



# Afterland

*Mai Der Vang*

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**Afterland** Mai Der Vang

**The 2016 winner of the Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets, selected by Carolyn Forché**

*When I make the crossing, you must not be taken no matter what  
the current gives. When we reach the camp,*

*there will be thousands like us.*

*If I make it onto the plane, you must follow me to the roads  
and waiting pastures of America.*

*We will not ride the water today on the shoulders of buffalo  
as we used to many years ago, nor will we forage  
for the sweetest mangoes.*

*I am refugee. You are too. Cry, but do not weep.*

—from “Transmigration”

*Afterland* is a powerful, essential collection of poetry that recounts with devastating detail the Hmong exodus from Laos and the fate of thousands of refugees seeking asylum. Mai Der Vang is telling the story of her own family, and by doing so, she also provides an essential history of the Hmong culture’s ongoing resilience in exile. Many of these poems are written in the voices of those fleeing unbearable violence after U.S. forces recruited Hmong fighters in Laos in the Secret War against communism, only to abandon them after that war went awry. That history is little known or understood, but the three hundred thousand Hmong now living in the United States are living proof of its aftermath. With poems of extraordinary force and grace, *Afterland* holds an original place in American poetry and lands with a sense of humanity saved, of outrage, of a deep tradition broken by war and ocean but still intact, remembered, and lived.

## Afterland Details

Date : Published April 4th 2017 by Graywolf Press

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Author : Mai Der Vang

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## From Reader Review Afterland for online ebook

### Robyn says

From Laos to Minnesota, Minnesota to the Central Valley of California, Mai Der Vang chronicles the Hmong refugee experience. From the 18th century to the war that led to their migration, to the varied experiences in the Afterland, America. Loved these immense poems.

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### Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

Never have I read such a powerful work that humanizes the Hmong experience so personally. Mai Der Vang takes you by the hand and leads you to very emotional and disturbing places; yet she never leaves you there to dwell on the negativity. Highly recommended.

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### ActiveUSCitizen says

Afterland is a powerful, essential collection of poetry that recounts with devastating detail the Hmong exodus from Laos and the fate of thousands of refugees seeking asylum. Mai Der Vang is telling the story of her own family, and by doing so, she also provides an essential history of the Hmong culture's ongoing resilience in exile. Many of these poems are written in the voices of those fleeing unbearable violence after U.S. forces recruited Hmong fighters in Laos in the Secret War against communism, only to abandon them after that war went awry. That history is little known or understood, but the three hundred thousand Hmong now living in the United States are living proof of its aftermath. With poems of extraordinary force and grace, Afterland holds an original place in American poetry and lands with a sense of humanity saved, of outrage, of a deep tradition broken by war and ocean but still intact, remembered, and lived.

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### Jenna says

My review of this book appears on *The Rumpus*: <http://therumpus.net/2017/07/afterlan...>

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### James Huynh says

Incredibly breathtaking. Mai Der's landscape metaphors evoke deeply provoking thoughts regarding the Hmong peoples.

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### Avery Guess says

Mai Der Vang's debut collection Afterland is composed of gorgeous imagery juxtaposed against the horrors of war and what it means to be in exile. It is also a testament to the power of the written word to protect what is under constant threat of erasure. The aftermath of the war in Laos is explored not just in the cost to people

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who had to flee, but in the cost to the land—"It's been forty years of debris / turning stale, and submunitions / still hunt inside the patina of my mud." Afterland is filled with ghosts, spirits who "come to dine / in my kitchen." Here, the spirit is just as much a refugee as the body. In "The Howler," a man "howls the clattering deceased, / whose keening voices I hear / in whispers that live" and in "Thrasher," a "girl-haunt "is the monsoon digesting / The laced agate earth." Threaded throughout the collection is the importance of words and writing to the poet and to the people and land she is writing about because "When the words burn, all that's left is ash." Vang calls on Niam Ntawv—mother of paper or mother of writing—who "when all you had was given // you lined your grave with paper." In "At Birth I Was Given a Book," Vang writes: "They say each birth is given pages / that equals the span of its life. // Last breath happens / when last word has been seen." Thanks to the publication of Afterland, that last word will be seen again and again, allowing the breath to live on in words.

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### **Ellie says**

I'll say upfront that I have a complicated relationship with "poetry as witness" (not my expression but one that applies here). I learn so much from those poems as testimony, as information I need to have, as outrage, but I don't always think the poetic aspects are as prominent as the story.

Afterland falls somewhere in the middle of this. Certainly it is a powerful document about the fate of the Hmong people, their country (Laos) destroyed by the United States and our wars. The pain and suffering is powerfully documented in beautiful language.

I found the first half particularly strong as story and the second half stronger as poetry. There were poems that beautifully combined the witness with poems that stood up on their own. There were many poems that I read more than once both to understand better and to appreciate. A favorite is one called "Calling the Lost" that ends with:

He will call for what left  
to come back,

and for the found  
to never leave.

For me, these lines captured both the witness and the poetry of this collection.

An important book to read, both for the information and the language.

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### **Pamela Laskin says**

Just finished reading the most evocative, powerful poetry collection ever, AFTERLAND by Mai Der Vang. She writes about the Hmong population—the lament of her people and the songs of loss and grief that come with war. Each poem sliced through my skin in its silent, grotesque and powerful imagery as these resilient refugees struggled to escape and survive. Every image is staggering. In the poem "Light from a Burning Citadel" she begins:

"now I am a Siamese rosewood on fire.  
I am a skin of sagging curtain.  
I am a bone of bullet hole.

