

“Endless Storms, Endless Bailing”: Luong La

2017. Acrylic on wood. 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ " w by 8" h.

David Feinberg and Beth Andrews, with contributions from Storyteller Luong La and from visual artists Michelle Englund, Kimchi Hoang, Jennifer Hensel, Kristin Anton, Sima Shahriar, Paula Leiter-Pergament, Sara Feinberg, Julia Breidenbach, Jane Bollweg, and Annie Nickell.

Luong La, Lu for short, was a teenager when he and his family escaped by boat from Vietnam. The family had plans to leave on the second day of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. It is the country's biggest holiday, so the hope was that the celebrations would distract from their departure. During this time, Lu could trust no one. He grew up in Hoi An, a small village in South Vietnam near the North Vietnamese border. Secrecy was very important in order not to be caught by the authorities. Lu's girlfriend, now wife, could not even know that Lu and his family were leaving. The day before their departure, she was at his house talking about their plans for the next day, as if everything was normal. She had no idea the next day Lu and his family would be gone.

Once the ship departed, they were aboard for many days. It was very cold and wet, and they easily lost track of time. As the boat sailed closer to Central Vietnam, the Chinese captured them. They were taken to an island near China and interrogated as if they were spies. Luckily, Lu's father spoke Chinese and was able to explain that they were escaping from Vietnam. Upon learning this, the Chinese gave them food and water and allowed them to sail away. A few days later, they encountered a Taiwanese fishing ship and hoped they would tow them to Taiwan. The fishermen said they could not, but gave them directions, food, and water.

As they journeyed on, a large storm hit their boat and they became lost. Once again, cold and wet, time became blurred. Because they were so worried and stressed, they were unable to eat. The intensity of the storm filled the boat with water. They used anything they could find to bail the water out; buckets, hats, cups, jugs, their hands, and even wrung out t-shirts. After the storm when they finally reached Taiwan's shore, everyone was happy to be safe and free, but didn't know where to go. The captain of another ship gave them directions to "follow the star." Lu's family eventually ended up in Hong Kong.

Sixteen years after escaping, Lu went back to Vietnam, found his girlfriend, Kimchi, and they married. Today, they reside in Minnesota.