in the McDonough housing project in St. Paul. Can you tell me what was especially difficult about those early days adjusting to Minnesota?

KKY: I remember so clearly the first night of our arrival. July 7, 1987. Everybody said Minnesota would be cold, Josh. I was prepared for a cold Minnesota. But I remember walking out of the airport and feeling the blast of humidity and heat hitting me. My cousin and his wife who came to pick us up, they didn't have air conditioning in their car. They had all the windows open, and

when we were driving back to the McDonough housing project they were living. There wasn't enough room, so I sat in front of my cousin's wife, in between her legs. We were afraid of the cops. She said it was illegal, that kids couldn't sit in a car in America without a carseat. So I was ducking my head up and down, but her window was open and I remember all the lights along the highway. And because I came to America with a fear of the dark inside of me, I thought, "Oh my god, this is it. Follow the lights and I'll never get lost in America." And I thought, "Oh, this is so delicious." Here I am, having my first feast of American wind, and nobody knows it. I'm swallowing wind like crazy, like nobody knows, and nobody cares, but I'm going to remember this forever. That night was incredibly magical. It was dark. I couldn't see the houses along the highway with the picket fences, I couldn't see anything. And all of a sudden we arrived at this place where all the buildings looked alike. And in this way the McDonough housing project was not so different from the refugee camps of my past, that all the houses looked the same. It wasn't until that fall when I first began school that I could see everything. The bus that picked us up also picked up other kids outside of the McDonough housing project. I saw the houses and I saw some of those houses had yards. And then in school, I saw that me and all the other refugee kids were in the same classes, regardless of our age. When all the other kids went to classes with people their age. And then in the lunchroom I saw we were all in the free lunch line, and everybody else had lunches they brought from home, or they were paying for their lunches with money or something else. But not us. The differences of America began hitting me really hard. When you come from a place where everybody's poor and then all of a sudden class becomes a real thing. We shop from the church basements, so the clothes never quite fit right, and they never were really what we wanted to wear. They were what other kids had wanted to wear before us maybe. But all the things started crashing in on me. Everything I think in America comes down to one single moment. I'm in the lunchroom. We're having french toast sticks, and we're dipping sausage patties into syrup. It is incredible, okay? Since you are a kid from the refugee camps, it's an incredibly sweet lunch. And I'm eating and eating and relishing it. And then I notice the whole table quieting around me. And I notice all the other kids looking at me. And I notice that some of the other kids start mimicking me, the way I'm eating. And halfway through, because I'm not a dumb kid, I see they're making fun of me because I'm eating with my mouth open. All of my life, I've only always been taught to eat. And all of a sudden I knew that the thing I had been taught was not enough for America. I start crying. All these tears start falling, and I can't control them. I'm super stubborn, and I'm not gonna stop. I'm not gonna stop eating and do what they want me to do. Because they think it's good for me. Because whether they mean to or not, they're saying that the way I have been taught to eat is not good enough for this country. I'm crying, I'm stuffing myself, and I start choking. And the adults intervene, and I'm in the principal's office with the interpreter, and they're asking me what's wrong. And I tell the interpreter, this small man who was like my dad's age, and he was as scared to be in there as I was, and I tell him what's wrong. He looks at me, and he tells me, "You're going to have to learn how to do things like other people here in order to survive." Oh, and I remember in my heart, the birth of defiance. I'm never gonna do everything the way that other people want me to do them, simply to survive. I would do something more than survive here in America. That moment I remember so very clearly.

JD: Wow. That takes me back to elementary school, certainly. A very different experience. I wore homemade clothes to school, and had some feelings of marginality from that, but that's much more intense, certainly. One story from your first book is how in those early days of the McDonough housing project, your family would sometimes gather at your uncle's house to watch professional wrestling. I'm curious how that came about and maybe what you learned about American culture from watching Hulk Hogan and Rick Flair.

KKY: Yes. The WWF matches. When we came to America, our cousins before us − that was what they were excited about. This was the late '80s. Hulk Hogan was supreme and Rick Flair was the villain. The good and the bad battling it out before a cheering audience. The bad guys would cheat and cheat and cheat, and sometimes the refs would pretend that they hadn't seen it. Or they would look at it and openly support it. Oh, we felt those injustices so keenly. I think my family was so into wrestling because for us, it mirrored so much of what was going on in our lives and the very real worlds that we were living in. Where life was hardly ever fair, and sometimes justice looked at it, and justice looked away. Somehow we still had to win. Somehow we still had to believe, believe in the goodness. For years and years my family would gather and cheer on the good guys, and we'd be so sad and despondent when things didn't go well, when there was the hurting and the cheating and the lying going on. But we cheered them on anyway because we felt it was the least we could do. Cheer on the good guys. For years, that was our main entertainment. The basis of so many family gatherings.

JD: And it was a metaphor, essentially, for the adversity you felt you were going through as a child and your parents as adults building new lives together.

KKY: Yes. It was a metaphor. But also a metaphor we could share together. This tiny little twenty inch TV propped on a table. You can begin to imagine a housing project where everybody is sitting on the floor. The adults sitting sometimes in chairs along the walls. Because I was among the youngest, my cousins and I, nieces and nephews, would sit underneath the dining table on the other end of the wall, looking towards this TV in our little house, watching with everybody else. Our little house inside the little house, if you will.

JD: That's delightful. So that was in the projects, and then you moved briefly to a government subsidized house where you met another of your ghosts. Is that right?

KKY: Yes. 1259 North St. Elbin Street. Not too far from Como Lake and Como Zoo. One of my favorite places on earth actually, Como Zoo. But in that house there was a little ghost boy who I met several times. Even when I couldn't see him, I could hear him falling down the steps from the attic. A bump at a time. Our time there was fraught as well. This little 1950s bungalow. Cute, quiet. Our first house with a yard, a fenced in yard. But of course, it was a house that many people had lived in before us, and had seen other things before us. People who moved in after would also see different things and would also move out as well. So haunted houses in America, I could go on about that for a long time.

JD: The family before you left an envelope with one hundred dollars in it as an offering of sorts?

