

M
E
T
A
M
O
R
P
H
O
S
I
S

by Emily Nguyen

C O N T E N T S

03

Author's Note

04

New Kids on the
Block

07

Count Your Blessings

10

Emerging from the
Chrysalis

13

Acknowledgments

M E T A M O R P H O S I S

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Ever since I was a child, I had an understanding of how the Vietnam War had affected my parents, who had immigrated to the United States as young adults. However, I never truly realized how much it affected me, personally. As a result, I decided to embark on this writing journey to gain a deeper understanding of how my history intersects with my understanding and experiences with race and identity both now, as a college student, and while I was growing up.

I named this piece *Metamorphosis* because the growth I felt during this writing process was, in my opinion, similar to the evolution from a mere caterpillar to a free-spirited and unconstrained butterfly. The essays sequence the start of my writing process, when I began establishing historical context to when I started looking at my own family's history to when I reflected on my own experiences in the final essay, "Emerging from the Chrysalis." While my journey is nowhere near complete, I like to think that now I have figuratively evolved into a butterfly, free to explore these issues further and voice my opinions unhindered.

I must disclaim that in this composition I am not an unbiased observer. I am reflecting on what I have learned through the research process and my own personal experiences as an Asian American.

Emily Nguyen

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

The fall of Saigon in 1975 led to a period of mass immigration of Vietnam War refugees into the United States. It was an opportunity for a new start, an escape from their war-torn homeland, and, most importantly, a chance to pursue the American Dream. However, what immigrants soon found was that the country they now called 'home' had a complex and fluid view on immigration and race; the United States was a place where the concept of immigration was embraced, but the immigrants, especially Asian immigrants, were not. The racism, identity-crises, and experiences that they began to face in America were a reflection of this.

Let's take a look at Tuan's story. Upon arrival in the United States in the mid-1970s, Tuan, a Chinese descendant born in Vietnam, lived in Silverlake, CA in a predominantly Asian community and was seemingly able to adjust to his new life. However, when he and his family moved to East Los Angeles a year later, this was not the case. Now, he found himself as a minority among the minorities, living in a community with a large Latino population, and his family was one of only two Asian families on the block. Tuan and his younger sister were forced to navigate the ins-and-outs of this unfamiliar country, while also dodging racism-fueled bullying that he could not comprehend:

"Everyday, we would just get harassed.... [and] would get beat up all the time. So my sister and I, we walked out of the bus after school....and they would take these old Coke bottles and they would just throw 'em at us....My sister got hit bad. The bottle hit her head, I got hit in the head and I was bleeding and shit....it was so bad that my sister just stopped eating. She actually almost died because she became bulimic, at a time when there wasn't even a word for it. I don't think there was even a word for it at that time."

His experience was part of a larger trend of unprovoked xenophobia misunderstood by the broader American population. To Alex, it was hard even for him to understand why he was targeted. So he persisted and kept dealing with it, but, as he grew up, he came to a realization: "He was being picked on because he was Asian and not because they were Latino."

His experiences were not an isolated incident:

*In **Galveston Bay, TX**, Vietnamese refugee communities were besieged by paramilitant Klansmen who sought to destroy Vietnamese fishing businesses. The conflict was initially sparked by the death of a white crabber after a Vietnamese fisherman shot in self-defense in 1979. The campaign of terrorization that ensued following the incident, launched by the KKK, made it clear where people stood on the discussion of Vietnamese immigrants. They were not welcome.*

*In **San Jose, CA**, Lan, a Vietnamese immigrant, recalls her first experiences with racism in third grade. She did not even understand what the slur word meant but the way it was said "with such vitriol" signaled to her that something was wrong. Following this initial incident she thought to herself, "this [is] probably going to be a pattern here in California." And her suspicions were correct. She describes multicultural factions and conflict that "you could tell that were marked by race and class."*

*In **Stockton, CA**, five Vietnamese school children, the children of Vietnamese refugees, were gunned down at school by a drifter who hated Vietnamese; he had opened fire on the schoolyard during a recess period. The gunman's actions were motivated by hatred for the general Vietnamese refugee community since he claimed they were taking away the jobs that native-born Americans should have. These innocent children were targeted simply because of the color of their skin.*



Alex Luu and his older sister, date unknown (Viet Stories - UCI)

While experiences varied, it did not change that Vietnamese Americans as a whole were perceived as the 'Oriental Other'. This was a stark contrast to Vietnam. For the most part, Vietnam was, and still is, a very homogenous country. At the time of the Vietnam War, the population was mostly Vietnamese plus a minority of ethnic Chinese who had emigrated to Vietnam in previous generations. Due to a long history of conflict, however, each ethnic group kept to themselves. The United States, on the other hand, was a whole different ball park. While diversity is one of America's most defining traits, it also has its difficulties. One of the most significant struggles of those coming from a homogeneously Asian country was finding one's place in society. In Vietnam, people may have been identified based on categories such as socioeconomic standing or gender. In the United States, people are identified and sorted based on the aforementioned categories, but also based on *race*.

