

THE HERE AND THE GONE:
MEMOIRS, POEMS, AND STORIES
OF HMONG-AMERICAN LIFE

by

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INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago, my ten-year-old daughter asked, “Who am I? Sometimes I don’t know who I am. How do I figure that out?” Our kitchen, for a long moment, was silent. My husband and I glanced at each other, unsure of how to respond. And then finally, we said something along the lines of, “You’re Jasmin, our daughter. You’re also a sister to Kiersten and Eva, and a friend to others. But what’s important is that you’re a good person, and that you’re always kind.”

Afterwards, I thought, is she already thinking about questions of that nature? And then I immediately thought, did my husband and I answer her questions adequately? Because the truth is that I didn’t expect my daughter to be pondering such philosophical questions already at her age. I still want to keep her free from care, young, and naïve, just for a little bit longer. And I certainly didn’t know what to tell her about how one goes about finding out who he or she is.

Her questions, of course, are fundamental questions of life, ones that I have continually asked myself, because the answers keep changing as I go through various stages of my life. One answer I’ve always given though, from the time I was a little girl, is that I am Hmong-American. But even then, at times, I’m not quite sure what “Hmong-American” really means.

All I know is that I’m not Hmong. I have never stepped foot in Laos, the country my parents came from and the place they still consider their true home. Having been born in America, I know I’ll never fully understand the Hmong language and culture the way

my parents do. And I certainly do not agree with much of what the Hmong culture dictates for me as a female.

But I'm not American either. Although I have a birth certificate declaring I'm a natural born citizen of the United States, and although I feel as American as anyone else in this country, my physical features will always project the notion that I'm from some other country and that I'm not a "real" American. When I speak (my words coming out in clear, American English), people who have never met me are sometimes surprised. Put me in a crowd of people, and ask someone at random who, from the crowd, is an American. I'm quite positive I will not be picked.

Because I am neither Hmong nor American, I suppose I've settled for being "Hmong-American," something like a blend of both—a little bit of Hmong and a little bit of American thrown together. It's a label I can live with and one that satisfies other people's need to know who or what I am.

But then another question poses itself—what else defines who I am? Because I feel I'm much more than Hmong-American. While I don't have a clear answer to my own question, a self-awareness tells me that I'm not so much the color of my skin or the country of my birth; these are physical things about me I can't control. So ultimately, I think perhaps I'm more so the color of my mind, if that makes sense. For example, I'm passionate about my kids, my husband, and my teaching career. I believe my education and being a lifelong student is a need for me just as much as food and water is. Books are my treasures; I love reading. I also love writing. I don't talk much and I'm a bit reserved, but I like listening and observing. I care a lot about people, though I may not always

show it. I'm not good with animals or plants despite my attempts—too many have suffered under my care. I have a drive to always push myself towards unattainable perfection. I'm obsessed with Q-Tips and their many uses. These and others aspects like these (whether good, bad, or peculiar) are what make up the complexity of who I am. If my daughter asks again, perhaps I'll give her an answer similar to that.

This kind of complexity is what I strive for in my writing. Whether I'm writing poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction, I always want some level of complexity. The people depicted in my writing are usually Hmong-American (I would venture that it's because I have a need to explore what it means to be "Hmong-American"), but I always want them to be more than just that. I want them to be as life-like as me with passions, goals, and quirks. I want great settings, conflicts, plots, and themes that are equally as realistic and complex.

Another goal I want to achieve with my writing is to be able to pull readers in and mesmerize them by the concept of reading to enter another person's world. It is the world of Hmong-Americans that I want readers to experience. By the end of the piece, I want readers to have gained a better understanding of what life is like for me and other Hmong-Americans.

And so with these two writing goals in mind, I set out to write a creative thesis. From the start, I knew my focus would be on the Hmong-American experience. But somewhere along the line, ideas for my thesis became something almost out of control. When family and friends found out my thesis was about the Hmong-American experience, there were all sorts of things they felt I should include.

There were suggestions for me to write about living between two cultures of extreme opposites, that of the Hmong and the American. Some suggested including the generational gap that exists between the Hmong elders, who immigrated to America from Laos, and the younger Hmong generation, most of whom grew up in America.

Others thought I should emphasize the successes of Hmong people in America—how far we've advanced from the simple agricultural life in Laos, going from having no formal education to having Hmong doctors, lawyers, professors, senators, and other such prominent positions.

Some of the older Hmong wanted me to write about life in Laos. The farms, the small villages, the thick jungle that beautifully surrounded them, and probably, most of all, the sense of independence and self-sufficiency that had sustained them for hundreds of years and allowed them freedom from the Laotian government, back before the Vietnam War.

And yet, there were other ideas too. Write about our culture, someone said. Preserve it before it is lost forever in this modern world. This idea alone offered so many areas of focus, topics such as shamanism, language, medicine, folklore, clothing, wedding ceremonies, funeral rituals, holidays, gender roles, food, and so forth.

But the most frequently repeated ideas were those pertaining to the plight of the Hmong to flee persecution in Laos after the Vietnam War was lost. There were so many personal stories I heard about this event in Hmong history: elders who died on the way to Thailand; starving and digging for roots to eat; families being ambushed, raped, and killed by the Vietnamese; hiding in caves and under bushes during the day and traveling

by foot at night; bombs dropping from the sky and falling on Hmong villages; parents so afraid of being caught that they gave too much opium to quiet their crying babies; drownings and shootings at the Mekong River; and so many more. These are stories about the end of a way of life for the Hmong people.

And then there were some who adamantly felt that I should include the current situation in Laos, that I should write about the atrocities happening to the thousands of Hmongs who, to this day, are still trapped and hiding in the Laotian jungles. I should write about the persecution and the massacre of these Hmongs who are targeted by the Lao government, simply because more than thirty years ago, during the Vietnam War, the fathers and grandfathers of these Hmongs allied themselves with America and fought against communism.

All of these suggestions made my task a daunting one, to say the least. I knew there was no way for me to write about and include all of that. But it did tell me one thing, loud and clear: that my people want to be heard. It is about time our stories are told and our lives validated. This thesis, then, is my meager attempt to do so. However, it is just a tiny inkling of what the Hmong-American experience is like; it is by no means representative of the whole.

Part one is a memoirs section that includes “Teach Me,” a narrative collage of my experiences in the educational system, mainly from the student perspective but a little from the teacher perspective as well. The other memoir piece entitled “One and the Same” is about my relationship with my father. In part two, I have included four poems: “Grandpa from the Dead,” “Let It Go,” “When My Girls Were Small,” and “Inner City

Saint Paul.” These poems deal with issues of racism, love and sacrifice, kindness in the face of poverty, ignorance, and parent-child relationships. The last section, part three, contains three short stories. “Across Lands” focuses on the decision a teenager must make regarding marriage. “Making Amends” is about a mother’s concern for her son’s inevitable encounters with bullying and racism. And “Shortcomings” tells the story of a woman who, as a child, witnessed her mother being continually abused by her father.

These pieces represent *my* version of the Hmong-American experience—memoirs, poems, and stories written from the female Hmong-American perspective. I wish I could include other perspectives too, because all voices deserve to be heard, and because Hmong-American literature is still so much in the early developing stages that I feel almost naked with the small offering of this thesis and my one perspective.

Of the few Hmong-American writers, I admire the works of Kao Kalia Yang and Ka Vang. These are two writers who I feel are currently making headway for Hmong-American literature. Two other writers of Asian descent who have especially influenced me are Jhumpa Lahiri and Maxine Hong Kingston. Reading their works showed me how to write in a manner that seamlessly combined both cultures: the American and the Asian. Other Asian-American writers who have helped to inform me on the genre of Asian-American literature are Cathy Song, John Okada, Victoria Chang, Kyoko Mori, Hisaye Yamamoto, David Henry Hwang, and Chang-Rae Lee.

Other writers of non-Asian descent who have also been an inspiration to me include Harper Lee, Sylvia Plath, Cornelius Eady, Frank McCourt, Jeffrey Eugenides, Jim Daniels, Charlotte Bronte, Dorothy Allison, Sharon Olds, and Anzia Yeziarski. These

writers in particular have either helped me explore issues in cultural differences or given me, through their published works, great examples of superb writing.

I can't wait to see the rise of Hmong-American literature. I can feel the need for it pulsing in my soul and in the souls of my fellow Hmong-Americans. I can hear all of the stories of Hmong-American life thrumming softly, waiting to be opened up to the world. I have faith that the foundation for this new genre of literature is surely being set, word by word, by Hmong-Americans all over this country. Finally, our voices will be heard.

PART I: MEMOIRS

TEACH ME

* Names of people and places have been changed.

Margaret

My dad tells me to speak when the teachers ask me questions. “They’re testing you to see if you’re ready for school,” he says. I don’t know why, but I don’t say a word to any of the white ladies. I sit in the little plastic chair and look at my hands. My dad sighs and tries to talk to one of the ladies. His talk comes in the form of exaggerated gestures and bits of Hmong and English interspersed. The lady shakes her head. My dad takes me back home. While my older brother and sister go off to school, I sit on the stairs of the front porch and wish I could go to school too. I open the empty palms of my hands so they resemble a book, and I pretend to read. My lips move silently as I form words in my mouth, the way I’ve seen my brother do when he reads.

I start school a year later than all the other kids my age. A yellow bus picks me up and takes me to my kindergarten class. In the afternoon, another bus takes me to another school so I can be in first grade with kids my age.

The floor in my kindergarten classroom is covered in thin, gray carpeting, like pants worn out at the knee. The bulletin boards are bright and colorful. One of them has a weather chart tacked on, and the other has cut-outs of jungle animals with books, pencils, crayons, and papers. It looks like a cheerful place, but I don’t like being there.

My teacher’s name is Margaret, and she makes me sit in the corner by myself. All morning, I watch her sit in a circle with the other kids and read or sing songs with them.

After Christmas break, she finally invites me to join the circle while all the other kids do show-and-tell with the toys they got for Christmas. When it's nearing my turn, I think about pulling out my purple My Little Pony from my sweatshirt pocket. Maybe I'll tell them my parents gave it to me for Christmas, even though it came wrapped in thin tissue paper from the Catholic church down the street. But when it's my turn, Margaret says, "Oh, you people don't celebrate Christmas." She skips me and goes to the little red-haired girl on my right. All year, I sit in my corner and look at my hands. They're browner than everyone else's.

Second Grade

I can never remember the names of any of my second grade teachers because my family moves so much in one year. I start second grade at Spencer Elementary, then we move to an old farmhouse on the outskirts of town and I go to a small school with only five teachers, then we move back into town and I'm at yet another school, this time Belle Elementary. I'm so quiet the teachers aren't sure if I know any English. Some of them speak loudly and slowly to me. They make weird gestures with their hands to help me understand. They want to know if I need help with anything. Finally, they decide to pull me out for ESL class.

On parent-teacher conference night, my parents decide to go. They make the rounds to each of their children's teachers. At the end of the night, my parents come back with their arms full of projects, tests, and assignments. "What did my teacher say about me?" I ask. My parents look at one another. Finally my dad says, "*Zoo heev*. Good. All

your teachers are nice. They said great things about you.” “And? What else?” my brother asks. My mom shrugs her shoulders. She says, “Your dad and I didn’t understand the rest of what they said. But they smile a lot. They’re very nice people.”