KKY: When my mom and dad were cleaning out the house before we moved in, they found one hundred dollars in a white envelope tucked into the very last stair, underneath the carpeting of the very last stair from the attic. When they told us this, we took it as a gift. And so we ordered pizza, and we had a party. Then when we moved in and we went to bed late at night, I would hear this thump, thump, thump down the attic stairs every single night. I'd ask the people around me and they'd hear it too, but there was always some practical explanation until things quickly got out of hand.

JD: And you start actually seeing this little boy?

KKY: I did. The first time, I ran into the mom and dad's bedroom to get a diaper for the younger kids. Both my mom and dad were working at a factory at this point in our lives on the night shift for the nominal increase in wages, so every day after school my older sister and I would take care of the kids. There were, at the time, three little ones. One night I ran in to get a diaper, and I turned around, and in the doorway there was a little boy, about four or five, and bigger than my brother was at the time, in a striped t-shirt. He ran into the closet when he saw me staring at him. I ran out and said I'd seen something. I was convinced that it was a trick of the light, or maybe it was just my eyes until my sister saw the same thing. Because she's braver than I am, she ran into the closet and looked for him and found nothing. Eventually, my father had an encounter with the boy. One night, my cousins were sleeping over. We were watching Chinese dramas dubbed in Thai in the living room. My dad was asleep, not quite asleep yet when he looked and saw a boy standing in the doorway. He said he saw the boy merge with the shadows on the wall, and then the boy was all of a sudden beside him. My father said the boy reached out his tiny hands, grabbed my father's arm, and my father could feel a coldness seeping through. He knew that if the coldness got to his heart, that his heart would stop beating. He tried to scream for us, but he couldn't. With his free arm, my father grabbed the little boy, felt that it was just a little boy's arm, so my father snapped it, felt a break, and the little boy danced on quick feet and ran into the halls. My father got up and searched, and there was nothing. When he came out, we were all watching Chinese dramas still, and he said, "Did you not hear me yell for you?" Of course, nobody heard him. That's how we knew the house was indeed very haunted, and that the force in the house wasn't just a presence sharing the space. In fact, it wanted to hurt us.

JD: So, your family moved into the home that was − I think the next house was your home through college. Is that correct?

KKY: Before that house we moved to a very tiny two bedroom apartment. It was very hard to find − with a family our size − it was very hard to find an apartment building that would allow all of us to live in there. It was a Hmong-owned apartment. We lived there for about six months until my mom and dad found a house that looked like it was from *Little House on the Prairie*. It was built in 1895. It had 2.5 bedrooms. It was 900 square feet. There wasn't a basement. There was a dugout earth room underneath the house, a tiny little room. $36,500. We lived in that house until I graduated from college, yes.

JD: So, in your memoir you describe that house both as a kind of Laura Ingles Wilder house and also as the exact phrase in your book is “the moldy house.” I think you might even have a chapter with that title. How did that particular house come to mean such opposite things for you? Did one of those views of the house become more dominant than the other, or did you feel them simultaneously?

KKY: When we moved into that house, it was the first piece of Americana we’d ever bought. My sister, who was then just a teenager, negotiated the house for my mom and dad. She was this kid, she’s now a lawyer, but long before she even knew what the word lawyer was, that was the work that she was doing to keep up alive in America. It was incredibly special. It was cute. But it was an old house with moldy walls and bad heating. In that house, we were sick the entire time. No matter how much my parents scrubbed with bleach, no matter how many layers of paint they applied, the mold grew wild on its walls like paintings. It was a house that on the outside looked so very charming, and on the inside was just rotting away. That was our life for all of those years we lived in that house. Always sick, perpetually sick.

JD: What you’re describing sounds similar to an idea from James Welch’s *Fools Crow*. The titular character describes his experience of happiness as a happiness that sleeps with sadness. It sounds like that was an apt description of your experience in that house.

KKY: Yes. It’s also site of so many of the fonder memories of my siblings. In fact, there’s a huge old tree in front of the house, and one of them found out what type of tree that was and she had that tattooed on her hand because her memories in that house were so beautiful.

JD: It was in that house that you were struggling through primary school initially −

KKY: Middle school, yeah. High school, and then college.

JD: Okay. Backing up to primary school there for a bit − you really struggled to speak English, not that you didn’t understand it − you read perfectly well. You were, even at a young age, gifted as a writer. Why was speaking English so hard for you in your early years, and what was different about reading and writing versus the spoken word for you at that age?

KKY: In the beginning, it was just fine. I was a kid, and learning. I was in school for the first time so I was already hungry to learn, and I understood the importance of the things that I was learning. I was doing well. But one day, my mom and I, it was a year after we came to America, we went to K-Mart to look for light bulbs because one day the light bulbs in the bathroom started flickering. My mother, who was then only 25, 26, went up to the desk because we didn’t know where the light bulbs were. She asked the clerk, “Where are the things that make the world shiny?” She kept on pointing up to the ceiling. My mother, of course, spoke with a thick accent, and the clerk started tapping on the counter. The faster the tapping, the harder it became for my mother to speak. My mother is brave and my mother is courageous, so she pushes through. My father had said when the bombs are falling in Laos, because Laos is the most heavily bombed nation in the world, only the world didn’t know it. For 8 years, American bombs rained on Laos every seven minutes, twenty-four hours a day. My mom and dad both grew up in the most

heavily bombed province of all. My dad would say the bombs would fall, and my mom would walk her chin parallel to the ground when old men and women were scrambling to find safety. My incredibly brave mother asked where the things were that made the world shiny. The clerk walks away. We think the clerk is going to come back, so we're waiting. I knew the word for light bulb, but I was so young. I didn't have the courage to say. So I waited with my mother, thinking she had done a good enough job. Fifteen minutes ticked away on the clock, and she didn't come back. The clerk didn't come back. My mom, I looked at her, and her head was bowed. I could tell she was ashamed, in front of me. I decided I was no longer going to speak this language. This language that did not need my mother or my father. That didn't need me either. That if the world we lived in no longer needed to hear what my mom and dad had to say, then it no longer would hear anything I had to say. The next day, I stopped talking. At first, it was a great revolution. Somewhere along the way, I realized the revolution was against me. I caved underneath all that pressure. I became a selective mute in my files all the way through until I became a professional writer. In college, I started whispering. In graduate school, it was a little over a whisper every time I had to speak. But it wasn't until April 10, 2008 when *The Latehomecomer* came out when I actually spoke to be heard for the very first time in a great long time.