Race is a social construct that groups humans based on perceived physical distinctions. In practice, within the American racial landscape, it creates a white-dominated social hierarchy that leads to rifts between different racial groups. The United States has a long history of racial conflict that was, at least to an extent, further exacerbated by the diversifying demography and influx of immigrants. Racial groups, especially minorities, were pitted against one another in their quest for economic opportunities in America. This being said, to other minority groups already established in America, the surge of Vietnamese immigrants was simply more competition. This generated feelings of resentment and led to backlash, resulting in racially motivated incidents like the ones Alex experienced vividly in his youth.

Experiences like these can have shaping effects on one's sense of identity in America. In Alex's case, his perception of his 'Asian'-ness was in flux. How does he identify himself in American society? That was a question he had to ask himself for years. He was racially Asian, but his experiences diverge from other Asian ethnic groups that had already established themselves in America (i.e. Japanese, Chinese, etc.). This changed for him over the years....he identified as Chinese-Vietnamese then Asian, Chinese-American, American, and then Asian once again. This has all evolved based on his own experiences as a Vietnam War refugee in America learning to adapt to society. However, in shaping his identity, he also realized the importance of understanding and maintaining ties to his culture.

Vietnamese Welcomed by St. Paul's



BUTLER'S NEW FAMILIES — A large crowd of St. Paul's Catholic Church parishioners, led by the Rev. Msgr. Francis A. Szym, pastor, and Gerald Sisk, lay deacon and chairman of the Committee for Resettlement of Refugee Families, greeted the Duong and Nguyen families who will now be making their home in Butler. The two families will stay at the Butler Holiday Inn until more permanent housing is obtained. — Butler Eagle photo.

July 7, 1975, Butler, Pennsylvania. An article in the local newspaper about the Lan and her family arriving at the airport (Viet Stories - UCI)

“Do you know what happened to the people before you? Do you know that there is...a pattern of being treated this way?”

Ultimately, the battle Vietnamese refugees experienced upon arrival in America was a battle on two fronts: struggling to survive and to familiarize oneself with the new social and racial terrain while simultaneously finding one's identity in respect to American society. Alex's experiences further reinforce that understanding your familial history and the experiences of your ancestors is not 'dwelling in the past'; it is actually useful in understanding one's identity because these histories are intertwined with the experiences you face today.

In learning about Alex's and other immigrants' experiences, these are my key takeaways: your history isn't just composed of your individual life experiences; it "doesn't always necessarily include *you*, personally." Just as America's history has shaped the racial and political landscapes of our country today, your history plays a role in your worldview and the experiences you face today. This search for individual identity, however, is not exclusive to immigrants. In the evolving social sphere today, it applies to many. What is your history? How do you identify yourself? It is important to understand that identity is not uniform or assigned by society; it, in part, is shaped by how *you* perceive your experiences and your past history.

**ENLIGHTENMENT IS
GROWING ALL THE
TIME. IT IS NOT
SOMETHING THAT
HAPPENS ONCE AND
IS THEN COMPLETE**

-Thich Nhat Hanh

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Born in 1962, right in the middle of the war, my father grew up only knowing a life of conflict and uncertainty...it instilled in him a *state of survival*, he called it. I remember him recalling that life in the years following the fall of Saigon (1975) was almost worse than the war period itself: my ông nội (grandfather), who was an officer in the South Vietnam army, was sent to a re-education camp for six months and my bà nội (grandmother) struggled to feed and care for her six children. The new communist government was intent on harassing anyone suspected of aligning with the former South Vietnamese government, further adding to the sentiments of fear and uncertainty.

By 1985, my father left his family and fled Vietnam by boat, arriving in Palawan refugee camp (Philippines) later that year before being transferred to Bataan refugee camp (Philippines) in 1986 and eventually entering the United States in 1987. By the end of the 1990s, his entire immediate family had reunited in Southern California.

