

# BRICK

A L I T E R A R Y J O U R N A L



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KEVIN ADONIS BROWNE OCEAN VUONG ALEKSANDAR HEMON LINA MERUANE  
ROBERT HASS KEGURO MACHARIA CASON SHARPE AMANDA MEI KIM  
MYRNA KOSTASH JASPREET SINGH MAAZA MENGISTE JOSÉ TEODORO

# Van Life

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AMANDA MEI KIM

## 1. Ban de!

Every month, my uncle Kenji and tía Sol would drive up the coast from San Diego to the wide, green plain of Oxnard, California, where my family had been farming and working in the fields since the end of World War II. We would host a garage party for them, dragging the mowers and buckets of tools to the driveway to make room for a ping-pong table covered with platters of futomaki, inari, teriyaki chicken, steamed corn, and watermelon slices. We sat on wooden crates and threadbare couches in the cool garage, balancing paper plates of chicken and potato salad on our knees while listening to Japanese folk music on a cassette player.

Uncle Kenji, my first best friend, drank and smoked a little too much, read philosophy books, and disappeared to Mexico for months at a time, eventually returning with Marisol, who was fourteen years older than me and, depending on her mood, would either dress me up as a disco dancer or tackle me to the ground with all the love and authority of an older sister.

Sol told me a story recently, in the fulsome, lyrical English she picked up after forty years in California: “Remember that blue van Papa used to have?” She was referring to Kenji’s faded 1965 Ford landscaping van. “He would have you sit right in front, right on top of the engine cover. Your butt must have been on fire, but who cared? We were so happy then.”

I didn’t remember, but I could imagine it. Our family was part of a group of agricultural workers

and tenant farmers—Japanese, Mexican, Filipino, and Chumash—living in a region famous for strawberries, labour strikes, and boxers. We grew, caught, traded, and foraged our own food. We had a sense of abundance even though we were all poor. My mother or grandmother would shout, “Ban de!” and my siblings and cousins and I would clamber into the van, elbow our way to an overturned crate or a bag of mulch to use as a seat, and cling to each other as we wound our way through mountain roads and coastal bluffs. We never knew where we were going until the door slid open to reveal a forest floor covered in fat pine cones, a stretch of glittering tide pools full of salty limpets and rock crab, or, usually, a field full of unpicked beans, or corn stalks that needed to be cut down.

Every part of our lives involved vans. On New Year’s, my grandparents lit incense for their van, just as they once had for their horses and cows. Our only public art was the painted vans we saw on the highway—muscled stallions galloping across the desert, ocean sunsets with a saint floating in the sky. Our Lady of Guadalupe was more popular than Jesus of Nazareth by a mile. My favourite was an enormous Godzilla holding a van with a painting of Godzilla holding a van . . . Whenever I saw it on a country road, I would roll the window down, stick my hand out, and give the driver a thumbs-up. The driver would always wave back.

Popular, too, in the seventies were conversion vans with futuristic decal stripes and bubble windows, designed entirely for leisure. I had never seen one up close until I met Kendall, my first white friend, at a summer recreation centre program. Her family lived in a tan stucco house in the middle of a





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rectangular subdivision that cut into the hillside above our farm. Their gold van had luxurious carpeted levels where we lounged and drank name-brand sodas from the mini-refrigerator.

I felt so lucky to be driven home in that van after a sleepover, singing “Blueberry Hill” along to the radio with my new friend, when we stopped suddenly. Kendall and I crawled to the front and saw her mother hunched over the steering wheel, her body shuddering, tears rolling down her face, her hand on the radio volume knob.

“The DJ said that the King . . .” her mother sputtered, “is . . . dead.”

Kendall wrapped her arms around her mother’s shoulders.

I didn’t know what was going on. We didn’t have a king. England didn’t even have a king. I was pretty sure they weren’t talking about Tarzan, or Kong, or the Burger King king.

“How did he die?” I asked.

“God called him to heaven.”

I thought of the laminated Bible placemats she had shown me at breakfast. “Jesus loves all God’s children, but he doesn’t save everyone,” she said as she spooned Cool Whip onto my waffles. I was drooling over my plate, my eyes riveted to the ladle overflowing with a puffy white cloud of palm oil and syrup.

“There’s more where that came from, and you can eat as much as you want,” she whispered.

“Where?” I asked.

“In heaven.”

*Lucky Elvis.*

Her mother let out a long shriek, hit the fat padded-leather steering wheel with her palms, turned the key

in the ignition, and drove me home. I never told my parents about that ride. Somehow, I knew that crying over Elvis was a luxury we could not afford. Kendall and I returned to our respective vans and lands, never seeing each other again, even though we only lived a few miles apart.

