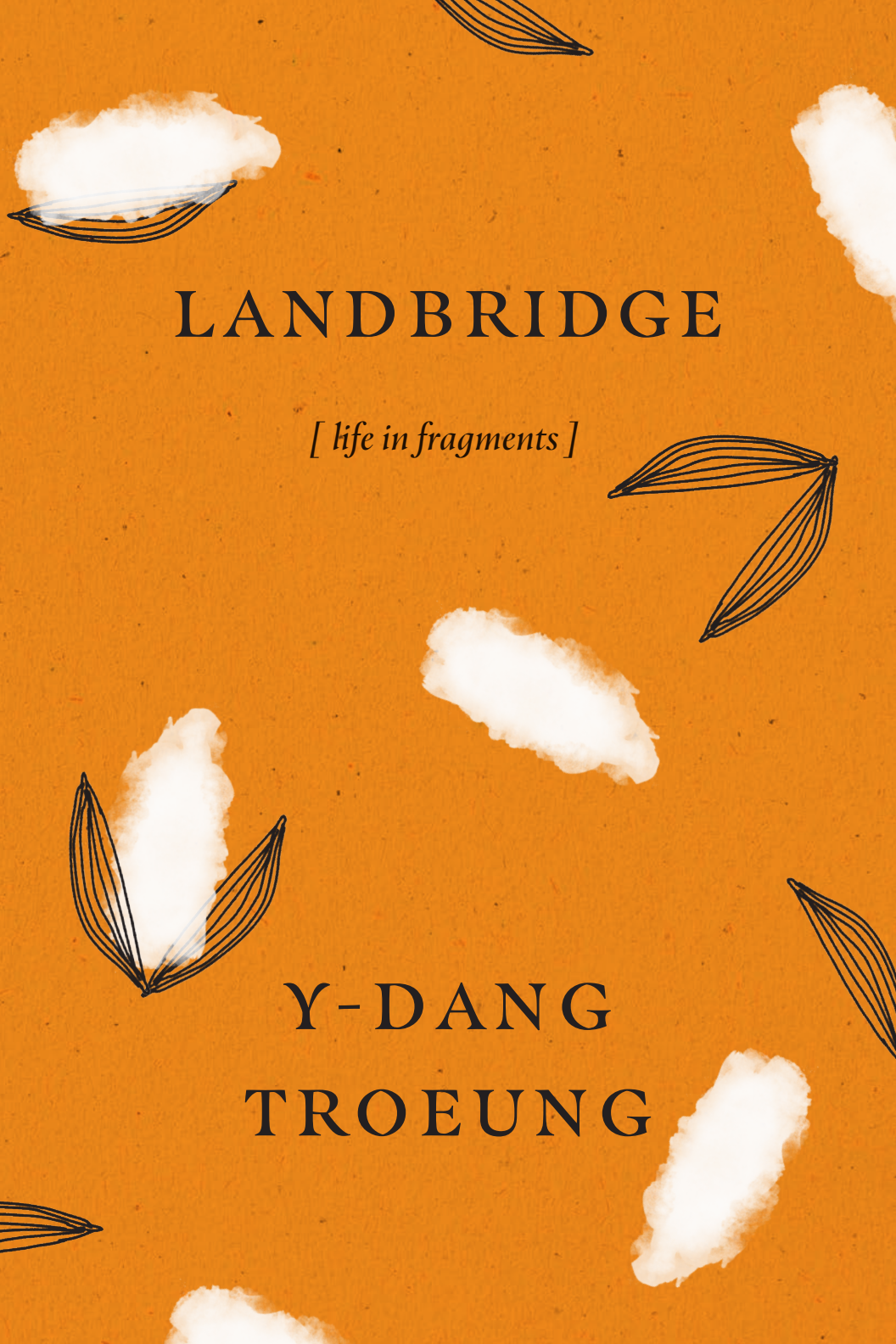




LANDBRIDGE

[life in fragments]

Y-DANG
TROEUNG

[More Praise for *Landbridge*]