Mr. Wells

My third grade teacher is named Mr. Wells. He has beanbags placed in one corner of his room. It’s divided from the rest of the class by a waist-high fence made to look like oversized, red pencils. We all want to sit there for reading time, but we have to earn enough points first. At the end of the day, Mr. Wells likes to take us outside to run around the perimeter of the kickball field. He races with us and says that whoever beats him gets to sit on the beanbags all week during reading time. I’m fast, and I almost beat him a few times.

One rainy day, Mr. Wells starts reading aloud a book to us because we can’t go out for recess. The book is called *The Indian in the Cupboard*. I like the story so much I want him to keep reading until it’s finished. He reads one or two chapters to us a day, and when the book is done, I’m so fascinated I want to read another book for the same effect. It feels supernatural, like I’m floating around from one character to the next, from one world to another. In books, I fit right in.

During library hour, I find five books I want to read, but the librarian says kids can only check out three books at a time. I start reading so much at home my parents decide I don’t have to do my chores. “Let her read. She’s doing homework,” they say.

Anything with a book is homework to them. But really, I'm just reading because I want to.

It gets easier and easier to read, and pretty soon, I'm also really good at spelling. Mr. Wells asks everyone in class to spell "biscuit," and I'm the only one who does it right. He puts me in the spelling bee at my school, and I win. At the next level of competition, I stand in a long line of contestants in front of three judges and a small crowd of people. The event is in a stuffy cafeteria that smells like meat loaf. When it's my turn, one of the judges tells me to spell "whether," but I spell "weather" instead and lose. I ask Mr. Wells, "Why do some American words sound the same but are spelled different and mean different things?" He says it's probably because a long time ago, a group of all-important men sat together at a table and decided to make English confusing. He does the air quotations with his fingers when he says "all-important." Then he says, "You did a great job in that spelling bee. Better than a lot of kids who've known English all their life and still can't spell." I think about what he says and decide I'd rather be those white kids who can't spell than be a Hmong kid who can.

Mrs. Adams

Mrs. Adams says we're going to have a Christmas gift exchange on the last day before winter break. My parents don't have much money, so my dad goes to Goodwill to buy Little Golden Books that cost five cents each. I don't want to bring these books in as my present to a peer, because they're too childish for fourth graders. They're also too cheap. I cry about it at home and make a big scene, but my dad says he can't do anything

about it—he has no money. So finally, I wrap two of the books together. One is called *The Poky Little Puppy* and the other one is called *Tootle*. During the Christmas exchange, I pick Sherry’s name out of the hat so I have to give my present to her. The second I hand it to her, she pouts. “I don’t want this present! I already know what it is. It’s a book, and I don’t want stupid books,” she hollers. She throws the present back at me. I saunter to my desk and sink into the chair, my face burning red like the globe ornaments on the classroom’s little Christmas tree. Mrs. Adams takes Sherry by the arm, drags her out into the hallway, and scolds her. “You be polite. Not everybody can afford nice gifts,” Mrs. Adams says. Her voice echoes into the classroom. I can hear her clearly, and so can everybody else in class.

The Red Pick-up Truck

One morning, my mom wakes me up before all my other siblings. It’s the day of my fifth grade class field trip to the state capitol, and Mrs. Martin says we all need to be at school by 6:45 a.m. My mom can’t send me, because she doesn’t know how to drive. My dad is gone somewhere. It’s raining, so my mom gives me an umbrella. She glances out the window and sees that it’s dark and wet. She looks worried, but she sends me out anyway, and says, “*Ceev faj*. Be careful.” I’m scared because I’ve always walked to school with my siblings, and everything this morning looks spooky and different in the gloom.

When I’m halfway to school, I see a red pick-up truck slowly following me. I try peering shrewdly into the truck to see who’s inside, but the windows are tinted so dark

that it's like looking into a glossy lake at night. The truck follows me and stops when it's right next to me. Then it waits for me to walk further ahead before it drives slowly to catch up to me again. It does this for blocks.

My heart pounds, and I'm mad at my mom for staying home with my siblings instead of walking with me. I'm mad at my dad for being somewhere else instead of driving me. I start to run and run so fast that I could definitely beat Mr. Wells if he were here. Finally, I see my school two blocks away, and Mrs. Martin is standing next to the bus driver by the yellow bus. I turn around to look behind me. The red truck turns a corner and disappears.

Mrs. Taylor

In sixth grade, all the Hmong kids like me are put into Mrs. Taylor's class. Last year, we were all in Mrs. Martin's class. At recess, my cousin says it's because some of the teachers don't want to teach Hmong. I don't mind, because it means I get to be with my cousins. It also means the teachers who take us are always nice. Mrs. Taylor is nice, even though her first name is Margaret, like my kindergarten teacher's.

In the classroom, the desks are arranged in groups of four or five. The bulletin boards display themes like the solar system and the stages of the writing process. There is one computer in the room, a relatively new technology. We're excited when we have assignments that give us reasons to clack away on the keyboard. When we're done, we save our work on thin, flimsy disks that Mrs. Taylor calls "floppies."

Mrs. Taylor likes to learn about the Hmong culture. “What kind of food do you eat at home?” she says. We tell her about eggrolls dipped in peanut butter sauce, curry soup, and purple sticky rice. “How do you greet each other in Hmong?” she asks. “*Nyob zoo*. It sounds like this: *nyah zhoong*,” we say. She repeats after us, and we commend her on her pronunciation.

One day, Mrs. Taylor is very sad. We ask her what happened, and she says her husband is dying from cancer. She has to explain what cancer is, because we don’t have a word for it in Hmong. When a person gets sick, we’ve been taught at home that it’s usually a result of the person’s spirit having wandered away, not because of things like abnormal cells growing out of control. I tell Mrs. Taylor that she and her husband should watch *Home Alone*, because it’ll make them laugh and forget about cancer.

In the spring, Mrs. Taylor’s husband dies and we have a sub for a week. We make cards for her, and then we work on writing stories. Mine turns out to be pages about a girl who spills weird chemicals on herself during a science experiment. Later, she finds out she has the ability to change into a cat, except that it happens when she doesn’t want it to. I title it “Half-Girl, Half-Cat.” The sub gives me a curious look when she reads my story. “Did you really write this? Because if you did, you should enter this in the school’s writing contest,” she says. I don’t really want to, because if I win first place, I have to read my story in front of the whole school. When Mrs. Taylor comes back, I show her my story. She also encourages me to enter it in the contest, so I decide to do it.

During the school assembly, I’m so nervous I can hardly focus on anything. All I can think about is: what if I really do win first place and have to read my story in front of

everyone? The gym is noisy with kids talking, laughing, and shuffling their feet on the bleachers. One of the teachers blows his whistle—BLEEP, BLEEP—and the whole gym goes quiet. Finally, the principal makes a speech and announces the winners of the contest. It turns out that I've won second place. I get a certificate and a rigorous handshake from the principal. It feels good, maybe even better, than winning first place.

South Junior High School

In junior high, the classrooms are not as brightly decorated, and the desks are all in straight rows. Time is dictated by the sound of the school bell ringing. One day, with ten minutes left in class, my home economics teacher asks what our parents do for a living. We're studying careers, and so she makes everyone share. All of my classmates' parents have cool jobs, like engineer, construction worker, or salesperson. I don't want everyone to know my dad works in a slaughter house and kills pigs for a living. I don't want them to know my mom gets assistance from the state. So what I say is that I have a stay-at-home mom and a dad who is a soldier, which is partly true. Or *was* true.

I know a little bit about my dad's past, that he was a lieutenant colonel in Laos. He led a platoon of soldiers to rescue downed American pilots and block the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the Vietnam War. But now he's just an immigrant who works at a pig slaughter house. He drives an hour every day to work, and when he comes home, he smells of pig. He has splashes of blood and grease on his clothes, hair, and skin, as if he's just come back fresh from a real war. Some days he brings home a plastic bag full of pig parts that nobody else wants, and that's how we save money by not having to buy meat.

Miss Nadelbach

I have a first year teacher, whom we call “Mrs. N.” for eighth grade social studies. She has wild ideas for lessons. We spend a week building a train model. Pretty soon, the project turns into months in which we’re building a whole town around our train model. Mrs. N. brings in little booklets from a company that sells model kits and says each person can buy one building to add to our town. I choose a lighthouse because it’s only three dollars. When it arrives, I construct it and place it on the town’s edge. The whole town grows to take up half our classroom.

When we’re finally done building our town, Mrs. N. has us sit at our desks, except we’re all crowded together on one side of the room and we can barely move. Mrs. N. has us write about what we want our new town to be like. We can write about anything we want. So I write this: *I want our town to be open. I want everybody to get along and not have disagreements. If somebody doesn’t understand somebody else, they shouldn’t be so quick to judge. They should take the time to talk to the other person and try to understand.*

Mrs. N. glances around the room at everybody’s paper and says, “Now make sure you include examples of what you mean.” So then I add this: *For example, you shouldn’t believe everything you hear. Some people think Hmong eat cats and dogs but that’s just a rumor. I’m Hmong and I don’t know of anyone my race who eats cats and dogs. I think the rumor started because some people didn’t take the time to talk to us to understand our culture. I also don’t think it’s fair to think everybody of one race is the same. Jeffrey*

Dahmer is a white American and he ate people. Does that mean every white American eats people too? No. It's not right to judge. So that's why I want our model town to be more open to others.

The next day, I see Mrs. N. in the hallway before class. She wants me to read my paper aloud, but I tell her that *she* can read it if she wants, but only if she doesn't say who wrote it. Just as she starts reading it to the class, I realize everyone will know who wrote it anyway: I'm the only Hmong student in class.

Rosemont High School

In tenth grade, I start hanging out with other people besides my cousins. I have a small group of white friends who I sit with every day for lunch. They bring brown paper sacks that usually contain ham sandwiches, soda, yogurt, apple slices, and cookies. I feel different being the only one with free hot lunch, so some days I don't bother waiting in the lunch line. On those days, my friends share food with me.

I don't sit at the Hmong table anymore. My cousins get mad and call me a "white wannabe." They also call me a "twinkie" because they say no matter how white I try to be on the inside, I'm always going to have yellow skin. I don't care though, because being with my white friends means I don't get paper wads thrown at me anymore.

In English class, my teacher shows us a poem she's published. I'm amazed that she's a real published writer. I change my career goal from social worker to writer. I start a notebook in which I write stories. My favorite one is about a girl named Brandy whose family moves into a big Victorian house that's haunted. Brandy hears strange noises in

the basement, so one day she decides to investigate. Buried among basement junk, she finds a box full of items. An old Raggedy Ann doll, a friendship necklace, a diary. She also finds an old newspaper clipping about a girl who suddenly disappeared and was never found. Brandy starts to see a ghost girl who's trying to tell her something. Finally, at the end of the story, Brandy figures out from all the clues that the girl was murdered by her own father. She follows a strange crying that leads her to a tree in the backyard. She starts to dig and dig until she finds something. Bones. Human bones.

American Dream Class

“What *is* the American Dream? What is *your* American Dream? I'd like to see *copious* paragraphs, folks,” Mr. Evans says. He's always telling us to do everything copiously—take copious notes, read and write copiously. I write about college, although I haven't really thought about going. Mr. Evans asks me if I've taken the ACT, but I haven't. He asks if I've thought about which college, if I've filled out the financial aid forms, if I've asked people to write me recommendation letters, but I haven't done any of those things either. “Why not?” he says. I shrug my shoulders. Simply put, I've never been exposed to the process of going to college.