JD: Wow. As you were describing your very early years in the first refugee camp, your family was telling you stories and you absorbed that history and these rich narratives from the earliest age, which I think would be part of how a writer is made. Would you say your silence as a child also contributed to that growth as a writer?

KKY: Yes. The fact that I didn't talk – the fact that I was so silent – made me a better listener. Now when you don't talk and you try and hear other quiet people talk, the first thing that teachers will say is, "Speak louder." Early in my life I realized a person could control the volume of their listening, not just the volume of their voice. That, I think, was formative for me, that understanding that you can turn on your attention. That you can turn on your hearing. That is wasn't just always about the voice. I learned stories long before I learned how to read. But growing up as a poor kid, one of the things I had access to was the library. First, the bookmobile that visited the McDonough housing project, and then the public library. My sister and I, on our very special days, my dad would take us to the libraries and we would check out all of these books. My older sister became the human VCR. She would hold up these books and tell me movies and quotations from the images in the books. Movies that somehow spoke to our lives and the lives that we'd seen on the old Chinese dramas from the camp and other places. Books are my friends. I learned how to read, how to love stories. All of those moments when I had no friends in the playground, all the other kids were playing, but I was too shy and quiet to play with anyone. I would create stories to be my friend. I used to look at my palms and pretend to be really dizzy and engaging in the lines so the teachers wouldn't think I was lonely or bored. I learned how to read palms that way. I would pick up rocks and leaves and examine them. Be really really focused on that so the other kids didn't see my fast and incredible yearning to be among them. I think all of that is the making of this writer.

JD: When you started speaking to be heard, we think of part of how you come of age as a writer is you find your voice. So that was a very literal kind of thing for you - finding your voice audibly to speak to be heard. But we also use that term figuratively to speak of the presence on the page and rhythms of sentences and that distinctive sound that a unique band has. I wonder if you think your writing voice echoes your native Hmong language even thought you write primarily in English.

KKY: Yes, definitely. When a Hmong reader reads me, they'll say, "It's in English, but it feels so Hmong." Ya know. The way I feel the world, the way I see it, the way I first encounter is very much through a Hmong lens. I saw the world first through my father's shoulders. My first pillow was my mother's arms, her breasts, and they are still my teachers in the world that I live in. My metaphors are close to the ground because I'm a short human being. I look at the growing things, the things that I can see around me. These things all shape who I am as a human being. Positionality is key. We write from where we're positioned. I'm a very soft-spoken person. The Hmong language itself is very tonal. Every breath that we breathe into the world carries meaning. My awareness of breath on the page is not very American at all. How I control the length of my sentences, for example, is very Hmong. And then of course, because I'm a Hmong child educated in the American school system, I've learned things. Mel Gibson when he was still Hamlet, before he became a bigot and an adulterer, he said, "Every good actor would be great if they understood words dictate breath. Breath dictates emotions." So true. He put words to what I understood on the page. Words dictate breath. Breath dictates emotions. How far is the wind inside of me? How much sailing do I want you to do before you land? This is not a traditional western kind of awareness. But it is what I do, and I do this because I am Hmong first.

JD: Fantastic. I just wanted to say we're about halfway through. Is it okay if we power ahead, or do we need to take a break for a little bit?

KKY: No, we can power ahead.

JD: Okay. We're talking about how you became a writer, and it sounds like there's a really formative turning point for you in high school with a teacher, Mrs. Gallentin. One teacher in high school seemed to see your promise as a writer. I wonder if you might tell us about Mrs. Gallentin and your essay on *Romeo and Juliet*?

KKY: Mrs. Gallentin had a really red face. Mrs. Gallentin either laughed or she yelled. My older sister had Mrs. Gallentin and she says, "Mrs. Gallentin doesn't like high school girls with a lot of eyeliners. I had on too much eyeliner. You shouldn't wear any." And so that's how I went into Mrs. Gallentin's class. I sat in the front so I wouldn't fall asleep because I didn't talk. And Mrs. Gallentin, I think, at first paid attention to me because of my handwriting. I spent hours learning how to do cursive, and I modeled my handwriting because of the people who signed the American Constitution. In American history, I spent all my time practicing how to write like the people who signed the Constitution. I had a very flowy, elaborate handwriting, and in order to understand my responses to her tests, Mrs. Gallentin really had to read my handwriting carefully. I think that was how she first became aware of my presence on the page. Mrs.

Gallentin one day had us read *Romeo and Juliet*, and she had us answer a question: “Is *Romeo and Juliet* the story of love or lust?” I was a freshman in high school. I had no experience with love. I couldn’t think of anything to write, so I pondered for hours. In the early morning hours, I wrote an essay about my mom and my dad. I wrote and I’ll read from the book. I said, “It took me all night long to think about the essay. I had no personal experience with love or lust. Some of my friends said they were in love, but I was not convinced. The phone conversations they had with their boyfriends were mostly just listening to each other’s breathing. After many false beginnings, I wrote about what mattered to me. I wrote about the love I felt I knew. Love was the reason my mother and father stick together in a hard life when they might each have had an easier one apart. Love is the reason you choose a life with someone, that you don’t turn back although your heart cries and sometimes your children see you cry and you wish out loud that things were easier. Love is getting up each day and fighting the same fight only to sleep at night in the same bed, beside the same person. Because long ago, when you were younger and did not see so clearly, you had chosen them. I wrote that I would never know if Romeo and Juliet really loved, because they never had the chance. I asserted that love only happened in life, not in literature, because life is more complex. As soon as I wrote the essay, I started worrying about it. What if she didn’t like it? What if she didn’t agree? What if I had it all wrong? That was my first understanding of how writing worked. How I mattered to the writer, personally. That day, I turned in the essay, and later Mrs. Gallentin caught me in the hall, and she said I had a talent for literature. And of course, I didn’t know what she meant, but it made me happy to hear her say this. Mrs. Gallentin said I would do well in college because college is all about good reading and good writing. And I think that gave me a kind of confidence for the next chapters of my life.”