“A compelling, multileveled story. At a time when a resurgent global fascism builds much of its support through racist and xenophobic attacks on refugees, this remarkable and beautiful book is a much-needed corrective.” —*Vancouver Sun*

“Y-Dang Troeung’s presence feels so alive in these pages, where wonder and sorrow, motherhood and history trace one another across time and unspool the shape of our present. *Landbridge* has forever altered what I know, how I love, and what I hope.” —Madeleine Thien, author of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*

“*Landbridge* is the most unforgettable book I’ve read in years, a work of astounding humanity and honesty in the face of unimaginable grief. It is no small undertaking, to wrestle with the generational toll of genocide, migration, upended pasts and unreachable futures, yet this is what Y-Dang Troeung does. In their totality, the fragments that make up this memoir are a vital, visceral reminder that, across all manner of tragedy and violence and even time, we are bound to one another by love. For all the pain it charts and of which its author manages to make meaning, *Landbridge* is, above all else, a love story, one that will be remembered.” —Omar al Akkad, author of *What Strange Paradise* and *American War*

“*Landbridge* is among the most profound and heartbreaking accounts to emerge from the Cambodian diaspora. Y-Dang Troeung weaves a complex narrative that speaks to the unceasing traumas of war and dislocation. Each of the fragments rendered here shimmers like a small jewel, at once spare and prismatic. Equal parts memoir, history, and love letter, the collection as a whole is nothing less than a tapestry of life itself, made more beautiful and precious because it is wrought

from the salvaged pieces of all that is broken. A rare and stunning achievement that deserves its place in the literary canon.” —Vaddey Ratner, author of *In the Shadow of the Banyan* and *Music of the Ghosts*

“Heartbreaking, courageous, and exceptional—after finishing *Landbridge* you will want to call everyone you know to tell them to please start reading. You will tell them it is a matter of urgency. This rare book by Y-Dang Troeung is unforgettable.” —Linn Ullmann, author of *Unquiet*

“Y-Dang Troeung is a great ancestor to whom we owe our reverence. Her gift to us is the art of reclamation that renders infinite futures possible. Troeung’s legacy is a refugee lifeworld—powerful in its creation, fearless in its scholarship, and eternal in its love. *Landbridge* is a torch that we must pass on to every generation. The story of her life is an extraordinary fire in my heart.” —Monica Sok, author of *A Nail the Evening Hangs On*

LANDBRIDGE

[life in fragments]

BUY

LANDBRIDGE

[life in fragments]

Y-DANG TROEUNG

Duke University Press

Durham London

2024

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Troeung, Y-Dang [date] author.

Title: Landbridge : life in fragments / Y-Dang Troeung.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024005734 (print)

LCCN 2024005735 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478031123 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478026884 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478060116 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Troeung, Y-Dang, 1980–2022. | Troeung, Y-Dang, 1980–2022—Family. | Troeung, Y-Dang, 1980–2022—Health. | Refugees—Cambodia—Biography. | Refugees—Canada—Biography. | Refugees—Canada—Social conditions. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Ethnic Studies / American / Asian American & Pacific Islander Studies | HISTORY / Asia / Southeast Asia | LCGFT: Autobiographies.

Classification: LCC F1035.C27 T76 2024 (print) | LCC F1035.C27 (ebook) |

DDC 305.9/0691409596092 [B]—dc23/eng/20240802

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024005734>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024005735>

Text design: Emma Dolan

Cover design and illustration: Emma Dolan

Image credits: (watercolour) WONG FOK LOY/ Getty Images; (texture) svetlanais /Adobe Stock

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This book is dedicated to my family: Yok Troeung, Heung Troeung, Meng Troeung, Pheng Troeung, Sophia Troeung, Mary Tsoi, Christopher Patterson, and Kai Basilio Troeung.

And to all Cambodian people, with love.

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[preface]

The intensity of these accounts, the imprint they leave on me, does not lessen with each telling.

A quarter of Cambodia's population died during the genocide; the remaining three-quarters were physically and mentally debilitated.

US bombings, the Khmer Rouge genocide, toxic and carcinogenic exposure, incarceration, urban and rural divestment, deportation.