The next day, I ask my dad to write a check for me to register for the ACT. “Do I look like I have money?” he says. I don't blame him for his response. There are two reasons why. One, money is always an issue in my family. And two, my recent bouts of teenage rebellion have angered and frustrated my dad. But I keep bothering him about the money, because although none of my cousins are planning for college, it's all my white

friends are talking about. I want to be like my white friends. After two weeks, my dad finally gives me the money to register for the test.

When I get my test score back, I don't know what it means. I'm doubtful I did well, because after registering for the test, I completely forget about it. But I show my test results to Mr. Evans. "A 25? That's good," he says. I ask, "Does a 25 mean I get to go to college?" Mr. Evans pats my back and says, "It means you have a great chance of getting into college." I smile, because it's the first time I have proof that I can make it in college.

English 101 and 102

I enter college knowing for certain that I'm going to major in English. But when Professor Griffith hands back my first essay in English 101, I see that she's written at the top, "*This is NOT what I call college writing.*" The D grade on the last page makes me cringe. I start to worry that I'm in the wrong major, that maybe I'm not even supposed to be in college. What's a Hmong girl doing majoring in English when it's not even her first language? But I keep working hard and by the end of the semester, I earn a C in her class.

English 102 is all about research methods and research papers. It's a lot harder than English 101. But for some reason, I'm doing a lot better in this class. One day, I'm the first one to walk into the classroom. Professor Lawrence looks up from his stack of papers and greets me. Then he says, "So what are you planning to do with your English degree?" I'm a little taken aback, because I haven't thought that far ahead. Professor Lawrence says, "You know what I was thinking? You'd make a great English teacher." I

frown in surprise at his remark. “Really? Are you sure?” I ask. Professor Lawrence nods his head. “You’re smart, you’ve got a good head on your shoulders, you work hard, and you’re patient. I think you can help a lot of kids.” I’m still too shocked, but I let what he says float around in my head. Me? A teacher? I think about it all semester.

Professor Pazinski

Professor Pazinski frustrates me. I spend hours and hours writing essays for his class, and I feel pretty confident I deserve an A. But every paper he hands back to me is always a B+ or an A-, never a solid A. He always finds something to critique about my essays, no matter how minor it is. It’s maddening, because then I have to force myself to pay attention to every little detail in my essays. If I don’t, he’ll pick it out and deduct points. And yet I sign up for another one of his classes. And when I’m done with that class, I sign up for a third one.

One day, we’re doing writers workshop, and it’s my turn. I’m up at the podium in front of the whole class. I have to stand there the entire time while Professor Pazinski and my peers critique my essay. They talk about the tone. They mention the use of a simile that could be revised. Then Professor Pazinski turns everybody’s attention to page three. “Did anybody notice the shift in verb tense from past to present on this page? It’s very subtle, barely noticeable,” he says to the class. Then he turns to me and asks, “Why did you change the verb tense?” I fiddle nervously with the pen in my hand. Then I explain. “That scene is really important. I was trying to give it a sense of immediacy, so it feels like it’s happening right now,” I say. Professor Pazinski nods and says, “Well-done.

You've switched in and out of present tense quite seamlessly. I knew there was a sophisticated writer in you after all."

It isn't until a long time afterwards that I realize the potential he saw in me.

Becoming a Teacher

I decide to major in English Education and minor in Writing. Everybody says education majors take at least five years to finish their degree, but I've decided I'm going to do it in four years. I take credit overload during some semesters, and I take one or two classes every summer.

Finally, at the start of my fourth year of college, I'm placed in an eighth grade classroom to observe. The kids are antsy and loud. Frankly, they kind of scare me. When I finally go up in front of the class to teach them my very first lesson, I'm so nervous that I stammer and stutter. They roll their eyes, but I continue on with my lesson anyway. I talk about narrative writing and give them an example. As they work on a story map for their own narrative essay, I look around the room. Some are busy writing, their pencils scratching away on paper. Others are staring off into space. I walk over and tap the desks of the ones who are staring. "Let me help you get started," I say. "List all the important events in your life. Vacations? Birth or death of someone you know? Ever broken a bone? Met anyone who changed your life?"

It's the last semester before I graduate, and there's only one teaching internship being offered. All of my peers are going for it. Everyone else will end up with an unpaid

student teaching placement. I don't think I have much of a chance at getting the job because there are so many people being interviewed, but I go in for it anyway.

A week later, the principal of the school calls me up and offers me the job. I'm surprised but absolutely thrilled. I go in to meet my cooperating teacher. She teaches at the school, but she also has a second job in which she travels all over the country doing presentations. When she's gone, which is half of the time, I'll be solely in charge of teaching four classes of seventh and eighth graders and supervising one study hall session. I'm a bit bewildered, because I have never yet been the sole person in charge of students. The cooperating teachers I've been with have always stayed in the classroom to help out.

On my first day alone with the students, I'm nervous. I can see in their eyes that they know how I feel. So I force myself to smile. I shake out the tension in my shoulders. I walk around the room, greeting students and talking to them about their day. Eventually, I start the day's lesson on the story of King Midas with the golden touch. I have the students do an anticipation guide, and we start talking about wealth and greed. Hands go up all over the classroom—there are so many things the kids want to share. I read the story aloud to start them off, and then I tell them to finish reading it on their own. Soon, I'm no longer nervous.

In the quietness of the classroom, I look around and see the bent heads of the students, their eyes flowing from the left of the page to the right as they read. A couple of them move their lips silently while reading. And it reminds me of the same way I used to move my own lips when I was a young child pretending to read on the front steps of my

porch, wanting so desperately to be worthy of an education. And now, not only have I learned my worth as a student, but I know my worth as a teacher.

ONE AND THE SAME

I sit across from my dad on the green, checkered sofa that he and my mom have owned since I was a child. I gaze around at the new house my parents have just bought from a policeman. There is a decent-sized living room with shaggy blue carpet, a small kitchen and dining area, three bedrooms, and one bathroom. The house, located on the edge of the tiny town of Elk Mound, is smaller than the ones I remember growing up in. But of course, the size of the house is no longer an issue; there aren't that many kids living with my parents anymore.

My dad is sitting slouched in a way that makes him look small, his back bent, his shoulders slightly drooped. He talks about the house's old windows, the mold growing on the wooden frames, the roof that appears to have yielded in a couple of areas. He wants to get those fixed, and he also wants to install central air. The summers are just too stifling for him. And he complains of the horrendous dog smell in the house, says he can't get rid of the stink that the two police dogs have left behind. I sniff the air, but there's no apparent dog odor, just the smell of my mom's cooking in the kitchen: steamed rice, stir fried pork with vegetables, stuffed chicken wings, and spicy cilantro pepper sauce.

I haven't visited my parents in a few months or more, and now as I take a quick side-glance at my dad, I realize he looks different. Older. His black hair is grazed with touches of gray, his dark skin dappled with freckles and strings of wrinkles. Has he really aged this much since I last saw him? I blame it on the bouts of sickness he's been having.

My dad leans against the arm of the sofa. He's wearing navy sweatpants and a gray t-shirt with a huge fish and the words "Bass Fishing" splattered over it. He looks at me quietly for a moment, his black eyebrows pushed together. And then he asks a question.

"Ua caag tseg ntev koj tsis tuaj saib kuv le? Why haven't you visited me in such a long time?" he says.

His question reminds me of the phone conversation I had had with my mom a few weeks ago.

"He's been so sick. Tuaj saib koj txiv hab mas—come see your dad," she said.

She mentioned my brothers and sisters also, but her hint was pretty clear over the quiet buzz of the phone line. She meant me, specifically, because I'm the one who hasn't been there to see him in months, I'm the one who's been out of the house the longest, the one who married young, the one who was practically raised by another set of parents—the in-laws. I'm also the one so much like my dad, both of us wearing stoicism like we do our jackets on cold days.

My dad has never been one to talk about feelings or show emotions. As a young child, I thought of him as a sort of Superman-figure. He was tough, he was always right no matter what, and despite our family of eleven, we never went hungry or wore dirty clothes on account of his ability to support us financially with his meager job at the pig slaughter house. Perhaps it was with admiration for him that I grew up to practice his restrained emotions.

When my mom called, imploring me to go visit, I couldn't see my dad sick, not any other way than the way he had always been.

My dad never talks about his past life before America, but I know some things about him. He came from an extremely poor family. Both his parents were opium addicts who used all the money they had to buy more opium to satisfy an undying need. As a result, my dad was raised by his older siblings, particularly his oldest sister, who breastfed him along with her own babies. When he grew into a young child, he began rising in the early morning hours, long before the sun peered across the Laotian land. On the steep hill on which he lived, he tried growing vegetables and raising a few farm animals, some pigs and chickens.

But on the brink of starvation, my dad finally ran away at the age of fifteen, leaving behind his parents and his home. He joined the Hmong army and worked harder perhaps than he had ever done so before. Through the many years he was with the army and through his involvement with the CIA and the Secret War, he eventually worked his way up from being a kitchen cook to being lieutenant colonel.

He went from living in a bamboo hut with a thatched roof (the home of his childhood) to a real house with a door that had a lock and windows with glass panes to look out of. He grew wealthy and respected enough to have multiple wives, my mother being the fourth. He lived well for many years until the Vietnam War came to a close, and he, along with many other Hmongs, had to flee Laos for fear of death by communist hands.

All of these details about him I overheard from my mom and some of my relatives, a little piece at a time. This knowledge of his past life and my own childhood perspective of a dad of Superman status—this was how I saw him, tough as the jungle boots he trampled in through thorny forests in Laos to a refugee camp in Thailand and finally to a makeshift life in Elk Mound, all the while with emotions entombed.

In fact, there has only been one time in my life in which I saw my dad stripped of his stoicism. It occurred one evening when I was in my early teens. The phone rang. There were probably a handful of us in the kitchen: my mom, my dad, a couple of my siblings, and myself. My dad answered the phone and talked quietly in Hmong for awhile. When he hung up, he didn't say a word, but from his tense posture and tight jaw line, I knew something was wrong. Silence enveloped the kitchen as he seated himself on one of our wooden kitchen stools.

Then finally he said plainly, "*Txiv Laus Vaam Xeeb tuag lawm*. Uncle Peanut is dead."

Of course, Uncle Peanut wasn't really his name. As young children, my siblings and I could never pronounce his name right. When my parents said his name, it sounded like the Hmong word for peanuts, so we called him "Uncle Peanut." He was my dad's best friend—had been, that is. My mom says there was a time when my dad and Uncle Peanut were inseparable. They talked daily and were always together: hunting, fishing, or simply hanging out. Then something happened that tainted their friendship, something about missing money, something about someone being blamed; my parents never really told me the whole story. Since then, my dad and Uncle Peanut had ceased being friends,

both of them with too much pride, neither able to overcome the problem that demolished their friendship. Not long after, my family moved halfway across the country and my dad heard no more of Uncle Peanut until the day he received the phone call.

On the wooden stool, my dad sat staring straight ahead. And then in our kitchen, right in front of me, he covered his face with his hands, those hands toughened from years of hardship and endurance.

And he cried.

He openly wept, not just the soft, sniffling kind, but the weeping kind that a grown man is never allowed to do, especially in front of people. Especially someone like my dad.