JD: I love that story about your essay. It seemed, like many other chapters in your life, there was this encouraging experience or a breakthrough or a turning point like that, but you also, during high school, experienced some real setbacks. One of them was a kind of mysterious illness, so I wonder if you might read a little from your memoir about that frightening time.

KKY: Yes. In high school, all of a sudden I got quite sick. I’ll read from that part. “A new chapter of our lives unfolded as we strived to become Americans. We sank our roots deep into the land, took stake in the ground, and prayed to the moon that one day the wind would carry us away from our old, moldy house into a new, stronger home that could not be taken away. That would not fall down on us. That would hold us safe and warm. Grandma and the uncles from California came to live with us in Minnesota. I felt called in the larger context of being Hmong. We were only one family of over 200,000 that lived in America. We all came from the same history. I heard our stories and our poverty and our cause. I was only in high school, and there was very little I could do. My father tried to soothe my impatient heart. He said, “Patience is the slow road to success.” My father was a poet and had a poet’s heart. He carried love songs about the falling apart of a country. He made music of the loneliness of Thailand. He sang traditional song poetry of the earth grumbling and the sky crumbling, the leaves of the human heart fluttering all the while. I was his daughter, and I could not see poetry that grew in the mold on our walls, no matter how much my mother scrubbed, it never stopped. No matter how many layers of paint we applied. I couldn’t understand why the Hmong people had to run for their children while their

children had to make lives again and again in different soils to know belonging. Why it was that our house, so cute on the outside, rotted on the inside. All of this made me sick. My stomach cramped and I could no longer eat. My bones hurt. I was tired. In the night, my heart squeezed itself and I woke up incapable of crying the pain away. I remember one night falling asleep, looking at the car lights from the street reflecting on my wall. I could hear the pounding of my heart in my ears, loud and deep, like a hollow cry. I felt like needles were twisting their way into my heart. I remember thinking that the pain was teasing me for realizing that it wasn't a joke. The air in my lungs caught in my throat. I struggled for escape, my hands reaching for my heart, beating frantically within me. I remember trying to try out but finding a lack of air, a thickening tongue. I kicked desperately on hard wall. "Mom and dad help me, I'm dying." I'm Hmong and I'm your daughter and I'm dying." The thoughts were on repeat. Sweat. I could feel it breaking out on my forehead skin. I could feel the cold settling in. Heaping inside of myself, my eyes growing tight in the darkness, light streaming in. The door opens, slamming with force against the wall. My mom and dad rushed to my side, and I remember seeing myself twisting and turning, out of color, out of breath, but still moving. My father told me to hold on, and I could hear my mom's voice panicking and running to the phone. And then I felt inspiration come. I stilled. Air flowed in. My vision cleared. It was slowly over. In the month that followed, I lost twenty pounds. The doctors didn't know what was wrong. My mother and father hovered over me. My siblings watched me go pale and weak, the bones on my hips jutting out and the bags under my eyes took permanent residence. Was I making myself sick, looking for fundamental changes in my life? I love the children and I was happy to take care of them after school. All this time I had been feeling like I was pushing against my skin. Was it possible that I was pushing against my very own heart? The idea was a little preposterous. I didn't really believe it, but it nudged at me. But if indeed my own heart did need changing, then what part of it? There was a clear division: the Hmong heart, the part that held the hands of my mom and dad and grandma protectively every time we encountered the outside world. The part that cried because Hmong people didn't have a home. The part that listened to Hmong songs and fluttered about looking for clean air in crisp mountains in the flat of St. Paul. The part that quickly and effectively forgot all my school friends in the heat of summer. Or the American heart. The part that was lonely for the outside world. That stood by and watched the fluency of other parents with their boys and girls. Children who lingered in clubs and sports teams after school, waiting to be picked up later by parents who could. The part that wondered if forgetting my best friends was normal and necessary. My body was surely whole. The doctor said so. What was broken in me was something doctors couldn't see. I worried. The more I thought about it, the sicker I became. How does one change what one is becoming? One day I lay on the sofa, another day absent from school. My grades were slowly dropping. Looking up at the wall, grandma had gone shopping. My mother was in the kitchen preparing rice porridge for me. I heard the key in the lock. I heard them come in. I turned and I saw that my grandma had a gift for me. There was something glittery in her hands. Her uneven gait came closer. She presented a thin silver bracelet made of elephants. Bigger mother ones and smaller baby ones. It was the most beautiful gift anyone had ever got me. She told me that the man at the store had taken off a few of the elephants to fit my small wrist. Grandma put the bracelet on me and said, "Elephants protect their babies by forming a circle around them. You are sick and I cannot protect you. I bought this for you so that

the power of the elephants will protect you and make you well again." I wore the bracelet every day. I started to eat a little bit of food and took the medicines the doctors gave me. I wore the bracelet and grew stronger in its hold."

JD: I love that story, thank you.

KKY: Thank you.

JD: Another powerful moment from your grandmother and her influence on your life in the many ways you thought she kept you safe from the very beginning, but even into your young adulthood and your teenage years. Another figure like that in your life, a protector, was your older sister Dao?

KKY: Yes.

JD: And when you followed her to college, not to the same college, but she went to college and you always had those aspirations, she warned you about that experience by reading a book to you. What was she trying to warn you about?

KKY: The night before I left for college, my sister read me Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*. She read me this excerpt about how education was the distance that grew between his mom and dad, even as he was searching for a place where they might all be together in this new world with the demands of an American system. Oh, I cried when she read that piece. I went to college afraid that I would forget. In the beginning, everything I learned, I would try to find the words in Hmong. I remember trying to talk about hegemony and paradigms of power with my dad, trying to translate these words into Hmong and knowing that I was failing in the process. I never wanted school to be this thing that came in between me and the people that loved me most. But I knew that I was human, and I knew that I was away from home more often than not. It was very fraught for me. I went to Carleton College, a school where all of a sudden I became one of three Hmong girls. In my high school, 51% of us were Hmong. All of a sudden, nobody knew what Hmong was in a very different way.