Now, just over three decades later, I asked him about his experiences during his initial years in the U.S. His response to the following question had me taken aback. "Did you experience racism initially when you came to America?" A pause. "Racism happens everywhere," he replied. Not a 'yes', not a 'no'....just this statement. I pushed further and asked where he has experienced racism personally. His response?

"It happened at school...at work...I don't know I really didn't have the *time* to pay too much attention to it"

Time. That's what had me reeling. My father wasn't saying that there was an absence of racism...no, that wasn't it. In actuality, he simply did not have the privilege to pay attention to any discrimination against him because his first and main priority was to "pay the bills and survive." My father, as well as many other Vietnam War refugees, fled their home country with few belongings and little to no money. Their resources were scarce. In coming to America, they wanted to pursue a better life for themselves--the American Dream.

I came to the realization that I had spent so much time focusing on my father's experiences in the United States that I failed to pay attention to his life experiences prior to immigrating to America, more specifically his experience as one of hundreds of thousands of 'boat people' who fled Vietnam. The struggles he experienced during that time have had a formative effect on his outlook of life.

The 'boat people', also known as "Thuyền Nhân Việt Nam", fled en masse after the Second Indochina War (also referred to as the Vietnam War in America). After successfully being smuggled onto small boats in coastal villages, they braved the seas in hopes of reaching a sponsorship country. Overcrowded boats, uncertain destinations, Thai pirates, lack of food...these were all circumstances 'boat people' like my father had to endure; many did not survive the journey. Risking death and fending off looters became the norm. However, my father's boat was extremely lucky; his ship was rescued by the French Navy as it was almost on the brink of capsizing due to overcrowding.

I did not truly realize the gravity of these events in my father's life until 2017, when Netflix released a docu series called *The Vietnam War*, which was filmed and narrated by American filmmakers. I did not watch the production with him but, the time I did, there were moments that I have never forgotten. Watching the documentary in solemn silence, I heard him mutter an occasional "that's not what actually happened" in Vietnamese. More strikingly, during a scene about 'boat people', I witnessed him silently shedding bitter tears. In my lifetime, I had never seen my father cry....ever. This was the first time he really watched a documentary on the Vietnam War from an American perspective. I realized that the strong exterior that he puts up is at least in part a consequence of surviving the traumas of his escape from Vietnam. While his arrival in the United States was a huge culture shock, he had to quickly adapt to survive. As a result, the painful memories of his journey and life experiences were forced to be *suppressed*.

With his *state of survival* mentality in mind, he continued his struggle to create a better life for himself and his family. His firsthand experiences of hardship, starvation, and oppression pushed him to fight to succeed in America. 'Count your blessings' became one of his mantras....and he followed through. Ten years after entering the U.S. and working a few odd jobs here and there, he received his M.S. in Mechanical Engineering from California State University, Long Beach. Subsequently, he received his designation of Professional Engineer certified by the State of California. Since then, he has been a Professional Engineer for nearly three decades.

My father constantly reminds me that I am privileged in that I have a stable education, food to eat, and a roof over my head...and he's right. I remember asking him the following question: what is the most important thing for my generation of Vietnamese Americans and future generations to know? First and foremost, he spoke about the importance of knowing your culture, but, most importantly, he told me "freedom should not be taken for granted." In the United States, freedom is a right granted by the Constitution and, as a result, is often treated as an inherent birthright. However, what is often failed to be considered is that, not all people experience the freedoms that Americans can due to varying governmental systems and censorship. Even in America, the rights we now enjoy did not come without a fight. As a second-generation immigrant born in America, I will never truly be able to understand the hardships my father and his generation endured, but can only hope to learn from their experiences and use this as my motivation to make an impact in the world.

**YOU CANNOT TAKE YOUR
FREEDOMS FOR GRANTED.
JUST LIKE GENERATIONS
WHO HAVE COME BEFORE
YOU, YOU HAVE TO DO YOUR
PART TO PRESERVE AND
PROTECT THOSE FREEDOMS.**

MICHELLE OBAMA

EMERGING FROM THE CHRYSALIS

The callous, blanket stereotypes that continue to be used to portray Asian Americans ultimately erase the nuances in life experiences that make an individual unique. I remember learning about these stereotypes in history class as I grew up, but, initially, that is all it was to me....facts and history. I never looked deeper to see the implications of its persistence in modern society because it had already become so normalized. However, once I entered college and further immersed myself in Asian American and diasporic studies, I realized my "it is what it is" mentality was flawed. Just because these stereotypes are normalized does not mean they are correct nor does it mean we, as a society, cannot work to change the narrative. Stereotypes are a myth, and it's time to dismantle them.

