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Interview by Kelcey Parker

TW is pleased to join author Kelcey Parker in copublishing interviews with some of our featured writers. Kelcey's "How to Become a Writer" series appears on her website [Ph.D. in Creative Writing](#) [5], where she's been running interviews with authors since July 2011. Each writer answers the same five questions.



Andrew Lam is the author of *Birds of Paradise Lost*; *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*, which won the 2006 PEN Open Book Award; and *East Eats West: Writing in Two Hemispheres*. He's an editor and cofounder of New America Media, an association of over two thousand ethnic media outlets. He's been a regular NPR commentator, and his essays have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Mother Jones*, and many other journals.

In TW's Spring 2014 issue, we've reprinted "[Grandma's Tales.](#)" [6] one of Andrew's short stories from *Birds of Paradise Lost*. Here's an excerpt:

The day after Mama and Papa took off to Las Vegas, Grandma died. Lea and me, we didn't know what to do. Vietnamese traditional funerals with incense sticks and chanting Buddhist monks were not our thing.

'We have a big freezer,' Lea said. 'Why don't we freeze Grandma? Really, why bother Mama and Papa—what's another day or two for Grandma now anyway?'

Since Lea's older than me and since I didn't have any better idea, we iced Grandma.

1. Why did you want to become a writer?

AL: In my freshman year at UC Berkeley, I fell hopelessly in love; in the year after I graduated, my heart shattered. While working at the cancer research laboratory on campus while planning to become a doctor, I took to writing, in part, to grieve. Daytime, I bombarded the mammary tissues of mice with various carcinogens to see how they grew; nights, I gave myself to memories, to heartbreak. I typed and typed. I got good at writing, bored with science, with studying for the MCAT, and so I dropped the test tube and kept the proverbial pen.

2. How did you go about becoming a writer?

AL: I took courses at UC Extension. One of the teachers there said, "Andrew, you are not going to medical school. You are going to creative writing school. And I already sent your stories to San Francisco State University. They say for you to fill out the application, and you are in." I said, "My mom is going to kill me."

I applied. Got in. And my first semester, in an autobiography class, I read my first essay out loud. The assignment was *Why did you want to become a writer?* I talked about the Vietnam War. I talked about childhood memories, the falling bombs, the bravery of men and women. My parents' struggles and fears. My own sadness. My longing to return to those bomb craters filled up with monsoon rain where children, who survived the battles, laughed and swam.

"After all these years, I want to dive into that water," I wrote.

When I finished reading, there was this strange silence. The entire class looked at me in awe. The professor wept. The piece somehow reached the writer Richard Rodriguez and the editor of Pacific News Service, Sandy Close. They took me to tea. They more or less offered me a job as an op-ed writer. I started to travel the world, started to write about my past, my history, and the Vietnamese diaspora. And it resulted in *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*, which won a PEN award. In any case, it was all unexpected. And it started with a heartbreak.

3. Who helped you along the way and how?

AL: Many people helped me. My first English teacher in seventh grade was instrumental in providing a fun and safe environment—his classroom turned into a lunchroom full of books; he gave us books to read in the summer—and I fell in love with the English language as I was going through puberty, a literal transformation along with a new literary life.

Richard Rodriguez became a mentor of sorts, turning my gaze toward literary nonfiction, whereas before my only passion was for short stories and the novel. He gave me Joan Didion, James Baldwin, V.S. Naipaul, Truman Capote, and a whole lot of literary giants to read. My boss, Sandy Close, who won a MacArthur "genius" award, gave me opportunities to travel the world during the years after the Cold War ended. Professor Franz Schurmann of UC Berkeley [cofounder of Pacific News Service who died in 2010] made me think more deeply and seriously than I had before.

My sister bought me William Strunk and E.B. White's classic *The Elements of Style* because I didn't have any writing confidence. English was my third language after Vietnamese and French.

Video of kb8yBEgWhbs

4. Can you tell me about a writer or artist whose biography inspires you?

AL: James Baldwin comes to mind. His is a voice of grace. He wrote at a time when he—a gay black man—was marginalized twice over, at a time of segregation. Yet, he wrote from that margin knowing full well that his voice mattered, that in time the margin reaches and changes the center, integrating with the collective consciousness of this country. His story belongs to America, to all Americans.

It encouraged me—a refugee boy who came from a defeated country that was encouraged to fight, then abandoned by the United States—to write with the hope that mine, too, would in time become an American story.

5. What would you say in a short letter to an aspiring writer?

AL: Be willing to live with disappointment, with heartbreaks and difficult questions when you have no ready-made answers. For as certain as the rain, disappointments will come. And you will have to live with them and embrace them. And work through them. I myself lost a country. I've been homeless and stateless. I lost friends and relatives due to war and the subsequent exodus. I had my heart broken.

And yet, I write to you today feeling profoundly grateful and blessed. Why? In my struggle to overcome grief and confusion, I found myself. And when I spoke up for those who couldn't, I found my tongue. And when I told stories of those oppressed and suffering in obscurity, I found my voice and my direction in life.

You are writing today at a challenging time in which being a citizen of the world is just as important as finding a voice. So you must find the balance between the "I" and the "we," between following your own conviction and finding a way to contribute to the greater good. But move forward, always. Don't be afraid of failure. Or rather, move forward, despite the failures and self-doubts. And keep on writing.

Read More by Andrew Lam

- Audio of Andrew reading "Grandma's Tales": [American Public Media](#) [7]
- Book of Stories: [Birds of Paradise Lost](#) [8](Red Hen Press, 2013)
- Book of Essays: [East Eats West](#) [9](Heyday, 2010)
- Book of Essays: [Perfume Dreams](#) [10](Heyday, 2005)
- NPR Commentaries: [All Things Considered](#) [11]

*This interview originally appeared in a different format as ["How Andrew Lam Became a Writer"](#) [12] in **Ph.D. in Creative Writing** on May 18, 2014.*

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