In this book, theory, fiction, and autobiography blur through allusive fragments. These fragments—a perforated language of cracks and breaks—seek to knit together, however imperfectly, the lifeworlds that inspire me to write here, on this page.

I seek the regenerative possibilities of speaking for myself as a Cambodian refugee. I do not seek to speak for all refugees or all Cambodians, or even some of them, including my family members, whose stories I have reproduced here (as filtered through my own recollections) with their consent and collaborative curation.

My public image as a refugee child rescued from Cambodia has been made and remade frequently throughout my life in ways that have been largely out of my control.

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I am sensitive to the vital issue of voice and appropriation as it relates to life stories and testimonials. Having your story told for you can be painful and wounding, especially when you do not see yourself in someone else's carefully crafted portrait.

For my mother and father, the ruination of wartime is forever etched in their memory, and it remains alive with us, we who carry these histories forward. Dwelling in their memories, I write now of myself, in dialogue with the lifeworlds of my community.

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land bridge

A connection between two land masses, especially continents, that allows the migration of plants and animals from one land mass to the other.

Michael Allaby, *A Dictionary of Zoology*

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My mother holding me at nine months old with cousins (person second-to-left unknown) at Khao-I-Dang (KID) Holding Center, Thailand, September 1, 1980.

Courtesy of the Troeung family. Photo by unknown.

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[portrait]

The image opposite was taken in the refugee camp where I was born. In the background, the mountains of Khao-I-Dang loom, forming a picturesque backdrop for six refugees (my mother, me, an unknown girl, and three members of my extended family). A story of pain subtends and saturates this image—death, illness, disappearance, starvation, forced marriage, child loss, and so much more.

As I look upon this image now, I do not see a portrait of suffering. I see a serendipitous, reconstituted family. I see a mother's fleeting instance of joy born out of a chance encounter with another Cambodian refugee in the camp looking to make a few extra dollars with his Polaroid camera.

What mother would not want a photo—at least one photo—of her new baby in that fragile first year of her life?

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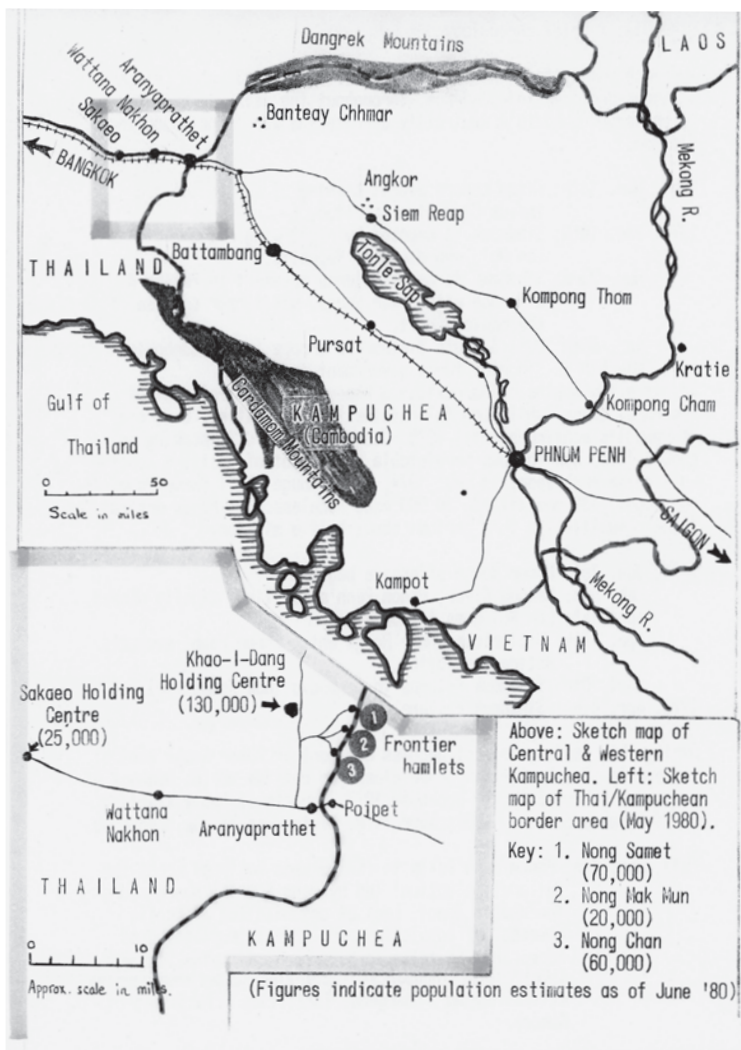
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[transport]