## 2. Dream Big, Live Small

I heard a story on public radio last month. Apparently, millennial coders, accountants, and others have happily taken up the van life. A web search for #vanlife reveals an endless stream of Instagram posts of customized vans, gourmet campfire meals, tire tracks on forest paths, sandy beaches, and desert floors. There are hacks, builds, DIY instructions, and even blueprints for Range Rover and Fiat Ducato “mods.”

The journalist opened her story with these words: “People in the van life share the big dream of living small and going places.” She featured a thirty-something white man who outfitted his van with pine panelling and bamboo floors. He demonstrated the space-saving features, sliding the table out from under the bed.

“Whoa,” the journalist said.

I imagined him in a faded, button-down shirt and full beard, some leather flip-flops. She described the van’s headroom and narrow interior, and I knew it was a Mercedes Benz Sprinter even before she named it.

I had a taste of van life, eating Velveeta because it doesn’t go bad and living in the seventies version of the exact same cargo van. Ours was bright green and modified for camping, one of just twenty or so sold in the U.S. My mother spent twenty-five thousand dollars on it, which was a scandal back then. She could

have bought an actual house with that money, but she had just discovered that my father was having an affair and she was determined to empty their shared accounts—a signal that she, too, could destroy what they had built together.

She bought custom leather furniture that barely fit in our living room. She donated money to a guru and invested in a water-ballet school. When we went shopping at Saks, she wore a heavy belt of sterling silver that let the sales staff know *We're here to spend!* I picked out my own earrings in the fine-jewellery section, two flower-shaped clusters of emeralds.

It didn't take long for the money to disappear, followed by the silver belt and the earrings.

When my parents split up, they each took two kids. My two older brothers went with my father, and my younger sister, Sarah, and I climbed into the van with our mother and drove to Ojai, a wealthy mountain enclave where she had found a job as a housekeeper. We lived in the maid's quarters of a three-storey mansion, above a middle-aged man in a wheelchair, his younger brother with downy yellow hair, and a caregiver who came from Vietnam as a refugee. I was responsible for vacuuming up miles of wheelchair tracks, dragging the hose for the central vacuum system down the main spiral staircase—also carpeted—and piling the coils into the elevator for the ride back up.

My most vivid memory from those days was of Tom rolling toward me in his wheelchair, whispering, "Water, please." He could barely push air through his vocal cords and had to use both hands to lift a small cup of water to his lips. He had once been tall. His frame filled the wheelchair, and sometimes

his broad shoulders would tilt and he would lean over the armrest. Either his brother, Robert, or the caregiver, Nguyen, would gently push him upright. He must have weighed 250 pounds or more. It took two men to help him with his daily needs.

Just as Tom depended on us, we depended on him to roll onto his van lift every day and go to his office, where he presided over the cement empire he had built before a neurological disease weakened his body in his late thirties.

The adults seemed to get along. They enjoyed wine and casseroles. My mother was in high spirits—impossibly high—often laughing about my father. "Who could want an old man like that?" She made pots and pans clatter as she cooked new dishes such as Hungarian tomato chicken stew for these people we barely knew, our temporary family. "Some cabernet, anyone?"

I could feel how thin the air was getting in that hillside mansion. The tall cathedral windows shimmered with the blue light reflecting off the pool and the bright pink of a California sunset. The carpets sparked and crackled with static electricity.

All it took was a single hair to burst our bubble. One day, as my mother was doing laundry, she found a wiry black pubic hair in Robert's sheets and was furious. When the van rolled up the long driveway, she was waiting for them, holding the hair in a hand towel. She accused Robert and Nguyen of being gay lovers. A frantic anger filled the house as the two men rolled Tom into the elevator. My mother ran up the staircase to meet them when the door opened: "Don't lie, don't lie to me, you perverts!" They yelled back. After days of kitchen arguments and slammed





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pantry doors, she decided we couldn't live under the same roof. We moved our belongings out of the maid's quarters and into our van in their backyard, where we lived for another eight months while my mother continued working for them and my sister and I finished out the school year.

I made peanut-butter sandwiches for my sister and waited for us to be evicted. I'm still surprised they let us stay so long. Either we really did need each other, or they didn't want to put my sister and me out. We were five and ten.

Today, when I see vans in my neighbourhood, I can tell when there are people living inside—by the heat shields, the privacy curtains, and the fogged windows cracked open to let in fresh air. Even in summer, van life can be cold at night. There's nowhere to go to the bathroom, and smells can't escape metal and glass. You keep your food in a plastic bin. You bathe with a washcloth that is never totally clean or dry. You wear gym clothes to bed and school clothes to gym. Bed clothes are a luxury.