So why haven't I visited him in such a long time?

My dad asks the question with sternness, a little bit of anger. And because I am so much like him, his question lingers in the air and hangs heavy like a burial shroud between us.

PART II: POEMS

GRANDPA FROM THE DEAD

He stands before me like a dream,
nearly seventy-years-old, bones weak,
eyes, hair, and skin white as the milk
I feed my baby. He reminds me he came
from mountains dotted with opium poppies,
rice fields, and tiny villages with narrow
dirt roads. He tells me of ten days and ten nights,
being carried piggy-back through a jungle,
up and down two mountains, past countless dead
bodies covered with banana leaves,
provisionally buried. He talks of not nearly
being close enough to the Mekong, the grueling
pace slowing his sons, their backs bent
like curved bamboo, and finally, being left behind
under a banana tree, its long, wide leaves so green
and alive, the sky so blue and warm. What he had
was an iron knife in its wooden sheath, a thin
blanket, a tiny bag of opium, and the back glances
of his sons and wife, whose sad wailing scattered
the calls of birds and insects. His choices then

were death by wild tigers at night, death by communist
soldiers roaming the jungle, death by opium,
or death by his own knife. What did he choose?
His thin lips, a straight line, remain still. Instead,
he places the coarse palm of his hand on top
of my baby's head and blesses her with strokes
as gentle as an artist painting life on a bare canvas.

INNER CITY SAINT PAUL

Memory tells me my parents were like early morning mists rising
in split-second stillness, then gone. And that the sun never dropped lower
than the rooftop of our townhouse. It turned me the deep color of worn
pennies and brought the blaze of souped up muscle cars in the streets,
Michael Jackson's "Thriller" teeming on the windowsills of teens.

On the ground in idle dirt, rhubarb grew along the sides
of two-story brick buildings. I pulled them from the ground,
snapped off the poisonous leaves, and stripped the stalks
to chew, letting the tartness go down slow like the summer day's pace.

My family must have been pushed here by a gentle finger of God. At first,
the black kids stared and we Hmongs stared back. This had been their place,
but it was ours too, now that we had dropped in so unexpectedly.
Together, we and they stood mute in clothes too big or too small.

The old witch in #435 liked to shake her keys at my sister and me,
chanting strangeness into the wind. We ran in fear, jelly shoes
kicking up dust on the gravel, until my sister fell, ripping open her forehead
on the see-saw. The witch stood above her, keys jingling from the folds

of her apron. Somehow her chants dried the blood and stopped the flow.

Beyond rows of townhouses was a great, green hill. From the top, I could see everyone, even the Mexican ice cream man with stubby beard and sullied clothes, slowly carting his way up the hill's asphalt path, shouting, "Ice cream for sale! Very cold, very nice!" On lucky days, he gave my sister and me a twin popsicle to share. Banana-flavored—because nobody ever bought those.

In return, we searched our pockets and gave him all we had: a penny or a nickel found in sidewalk cracks. On lucky days, I sat atop the hill, savoring the popsicle, while below, everyone looked the same, like tiny beetles thrown to the ground on their backs.

LET IT GO

On the day of my mother's kidnap, the early dawn hung loose
and turned the mountains into gold. She was fourteen with pearly cheeks
and long lashes, her body slender in a black shirt and pleated skirt.
She was on her way back from the nearby lake when it happened:

three men sprung from jungle bushes
like preying cats, snatching her away,
her two pails of lake water teetering
like drunks spilling forth their innards,
she was lifted up and carried away,
taken far from her father's bamboo hut,
from the slash and burn fields she toiled over,
from the pictures of her mother long dead,
and into the hut of a stranger whose body
tainted hers so that she would never be desired
by anyone else, her young body left
trembling in the bed of her kidnapper.

And now my mother bends forward on the sofa, its green plaid
pattern making her skin look sick. She covers her face

with her hands and cries tears that streak her cheeks. My siblings and I glance at each other. We sigh, roll our eyes, gaze away.

It's menopause, we conclude. We speak English and talk of trivial matters unnecessarily spun into big ones. My mother's sniffles intensify, she knows not a word of English, but like an infant, she observes the facial expressions, knows the tones, reads the inflections. I pat her back, tell her not to cry. But when they've been fighting, what I really want to say is, *let it go, mom, it's not a big deal. Dad has always been that way. He's always come out stronger, fiercer, unrelenting. You have never won.*

Weeks later, my mother's weeping image haunts me, on a sweltering, restless night, it crawls up, looms over me, brings me back to her on a warm afternoon as golden as the day she was kidnapped. I ask, and she tells me her life story, whispers it like musty secrets. My father is the kidnapper, with whom she has lived for over thirty years. She bore him nine children, all who knew no better than to think she should simply, let it go.

WHEN MY GIRLS WERE SMALL

I would watch her small body
rising and falling with each breath.
I'd run my fingers along her arm
and trace her smooth skin until
I reached fingers clenched tight
like the petals a new rose. Every time
I peeked in, her chest still rose and fell—
but sometimes while sleeping, her tiny
face crumpled like the earth
in a quake, she'd heave deep sobs
as if she knew evil and grief. I'd look
at her slant eyes, her small, flat nose,
the black hair, and the skin a dim shade
of beige, and think of how I'd make life
better, of evils and grief the world held
that I could possibly change for her—
my Hmong-American baby.
Sometimes, when she was still asleep,
I'd pick her up simply to feel her in my grip,
one hand under her delicate neck,

the other cradling her bottom, and I'd bring
her up close to inhale milk-breath
and warmth, the smell of new babies.
And sometimes, she'd smile in her sleep
as if she knew of spring after snow—
on some occasions, her eyes would open,
two bright stars staring back at me.

PART III: SHORT STORIES

MAKING AMENDS

The thought entered Song's mind in the fleeting moment between sleep and wakefulness, when the mind blends golden dreams with reality, so that there's no telling the difference. It was a horrible thought, really, and it came to her just as horribly, like an acute pain, forcing her almost to sit up in bed.

Before that moment, Song had lain in bed all night, eyes closed, but with a keen awareness of her husband's slow, rhythmic breathing, of the ceiling fan whirring softly above their bed. At five in the morning, slivers of sunlight had begun sneaking in through the Venetian blinds of their two bedroom windows. The shadows they cast were streaked along part of one wall in striped diagonals, like prison bars.

Lying there, Song knew that any minute now, the alarm would go off and her husband, Nhia, would be leaving for his trucking job that would take him on the road for five days. She knew that she would be waking her 10-year-old son, Michael, at nine o'clock to watch *Fetch*, a show Michael loved because of the host, an animated canine named Ruff, who doled out missions and awarded points to real kids from his doghouse headquarters. And Song knew that after lunch, Michael would be with his three neighborhood friends, re-enacting the morning's episode in someone's backyard. He would be back for a snack around three, and if he and his friends decided to play football in the empty field one block down, he'd be gone and back for dinner at five. If Nhia was home, the three of them might go out to see a movie or perhaps go play miniature golf.

But since Nhia would be away for most of the week, it would just be Song and Michael. They would stay home then and watch a rented movie or play checkers.

These were the daily routines Song enjoyed about summer, those lazy days before school started for both her, as a media services coordinator at the high school, and for Michael, who would be going into the fifth grade. The only thing she didn't enjoy was that Nhia was gone all the time. It felt to Song that the family consisted mainly of herself and Michael. Some days, when Michael looked about longingly at the empty house, she knew he felt it too.

But all that night, she lay in bed. She had not slept. Finally, she opened her eyes and gazed at the wall with its striped shadows. She gazed intently, and it was in that one moment that the thought, which she had previously considered on and off only in fantasy, strengthened and became an absolute. It was unHINGING, almost revolting. But it carried with it so much strength and clarity that she felt there was no choice.

It had to be done.

The alarm clock suddenly beeped in six quick spurts before Nhia reached over to shut it off. Song felt his foot touch hers slightly, then his body moved close to hers, pressing against her back. He held her tight, their bodies folded together like hands entwined in prayer. She spoke in a barely audible voice.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"About what?" he asked.

"I can't explain it now, but there's something I need to do. You'll find out in time."

He tried to turn her so she'd have to face him. But she resisted.

"What do you mean, Song? Turn and look at me," he said. His voice was strained now, and she knew she shouldn't have said anything at all. A long silence passed before neither one of them spoke.

"Never mind. It's nothing," she finally said. She turned around to face him then and gave him a smile. "I didn't sleep much. Been thinking about the school year starting up again in a few weeks, the downstairs bathroom that isn't even half done, my mom's constant heart condition."

"Don't worry. Things will be fine. Try not to think so much," he said. Then he frowned. His brown eyes darkened. "What is it that you said you need to do? Sounded serious. A vacation? A get-away before school starts?"

She pushed black strands of hair out of her face and thought for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "You know what I think I'll do? Maybe all I need is a small break. I've been cooped up at home too long, I think. I'll take Michael over to my sister's today, so I can do some shopping. I do need a new jacket now that summer's ending."

They spoke for a few minutes more, nothing in particular, just the usual leave-taking they'd grown accustomed to in the years since Nhia became a trucker. He gave her a hug and kissed the curve of her shoulder, his lips trailing her skin like the glide down the slope of a snow covered hill. She didn't kiss him back. It wasn't until later, after he'd already gone into Michael's room to say goodbye, after he'd left through the front door and closed it with a soft thud, that she felt a sudden urge to call him back, to run her

hands over the rough spots of black stubble on his cheeks the way she used to do years ago. But by that time, he was already gone.

Song made coffee and went out on the front porch to sip it. Across the street were the Johnstons, the Monroes, and the Williams. On the left were the Buckleys, and on the right, the Scotts. Although most of Song's neighbors were at work, a few of the retired ones were out mowing their lawns or washing their cars. She rarely thought about it, but now it bothered her immensely that on the whole block, in fact, the whole section of this town, her family was the only minorities. Did they stick out in this suburb of middle class whites?

Across the street, Allison Monroe opened her front door and appeared in a gray jogging suit. She and Song smiled and waved to each other. Last winter, the Monroes had surprised Song by giving them a Christmas gift: a pair of Oriental fans painted with a yellow bird perched on a budding branch. To match the décor in your house, Allison Monroe had said. But Song's house didn't have Asian décor. She and Nhia had gone with a modern look, simple and sleek: in their living room, a sofa and chaise lounge in natural buff, a beige rug with big, black swirls, and one of those arc lamps with five long, bent arms, each with its own bulb encased in a white dome shade.

Song sipped her coffee and watched as Allison Monroe stretched on her driveway and took off for her morning jog. She set her coffee mug on top of the porch's flat railing and glanced up at the air. It was still early enough that the sun was far from being midway in the sky. There was even still a tinge of cool air lingering from the night before. Ed Parker, who lived around the corner, strolled by with his dog.

“*Nyob zoo*,” he said. “Did I say it right? Means ‘hello,’ right?”

“Perfect pronunciation, Ed,” Song said. She smiled. He was always so willing to learn words in Hmong.

“It’s a beautiful day, but I heard it’s going to rain the rest of the week though, so better enjoy it,” Ed said.

His little terrier dog sniffed the ground, then lifted his leg and peed.

“You heard about that one murder up in Marinette?” Ed Parker asked. “That poor man, Cha Vang, getting killed like that. You know him?”