My mother tells me the story of my birth. It is 1979 at the Thai-Cambodian border. Every day, a Red Cross bus arrives in the morning to transport people across the border, into Thailand. After four years of deprivation under the Khmer Rouge, the refugees hope to reach Khao-I-Dang, a camp run by the United Nations and rumoured to be safe. We are at a border camp called Chumrum Thmei that is vulnerable to attacks. The genocide is over, but the war rages on among different militia groups.

When the bus arrives one particular morning, my parents are determined to get on it. They sense an imminent danger and know the time has come to pick up and leave, yet again. In the crowd of refugees pushing forward, they jostle in front of the bus, hoping to be selected. Knowing the sick and the pregnant are given priority, my mother shows her eight-months-pregnant belly to the Red Cross workers and manages to secure a spot for our family. They board the bus and leave Cambodia for the last time.

After a sixteen-hour journey, my family arrives at Khao-I-Dang Holding Center, a sprawling camp inhabited by more than 130,000 people. Soon after they get off the bus, my parents hear



Khao-I-Dang Holding Center on a hand-drawn map, made by relief worker Colin Grafton, 1980. Courtesy of the artist.

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the news about an attack. The night before, Khmer Rouge soldiers had arrived at the Chumrum Thmei border camp on the Cambodian side, ransacking and burning it down to nothing but rubble and ash. Everyone my family knew at the camp was killed, captured, or subjected to worse horrors. It shamed my parents to marvel at their luck yet again. But they also felt that finally, in reaching Khao-I-Dang, they had crossed into a new life.

When my mother tells this story, she likes to emphasize the part about my presence in her womb. *I think it is because of Y-Dang, because I was pregnant with her. That's why we got lucky.*

In Khmer, giving birth is referred to as *chlong tonle* (ឆ្លងទន្លេ) meaning *to cross a river*.

My mother gives birth to me in Khao-I-Dang (เขาอีโต้) about one month after our arrival there. In Thai, *khao* (เขา) means mountain. *I-Dang* (อีโต้) is the name of the mountain near the camp. The camp takes the name of the mountain. My name, Y-Dang Troeung, យ៉ង់ត្រឿង, Mom and Dad always remind me, carries the memory of our survival through multiple crossings.

[currency]

On April 17, 1975, my mother and father, along with my two brothers, walk outside the front door of their home in Kampong Thom, Cambodia, their arms full of food and gifts to welcome the Khmer Rouge soldiers who march into the city. They feel relieved to go back outside. The war, the bombings, and the rockets have come to an end. My mother, a slight woman, resourceful and beautiful, and my father, a gentle rebel, huddle their young boys close to them.

The Khmer Rouge tell people to pack up their belongings and prepare to leave their homes for three days. My mother and father's expressions turn to worry, then fear, then dread. The Khmer Rouge announce warnings that the Americans plan to bomb again. All those in possession of arms must lay them down in the town square. My mother goes to dig up a jar of *riel*, Cambodian currency she had buried in preparation for this day; but as she does so, the Khmer Rouge suddenly announce that money, as well as books, art, and religion, are abolished in the new Democratic Kampuchea.

Banks are blown up. Libraries, cinemas, and temples are destroyed. My parents watch as soldiers point their guns at people

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who refuse to vacate their homes. They watch as strangers, friends, and neighbours are rounded up and taken away.

Decades later, my mother and father tell me that it was a trap. They were not allowed to return to their homes in three days. Instead, they walked. They walked for days and nights into the jungle, into the new Cambodia, Year Zero. They crossed into new lives that would be shattered and remade again and again over the next four decades.

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