We lived out of that van until my mother found a small one-bedroom house for us, but we didn't stay there long either. In a few years, we were back in our rickety farmhouse with my father and my brothers. By the time we moved back, he had lost his wholesale-produce company and our 250-acre citrus farm. My mother told everyone what a terrible farmer he was. "He's arrogant. That's why he can't grow anything." My aunt told me a different story, that his customers dropped off when my mother called them one by one, accusing them of being complicit in his affair.

We were able to keep the house and twenty acres of farmland in exchange for my father's labour on a

four-hundred-acre lemon orchard. At night he hitched lamps to the tractor so he could manage the orchard, and during the day he worked our twenty acres.

Around that time, unbeknownst to me, I would appear in some B-roll for a documentary about “car people.” My college friend saw it in one of her social-work classes. She described the scene to me. I was a teenager, working at a farmers’ market somewhere in Los Angeles, probably Santa Monica, unloading heavy crates of cabbage and Chinese vegetables. By this time, the green paint on that old Mercedes Benz van was oxidized and faded. The cabinetry was gone. The back windows were covered in cardboard so we wouldn’t break them by accident with our market tent poles. The floor had rusted through, and my father had welded steel plates to the body. Every week, we would criss-cross the Southland—Torrance, Redondo Beach, Pasadena, South Pasadena, West Hollywood, Santa Monica, Burbank, Pacoima, Ventura—and then head north to Carpinteria and Santa Barbara. To prevent the engine from overheating, we filled burlap sacks with ice and packed them around the radiator.

I imagine that the documentarians showed me as a contrast to people living in their cars, a healthy farm girl and a trusty work van. Maybe there was a bit of a racial twist. It was shot at a time when people only knew how to frame a single issue, before intersectionality. I could have told the filmmakers I was a former car person too, though my aunts and uncles would disagree. They’d say that my mother chose to live in a van, but I’m not so sure. Between the bombing of Pearl Harbor, when her family’s Palos Verdes landlord evicted the entire farming cooperative and stole

all their crops; two relocations to military-exclusion zones in California; two concentration camps in two states; and seven years in migrant-labour camps, she had spent most of her childhood in tents, shacks, and barracks scattered across deserts, orchards, and foothills, where she lived as an exile in her own country. When she became an adult, her restlessness never ebbed. It flooded over us.

### 3. Last Legs

Our green van kept running into the nineties, so it turned out to be a good investment after all, though still not as good as a house. When it finally broke down, my mother put all my belongings inside it. By that time, my parents had moved away from Oxnard to a little ranchette in Fairmead, a poor, unincorporated African American town in what was once the heart of California’s Klan country. Before he lost his words, my father would joke, “Fairmead: not good, not bad, just fair.”

When I went to visit my parents in their last home together, I spent most of my time in that van, especially at night when it was a few degrees cooler. I would lie down across a row of cardboard boxes of clothing and letters and smoke a cigarette. My books were tossed in a pile in the middle of the floor.

My things must have irritated my mother so—a college textbook on Sanskrit epics, which she would have loved to have studied if she had had a path to college; the handmade futon my grandmother gave me; and the boxes of childhood outfits, hand-me-downs from cousins and aunts who no longer visited her. She was exiled again. They said she had pulled too many “stunts,” their word for her outbursts that

took place whenever there were enough people to form an audience, such as graduations (mine), anniversaries (my grandparents'), funerals (too many to count). How many times had I looked up to see a row of faces staring at us, mouths all forming *o's*? In restaurant parking lots and front yards, the neighbour's house, during parents' night, and even on the bus during a field trip to the Tule Lake concentration camp, surrounded by dozens of Japanese American families. The bus driver offered to stop so people could take pictures of the scenery. "We're not stopping, no matter what! No! No! No! No!" she yelled.

After that trip, one of my aunts asked me, "How did that make you feel?"

I didn't even know.

"It's okay to be embarrassed."

As I read my books by flashlight in the van, I could hear my mother yelling at my father inside the thinly insulated house, surrounded by withered almond trees and irrigation canals full of grey water. I kept a well-calculated distance from the argument—close enough to monitor them and far enough away that she couldn't throw a rope over me and drag me under. Sometimes, I would answer the howl and join the fight, but I could always leave, unlike my father, who after a series of small strokes couldn't speak or drive. He needed someone to lift him up from the deep couch and lean him against his walker, which wasn't hard to do at his weight, probably less than 120 pounds.

When I wasn't reading in the van, I would walk around the property, always stopping to see what was happening in the neighbour's water-collection pond. He had installed a water recirculator, which

captured irrigation water in a ditch and sent it around his orchard a few times before it went downstream. Frogs lived in the ditch pond. They were often disfigured, with missing or extra or truncated limbs; one or both eyes engorged; humps on their backs and thighs; S-curves in their spines; tumours; bleached, translucent, or missing skin.