JD: I'm just wondering how fair it is to describe your journey through college and graduate school and then back to Minnesota as another kind of immigration. Is that how you experienced it?

KKY: Yes. An immigration. This time in the true sense of the word, I was an immigrant. I was going to college and graduate school in the hopes of finding more possibilities. I wasn't a refugee, which I had been as a child in the camps of Thailand. So yes, I think that is very fair. I went to Carleton and Columbia, New York as an immigrant to these places. First, a small white town along a beautiful river. The second, one of America's biggest cities. I'd only seen New York on TV. *Law and Order* and other crime shows. Yet there I was, trying to become a writer in this place where my mom and dad couldn't afford to drop me off. My older sister, my cousin, and one of my sister's friends dropped me off at Columbia. I remember taking this Toshiba laptop that my mom and dad had purchased for me when I had first gone into college. I still have such

a clear memory of mom and dad giving me that laptop right before they left with the kids all in that old Honda. They handed me this cardboard box, and when I opened it, there was a receipt inside. The laptop cost them $2,100. In their whole bank account, and I know because I had access to it, only had $2,300. They cleared out the entirety of their account to buy me this computer, this laptop, so I could go to college. That was the same laptop I wrote my first book on, *The Latehomecomer*. And then they bought me this printer, and by the time I took it to graduate school, that printer had stopped running in black ink entirely. So, for two years at Columbia University for a workshop, every time I printed out something, it was in blue or red. I was an immigrant, and I went with everything I had to give.

JD: In a city of immigrants.

KKY: Yes. Where I became the only Hmong person I knew looking into the mirror every morning and every night.

JD: What were some of the challenges you faced in trying to come home to your family in Minnesota after those years at Columbia and in New York City?

KKY: I remember very clearly one time I was coming home from New York, and I had gotten myself a new jacket. A fancy jacket. I had some fellowship money left over, so I bought myself a nice white jacket. My dad came to pick me up at the airport, and he was so proud of me. He missed me so much. Then he took me immediately to the butchering house so we could get a hog to celebrate my homecoming. It had been a while since I had been to the butchering house. In this white jacket, I'm standing there with my father and the hogs are crying like crazy because it's a butchering house. I thought, both of these things are my world.

JD: Wow. Is that the same jacket you have on your website?

KKY: No, it's a different one. When I became a writer, if there is promise, young writers get a lot of free food and plane tickets. I put on quite a bit of weight. So no, no, it's an entirely new jacket.

JD: You can like the white jackets though, I can tell.

KKY: I have a great fondness for white jackets, I do.

JD: I didn't anticipate this as a segue, but I'm gonna use it. So, simplifying grossly, after you came back to Minnesota, you were trying to make a career as a writer, and during that time you met and then eventually married a white guy.

KKY: I published my first book, and I was invited to give a talk at a conference a Critical Pedagogy: Theater of the Oppressed conference. My husband was in the audience that day. There's a video of our first meeting. He came to that conference because his teachers, two of his professors wanted him to come to hear this young, up-and-rising Hmong American writer. He himself hadn't had that much experience with Hmong American folk. He was doing a PhD in curriculum and instruction, culture and teaching. He came to that talk. I didn't meet him that day, but he met me that day. Later on, he emailed me, and I'm a nice person, so I said, "If I can be of

help in your work, let me know." He goes, "Would you like to meet for coffee?" I don't drink coffee, so I said, "How about lunch?" And we met for lunch. I had put myself back in that seat on that day, a very very hot June day, when he biked all the way from Minneapolis to St. Paul to meet me for lunch at this Hmong restaurant. I had no idea that I would marry him. I had no idea that my first serious boyfriend would be this guy in a pink shirt soaked through with sweat. He was vegetarian. Not a lot of Hmong folk are vegetarians. There's a growing population, but not then. He was a vegetarian, and I thought, "Oh, he's so odd." He told me he graduated from Penn, but he didn't like UPenn, and I thought, "All that privilege, and yet he wants to tell me he didn't like it." Yet here I am, three kids later, a mortgage, and two cars. Life is unpredictable. The impossible happens every single day.

JD: That's the simple answer to the question of how you met him, but you have a more powerful answer to that question in your forthcoming book, *Somewhere in the Unknown World*. I wonder if we might hear that. This is the version you tell your children?

KKY: Yes. This Is the very end of the book, *Somewhere in the Unknown World,* which is a collective memoir of 14 different refugee stories, not just the Hmong story. It is the most ambitious of all of my projects, but this is where the book comes to. "Your father and I met because in the late 1950s, long before either of us were born, America entered a war in southeast Asia, in Laos. A country you know as the birthplace of your Tais Tais and Yawm Txiv. During the war, the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States recruited Hmong people to fight and to die on America's behalf. The Hmong were farmers in the high mountains, trained to tend to the earth. We could not win the fight against communist soldiers. When Laos fell to communist rule, the Americans left the war with the highest ranking Hmong military families. They abandoned hundreds of thousands surviving Hmong to an incoming government that saw them as enemies. My family was one of the families left behind to face genocide. To escape death, your Tais Tais and Yawm Txiv fled across the Mekong River into the refugee camps of Thailand. I was born in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. I was born with no memories of the war but stories of how we came to this place we couldn't leave, waiting for food to come to us in huge trucks. Your father and I met because when the Americans left behind what would be called the Indo-China Wars, they left millions of refugees in its aftermath. In south Vietnam alone, there were six million refugees all fleeing persecution. Most Americans did not know who the Hmong were or that Americans had been involved in a war in Laos at all. President Gerald Ford signed into law the Indo-China Migration and Refugee Act of 1975. This act allowed for the resettlement of refugees from south Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In 1987, my family was able to register as refugees of America's secret war in Laos through the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees and apply for resettlement in America. I was six years old. Your father was eight at the time, living a life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with his mother and father, friends and neighbors. Neither of us could have imagined that our futures would be shared. Your father and I met because against tremendous odds, some Hmong people will survive that war. Against incredible odds, some of us resettled to America. I, a refugee child, became a Hmong American girl who became a writer to tell the right story of a wondrous old woman. That writer was invited to give a talk at a conference. Your father, a young scholar, had been in that

room, and he heard me and wanted to hear more from me. Because your father and I met, you three are possible. Shengyeng first, with her eyes the color of seaglass. I held her little feet tight in my hand and felt the beat of her heart, and my understanding, strength, and fragility shifted forever. Thayeng and Yuepheng came together next. One possibility dividing into two. Two little boys with matching eyes and noses and mouths. Two little ones who came into the world with big voices, although their bodies were small. Their cries were like sirens across the quiet landscape of my being, and I ran from one to the other, pushed beyond the limits of what I believed my body could deliver. Before your father and I met, all three of you were unimaginable."

