

LEAH LAX

NOT FROM HERE:
the Song of America



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Leah Lax

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This book is a tribute to the great Svetlana Alexeivich, and to our epic, fragile freedom.

With gratitude to Houston Endowment, the Brown Foundation, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, and Inprint, for their vision and their trust.

We bear each other, hoping to breathe in each other's freedom.

LAURENT BERLAND

It was as if he stood me squarely before the world, removed the blindfold, and ordered me to open my eyes.

CAROLYN FORCHÉ

Part One

The Curtain Rises

Not From Here began as an opera. Like a life still lived, its songs — its stories — are unfinished, as is mine. As is my country's. Each was given as an offering, a shared rush to freedom. *Come closer*, these stories whisper. *Let me tell you how I did it, and you will know what we have a little bit more.*

Every account reaches again and again for the fabled American Dream. It is a dream. “Not one of us was here when this house was built,” Isabel Wilkerson wrote. We are heirs to its fissures, its cracks spreading beneath the surface.

I was born a grandchild of refugees, but my family never told me our stories; my grandparents' experiences in coming to the United States were intentionally buried in favor of their American Dream. All through my childhood, I wondered, *Who are we?*

What are we without our stories? Sometimes we write new ones in the void. As a teen, when I found the Jewish ultra-Orthodox, I thought I had found the lost stories of my people. I left the girlfriend with whom I was in love and lived among them, largely apart from mainstream society, for thirty closeted years. Then, I lost my faith. I faced my secret desires. I left.

I became an immigrant in my own country, blindsided with the acute desire of an outsider. Online cacophony was overwhelming. When out in public, I darted glances at the varied welter of humanity and found no answers. Mornings, the questions were waiting in the mirror: *Am I of this place? If so, who are we?* “We are all migrants through time,” Mohsin Hamid wrote. It seemed he wrote that for me.

I finished graduate school, taught a few classes, and continued to hover on the edge like a stranger who wouldn't go home. Then I was asked to write an opera.

They wanted it based on immigrant stories of my immigrant city, but to write those voices, I had to know my city and speak its language. I went downtown to tell the opera director he was making a mistake, but then I was in Anthony Freud's crowded office on the edge of a small white sofa. Behind him, shelves of opera books, music books, and elegant items were tastefully arranged. I knew I wanted this. I cleared my throat, pictured my refugee grandparents and thought, *This is a whole nation of immigrant families; we are a nation of immigrants.*

It seemed in that moment that an underground train had always run beneath my family wafting its smoke and darkness long after their journey to this country was forgotten. *Was that it?* I thought.

The transition, the losses, never leave? Are we as a nation haunted by memories we don't know we have? The rumblings must be everywhere.

Freud was talking, saying the new work should reflect the audience in all its colors and stories, that audience and singers would become facing mirrors in a mutually defining dance. There was his inquisitive face, his keen gaze. I will never know why he offered me this commission.

“It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born,” Mohsin Hamid wrote. He meant the immigrant passage, which he envisioned as a portal of darkness, then an emergence into light, into a fractured world.

I began to search my city for people willing to tell their stories, and began to listen.

About a month into the project, I took a break and went into a nail salon run by a group of Vietnamese women. With the fingertips of my hand in a dish of warm soapy water, I asked the stylist holding my other hand for her story. I spoke with all the sincerity one might use to address an intimate, someone holding your hand. “Tell me, where are you from?” I said, *sotto voce*. “How did you come here?”

I imagined myself her friend asking uncomplicated questions, the answers to which I had a benign right to know. I couldn't hear my own subtext: *Of course you're not from here, and I am*. “I just like stories,” I added, and couldn't hear this as trivializing her experiences. Then, as if offering enticement — proof of the great value of what I was doing — I told the woman that the mayor of Houston was interested in the project, in her story.

I think now with a sigh of how suspicious, how careful people in communist Vietnam had to become about interrogations by strangers after the war. To tell that woman that a government official was interested in her testimony! I didn't yet know about the millions of people the communist victors sent to prison camps for the most arbitrary of reasons; didn't imagine the woman holding my hand could have endured something like an armed official striding unannounced into her home who might, for example, count rice bowls in her cabinet and then arrest them all. ‘There are five bowls here and only four people are registered to live in this house. Who are you hiding??’

