

Envy

I am envious of people who can claim a space, make it theirs. To decorate a room, put up photographs, posters—I have never been good at this.

I collect paper. Scattered, torn, or organized in orange envelopes by topic.

In high school, we learned of doublespeak, words with opposite meanings put together.

Bittersweet, says my teacher. Fresh, frozen strawberries.

What other examples can you think of? he asks.

Ten years later, I am still thinking.

IKEA products made in China.

Hmong kids going to ESL class when they spoke English.

And my green card, which reads, "Permanent Resident Alien."

I read historical books because I seek beautiful landscapes. Trees. Orchards. Farmland. Houses with names. Pemberley, Green Gables, Ingleside, Windy Poplars.

I am from 640, 410, 884, and other numbers that have become lost with my memory. How does one move from a number to a name?

I am called Bee. This is true. Bee. Short for baby. This is the identity I wear at home.

At school, I am May Moua and later May.

Many names to juggle but I morph in and out of them easily. My sister-in-law and her sisters have two names each. She is Kaying and Yer. Her sister is Houa and Cua. The youngest sister is Nou and Hlee.

Funny. We never question this. We never ask for clarification. We are used to this juggling. We know which identities exist in what realm.

Minnesota is cold but then I knew it would be. I expected the snow but not the other things to follow: I became dark. This is not entirely true. My skin became lighter, whiter, but it was my thoughts that became darker.

Older people said I was dug muag. Dark-faced.
You never smile, they say.
They want me to lie, to be like my sister who can serve drinks
with one hand and slap us with another.
Me, I just wanted to slap.

The house was a lie. My sister said we would have our own
room once we moved to Minnesota. That was how I left California
in peace. But we did not get our room. There was space. We just
needed to move a bed in, but this never happened. I slept in a bed-
room with my parents, two brothers, and four sisters.

I know about invisibility, how one can stick out like a sore
thumb yet be forgotten. I have gotten very good at hiding.

I am named after a country. Whether it is ours is anyone's
guess. I am named after a legend but that's all my father would say.

Nearly thirty years later, I Google it and learn of the girl who
stood by her dead father's body. She would not do as her brothers
had done. She would not abandon her father's body despite visits
from a ghost. In the end, the ghost congratulated her on her brav-
ery and named an entire country after her.

Mongolia.

Maiv Muam Nkauj Lig.

May Moua Gao Lee.

How arrogant it is of me to suppose we know each other.

My father had ambitious dreams. He wanted us to be noms—
emperors, kings, leaders.

You can't do that, I say. You have to be born into it. How can
you expect to just become a leader?

I must tell a truth: we did not starve. It may seem so the way
I write, but we did not starve. There was food, just not the food I
wanted.

We were poor, this is true. But I have never been very good
at being poor. I've never known my place.

In poverty, I still asked for Pepsi, candy, and hamburgers.

In poverty, I wanted pink dresses, jelly shoes, and Chinese
jumpropes.

It is good I was not born white, a boy, or rich. I would not have been a very good person because I have never known my place in the world.

I had an inkling we were poor when, in third grade, a girl, Mary, said to me, May Moua, you're so rich. I saw the smirk on her mouth, her eyes meeting someone else's in silent conversation. But I did not think she could be mean. She was my friend.

This friend would later tell me she wanted to beat me up and because I was angry and short-tempered, I said, Fine. I'll kick your ass.

She never showed up to our fight.

I never believed in Santa Claus.

When I was three, my parents came home with a black garbage bag full of toys. I knew Christmas gifts, if they came, were from the Salvation Army.

When I am in the third grade, we write letters to Santa Claus. Other children dream and make long lists.

I roll my eyes. The teacher is tricking us, I think. He just wants us to practice writing letters.

But weeks later, Santa Claus comes in the form a white lady who buys more than just the shirt and pants I asked for. She buys gifts for everyone in our family.

The other children in my class are envious my wish had been granted but not theirs.

I wonder if this is why Mary has suddenly decided to beat me up.

In a writing workshop, the instructor asked us to introduce ourselves—but with a catch. She wanted us to make a list of the things we owned when we were six. List only things that were just ours, things we did not share with anyone else.

I wrote down my list and, as I already suspected, it was short.

When it was time to share, the usual things came up: books, toys, and Barbie dolls. When it was my turn, I read off my list: At six, I owned a cloth that had been wrapped around me as a baby in the refugee camps. And I owned a chicken. Suddenly I felt like I was a kid again. I didn't feel bad for having so few items on my list, but I suspected *other* people felt bad for me.

Did you have a real chicken? someone asked.

It was a real chicken, I said.

What was its name?

It had no name.

I have no idea why but it didn't occur to me to name it.

When I think about things I own, today, I realize even my memories and words are not things I own by myself. They are things I share with my family. I find myself writing "we said," "we thought," and "we did" a lot. This is because "we"—mostly, Mee, Pao, Xin, and I—did so many things together. Our childhood experiences are so intertwined that sometimes I can't remember which were my words.

But each of us did own our own chicken at one time.

I am eighteen the year my family returns to Greenleafton to visit our sponsors. By then, our family is large enough that we have four carloads of people trekking through small country back roads. Greenleafton is a very small town. It is only two streets perpendicular to each other.

That was the house we lived in, my brother Tou says, pointing to a small, one-story house.

That used to be the town store, says my mother, pointing to a small, abandoned shack.

That church is the town's pride and joy, says my brother Houa, pointing to a massive stone building that looms at one street corner.

We gather behind the church for a potluck organized by the churchwomen. There are casseroles, ham and cheese sandwiches, Jell-O molds, and bags of buns donated to the church. There is an ambrosia salad, potato salad, coleslaw, and more foods whose names I do not know. This is the first time I feel like I am eating Minnesotan food.

Then one of the sponsors says, Let's re-create the original photo, and I know what she is referring to. It is the picture from a newspaper article from 1979 that chronicles my family's first two months in the U.S. The sponsor asks for the "original" family to stand before the old church steps where the original photo was taken. My parents take their places. My brothers Tou and Houa take their places. My sister Pa takes her place. My sister Mee is not

able to come today. My aunt Phauj Maiv now lives in California as does my Uncle Ber.

What happened to the baby? asks the photographer. Who was the baby?

And it occurs to me this is my cue to find my place.



David Mondedeu, photogravure