As an Asian American, I felt it was important to evaluate and critique the 'model minority' stereotype as it pertains to me. Let's not get ahead of ourselves, though. First, it is necessary to establish the context of how such a stereotype came to be in the first place.

Popularized by *NY Times* journalist William Peterson in 1966, the 'model minority' stereotype was inspired by the socioeconomic success of some Asian ethnic groups even after facing systematic exclusion, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 or WWII internment of Japanese-Americans. It portrayed *all* Asian Americans as law-abiding, wealthy, docile, timid, and smart (e.g. TIME Magazine's 1987 article dubbed 'The New Whiz Kids').

On the surface, this stereotype seems to be a positive one, but that is just its facade. This stereotype erases the institutional and historical xenophobia long faced by Asian Americans since immigration to the United States. Furthermore, it ostracizes Asian Americans as minorities by painting a veneer that depicts them as a group that has progressed past exclusion within the American racial landscape. Moreover, in glorifying Asian Americans, it vilifies other minority groups by implicitly asking, "If Asians could do it, why couldn't you?" This is problematic. It undermines the quest for racial justice by pitting minority groups against each other rather than encouraging their cooperation. Its normalization and negative implications in society worsen the racial divides in America.

While I have broadly referred to 'Asian Americans' as a group, I do so to reflect the reality of our experiences; this conglomeration, to an extent, is a product of the perpetuation of these stereotypes. For instance, "Asians all look the same." It's a statement that I and, arguably, many Asian Americans have heard in our lives. Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, or other Asian ethnic groups.....these all blend together for many non-Asians. Consequently, our experiences with xenophobia and racism in the United States seem to overlap despite having entirely different ethnic origins. This stereotype conflates over twenty Asian ethnic groups in the U.S. into a single group identity. By doing so, it erases each Asian ethnic group's unique history of immigration and integration into American society; some immigrated as a result of forced migration, some for economic opportunity, some for other reasons, but the 'model minority' stereotype completely neglects to recognize any of this.

My parents' immigration stories and, more broadly, those of Vietnam War refugees are a reflection of the inaccuracies of the 'model minority' stereotype. Mass migration to the United States from Vietnam did not occur until after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Many were able to come to the U.S. after the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act. Most, because of their refugee status, entered the country with little resources. They had to simultaneously learn and navigate American institutions while making sure there was enough money to put food on the table. They did not have the wealth that the 'model minority' stereotype assumed of them. Vietnamese immigrants, as well as other Southeast Asian groups, had comparatively higher rates of poverty and incarceration than their other Asian counterparts, who had immigrated decades earlier. More often than not, they still faced the resentment of those who despised the 'model minority.' As a result, many Vietnamese immigrants were being called out for the privileges they did not actually have.

In addition to erasing the complexities of Asian American immigration histories, stereotypes like these create walls and boundaries that tell young Asian Americans like me what we *should* be. This creates a societal limit on how much we can express ourselves; it silences us. Further, society constantly reinforces the belief that Asian American struggles are not "real" struggles. However, that belief is flawed in that it fails to acknowledge that racism occurs on a spectrum; it is not so clear cut. The perpetuation of these societal beliefs ultimately casts an unwarranted and unwanted 'invisibility cloak' over any challenges we may face.

In my elementary school class, I was one of three Asian students and I spent a large part of my childhood repeatedly told by not only my white peers but also my non-Asian minority peers that I was inferior or unworthy. This came in the form of off-handed jokes about my physical features, or through the oh-so-common "you only achieved [insert accomplishment] because you're Asian." The effect this had on my sense of being, even at such a young age, was profound. I was being characterized by the 'model minority' stereotype and treated as an outsider before I even knew there was an official term for it! I found myself wanting to reject my culture, purposefully breaking all the norms set by these stereotypes just so I would feel like I *belonged*. I would intentionally try to get in trouble for minor things such as 'talking out of turn,' and even asked my mom to make me peanut butter sandwiches in lieu of Asian food (which I, personally, had no issue with) just so I could be like *them*. In doing this, I lost sight of who I was because I was too preoccupied with figuring out how I could conform to mainstream societal norms.