I am locked in the ash oven of a forest."

So many tears shed for the grief for her people and you, too, will shed those tears. What a powerhouse of language!

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### **Leah says**

Perhaps I'm not in the right mindset to have read these poems. To be honest I knew nothing about the Hmong people before starting to read this book, and have since done a little bit of research and intend on reading more about the history of the Hmong.

That being said, there were only a handful of these poems that resonated with me. For the most part, Mai Der Vang writes intensely dense poetry, impenetrable lines that don't give up their meaning easily. To me they read as stiff and academic. Often a line that should've been beautiful actually just felt empty upon attempt to analyze. Or I would just have no idea what she was attempting to describe, no frame of reference. The poems I liked most were the ones that were more literal, dealt directly with narrative or invoked specific spirits. These pieces such as Dear Soldier of the Secret War, Mother of People Without Script, Thrasher, Dear Shaman, felt more genuine, more like she was speaking from her heart.

This is a worthy collection of poems but I struggled to get through it. I had a hard time following the thought process even from one line to the next, struggling to find meaning in the density of her language, wishing for even a hint of narrative and finding only disjointed line breaks and vocabulary I had to pause my reading to google the definition of. Maybe that is the point. I'm a stranger to her world, and I should have to work for it.

It just felt as though Mai Der Vang was attempting to write the entire history of her people into poetry. But I wondered more than once whether poetry was the right way to say or show everything she is trying to portray.

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### **Liz Mc2 says**

Mai Der Vang's Afterland is a collection of poems "about" Hmong history and experience, destruction and resilience, survival in a new land, after war. Sometimes there are recognizable stories here, but I found these poems strange reading, the images often deliberately—abstract? Oxymoronic isn't the right word, but she creates strange juxtapositions. Here's one example: "Today's bees have swallowed / the last milk of lanterns." Deliberately estranging and alienating, perhaps, to convey something about the strangeness of the refugee experience, of living in the afterland. Some poems make reference to the Hmong having no script, and I wondered if these poems also reflected in some way on the alienation of writing, and writing in English. The images are beautiful and strange, asking the reader to dwell on them. I feel I should re-read this collection, but on the other hand I'm not sure trying to "make sense" is the right way to approach it.

(I don't rate poetry.)

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### **Trina says**

Breathless from the beauty of this collection.

## Elizabeth Willis says

Many thanks to Graywolf for the ARC.

AFTERLAND is a storm; it is lightning illuminating the night “with the kind of light that can only/ Be found in the dark.” Mai Der Vang’s poems are a reaching-out: to ancestors, to origins. She traces these origins from China, centuries past, to the Hmong exodus from Laos, to her family’s immigration to the U.S., in order to grasp onto a history that cries out with the “howls” of the “clattering deceased.” In this way her poems are a remembrance, but also a creation story of Hmong refugees in America. She meditates again and again upon people, especially the dead, as Story: “our/ bodies will be books...When the words burn, all that's left is ash.” Vang’s poems are an important and timely evocation of so many dead, and so many still living, within a war-torn world, and within a nation that would deny their right to live peaceful lives.

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## Craig Werner says

Afterland will be a lasting touchstone for the Hmong American literary tradition, but you don't need to bring identity issues into play to recognize it as a significant debut, rightfully chosen by Carolyn Forché for the Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets. Vang's poems draw effectively on the still mostly-unknown story of the Hmong diaspora, which plunges into some of the uglier aspects of the Vietnam war, specifically the betrayal of the Hmong (in both Laos and Vietnam) who cooperated with the U.S. during the war. The most powerful poems in Afterland grow directly out of that history: the war, the multi-generational traumas connected with exile, and the cultural forces that remain alive in Hmong communities in the U.S., including Madison, Wisconsin, where I live. Vang's not limited to that material; she also has a strong connection with the natural world and issues of consciousness and expression that connect contemporary poets from very different backgrounds. Some of those poems work better than others for me; her strength is in individual images; at times I had difficulties orienting myself to the implied external contexts. Clearly, a poet who'll I'll keep following.

Favorite poems: "Dear Soldier of the Secret War," "Yellow Rain," "The Howler," "Dear Shaman," "Calling the Lost."

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## Michael Morris says

Two of the three well-known poets (at least in poetry circles) whose remarks grace the back of this book (including the judge of the contest the author won) called this volume "groundbreaking." It may be, but I am not sure. I do like the poems here very much. Mai Der Vang's imagery and turn of phrase is, most often, fresh and engaging. Her command of voice is astounding; the characters haunt the reader.

However, there a handful of moments where a whiff of the academy comes out. Sometimes it is an unnecessarily obtuse word; sometimes it is the kind of phrase that wows grad students in workshops, but which communicates little.

I would not such instances are all over *Afterland*, but there is just enough of the scent of the McPoem for me to keep from a bigger rating.

## David Anthony Sam says

Mai der Vang's "Afterland" manages to make surrealistic and visionary poetry accessible. She writes from biography and family history but speaks the universal. Images collide and morph into each other and language and syntax warp away and back into common tongue. I particularly liked:

- Another Heaven
- Original Bones
- After All Have Gone
- Gray Vestige
- This Heft upon YOur Leaving
- Three

Sometimes a poem stretches too far and fails from the surrealism and the warped syntax. But the collection as a whole is a fine one.

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