The woman flinched at my question, a quick clench of my hand, and muttered something to the stylist at the next station. Chatter in Vietnamese, loud and agitated, exploded in the shop. They could not get me out of there fast enough.

Intimations of a secret past. I had found the rumblings. They were not so underground.

The one hundred twenty-three people who spoke to me that year were my teachers; they taught me America. They had come from around the world, had left their homes both voluntarily and involuntarily, fleeing war (wars my country had fed or caused or drove) or they fled persecution, or gangs, or poverty. They came for an education, or for a job, or marriage, or to join their family, or seeking safe haven. Every one of them came to the United States to start over.

We met in diners and restaurants, in coffeehouses, office buildings, corner stores, and auto shops, in used cars, school lobbies, parking lots, sparsely furnished apartments, and opulent suburban homes. I listened to men, women, and children. With each, I said, “Please begin with *I was born. . .*” I knew I was looking for far more information than I needed for an opera libretto, but it seemed I needed to know, why choose a life of uncertainty and sweeping change? Why leave your home to rebuild without a foundation?

They often began slowly, even hesitantly, then sped up as if compelled, and could talk for hours. The accounts could be disjointed, or halting, the speaker exuberant, or determined, grieving, or damaged, triumphant, or angry, or starry-eyed, their English careful, or creative, educated, or nonexistent. As the stories unfolded, old joys and traumas bloomed before us. Many had never told anyone before. The men tended to cry.

I had found the American Dream very much alive, and it spoke with an accent. Perhaps it always has. I had thought that old myth badly tarnished, but from my Hasidic past, I knew how a myth can offer timeless hope one may need to live. I gave that dream credit for being no less than such a myth.

With every speaker, I felt a keen affinity that I didn't understand. I thought, *But I was born here*. Now I know that I had been hoping to follow them more surely into America. Instead, I uncovered my country constantly rebuilding itself, found its great beating heart.

The Refuge, by Houston Grand Opera, debuted in November of 2007. In a nod to the treks so many had endured, the performers sang barefoot. "Our stories are your stories," they sang. "Now, we are here."

Houston Grand Opera reprised the work the following spring at Miller Outdoor Theater in Houston's Hermann Park, at the center of the city. The Miller is an old bandshell that fronts a great grassy hill, sporting enormously tall amplifiers. I walked the hill that night, crowded with groups on blankets sharing food and drink and chattering in dozens of languages, including English, thousands of people from here and not from here but here *now*, children darting and laughing, and felt, finally, that I had come home.

Nine years later, January 2016

A Twitter feed pinged through my city. Immigration and Customs Enforcement had set up checkpoints at key intersections. There were arrests. "Stay home," people tweeted. "Stay away."

I paced the floor in my little rented duplex scrolling for news. Houston had a longstanding, unspoken policy of no immigration raids or profiling. I pictured a woman I had met for the opera project, short-haired and heavysset. She came to Texas as a migrant worker picking crops in the Rio Grande valley and sleeping outdoors, then made her way on foot hundreds of miles to Houston, where she obtained residency, then citizenship, and raised educated, productive children. "You know how one friend might give you dinner, but the next one is a better friend because he lets you go to the refrigerator yourself?" she said. "Houston is that kind of friend." When she said that, I heard: *the US is that kind of friend*.

The following year, deportations in my county at the center of Houston went up two hundred percent.

2018

The online map was marked with red X's, each X a protest march of people displaying their outrage about children being snatched from their parents by US patrol at our southern border. The screen was covered in red X's. My country was on fire. Another search, and another map indicated a rash

of buildings in a five-mile radius around my home. I got in the car and went to one of them, on the border of Houston's enormous medical center.

The place loomed inscrutable, stripped of all signage, windows covered and blackened. Inside were over a thousand adults and hundreds of children who had come in pursuit of a dream. I got out and stood on the curb squinting in the Texas sun as cars zoomed by in this nation of immigrants.