Growing up I always felt the need to stay silent on these issues due to the implicit status of Asian Americans as a quasi-minority. To justify these thoughts, I tried to convince myself that, relatively speaking, my experience was “not that bad.” After years of adopting this mentality, I felt invisible and suppressed. It seemed like my life was just a statistic; my individual story did not seem “important enough”. So, for a long time, few people knew about my family history or my struggles with defining myself as a second-generation immigrant. In retrospect, I find this somewhat ironic since the ‘model minority’ stereotype depicts Asian Americans as obedient and submissive. The reality was that, as much as I wanted to pave my own path, I couldn’t bring myself to speak out for fear of how it would be received. My story continued to be untold. Eventually I came to realize that this was a self-sabotaging cycle. How *could* anyone understand these struggles if there was no one to tell the story?

As I tried to make sense of where I fit in the American landscape, I found myself repeatedly asking the following questions: Am I eligible to voice my fears and struggles? Will addressing the issues I face as an Asian American appear insensitive in light of the struggles of other racial minorities in America? However, over time, I came to realize that the acknowledgment of my own struggles, and of those faced by Asian Americans as a group, does not invalidate the struggles of other groups.

It would be naive to conflate the struggles of Asian Americans with those of black or brown minority groups, but that doesn’t erase the fact that these issues exist. We have different historical contexts of immigration, integration, and oppression in the United States, but the central issue of racial inequality remains the same. So much time is spent pinpointing the differences between minority groups that we often forget to recognize the traits that draw us together. There is a ‘race problem’ in America that affects us all and desperately needs to be addressed.

America continues to be a racially-polarized country. It is a living paradox in its own right; how can we be a country built by immigrants while simultaneously ostracizing immigrants because of the color of their skin?

Confronting race and identity issues in the United States is tied to *acknowledgement* of the existence of these issues in the first place. There needs to be a consensus that a problem exists before any progress towards racial justice is truly made. As I have learned, the racial attitudes of our country and identities are inexplicably intertwined. Your struggles do not have to fit the mold prescribed by society; your struggles and your experiences come in all shapes and forms. Own them. Experiences I faced through the years undoubtedly played a large role in shaping who I am today.

Even when society tells us otherwise, our voice is our power. We are not invisible. Do not second-guess yourself or feel ashamed about your story. We all *belong*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE FOLLOWING FOR HELPING ME WITH THIS PROJECT:

TO MY PARENTS, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR SHARING YOUR STORIES AND CONSTANTLY INSTILLING IN ME YOUR STRONG MORALS AND WILLS TO SUCCEED.

TO MY FACULTY MENTOR, PETER HUK, THANK YOU FOR GUIDING AND SUPPORTING ME EVERY STEP OF THE WAY DURING MY WRITING PROCESS. FROM READING ENDLESS DRAFTS TO GIVING ME ADVICE FOR OVERCOMING SELF-CENSORSHIP, I TRULY THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP. I COULDN'T HAVE DONE THIS WITHOUT YOU.

TO DR. LJILJANA COKLIN, THANK YOU FOR YOUR WEEKLY CHECK-INS DURING OUR SEMINARS. EVEN WHEN I (AND OTHER RAAB FELLOWS) FELT STUCK, YOU CONSTANTLY WERE A REASSURING VOICE THAT PUSHED US TO KEEP WRITING AND EXPLORING.

TO DIANA RAAB, THANK YOU FOR YOUR GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS AND FOR BELIEVING IN THE POTENTIALS OF STUDENT WRITERS LIKE MYSELF. I AM FOREVER GRATEFUL FOR THIS FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM, WHICH HAS ALLOWED ME TO GROW AS A WRITER.