The murder had been featured on the local news frequently, but she’d only caught bits and pieces of the story. Something about a Hmong hunter being killed in the woods. Her mother had asked the other day about going to the funeral that would last three days and three nights. It was customary in the Hmong culture to go out of respect, whether you knew the family or not. But quite frankly, Song didn’t want to focus on incidents like those.

“No, I don’t know him,” Song answered.

“No?” Ed Parker said. “Aren’t you Hmong though?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know him,” she said. It occurred to her how silly Ed’s question was, that he would think she knew the murdered man simply because they shared the same race and lived in the same eastern half of Wisconsin. Maybe what was even sillier was the fact that he didn’t realize how ridiculous his question was. Instead, his gray eyebrows slowly crinkled in disappointment at her response.

“Well, see you around,” he said. He let his little terrier dog pull him away.

Song finished her coffee and went back inside the house. In her bedroom, she sat on the bed and closed her eyes. After a long time, she went to her closet and slowly pulled down from the top shelf a metal box about the size of a big dictionary. She unlocked it and lifted the lid. Inside, nestled among foam padding, was a .38 Colt revolver. Nhia had bought it years ago when he first started his trucking job.

“I’m going to be gone a lot,” he had said. “You gotta have something here, just in case.”

He stretched his hand out to Song, the revolver cradled in the middle of his palm.

“Take it. Try holding it in your hands. You never know when you might need it,” he said.

Song stared at the gun but didn’t pick it up. Michael, who was three-years-old then, had fallen asleep on the sofa across the room.

“I don’t know if I like the idea of having a gun in the house,” she finally said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Nhia said. “Lots of people keep them in their house for protection. Here, hold it. I’d feel better knowing you have this if something ever happens while I’m away.”

Song gingerly picked up the gun and held it in her hands. It felt cold and heavy, its stainless steel barrel gleaming at her.

“Is it loaded?” she asked.

Nhia shook his head. “No.”

He showed her how to open the cylinder, swing it out from the side of the gun, and load it. He showed her how to shoot. Across the room, Michael started to wake. He kicked off the fleece blanket Song had put over him.

“Put the gun away. I don’t want Michael seeing it,” Song said. The gun made her wary.

Now, though, as she sat on the floor by her closet, she stared at the gun in its opened case and ran the tip of her finger along the smooth barrel. She didn’t want to think too much about what needed to be done. She simply picked the gun up and slipped it into her purse. Then she called her sister about dropping Michael off in an hour.

The door creaked loudly when Song went into Michael’s room, but he didn’t hear. He was sleeping on his stomach, one arm hanging over the edge of the bed, the blanket bunched up around his feet. In his olive-green camouflage pajamas, he looked like a little soldier. Song sat on the edge of the bed. She listened to his gentle breathing, watched the tiny movements underneath his silver eyelids. She felt sad, suddenly. She bent down and wistfully kissed the side of his head, the minor dip of his temple.

The thought, which had so strongly entered her mind that morning while she lay in bed, was because of Michael. For him, rather. She was going to do it for him. For herself, as well, but mainly for him.

Last week, she had thought Michael was playing in the field down the street, but he had suddenly burst through the kitchen door, blood trickling from his nose and down his chin. His eyes were anxious and wide with fright. His hands and white t-shirt were smeared with blood.

Song had been cooking then, chopping green onions, cilantro, and mint leaves for the dish of *laj* she was making for that night's dinner. The ground beef was already browning in a frying pan on the stove. She dropped the knife on the cutting board and wiped her hand on a dish towel.

"This boy—I don't know who he is—he's big, mom, real big. He pushed me. I tried to get up—then he—" Michael said. His words gushed out.

"Michael, slow down," Song said. She lifted his chin and examined his nose. She dabbed it with a paper towel.

Michael had apparently gotten into a fight with another boy. There had been some sort of scuffle, but it wasn't that big of a deal. Boys do that sometimes, don't they? Michael was getting to that precocious age in which he was testing his masculinity. It was perfectly normal, a minor fight, a bloody nose. Song remembered her older brothers going through a similar phase during their childhood. Unlike her own parents, though, who didn't speak English and couldn't do much about her brothers' fights, Song was going to find out who the other boy was, call his mother, have a mother-to-mother conversation, and each mother would have a talk with her own son. And that'd be the end of it. That was the plan Song had set not too long ago, when she realized Michael was growing up. But it didn't turn out that way.

"He called me a 'gook,' mom," Michael had said. Michael had bathed, changed into clean clothes, and was sitting at the kitchen table watching Song throw together all the ingredients for the *laj* in a big bowl.

“What’s a ‘gook’?” Michael asked. He swung his feet back and forth underneath his chair.

“He shouldn’t have called you that. It’s a slur, a bad name for Asian people,” Song said.

“Oh. I didn’t know that. He said it real mean, so I just figured it had to be a bad thing,” Michael said. “He said his mom and dad said so.”

“Said what?”

“Said that we were gooks. And that he shouldn’t play with me or come near our house.”

That night, when Song went in to say goodnight to Michael in his room, she talked to him about racism. For the first time ever, she felt paralyzed as a mother, debilitated. She imagined herself a bystander, looking on as her boy would have to maneuver his own way through the world. It seemed to her as if she were a mere spectator in a circus show, watching as her little boy laid his worth in the mouth of a lion, the lion that was the world. Her advice to him that night had been this: be the bigger person, walk away, tell an adult.

But now, after brooding on the situation for nearly a week, she knew her advice would never be adequate. She knew this well from her own personal experiences. Growing up, she had received more than her fair share of bullying, mostly verbal, but there had been times when she’d been physically assaulted. She had almost never graduated high school; she’d skipped so much to avoid the bullying.

And so the night before Nhia was to go on his five-day trucking drive, the thought had occurred to Song. It was so obvious, she didn't know why she'd never considered it seriously before. She had thought of it, of course, sometimes in those instances of fantasy when she'd let her mind wander into vengeful thinking. She had certainly thought of it back in those high school days, especially in the hot moments of anger and humiliation, after the many times she'd been surrounded by a group of kids laughing and pointing at her. But to consider it on a serious note, she had never done. And now the thought lingered in her head, floated as large capital-lettered words in front of her eyes. A magical illusion. She could almost reach out and touch the words: KILL RANDI O'CONNOR.

Song had not seen Randi O'Connor in fifteen years, since they'd graduated from Lincoln High School in Montessori Bay. But Randi was someone unforgettable. There were many things Song could say about Randi. Randi was lucky, for one, was born lucky. Her family co-owned the biggest furniture-making factory in the Midwest. They also owned about two-hundred acres of land up north. Aside from that, there wasn't much else Song could say, other than the fact that it was Randi who had made Song's high school years the worst years of her life.

Kids pick on kids. That's a truth about growing up. And Song understood that. But if a person gets picked on and harassed every day of the school year, it becomes a truth more and more difficult to bear. A shove, a crumpled paper thrown, a nasty note, a mean name. Every day. These are things that can grow and amount to something much more than just normal truths about growing up. These are things bred by fear—are acts

committed by bullies out of fear. These are things that in turn breed fear in the person being bullied, and fear breeds anger, and anger breeds hatred. Hatred sometimes breeds a certain brand of killers like Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, and Seung Hui Choi, who one day wake up and start plotting to take matters into their own hands.

And so it was with Song. All throughout high school, Song was taunted by Randi. Randi's pet name for Song had been "chink." Although Song retaliated once by informing Randi that "chink" was a derogatory term for Chinese, and not Hmong, it only served to get more attention from the other kids, who had, by that time, gathered to surround her with smirks.

"Hey, chink, go back to where you came from. We don't want you here," Randi would often say. Or she'd say, "Come here, chink, come here," and then pat Song's head, sometimes stroking her long, black hair. At times in the hallways, she'd grab Song's books and scatter them on the floor for other kids to step on. If Song happened to be on the staircase below, Randi would spit with the aim of getting saliva in Song's hair. And always, sooner or later, the pointing of fingers and laughter by the other students would enclose her in the hallway or in the cafeteria, wherever she happened to be at the time. Because everyone knows that if you can't fight it, you've got to join it.

Thinking about it now, Song's breathing quickened with a deep-seeded hatred for Randi. It took form like something tight and compressed in Song's chest. She had felt it in high school many times, but back then, it was more like a faint, burning glow. Now, though, the hatred seared her insides like a fire, burning the cowardice and insecurity she had once cloaked with indifference. Back then, she had thought of her feigned

indifference as stoicism. Back then, she could never do anything to Randi. It was Randi O'Connor, after all. Randi, who was so popular, so rich, and so well-liked. Randi, who was always so meticulous about carrying out her taunts when teachers weren't looking.

Driving from Chagrin Hills, where Song lived, to Montessori Bay usually took about a full hour, but Song made it there in forty-five minutes. Before making the drive, she had secretly taken care to load the gun, just as Nhia had taught her. She had put the gun in her purse. Then she had dropped Michael off in the driveway of her sister's house, telling him how much she loved him, her eyes brimming with tears.

"What's wrong?" Michael had asked. He had already closed the car door, but he reached for the handle again, as if he was going to open the door, get back in, and stay.

"Are you okay, mom?" he asked. He was dressed in a black Spiderman t-shirt and jeans.

Song couldn't help but think about how young he was, so pure-hearted and naïve, and how the world was not. How it was people like Randi who would cultivate hatred in the minds of their children, and how their children would in turn teach their future children to hate, and the cycle would never end. It exhausted her to think of it. It infuriated her. She did not know the boy who had taunted Michael and given him the bloody nose. She did not know his parents. But she knew Randi. And besides, it didn't matter; in her mind, all those people were just like Randi.

"I'm fine," Song finally said. "You be a good boy now. Mind your manners."

She reached through the open car window to smooth down his hair, that one piece of cowlick that always stuck out. Then she backed out and waved to him before driving off.

Song breathed in deeply, the air inside her Camry smelling of royal pine from the car freshener dangling on the rearview mirror. She glanced down at the scrap piece of paper, where earlier she'd written directions from MapQuest. She made a left turn and headed out to the suburbs on the far east side of Montessori Bay. She passed a tall church and a large park with a basketball court before she finally saw it: 2643 Chayuga Drive. The two-story house was made of brick and had a wooden fence around it. It had a wide front door sandwiched between two big, beautiful windows with round arches at the top. She estimated that the house probably cost five times more than her little ranch home in Chagrin Hills.

Song drove past the house and then went around the block, before parking across the street from it. She wondered if Randi was even home. Song sat in her car for a long time, thinking over what she was going to do. An hour passed, but time was not of concern to her at the moment. She looked down at herself, a petite Hmong woman in her mid-thirties, dressed in a navy blue shirt and khaki capri's. Anyone walking by would never think she was capable of coming there to do what she was going to do. But she would prove them wrong. She knew now that all those acquiescent years in high school were ignorance on her part. Randi was ignorant, those other bullies were ignorant, but she had been ignorant too, for letting the taunts carry on through all those years. The sobbing she had forced herself to stifle in the girls' restroom at school. Her parents not knowing

how to help in this country so different from their mountaintop homes in Laos. Song suddenly felt ashamed for being so ignorant. She had come across a proverb once that said, “Silence implies consent.” Thinking about it now, she couldn’t agree more with that quote. She would be silent no more.

