

The background of the cover is a textured, painterly illustration of a forest. A young girl with dark hair and bangs is shown from the chest up, looking upwards with an open mouth and reaching her right arm high towards the top of the frame. Her hand is open, with fingers spread. The forest around her is composed of various shades of green and yellow, suggesting foliage and sunlight filtering through the trees. Dark, gnarled tree trunks and branches are visible, framing the girl and the text. The overall style is soft and artistic, with visible brushstrokes and a warm, natural color palette.

# FROM THE TOPS OF THE TREES

**KAO KALIA YANG**

ILLUSTRATED BY **RACHEL WADA**



For the loving arms that hold us high so we can see beyond the fences of our worlds  
—K.K.Y.

To Kalia, who has gone beyond the tops of the trees to share her story with the world  
—R.W.

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**KAO KALIA YANG**

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## Author's Note

I was born in the northeastern province of Loei, on the outer edges of Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, in Thailand, on a cool December dawn. I was four years old when my father climbed high into that tree with me. We came to call that photograph my mother took of us *From the Tops of the Trees*. After that first experience, I begged my father to take me to see the world again and again. He asked, “What is your favorite sight from the tops of the trees?” I answered, each time, “Everyone I love and everything I want to remember forever when we leave this place.”

When I turned six, my family left the refugee camp behind for a life across an ocean I couldn't possibly see from my father's arms in the treetops. It wasn't only my little legs that I had to rely on, it was buses and planes and the arms of my father and the rest of my family carrying me when I grew tired. Then, to my surprise, those legs grew a little longer and stronger—and just as my father had believed, they did indeed take me far beyond the places he has known.

In my way, I've taken him with me to each place I've been: schools in faraway cities, hotels in strange towns, even up and down mountains whose tops are covered with snow year-round. If you poked a long needle through the globe, from that hot place in the sun where I was born, you'd get to where I am now: a writer who travels all over exploring and learning exactly how big the world can be. I take pictures with my heart for my father.

Now, Mai and Yer and I are all adults. In fact, we have all become mothers. We all have children who we believe will one day see how big and wide the world truly is, and travel to the places we've never been.

Chue is pronounced CHEW. It means *bell* and can be a name for a girl or a boy.

Kalia is pronounced kah-LEE-uh. It refers to the dimples on a face.

Hmong is pronounced MOHNG. The word refers to a people, an ethnic minority, from Southeast Asia. Starting in 1975, many Hmong families came to the United States as refugees of war.

Mai is pronounced MY. It is the most common name for a Hmong girl, and it refers to a young girl or woman.

Yer is pronounced to JHER. It is a name given to the youngest girl and also a polite endearment.





**Kao Kalia Yang** is a Hmong American writer and author of the picture books *A Map into the World*, *The Shared Room*, and *The Most Beautiful Thing* as well as a



Photo by Shee Yang

Kao Kalia Yang (right) and her father in America, 2021

number of books for adults, including *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, *The Song Poet*, and *Somewhere in the Unknown World*. Much of Yang's work is inspired by the people in her life, individuals who have gifted her with the strength of their stories. She lives in Minnesota with her husband, daughter, and twin sons. Visit her online at [www.kaokaliayang.com](http://www.kaokaliayang.com).

**Rachel Wada** was raised between Japan and Hong Kong and is currently based in Vancouver, British Columbia. She has created illustrations for magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and even a mural. *The Phone Booth in Mr. Hirota's Garden*, her debut as a children's book illustrator, received the Freeman Award for Children's Literature. In creating the artwork for *From the Tops of the Trees*, Wada referenced photos of young Kalia and her family during their years in Thailand. She loves creating engaging illustrations that are rich in texture, color, and detail. Find more of her work at [www.rachelwada.com](http://www.rachelwada.com).



Jacket illustrations © 2021 by Rachel Wada

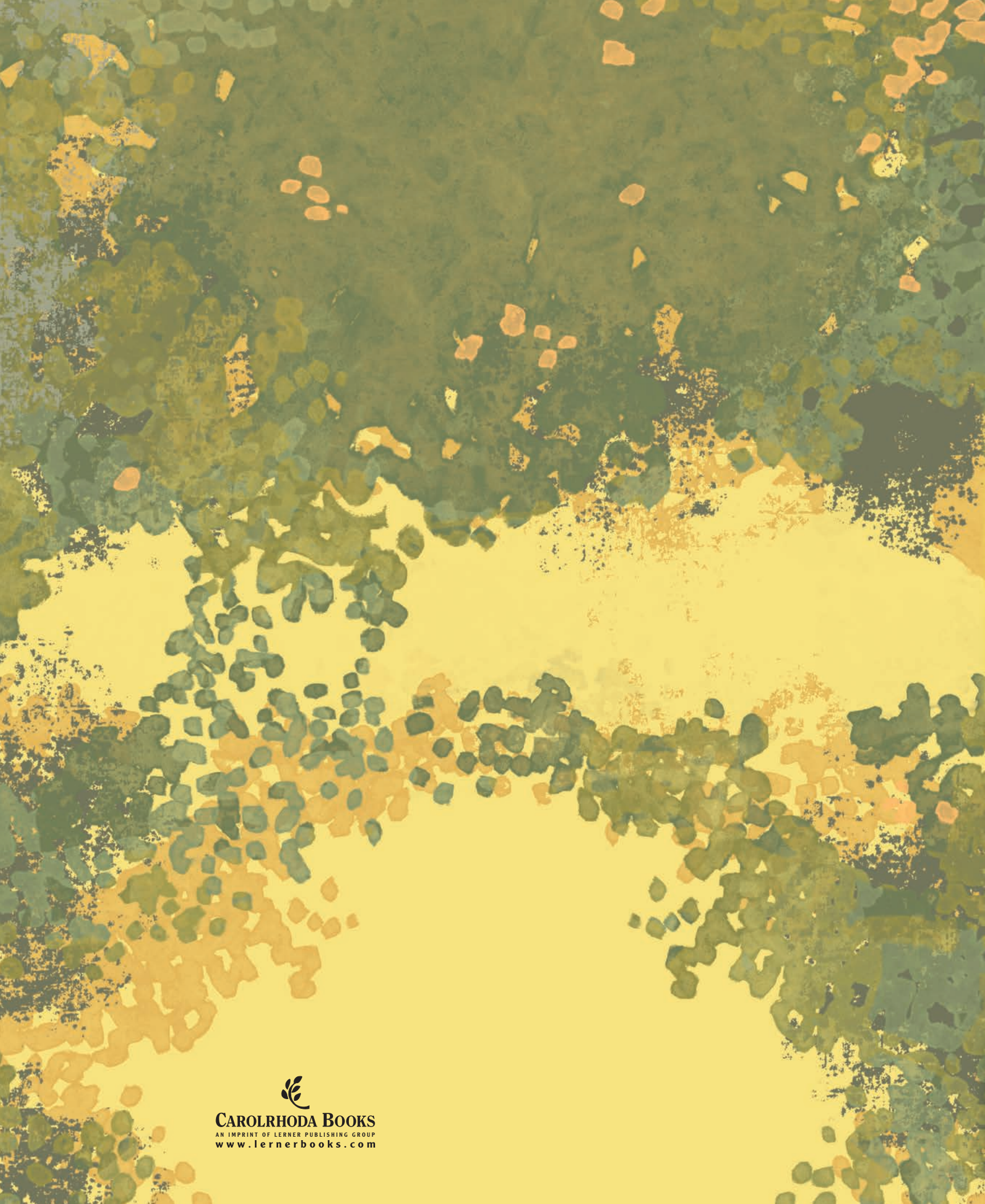


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