METAMORPHOSIS

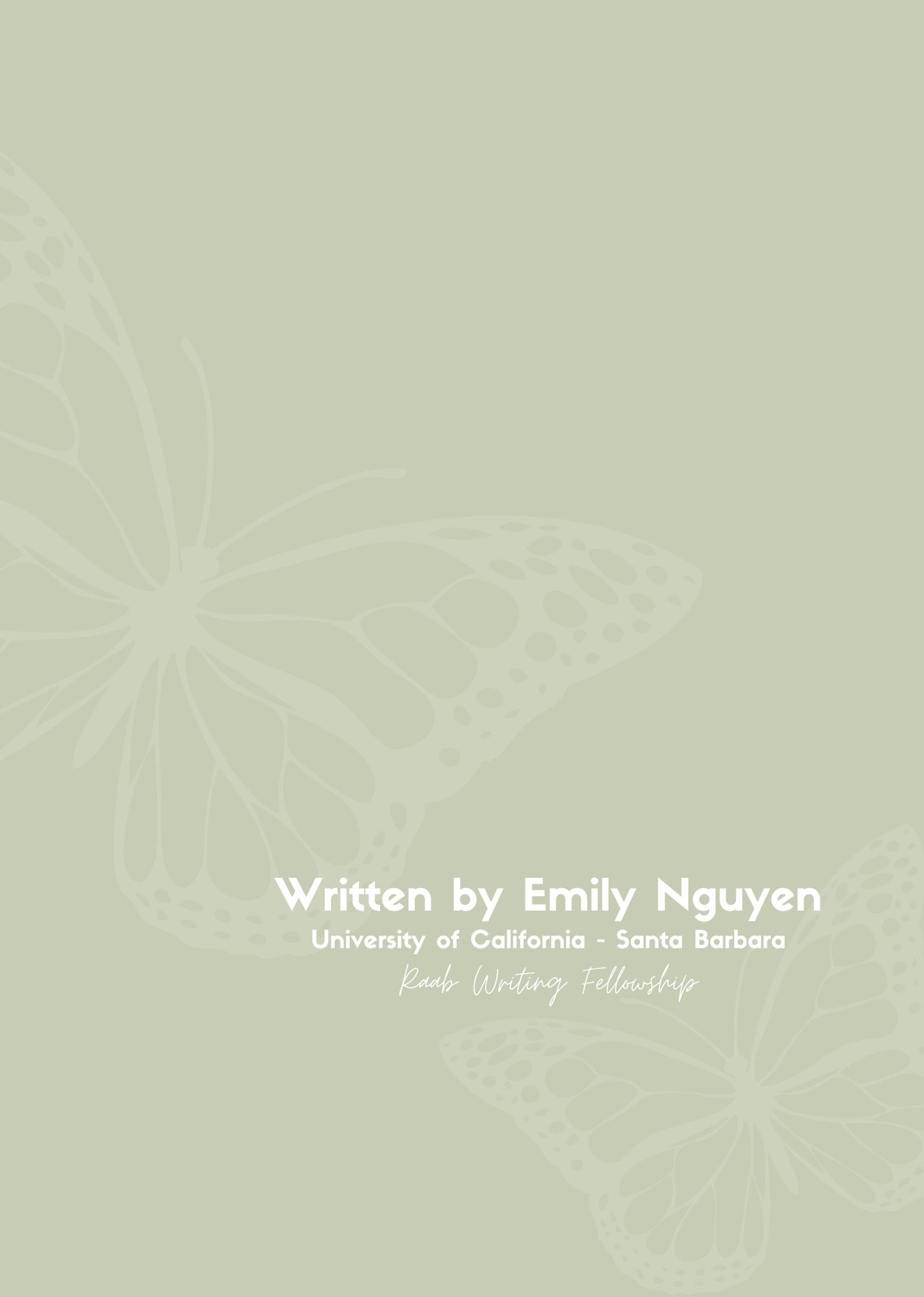
REFERENCES

“THE PRESCOTT COURIER.” *GOOGLE NEWS ARCHIVE SEARCH*, GOOGLE, 19 JAN. 1989, [NEWS.GOOGLE.COM/NEWSPAPERS?ID=zOtSAAAAIBAJ&sjid=ooEDAAAAIBAJ&dq=patri ck-edward-purdy&pg=4920%2C4551153](https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=zOtSAAAAIBAJ&sjid=ooEDAAAAIBAJ&dq=patri ck-edward-purdy&pg=4920%2C4551153).

“VIETNAMESE AMERICAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.” *VIET STORIES*, UC IRVINE, [SITES.UCI.EDU/VAOHP/](https://sites.uci.edu/vaoHP/).

“VIETNAMESE FISHERMEN'S ASSOCIATION V. KNIGHTS OF THE KU KLUX KLAN.” *SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER*, WWW.SPLCENTER.ORG/SEEKING-JUSTICE/CASE-DOCKET/VIETNAMESE-FISHERMENS-ASSOCIATION-V-KNIGHTS-KU-KLUX-KLAN.

METAMORPHOSIS



Written by Emily Nguyen

University of California - Santa Barbara

Raab Writing Fellowship