With their jelly-like eggs, frogs absorb pollution before they even hatch. As squishy tadpoles, they filter water-borne chemicals through their lungs and are susceptible to parasites that stunt their limbs. The sun's radiation alters their DNA. They drink pesticide-laced water through their permeable skin and breathe fumes from oil wells and the diesel trucks that haul out half the nation's fruits and vegetables.

Whenever my mother saw Hmong American children playing in the irrigation ditches, she would stop the truck and jump out. "Get out! Get out of that water. It's poison! You're going to grow horns and tail!" But they didn't listen. That's when I felt the most compassion for her, when she was absolutely right, and still no one listened to her.

#### 4. Lay Down My Sleepy Head

A few months ago, on my way to a workshop about trauma in rural communities, I drove down a long county road to the interchange with Highway 99, which bisects the state lengthwise, so I could visit the house where my parents once lived and my father died.

A safety railing had been installed since we'd lived there. Better this way. A railroad track ran parallel to the highway, and a pedestrian once got trapped between the lanes of oncoming traffic and a freight train. Days after the accident, his family was still

picking up his bones and flesh from the side of the tracks and along the highway.

When the news reported the story, they described the victim as a middle-aged Black man, unemployed. They interviewed a county worker who said that they would have cleaned up the remains if someone had called them. *Government fuckers!* These were the moments when my father and I saw the world through my mother's eyes, when a conspiracy of cruelty seamlessly connected her internal world of rage with an outside world of abominations.

Poor communities such as Fairmead don't change much from generation to generation, like my father's birthplace in South Los Angeles or my mother's in a migrant labour camp. As I drove to my parents' old house, I passed collapsing mobile homes, tiny bungalows with tarps over the roofs, window frames filled with peeling plywood boards. By then, hundreds of household wells had run dry. Agribusinesses had sucked the water out from under them, and people had to go to the next town to buy bottled water. Aside from the safety barrier, the community well that pumped cloudy water, and the earth's subsidence, nothing had changed. The night sky still glowed from the world's largest women's prison a few miles down the road.

As I neared my parents' house, I saw an old church out of the corner of my eye: a very plain building, about as plain and as tan as my parents' ranch-style house, but with two chipped plaster lions in front and a thin spire of a cross on the roof.

When my father was dying, he always wanted to go there on Sundays. He had grown up in an African American neighbourhood at the height of the

Depression. His parents were political refugees from Korea, so his American culture was Black culture. He sat in segregated theatres, went to segregated schools, and grew up going to Black church. My grandmother took him and his siblings to every church service in the neighbourhood. By the time he was a teenager, he was a Bible-quoting atheist. "The book says that in the beginning there was a word, a vibration, and that's how our universe began," he once told me. "That line is actually true."

There's a particular kind of sadness that comes when you are holding your dying father's hand in the parking lot of a church, listening to gospel music. We never went inside; he didn't want to intrude. His words were gone, but somehow there was an echo inside him, a boy seventy-five years ago who could still warble softly, "Down by the riverside, down by the riverside." When the music part of the service ended, we drove away.

The green van was long gone, taken to the scrapyard. That van represented a moment of flushness, of cash, luxury brands and emerald earrings, followed by a rapid and permanent fall. My father was never bitter about any of that. Whenever I had a bad day at school, we would sneak out of the house for an ice-cream cone or a doughnut. We'd drive the long way home and stop for sunsets, knowing that the longer we stayed out, the angrier she would be. But we couldn't help it. "You're even worse than him."

He would whisper to me, "Don't worry so much. Don't be so thin-skinned," but just like a little frog, I absorbed everything around me.

He would die in Fairmead. A former truck driver, he had taken the long way everywhere, but he ended

up just about where he began. After he died, my mother decided to go to my sister's place in the Florida Panhandle, where she and her husband had prepared an in-law unit for her.

"Do you think you'll be happier there?" I asked.

"As if you care."

After she left, our extended family slowly started knitting itself back together. I flew to San Diego to visit Kenji and Marisol. We ate nopalito salad and took long, meandering hikes through the mountains. I heard my

aunt tell that story about the blue van for the first time. We started going out in public as a family again.

Every year, we go to the Obon Festival at the Vista Japanese Buddhist Temple and dance for our ancestors in the parking lot. I dance for my Bachan and Jichan and even my father, who, as a Korean, did not like Japanese rituals. I do it anyway. We sing, "Ei ja nai ka? So-re, so-re." Isn't it good? It is, it is.

Someone always suggests we call my mother, but we never do. B