Then the online map disappeared.

To the reader:

I edited out the ums and repetitions and "corrected" the grammar in these accounts with real regret, because doing so altered the rhythm of their music. I smoothed partial sentences and reset stories in the past tense that had been spoken all in the present as if the events were just then unfolding before them.

Theirs was a language that sang with the determination of survivors. Often, the speaker had learned English at work or on the streets, adopted phrases from television and street signs. I teared up as I worked to create a more familiar path for you to travel. I felt I was erasing their songs.

If you will, try to imagine these stories each in its own unique rhythm and music. Imagine a face with each account, each its own shape and shade. Maybe you will hear your own music as well, and your family's, in harmony or in beautiful dissonance to your own, and that will flesh out for you the 'we' of your country a little bit more.

Before you are some of America's most operatic of voices. Together, we make the music.

Part Two

We Fled Danger: The Aftermath of War

Scene One

Luisa, *El Salvador*

It was 1986. My son Leib was seven, Libby was five, Yossie, three, Avrami was a toddler, and I was heavily pregnant. I moved as if through water from kitchen to playroom to the yard where the children played, where Gloria — fellow laundress, nanny, seamstress, cook, and my Spanish professor — watched, sort of. She was really watching a flock of birds in the ailing old elm. I dragged over a plastic chair. “Que estas mirando?” I said. *What are you looking at?*

She was patient with my limited Spanish. “In my country, there are no birds,” she said, enunciating slowly to help me understand.

“No birds? Really? How is that possible?”

Gloria was from El Salvador, where civil war had raged longer than I knew, in part because I paid little attention to the world and its news. She had run from that war, had once told me that the sound of gunfire had shaken her sanity. Even when she said that I didn’t ask questions.

“Guns,” she said. “There are no birds in my country because of gunfire. And people shoot them for food.”

Sparrows as food...

“Not one?”

“I didn’t see any for years, until I came here.”

I nodded for a sympathetic moment, but Gloria’s presence always threatened to breach the wall of the religious bubble in which we lived with things like guns and war and no more birds. I said nothing more. Instead, I turned to the children as if to reassure them of paradise.

Nineteen years later

It was one of those Houston spring mornings I loved, when warm sun couples with a cool wind. The city's signature azaleas were bursting everywhere in pinks and yellows and whites. I pulled into the circular drive of a stately brick home that sat like a crown on a hill in a neighborhood of manicured gardens, oil money, and velvet silence. I parked, rolled down a window, and settled to wait for the translator. A scent of roses was in the air.

Inside that house was the woman I had come to meet, who daily scrubbed already gleaming parquet floors, deodorized perfectly clean porcelain toilets, and dusted shining countertops. Millions like her and like Gloria were crossing our border with Mexico every year despite patrols and walls, fleeing impossible circumstances.

Anthony Freud had heard of this woman from a Houston friend who, like him, was also from the UK. I imagined the conversation over afternoon tea. "Oh yes," the friend says, "Houston is quite different from England. Why, I hired a housekeeper and, as we speak, her son is coming to Houston in the trunk of someone's car!" Freud reaches for a biscuit and the endless sweep of humanity across our borders steps out of the shadows. He hears the music, fresh and alive.

The woman was small in stature, with a sturdy build and long, wavy hair. She said little at the door, simply indicated with a turn on her heels that we were to follow her into an elegant dining room, where she gestured for us to sit at a carved maple table in chairs of rich brocade. Nearby was a marble-topped breakfront and on it, a crystal vase filled with a burst of yellow sunflowers. Only at our urging she took a seat as well, next to the translator, and darted repeated glances at the door.

I made a short introduction and presented the release form, which she quickly signed. I felt I had done my homework, but as I clipped a microphone to her collar and switched on the recorder, I couldn't see the ghosts of El Salvador that had followed this woman and two million like her into my country, hovering over us all that day.

A glance at my notes: She was twenty-seven years old. She had two boys, ages nine and eleven. She had immigration issues.

I had a vague idea that the opera company might help her find legal help, and that was all...