Another hour passed before a bold serenity filled Song’s mind. A calmness she hadn’t felt in a long time. She began to think rationally. She’d been sitting out in her car in Randi’s neighborhood for two hours now. Had anyone noticed? She’d have to act now, in case there were already suspicions. She’d ring the doorbell, and if it wasn’t Randi appearing at the door, she’d ask for her, saying they were old friends from high school. There was nothing she wanted to say to Randi. Nothing at all. The act itself would suffice. She’d pull out the gun, shoot Randi, and walk calmly away. That was all there was to it. Making amends.

Song got out of her car, slung her purse over her shoulder, and made her way toward Randi’s house. She stepped onto the driveway twenty feet from the front door and gazed up at the house. It was so big that Song felt small and insignificant, like one of the tiny ants scurrying along the driveway’s wide, open concrete.

She went quickly to the front door, raised her finger to the doorbell, and pressed. The noise that echoed from inside the house was that of chimes that sounded like it had a melody. Song waited a beat, then pressed the bell again. She paced a few feet and peered into one of the big, beautiful arching windows that covered the front of the house.

And it was then that Song saw Randi. Through the window pane, Song recognized her immediately. Despite having aged fifteen years and having gained some

weight since high school, Randi still looked the same. She still had the wavy brown hair, the same startling blue eyes. She sat in an armchair and seemed to be going through some papers in her hands—maybe the day’s mail. But her mouth was moving and it seemed she was calling out to somebody.

At that moment, the front door flew open and a little girl appeared. She couldn’t have been more than six years old. She poked her head out from the doorway before seeing Song.

“Hi,” she said. Her hair was brown and wavy, her eyes blue, just like Randi’s.

“Is Randi your mom?” Song said. The little girl nodded, her hair bobbing up and down. She took a step forward, and Song saw that she was dressed in a purple cotton sundress.

“I like your dress,” Song said.

“Thanks,” the girl said. “My name’s Laura. What’s yours?”

“Oh,” Song said. She paused and thought of giving a false name.

“Oh?” the girl said. She laughed in a carefree, childish manner. “That’s silly. ‘Oh’ isn’t even a name.”

“Who is it, sweetie? Is it one of your neighborhood friends again?” a voice called from within. It was the same voice that Song had feared so much in high school, and yet it was not quite the same. The girl turned back.

“No, mommy, it’s a woman,” she said. Then she disappeared inside the house, leaving the front door wide open.

Song breathed in deep and let the air out slowly. The time had arrived. Randi would be standing in front of her any moment now. Song would do it the first second Randi appeared.

It had been a relatively calm, sunny day, but now a gust of wind swept up, blowing strands of Song's hair into her face. And then before Song knew it, Randi was there standing at the front door, looking about for the person who had rung her doorbell. One glance and Song knew that what she had thought was a weight gain in Randi was not merely that. Randi was wearing a maroon shirt that billowed out at the waist, covering a round, growing stomach.

Randi turned in Song's direction. Their eyes met.

"Is there something I can do for you?" Randi said. Her eyes showed no mark of recognition.

Song's heart hammered in her throat. She inhaled deeply again, but this time, she held her breath, the air filling up her insides.

Slowly, Song slipped her hand into the open folds of her purse. She felt around and gripped the revolver's handle. Her fingertip grazed the trigger.

But before she could pull the gun out, a new thought flitted through her mind. A realization, really, about her and Randi and the lives each of them now led. Slowly, Song let out the breath she had been holding, and it felt like the expulsion of toxins that had long been trapped inside. She pulled her empty hand out of her purse.

Randi frowned and said, "Can I help you with something?"

Song didn't answer, didn't say anything for what seemed a long time, although it couldn't have been more than a minute. The two women simply stared at each other.

"I'm sorry. I think I've got the wrong house," Song finally said.

She turned and walked away to the driveway, where only moments ago, she had stood with the intent to murder. She turned back for one last glance at the bully she had feared so much in high school, the bully who haunted her even in adulthood and tainted the dreams she held for her son.

Randi was still staring quizzically, but then her eyes suddenly narrowed in recognition.

"I know you, don't I? We went to the same high school," Randi said.

Song nodded. The two women stared at each other again in a long, enthralling silence, a distance of twenty feet between them. And in that distance floated the same dreams in life, the same desires for health, happiness, and love in a world so big and wide.

Song held Randi's gaze and finally offered a small smile. Then she turned and walked away to her car. She drove home slowly and thought of Michael, who was waiting for her.

SHORTCOMINGS

Somewhere in the distance, the clicking of a woman's high heeled shoes resounded through the silent building. Mai Yang repositioned herself on the chair for the eighth time in three minutes. The pregnancy weight she had recently gained made her irritable and impatient. Not only that, but the numerous times she had sat on waiting room chairs had never once proved comfortable, but she could never decide if it was due to the chairs themselves or to the events that often led her to the many waiting rooms she had visited.

On this particular evening, it seemed her wait would be even more uncomfortable. She was sitting alone in the waiting room of a funeral home. Although the place was brightly lit and decently-kept, Mai couldn't shake off the thought that there were dead people lying somewhere in a room nearby. Maybe their souls were all hovering about her this very minute. She had never been one to believe in the paranormal, but tonight was different.

She looked up at the ceiling and counted the cracks. Seven. Seven cracks. Seven was her mother's favorite number. Lucky seven, her mother always said. It was a foolish idea her mother had clung to as a result of winning \$3,200 at a game of craps during her first visit to the casino.

But seven really wasn't a lucky number for the Yang family. Seven times throughout her childhood, Mai's mother had silently ushered her and her three younger sisters into the old beat up Chevy Laguna that once belonged to their uncle. Her mother

would toss into the trunk a suitcase that had been packed and carefully hidden in the laundry room days ago.

“*Me ntxhais*—daughters, stay right here,” her mother said. “I’m going inside to check on things and then I’ll be right back.”

Mai could see her mother through the living room’s bow window. Her mother was in the kitchen just beyond the living room, and she was doing something Mai had seen her do for years. Her mother carefully placed onto the kitchen table a bowl of steamed white rice, a plate of fried chicken wings, and a bowl of boiled green beans. Tonight, though, rather than just setting the table, Mai’s mother was also covering each dish with Saran Wrap. Mai’s father would be home in half an hour, he would be hungry, and upon discovering the house uncommonly empty, he would be angry. The food on the table was a contrite gesture on her mother’s part.

“We’re going to see your grandparents in California,” her mother said. She got into the car and closed the door. “It’ll be fun. We’ll stay for a long time.”

“Can we go to Disney Land?” The question came from one of Mai’s younger sisters who was strapped in the backseat.

“Maybe,” her mother said.

But even as a young child, Mai understood enough about her family to know what was happening. The trip to see her mother’s parents had been planned days ago, maybe even weeks ago. The plan was always the same. Her mother was to drive them from their small town of Holbern, Wisconsin to Chicago, Illinois, where she had a brother. He

would take them to board a plane at O'Hare International Airport. They would fly out to Merced, California, far away from Mai's father. That was always the plan.

Ideally, her mother wanted to leave in the early afternoon, right after Mai's father had come home for lunch and left again for work. But it never worked out that way. After her father was gone, her mother wandered the house doing little chores here and there or perhaps starting dinner, but she always appeared aimless as if she were mulling over something very important. Finally, an hour or so before her father was due back, her mother would suddenly rush about the house frantically, grabbing jackets, shoes, the suitcase, and toys to keep Mai and her sisters' busy on the long road trip.

But every single one of the seven times, when they were in the car, Mai's mother would gaze out the window with the keys in her lap, the fingers of both hands fiddling with each other. After awhile, her mother would sigh and turn to look at her kids. The corners of her eyes would crease, tears would rim the edges. And then they would rush to get everything back into the house before her father came home, back the way it was before, back to the many nights where her father would come home late smelling of vodka, smoke, sweat, and pickles from the pickling factory where he worked. Back to the yelling, the beatings, and the many nights when Mai and her sisters covered under the blanket while her mother was slammed into furniture. By the time Mai's father got her mother up from the floor, he would already be a sobbing, pitiful mess. In the hospital's waiting room, Mai and her sisters would sit quietly together while her father patted her mother's bloody face with a hand towel. He would translate for her, telling the doctor

about the little accident, how she was carrying a laundry basket full of clothes and tripped down the stairs.

“*Yog tsis muaj kuv koj yuav ua li cas?* What would you do without me?” he’d say to her later. “No one to help you, no one to translate. So many things I do for you.”

Sometimes, he didn’t even have to drink to get that way. All it took was a wrong word or two, something that Mai’s mother had said that he didn’t like. One time, she had said she wanted to go to her garden, a half acre of land about a fifteen minutes drive away, where she’d planted tomatoes, cilantro, and sweet peas among other things. There were bugs eating away her vegetables and she wanted to apply some pesticides.

“Poison—that’s what pesticide is,” he said. “Are you trying to poison me?”

“It keeps the bugs away,” her mother answered. But her father slammed his hands down on the kitchen table so hard it shook. He got up from his chair and grabbed a handful of her hair.

“If you ever put pesticides on my vegetables, you’ll be sorry. Do you hear?” He pushed her head down hard before he left the kitchen.

Seven times throughout their 23 years of marriage and still Mai’s mother could never carry out her plan. When Mai and her sisters grew older and there were no new babies in the family, the hitting grew worse. And often times, they happened for no apparent reasons.

“*Niam*—mom. Why don’t you leave him?” Mai once asked. She was helping her mother make eggrolls for dinner.

“*Tsis zoo li koj xav os, me ntxhais*—It doesn’t happen that way, daughter. You don’t understand about having to start life all over. I’m not young anymore, Mai. Being a divorced Hmong woman with children is not an easy thing,” her mother said. She took a large spoonful of the stuffing made of ground pork, bean thread noodles, cabbage, onion, and carrots. She placed the stuffing in the center of an eggroll wrapper. Mai watched her fold three corners of the wrapper over the stuffing before finally rolling the whole thing into a tight eggroll.

“Starting all over is better than staying with him,” Mai said. “*Niam*, I’m older now. I can help you with a lot of things. You don’t have to stay anymore.”

“I know you can help with things I don’t know about in this country,” her mother said. “But the truth is that you’re a girl and you’ll marry someday. You won’t be with me forever.”

“So what? Even if I marry, I’ll still be your daughter. I’ll still take care of you.”

Her mother shook her head. “*Me ntxhais*, you think like an American girl. Remember that you’re Hmong.”

“*Niam*, this isn’t about me. This is about you and dad. You can’t keep living like this. *We* can’t. You’ve been hit so many times. I can’t even count the times anymore. Just leave him. We can make it on our own.”

But her mother shook her head and explained the way it would turn out: he’d come find them where ever they were and make promises, her clan would scold him and point out the wrongs he’d committed, he’d say how much he’s changed and that he’ll never hit her again, he’d convince her clan to tell her to go back to him and they would

do it, and she would too, because the goal was always to keep families together. Except eventually the hitting would return, only perhaps worse than before.

“What if one of these times, I called the police?” Mai asked.

“You’d shame your father so much. You’d shame our family name. Don’t ever do that,” her mother said.

No, her mother had said then. No, her mother would say again and again. Every time Mai or her sisters tried talking to their mother about leaving, the answer was always the same.

And now, as an adult, Mai evaded all thoughts of her parents’ relationship and the harsh childhood she had known. She despised her father, but she also hated her mother’s weakness, for succumbing to a life of abuse.