JD: So lovely, thank you so much.

KKY: Thank you.

JD: This is a hard question to ask, but it seems like the right time to ask if you might be willing to talk about baby Jules? Was he then the fourth?

KKY: Baby Jules was the first, officially. He was our first pregnancy. A year after we got married, I got pregnant with baby Jules. He was 19 weeks when he died inside of me. We found out at our first ultrasound. It was to see if he was to be a boy or a girl. That's when the technician left the room and two doctors came in, and one of them held one of my feet, and the other said to me, "Your baby is dead." Baby Jules was technically our first.

JD: I think it's your third book, *What God is Honored Here*, an anthology of grief narratives, as you said before, for indigenous women and women of color. I'm curious what you learned about other stories of loss and how you connected those to your own.

KKY: I could not have done *What God is Honored Here* alone, and Shannon Gibney, my co-editor, would say the same. She had a late term stillbirth. Forty-one and a half weeks. We were colleagues before, but we became much closer after the process. Shannon and I both looked desperately to the bookshelves we both loved to find stories that would help us in our moments of loneliness and need. We both found that while miscarriage and infant loss happened disproportionately to indigineous women and women of color in this country, there is nothing written by or for us. Not on the literary shelves. So we decided to put forth a collection together. I think the need was driven by the fact we wanted to be of service. My father likes to say that all of life is a garden of meaning, waiting for the artist to harvest. We had gone through these experiences we knew would shape us forever as women and as human beings. Both of our experiences were deeply meaningful, and we wanted to give other women across the spread of this nation an opportunity to speak to their own experiences. We put forth a call, and we got lots more submissions than we could take. Some of them were horrendous, others were incredibly moving and beautiful. We both knew we wanted a literary collection. We both knew we wanted a diversity of voices and traditions. What did I learn? I learned we are not alone. I learned we've never been alone. When we talk about the history of America, you have to talk about the history of children and mother being torn apart. In the Native American instance we know about the boarding schools. African Americans and slavery. We talk about what's

happening at the borders right now. In the Hmong example, it was boys and girls commissioned to fight for the CIA, boys and girls who never returned. These experiences of loss are connected, are part of the legacy. This work is much bigger than we are. We can do it because we have. It isn't a testament to our strength; it is being unafraid to let the world hear our cries in the fashion of Emmit Till's mom and so many other women across time.

JD: I was curious if you're making connections by linking your experience of loss to Emmit Till's mother, are you feeling a connection to George Floyd's mother and other women of color during this period of protest and a cry for reform with police brutality in particular?

KKY: George Floyd's mother, yes, Josh. But Philando Castile, my children go to JJ Hill. That was the school where he worked. My sister's kids were in there as well. They called him Mr. Phil. Mr. Phil, who before my daughter even met him, he used to give my nephew extra bottles of milk to take home because he refused to drink anything if it wasn't from school. This is before she went to school. She was excited about everything school. Philando Castile really rocked our family and our community when he was brutally shot and murdered. George Floyd is one more name on that list of names of children who were taken from their mothers. So as a mother, yes, I feel it so keenly. So desperately.

JD: Do you feel like there's any hope that people are hearing those cries finally now, or is this moving toward −

KKY: I'm a hopeful person, Josh. I can only survive because I am a hopeful person. Every day I get up in the morning and remind myself that today is a new day. There's lots of hopeful space. I'm an optimist, but I'm not delusional. Yes, we are crying and we will cry as loudly as we can. Some of us have cried forever, it seems. Hundreds and hundreds of years across the echo chambers of time. I know there are folk who refuse to listen. Among them our very President who is still going on rounds saying this is the Kong Flu we're experiencing across the breath of the station. I know there are people who won't listen. But I also know this: everybody drowns sometimes. Lightning hits and accidents happen. We are all subject to a much bigger law, subject to much greater forces than each other. Until we recognize that we are on one side and we are playing the same game for the same outcome, the possibility of a more beautiful future for our children − there is no true freedom. Without freedom, there is no peace. My identical twin boys are Thayeng and Yuepheng. Where freedom runs, peace follows. I believe we're in the midst of a revolution. I tell my children that these moments are hard, this time is hard, but if we can survive it and survive it together then the world they will receive will be a better one. One where there is more room for them to do the work, the good work, and really fostering and building community, of letting love lead.

JD: I certainly share that hope and thank you for sharing your own perspective. I had no idea you were connected with Philando Castile and through your children in particular. It's late to say this, but I'm sorry for your loss and for their loss as well.

KKY: Thank you, Josh. The reality is that it's never too late to be sorry. That's something I think we're all still learning here in this country. It's never too late to say, "I'm sorry." We go one

generation to the next and some of us feel like it's too late, like the words won't do anything anymore. But the words have always been able to do things. So I thank you for your words.

JD: I wish we could spend more time talking about this. We have fifteen minutes left. We've talked quite a bit about *The Latehomecomer*, and I wonder if you might just briefly tell me a little of the challenges you encountered while writing it and looking for a publisher and then maybe we have some time for the song poet and your forthcoming children's book?

