



THE BRIDGE

A Monthly Resource from the Southeastern Minnesota Synod



AN INTERVIEW WITH KAO KALIA YANG

When did you first begin to write as a way of making sense and meaning of the world around you?

I started writing earnestly, not knowing of my purpose, but desperately when I was given my first locked diary as a gift from my mother. I was perhaps in third or fourth grade. I was writing to locate myself, to express my feelings, to make sense of my thoughts, my confusion. Thus, from a young age, I discovered that writing was a useful and necessary tool for my sense of myself in the world.

In "The Song Poet," you write through your eyes and through your father's. What was the collaboration process like with your dad? What did you learn about your dad and yourself in the process?

All my life, my father has showered me with his stories. In the refugee camps of Thailand, I could not go to school (because they were over-crowded) so I soaked them in. In America, his work at the factories kept him away from us on the evening shift (we were in school during the day), so I missed the world of he'd fashioned for me. His is one of those voices in my life, where all I have to do is close my eyes to conjure and call up. The process of writing the book, the decision I had made to write the book as an album of songs as a tribute to him--required me to enter fully into the songs of his life. During the writing of the book, I approached my father and asked him if he wanted to know what I was working on. He shook his head. He said, "I hate it when people interfere with my process. I won't do that to you. I've witnessed too many potentially great works of art die in talk, don't do that to yourself. Share it with me when the book is finished." That's what we did. In the process, I discovered the heart of my father as a man beyond me (as my mother's husband and my grandmother's son, as a Hmong man in the world, a refugee, a factory worker, etc.). I discovered the artist who had the biggest influence on my art.

What current creative & writing projects are you working on?

Right now, I'm finishing up the details for my three books that will be coming out in the fall of 2019:

- *A Map Into the World* (from Carolrhoda Press)--my first children's book, the first book to be written by a Hmong-American writer to come forth from a literary press, a work that centers on the world of a young Hmong-American girl and her experience of the changing seasons, the seasons of a life, the story cloths on the walls, the maps she must draw so others can enter more fully into the big, living world.
- *What God is Honored Here?: An Anthology on Miscarriage and Infant Loss By and For Indigenous Women and Women of Color* (from the University of MN Press)--a co-edited anthology with the writer Shannon Gibney. It will be the first literary anthology by and for women of color on the experiences of miscarriage and infant loss--experiences that disproportionately effect women of color in this country despite the fact that there has been very little for them on the subject.
- *Somewhere in the Unknown World*--a work of creative nonfiction about refugee lives in America, a look across generations and refugee groups, at the stories of individual refugees in Minnesota, a state that is ranked very high in terms of racial inequality, second in the nation in fact, and yet contains more refugees per capita than any other state in the union.

Are there specific books/articles/authors that you would recommend attendees read in advance of this year's Theological Conference to prepare?

Yes, in fact, I've made formal suggestions in a new essay I wrote for McSweeney's. The series of essays is an excellent entry point to a diverse body of writers and perspectives across the American landscape. The link to my particular essay is: <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/the-wide-world-of-belonging>