Seven was not a lucky number. Mai sighed and repositioned herself on the chair again. She tried smoothing out the wrinkles in the hem of her blue cotton shirt. She quickly ran her fingers through her black hair. The clicking of the shoes resonated louder, and then abruptly, a woman with short, cropped hair pushed open a set of swinging doors. She was petite and wore a beige suit. The clicking of her shoes melted into the brown carpet as she entered the room and strode towards Mai.

“Hi. You must be Mai Yang?” she said. She smiled and took Mai’s hand in a firm shake. “I’m so sorry for your loss. I’m Jan Morris, the funeral director here. We talked so briefly on the phone that I didn’t get a chance to apologize for having to meet with you so late in the day. We’ve been very busy here lately.”

“Yes, well, that’s understandable. Did you...? Is everything...?”

“Yes, of course. Let me show you to the room. I did as you told me to do, a little color on the lips and some neutral tones on the face, just to make her look more natural as you’d mentioned on the phone.”

They walked silently for a moment through a darkened corridor.

“Do you ever get a little nervous working in a place like this?” Mai said.

“I’ve gotten used to it. It’s a job like any other. Not a lot of females in this line of work though, but that’s what initially drew me to this profession.”

Mai smiled politely.

“Well, here we are,” Jan Morris said. She turned the handle on the door and opened it slightly. “Do you want some time alone in there? You mentioned on the phone that you were coming in from North Carolina, so I assume you haven’t seen your mother.”

“No, I haven’t. My sisters who live closer have, and some of the relatives have as well, but...I just wanted to see her alone before the funeral began tomorrow. I’ll only be a minute. Will you stand out here and wait for me?”

Jan Morris nodded.

Mai pushed the door open. The room was large and square. It smelled of chemicals. Counters with various medical tools and supplies lined three of the walls. In the middle of the room, next to a large metal sink, the body of her mother lay on a metal table. Mai’s sisters and a few of the relatives had already come by to dress the body. Her mother wore the traditional black and red Hmong clothing given to the dead. Her hands were folded neatly on top of her abdomen.

In the six years since Mai had left home, she had not seen or spoken to her mother or father. Up until now, she wasn't even sure how she was going to react to seeing her dead mother. She didn't cry when she got the phone call, and she didn't cry even after a few days' time had allowed the news to sink in. Now, all she did was stare at the body lying before her.

This isn't my mother, Mai thought. This is a hollow body, not my mother.

But the face was definitely her mother's. Although the face was a bit thin and sunken, Mai could still identify her mother's high cheek bones, the wide forehead, thin lips, and that crooked nose that had been broken more than once. Mai ambled closer to the body. Halfheartedly, she reached out and touched her mother's hand. It was cold and hard, like stiff bread. Leaning in closer, Mai whispered the only thing she could think of to say.

"*Niam*, why couldn't you have just left him? I could of taken care of you...if only you had left."

Even as Mai spoke those words, she knew it wasn't true. At the moment, she had no idea what she was going to do with herself. How could she have taken care of her mother? The truth was that it had taken news of her mother's death for Mai to leave her own marriage, to save her own unborn baby the desolation of growing up in an abusive home.

Countless times, Mai had told herself that her husband was not like her father. He didn't really hit. He never made her bleed or broke her nose. She never had to pay a visit to the hospital either. But too often, in the heat of an argument, he grabbed her wrist and

held it hard, squeezed it or twisted it, until her hand throbbed. It would bruise and end up sore for the next few days. Sometimes, he pushed her too. Always, in the back of her head, Mai knew he was only a step away from seriously hurting her. It was only a matter of time.

Mai leaned closer to inspect her mother's face.

Jan Morris is a good mortician, Mai thought.

There was not a trace of abuse, no blue-black bruises, no open cuts. Even her mother's neck, although pale and a bit swollen, showed no signs of the rope that had strangled her to death. There was just her mother's quiet, solemn face.

ACROSS LANDS

“Marry me, Lia,” he said.

Chimeng, my boyfriend of eleven months, sat in the driver’s seat of his Corolla, which stunk of cigarettes. His excessive smoking irritated me. I stared at him from the passenger’s side. He held out a diamond ring. It was actually a “promise ring” sold at places like Kmart. I made no move to accept it.

“I can’t,” I said.

“What do you mean? Why can’t you?”

“Because I want to hear why you’re proposing.”

He sighed and placed the ring in the cup holder between us. “There’s lots of reasons why, Lia, but—okay, fine. If you want to hear it, I’m doing this because I love you. And you’re pregnant.”

“Because I’m pregnant? Is that really it?”

“No, that’s not all there is to it. I said I love you, didn’t I? What do you want?” He ran his fingers through his short black hair.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I want. I haven’t had time to think about all of this. I’m 17 and you’re 18. We’ve still got to figure out what we want in life. Don’t you see that?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Lia,” he said. “We don’t have time. You and I don’t believe in abortion. At least *that* we agree on. And adoption is not realistic. You know what our culture is like. Everybody’s going to know when you get bigger. Whether

we want to marry or not, our parents and relatives will pressure us into doing it. And your clan will want a higher bride price if they know you're already pregnant. So we do it now before people start noticing."

I didn't respond. I already knew all of the things Chimeng was explaining. We were parked at Callum Park. I watched as a group of kids played freeze tag on the jungle gym.

Chimeng continued. "You're two months pregnant. If we get married now, it won't look so bad by the time people start noticing that you're pregnant."

"I need to think about this," I said.

Chimeng drove me home and parked in the driveway. As I opened the door to get out, his face suddenly softened, the deep furrows of his brows releasing. He smiled in that kind of shy way that had attracted me to him when we first met.

"Hey listen, I really do love you. I'm not just saying it," he said. He reached out his hand and touched my black hair, the strands that framed my face. His finger trailed lightly on my cheek.

My mother wasn't home. I went into my bedroom and lay on the bed. The room had been my older brothers' before they'd left for college. On the shelves and in the closet were still some of their things. I had never gotten around to clearing them all out. The soccer trophies and science fiction novels that belonged to Bee, my oldest brother. Some of the paintings that Tou, my other brother, had done. Along with some of their items were many of mine: the six notebooks that I had been keeping of my various sketches and writings, my stereo and CD collection, a few of my old stuffed animals from when I was a

child, clothes (mostly comfortable jeans, t-shirts, and sweatshirts), and some of the roses that Chimeng had given me, although they were now dried out.

I covered my face with my hands and lay motionless for a long time. I knew I should change out of the jeans and blue sweatshirt I had on, before I got too tired, but none of that mattered much at the moment. My thoughts were focused on one question: what should I do? I did not want to marry, not at my age, not like so many of my Hmong friends and cousins. I was going to be different. I was going to go to college, like my brothers, and make something of myself first before I ever settled down with a family. In my future, I saw journalism—I would be a news reporter or maybe work as an editor for a newspaper or a magazine. I wanted to interview people and tell their stories to the world.

And then amidst all the perplexity roaming through my head, I suddenly thought of a cousin of my mother's and of her story. I hadn't thought of the story in years, although when I was younger, my mother's cousin used to occupy my mind constantly. I was so captivated by her in a weird, obsessive way that I couldn't stop thinking about her.

It was a thundering night, and I was eleven when I first learned the story of my mother's cousin. The electricity in our little ranch house had died, and my two brothers and I were lying on the carpet around my mother's feet. She had just gotten home from her job at the Golden Foods Factory and was resting in my father's recliner, the one that was really hers now, since my father had passed away from a heart attack four years ago. The one large candle on our old coffee table flickered, casting shadows that bent and bowed like beckoning fingers. To pass the time, my mother began telling us the story of Orphan, a boy in Laos whose parents died, leaving him to live with cruel relatives.

“Mom,” my brother, Bee, said. He reached down and picked at a scab on his knee. “You’ve told us that story so many times already.”

“This is a different one,” my mother said. “Just listen, *mloog kuv hais*. You’ll see that this one is different.”

We rolled our eyes. My mother sighed. She cocked her head thoughtfully and looked at the wall of beckoning fingers.

“I have a true story I can tell you. But promise me you won’t be scared?” my mother said. She looked at all three of us, the flame from the candle flickering in her eyes. We nodded eagerly. My mother shifted in her chair and leaned back a little. She looked up at the ceiling and began her story.

“I had a cousin who, in her time, was the most beautiful female. She was fifteen, tall, and had stunning white skin. Her thick, black hair drifted down to her knees. Every morning, she walked to a nearby lake to haul water in two large pails for her family. One morning, she caught the attention of a young man. He lived in the next village farther down on the mountain side, and he had a wife and three girls.

“*Nyob zoo*. Hello,’ the young man said. ‘Where are you from?’

“‘Just over there,’ my cousin said. She continued walking, her hands grasping the two heavy pails.

“‘Let me help you carry that,’ the young man said. He reached out to take one of the pails.

“My cousin smiled politely and said, ‘That’s okay. I’m almost home.’

“She walked away from him, following the dirt path that led to our village of huts. That night, the young man came to her house. He whispered to her through the thin bamboo walls of the hut, enticing her to come out for a talk. He wanted to get to know her. But my cousin said no, turned over on her mat, and ignoring him, she fell asleep. I know this happened only because the next morning, my cousin told her sister about it and her sister later told it to me. We believe the young man came again and again, almost every night, because there were footprints in the dusty dirt by the exterior wall of the room where my cousin slept.

“Two weeks passed in this manner before the young man suddenly came to visit during the day. I remember seeing him stroll up to the hut, dressed in black. My aunt and uncle—my cousin’s parents—had gone out to harvest their field. I dropped the small rocks I had gathered for playing with my sister and watched the young man approach my cousin. When she saw him coming, she put down the beans she was washing in a tin tub, went inside the hut, and closed the door.

“‘Come out,’ he called. He knocked on the door. ‘I want to talk to you.’ And then he just came right out and said it. ‘I want to marry you. My wife has given me three girls, but no boys. I can take care of you. I have enough money for a second wife.’

“Although my cousin didn’t answer, I knew she was irritated. I knew her well enough to understand that she didn’t like the young man at all and that she would never consent to marry him.

“‘If you won’t come out and go to my house with me, I’ll sit here and wait for your father to come home. I’ll talk to him and I’ll send for my relatives to come. My clan

leaders know him well, and I'm sure he won't object to our marriage,' the young man said. He sat down on a wooden stool by the house.

"It was then that my cousin opened the door. She held a broom in her hand and started hitting him with the grass bristles. Dust and dirt flew everywhere from the broom. I laughed when I saw this and yanked my sister's arm so she would turn and see. The young man jumped up. He hollered, then went running down the path that led away from our village.

"But this was not the end of the young man's attempt. Soon, word began circulating that he was coming back for my cousin. And sure enough, it happened. As my cousin and three of her friends walked out to the lake one day to wash their clothes, the young man made his attempt. He and a friend met them on the path, grabbed her, and tried to run off with her. She screamed and fought. Her three friends clawed and kicked at the two men until finally, they dropped her on the ground and left."

My brother, Tou, scrunched his dark brows. "They tried to kidnap her? That's illegal though," he said.

"The story doesn't take place in America, moron," responded Bee.

"In Laos, kidnapping your bride was practiced for—oh, probably hundreds of years," said my mother. "So it was perfectly acceptable for the young man to do that."

"Does it still happen anymore?" I said. The thought of being kidnapped for marriage appalled me.