KKY: Thank you. *The Latehomecomer* is a young person's book. I started writing it when I was just 22 years old, right after my grandmother passed away. I went to Columbia to learn the craft of writing, because I knew I needed to learn. At the end of my two years there − it usually takes an average of five years for an MFA at Columbia, but I did mine in two. I believe I was the second person in the program to have ever done it in two years. I was there on funding, and I wouldn't have any funding anymore, but also I felt a great sense of urgency to finish the book. So I came back with a finished manuscript, but it took me another year to dress it up for publication. When I was at Columbia, there were agents who were courting me, who would write to me and invite me to drinks and give me free books. That's how you court young writers, you give them free books. I came back to Minnesota knowing I wanted the story to come from the biggest urban concentration of Hmong in the world. I wanted that to be the beginning of my story, and to writing. I came back not knowing that the industry would shift super fast, and that by the time I was ready, these agents who had wanted to work with me would no longer be in place. That's exactly what I found. My twenty-fifth birthday I remember feeling very despondent, and remembering somewhere inthe back of my mind having said to me once, "Minnesota is home to the best independent publishing presses in the nation." That night on my birthday, I Googled independent publishing presses, Coffee House Press came up first. I went to their website, and they said, "We want to publish the underrepresented voices in literature." I said, "That's me." I followed their submission protocol. I sent in a query and they asked for sample chapters. I sent in sample chapters and they asked for the manuscript. I sent in the manuscript and it was like two months of a very long quiet. One day, I got an email from the editor and now publisher of Coffee House Press, and he said "You're the writer I've been waiting for." I met up with him. Monica Lewinsky had just sold her book for $10 million, and I thought I was a better writer. I knew it was independent publishing, but I said, "Chris, how much are you going to pay me?" And he said $3,000. My older sister who was a young attorney then said $3,500. Chris said, "Deal, done." I sold my first book, *The Latehomecomer* for $3,500 to a press that had been waiting for a writer like me. I've not regretted it. I love Coffee House Press. Chris is actually the person who sent me to New York. I gave him the manuscript to *The Song Poet* because *The Latehomecomer* had become the bestselling title at Coffee House Press. Chris himself would say it's the reason we made it through that recession. I gave him *The Song Poet* and he asked how much I wanted for it. I said, "35,000." I knew *The Latehomecomer* had done so well for him, and I gave him the manuscript. He didn't say anything for a while. I thought, "Oh my god, he doesn't like it." I wrote him and said it's okay if you don't like it. He said, "Meet me at a coffee shop," so I met him again at a coffee shop. I walked in and I saw there were tears in his eyes. I thought, "This is gonna be the saddest breakup ever." Chris looked up and he said, "This book

is worth much more than what I can pay for it. A long time ago, there was an agent who heard you at a talk and wanted to meet you." I said, "Yeah." He said, "I would rather you survive than die as a writer supporting a local press." Chris sent me to New York. Chris got me my first agent. *The Song Poet* came out, and it was critically acclaimed. The year it came out was also the year when Donald Trump was elected president. Books sometimes suffer the same fate as nations. *The Latehomecomer* came out in 2008. President Obama had just been elected. *The Song Poet* came out in 2016. The year it came out I was a finalist for a Penn Award. I was a finalist in the national Book Critic Circle Award, won the Minnesota Book Award, the Chautauqua Prize. The people were not picking it up. I was so worried about it because this book, as in terms of craft, I'm working at a different level but it's never going to get picked up. SOmeone from the Minnesota Opera, Jamie Andrews, who was then the educational director, read it and thought this was the stuff of which opera is made. The book will premier as an opera in the spring of 2021. I'd just heard from Ryan Taylor, the president of the Minnesota Opera that they plan to continue with the project and that they're committed. It's exciting. Now, many years later, when I think back to the publishing history of *The Latehomecomer*, I can only be grateful. I learned so much, Josh, coming from an independent press. I had something to say about the cover. I had something to say about when the book would come out and all these things that of course now that I'm working with different presses, a young writer has no ability or no say in.

JD: I want to very briefly ask about *The Song Poet* and then hear a little bit about *Somewhere in the Unknown World*, but that's a project you've described as your most ambitious. And then you have a forthcoming children's book − maybe we can wrap up with that. *The Song Poet* is so innovative in part because it's structured like a music album, so the introduction is "Album Notes" and the chapters are titled as tracks. I'm curious about how you got the idea of structuring the book like a music album and how did the structure shape the stories that you tell in *The Song Poet*.

KKY: In 1992, my father had come out with an album of Hmong song poetry. It had become a best seller at our annual July 4th soccer tournament. With the $5,000 that he made from the book, my father's goal was that he would come up with a second album. That fall, for the very first time in my life, I knew my mom and dad had a little bit of money. I went to my father and I said, "I'm not going to go back to school unless you buy me entirely new school supplies. I'm tired of sharpening the old coloring pencils, ripping out the used pages and going back. My dad looked at me and then he went and got up. He went to the $5,000. That year, not just me, but all of my siblings got new school supplies. That fall, my older sister said we wouldn't go to school unless we got entirely new winter clothes because we were tired of the jackets from the church basements and the boots and the scarves and the hats. My father went to the $5,000 and he bought us entirely new winter gear. The $5,000 that was supposed to be the second album translated into the bowls of rice in front of us and the chicken drumsticks we held in our hands. Like so many kids, I never asked him about it, the second album coming out. After my grandma died, my father stopped singing entirely. For the first time in my life, there was no more poetry in the backdrop of everything. I asked my dad, "Where's your song poetry? Where has it gone?" My father said, "I stored it in my heart. When my mother died, my heart broke and all the songs

leaked out." I lived with those words for a long time. *The Latehomecomer* came out and people were asking, "What is your greatest literary influence?" I was talking about Robert Frost, about that poem he wrote early on in his career about the little waves watching the big waves coming to shore, about what the sea wanted to do to land. I was talking about Louise Erdirich, love medicine. In my heart, I've always only known it was first and foremost my father. One day I asked him how he became a song poet. He'd just lost his job. We were in the recession. He and 14 of his other Hmong coworkers had just lost their jobs. I wanted to distract him because he was so sad. He would dress for work with nowhere to go. My dad looked at me and he said, "When I was a kid, I was lonely. My father had died when I was two. Your grandma had nine kids to feed. She took to the mountainside with a gardening hoe the size of my hand to feed us. So I used to go from the house of neighbors and friends, listening for the things people had to say to each other. Loving things. By myself, I would whisper the words to comfort my heart. One day, the words escaped on a sigh and a song was born. I thought, how beautiful?" So I said to my dad jokingly, "Maybe that's the beginning of my next book." He looked at me and said, "Maybe it's the ending." Then he laughed. "Nobody wants to read a book about a man like me. We live in a country where presidents can write books about themselves. Why would anybody want to read a book about a Hmong man with rough hands working in the factories?" My father has always said that I'm tenacious, like a dog with a bone, I don't know when to let go. I thought, "I have to do it. I have to prove him wrong. Isn't this nation, isn't this world built on the backs of men like my father?" I thought, "What if I could write into being his second album? The album that never was, because we became. What if I could structure it like an album. Poetically, it'd be much truer to his form. Wouldn't I be able then to play with repetition and the rules of poetry. Take the book outside the chronology of a prose piece. Make it more poetic, and yet do what I know how to do best to honor his voice, his art. That was how *The Song Poet* came to be. The structure was so natural.

JD: I love that story. You have two books coming out this fall: *Somewhere in the Unknown World*, which we've heard a little bit about, and then also a children's book. You say in the introduction to *Unknown World* that many people wanted to tell you their refugee stories early in your career, but you weren't ready. Why weren't you ready then, and why are you ready now?

KKY: I was so young, I was still learning how to stand strong beneath the pressures of my own story and the Hmong story. I respected the powers of representation. I wanted these stories to come forth from these different communities. I've always been a vessel for stories, so all these years when I thought I wasn't ready, I was already collecting them and learning how to hold them safe. Finally, about three years ago I started working on *Somewhere in the Unknown World* because I was writing that very first piece. One of my elderly uncles told me that he wasn't a good man, and I thought he was an incredible man, and the community believed him. He looked me in the eye and said, "No one walks from a war an innocent man, a good man." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I want you to write this story before I die. You have to write it and publish it before I die." And I said, "Okay." He told me this incredible story about the night of the crossing of the Mekong River. He and his wife were approached by a little girl who was carrying another little girl on her back, her sister who was about three or four but too weak to

walk. The older girl presented a pot with a little bit of rice in it, and said, “I'll give you everything I own. Our parents died in the jungles of Laos three weeks ago, but just carry my sister across with you. You don't have to take me.” My uncle looked at the raft and there was no room for two. He couldn't just take one. He told the girl, “I'm going to take my family across and then I'm going to come back for you and your sister.” The girl went to her knees with the bit of rice in her pot, held up toward the light of the moon. My uncle got on this tiny little raft and pushed him and his children off, with every intention they would return. He said they were in the middle of the river when he could hear the gunfire. When he looked toward the shore he saw them still kneeling there, but he knew he wouldn't return. He said he prayed to the ancestors and to the spirit of the land and the river that a better man would come along. But he didn't know if that happened. In Thailand, his wife gave birth to a little girl, so he was raising a pair of sisters. But all he saw, all he continued to see in his sleep were the two waiting by the side of the river. He says the older he gets, the closer they are. He's gonna meet them soon. He wanted me to write this book, this one story. I did. I sent it to my editor and asked what we can do with this. She said, “Are there more?” And of course I knew there were more. I sat out to collect them with the hope that the book itself would first and foremost be a service to the individuals and to their communities. There are people from my everyday life I talked to that I knew I would write their stories regardless. I've heard too many refugee folks share their stories and never have anything come forth from it. I wrote about the secretary at the pediatrician clinic where my children go. Another parent of kids at my children's school, and a Lyft driver in these cities. College students, these are the people in my life. People who I respect. People who make my heart stronger every time it grows afraid in the world we live in. Knowing that these people share these cities make me so much braver for everything that will come. I'm hoping that the book can do the same for others. That beyond that, it will always be of service to the men and women in the book itself.

JD: Thank you. I can't wait to purchase my own copy. I've enjoyed also reading your children's books to my children, *The Shared Room* and *A Map into the World*. You have another one coming out also this fall, *The Most Beautiful Thing*. Can you tell me a little about that and maybe read a little from that to wrap up?

KKY: Yes, I would love to. *The Most Beautiful Thing*, I believe, is truly the most beautiful thing. It is a book about how through stories, through my grandmother's stories, the little girl who she was peeks out at me from the past. It is a story about a poor family, poor in material things but rich in love. A story based on my grandma's single tooth. She never once said no any time I offered her food. She'd always say yes. Hard ice, Jolly Ranchers, we gnawed them bones together. It's about the power of that single tooth when I wanted braces growing up. We couldn't afford them, but I wanted them. My grandma asked me one day, “Is my tooth not beautiful?” It remains to this day, Josh, one of the most beautiful smiles I've ever seen. I'll read from the opening pages. “The Most Beautiful Thing. Dedication: For the everlasting beauty of a grandmother's smile. [Grandma's name], the grandma in this book, and [name], the grandma I never got to meet but whose love shines through my mother. My grandmother is so old, no one knows how old she is. Not me. Not my big sister. Not our older cousin. My father waits patiently while we try to guess her age. He is my grandma's ninth and youngest child. Even he doesn't

know how old she is. We know grandma was born on the other side of the world, across a wide ocean. My grandma came from a time and a place where creatures lurked in the jungles, waiting to chase children. She told us she once looked into the gleaming eyes of a tiger and felt its hot breath on her face. By the time I was born, my grandmother already had an old woman's face. Her skin was soft but dry like paper, and her mouth was a single tooth. Grandma said, "It is the only thing standing strong in my mouth. This final tooth my mother and father gave me." I asked to see a picture of her parents. She said, "They lived in a time long before the Hmong learned of things such as photographs." She pointed to her heart. "The only picture I have of them is here." I just wanted to say the artwork of *The Most Beautiful Thing* is incredible, Josh. We were supposed to launch it at the Walker, because the art is so beautiful. But we don't know if the Walker will be open on October 6 when the book comes out. We'll see how it enters into the world. But I'm so excited for the world to meet it. I really think it is just the most beautiful thing.

JD: I sure can't wait to read it to my kids. This has been such a privilege, Kalia, and I just wish we could keep talking, but we both have families and time ticks on, so we need to wrap up. I hope it's not terribly annoying if we take like thirty seconds for room tone, like we talked about in the beginning.

KKY: Sounds good.