"In Laos, yes. Sometimes. But very rarely in America," my mother said. Then she continued her story.

“When my cousin’s father learned of the kidnapping attempt, he said to her, ‘Don’t you like him? He’s a respectable man. He comes from a very good family. Our clans get along well. I’ll talk to them.’”

“Her mother said, ‘I’d better teach that girl how to cook, sew, and take care of babies better. I can’t have word getting back to me that she’s a bad daughter-in-law.’”

“It was fairly common for girls to be married against their wishes. But my cousin was pretty stubborn. She was set on marrying for love. She talked about it a lot. So my cousin did something nobody had ever done.”

My mother suddenly paused and looked at us thoughtfully. Outside, the storm seemed to subside. I could barely hear the wind rushing against the sides of the house and rattling the windows.

“What did she do, mom?” I said. I rolled and wiggled around on the carpet to loosen the blanket around me. I had wrapped myself up like a cocoon and was feeling too warm.

“Well, I suppose you’re all old enough now anyway,” my mother said. Bee was twelve, Tou was eleven, and I was ten.

Tou was sipping Capri Sun from a pouch and must have swallowed wrong. He started coughing and sputtering juice. We waited while he went to grab some paper towels.

“You see, there was a family of Americans who had come to our village,” my mother finally continued, “and they were doing some missionary work. I think the husband was a pastor, and he and his wife brought many copies of the Bible, and they

wanted to build a church in our village, because it was one of the bigger towns. If I remember correctly, they were in our village for only a couple of months. They never did get the church built. But of course, their presence in our village caused a lot of problems. Some of the Hmongs in our village liked the idea of Christianity. They wanted to convert. But others, like my father and all my uncles, didn't like it at all. Shamanism had worked for them for centuries—why change now?"

"Well, this American pastor and his wife had two grown children who had come with them. One of them was a tall, young man with blond hair and blue eyes, and he was maybe eighteen or nineteen years old. Anyway, I never saw this with my own eyes, but people began saying that my cousin was courting him. They said that *she* was courting *him*. Now, Hmong women are *never* supposed to be the ones to make advances towards men, not like how it happens in this country with some of the young people. And Hmongs and Americans had never been boyfriends and girlfriends before, from what I knew back then. So people definitely talked about my cousin. She invited him to eat with her, they said. She and he were often seen talking with gestures and smiles. She walked with him into the woods, they said. Into the woods."

At this, my mother paused and looked at us. She nodded her head up and down, her eyebrows raised. She said, "And of course, you know what happens when a guy and a girl go into the woods together, *alone*."

My brothers and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes.

"We learned about sex in the human reproduction unit at school already, mom. Geez," Bee said.

“You kids know too much in this country,” my mother said.

“When does the story get scary?” Tou asked.

“In a little bit,” my mother said. “We’re almost to the death part.”

Our eyes widened in anticipation. My mother continued.

“I didn’t understand what all the talk about my cousin really meant, because I was only nine at the time. But one evening, the young man who wanted to marry my cousin came to our village. I saw him walk right up to her and call her a *mej cab*, a whore. He said he was glad she wasn’t his wife or else he’d have beaten her already.

“My cousin was in front of the house, having just killed two chickens for that night’s supper. She stared at him for what seemed like minutes, but I’m sure it was only a brief moment. And then she held a dangling chicken by the feet, its slit throat still dripping with blood, and dipped it into a green bucket of steaming boiled water. She pulled the chicken back out and began plucking the loose feathers. It was like he was no longer there in front of her. She had dismissed him. The young man finally turned away, disgusted by her. He left and never bothered her again, except to spread more spiteful rumors about her. I remember seeing steam from the green bucket rise and swirl around my cousin as a breeze swept by. I don’t know why I remember that so clearly, but it sure was strange, kind of eerie.

“You kids might not understand this too well, being born in this country, but what my cousin did so she wouldn’t have to marry that young man was very, very bad. It didn’t just ruin her reputation, it caused her father to lose face. You see, he was a very important man in our clan. People consulted him on all matters, from family problems to health and

spiritual problems. But after what my cousin did, people started saying that if her father couldn't even control his own daughter, how could he be in charge of a clan?

“Time went by and we started noticing that something was different about my cousin. I went with her to wash clothes one day and when her shirt got wet, I saw that it clung to her body, especially to her round melon of a stomach. I had thought all of the talking was just rumors, but then I finally believed when she started to look like the pregnant women in our village.

“Now, you have to understand that being pregnant without being married is one of the worst things for a woman. It's like she's been used, and not many men will want to marry her. If anyone did, he would be risking his reputation as well as his family's. Well, of course, *everyone* talked about my cousin. I don't know exactly what my cousin's parents said or did to her, but they must have been extremely angry. I think they beat her pretty bad one night, because my father had to go over to their house and calm things down. I don't know how my cousin withstood it all.

“When the time came nearer for the baby to be born, my cousin went to live in the nearby woods. She couldn't have the baby in her parents' house, otherwise the spirits of her family would be angry and then poverty would fall upon them. Her brother built her a tiny shack of bamboo and grass in the woods, and this was where she gave birth, alone with her pain.”

My mother stopped. The corners of her eyes and mouth curved down a little.

“What happened to your cousin, mom?” I said.

“She died,” my mother said.

“In childbirth?”

Outside, lightning suddenly blazed. It lighted our living room like a camera flashing brightly in the dark.

“No. She gave birth to the baby all by herself in the woods in that lonely shack. She had just turned sixteen the week before. Why, she was only four years older than you are now,” my mother said. She pointed to Bee.

“My cousin survived child labor. So did her baby. I know this because I heard it crying the night it was born. It was dark and I couldn’t see a thing. The fire in the pit had died in my family’s house, and we were sleeping for the night when I heard a cry, a small whimper like an animal. But then it grew to sound more like a baby’s cry. That must have been right after it was born. Nobody really expected the birth yet—it was still too early, they thought. So nobody got up to look. That, and perhaps everyone was so tired from all the farm work. I thought about waking somebody up but I was only nine at the time and very scared of the dark. So I tried to go back to sleep. But much later, I heard the same cry again, only this time, it came from a different direction.

“The next morning, my cousin and her baby were not in their shack in the woods. However, the baby’s placenta was lying on the dirt floor of the shack. My cousin’s mother immediately dug a hole two feet in the ground and buried the placenta right there in the house. This way, the baby, when it died, would be able to backtrack its steps through life, back to its birthplace, and find its placenta, which we call *tshos* in Hmong, and which it needs to wear to get to the afterlife.”

I cringed. “Ew, that’s disgusting. A rotting placenta in the house?”

My mother nodded.

“After the placenta was buried, we looked for my cousin and her baby, but they were not to be found anywhere. It was then that my cousin’s brother noticed a trail of blood, which must have been my cousin’s postpartum bleeding. It led in the other direction, to the lake nearby.

“I wasn’t there to see it, but I heard that when everybody got there, they found my cousin and her baby. They said the baby was a boy with hair the color of chocolate and eyes like the sky. He was wrapped in a blanket and strapped to my cousin’s chest with a long cloth. My cousin and her baby were on the bank of the lake. They were floating, their bodies bloated from drowning.”

“Did she accidentally fall in the lake?” I said.

“No way. I bet you somebody drowned them on purpose. You know, killed them,” Tou said.

“Or maybe she committed suicide and took her baby with her,” Bee said.

We looked up at our mother expectantly. There was a long silence. My mother gazed at the carpet, her brown eyes lost in thought. My brothers and I waited. Outside, the rain tapped our windows softly. I thought about my mother’s cousin and her baby, both of them dead in the lake. In my head, I pictured their bodies rocking gently with the waves.

“So, mom, what really happened?” Bee finally asked.

My mother still didn’t answer. She suddenly glanced up at us, and then the lids of her eyes closed for a split-second. When she opened them again, her face looked tired.

“I think it’s time for bed,” she said.

She took the big candle from the coffee table and ushered us into the bathroom. We brushed our teeth with the candle's flame casting bent shadows on the wall. Then my brothers went off to sleep in the bedroom they shared. Since our house only had two small bedrooms, I shared a room as well as a full size bed with my mother. I pulled the covers up and tucked them under my chin, as was my habit. I tried to sleep, but that night, I couldn't. I heard my mother in the bathroom. When she came into the room, I heard her set the candle gently on the night stand. She changed by our closet, and then I felt her climb into bed and heard her blow out the candle. I listened to her breaths until they became the steady, heavy breathing of a person in slumber.

All night, I kept thinking about my mother's cousin. I retold the story in my mind and envisioned what she might have looked like, talked like, walked like. I pictured her wearing jeans and a t-shirt, not the Hmong clothes she probably wore back then. Somehow, I couldn't imagine her in Hmong clothes. I finally fell asleep, but in the morning, I awoke with dreams swimming through my head, dreams of dead babies being held upside down by their ankles and dipped into boiling water, steam rising eerily around them.

That was the beginning of my fascination. I once asked my mother what her cousin's name was, but my mother said that I shouldn't think so much about the story. I disregarded her words and created in my mind other stories about her cousin. In one of the stories, she came back from the dead, her long black hair falling over her face, her baby still strapped to her chest. She drifted like a ghost into the house of the young man who

had wanted to marry her, she made him kiss her soiled feet, and then she lured him into the lake with her and her Hmong-American baby.

Maybe it was due to maturity, maybe it was due to a more active social life, but once I began high school, I stopped thinking about my mother's cousin. And then I started so suddenly, thinking about her again, the night Chimeng proposed.

The day after his proposal, Chimeng called me. He called again a few days later, but I still hadn't made up my mind. For some reason, though, he was more patient than he was in the car.

"It's okay. It's a big decision, so I'll wait for you to be sure," he said. I could hear his quiet breathing on the other end of the phone line.

A week later, though, something happened which I'm not even sure I can explain well. I had gone to the store to buy green onions and limes at the local Super Wal-Mart. After picking up the items, I passed the baby department. The tiny clothes hung like colorful ornaments on the racks. The blues, pinks, and yellows all lined up so neatly, each style belonging to their own racks and organized by size. I couldn't help but think about life—if only everything could be fitted nicely into its own section, like putting clothes away in drawers after doing the laundry. And maybe whatever didn't fit nicely would have its own drawer, and it just wouldn't ever have to be opened. I gave the tiny clothes one last glimpse before turning away, my head feeling light and dizzy.

On the way back home, I turned the radio on as a way of avoiding my thoughts. The road was a long, winding one that seemed to go on and on, because we lived out on

the far edge of town. As I drove, weaving around the bends in the road, I wasn't even really thinking about what I was going to do with my pregnant self.

But something suddenly happened. A sensation inside me like that of a baby moving, the sensation that my mother had described as being a flutter when she was describing pregnancy to me a long time ago. Except I knew that what I felt wasn't the baby. It was still too small for its movements to be felt. So from where the movement came from, I don't know. All I know for certain is that at first, it felt like a quiver, a tremble maybe that I can only equate to the feeling of being nervous.

But within a few minutes, it worsened into something sharp and severe. And then I knew that it was coming from inside my chest. I pulled over to the side of the road and thought perhaps I was dying. I cried for a long time, those heaving sobs that come from the depths of your stomach. I must have stayed there on the edge of the road for nearly an hour, alone and enclosed in the tiny space of my mother's Ford Escort.

I thought of the hardships I would endure as a Hmong mother with no husband. I saw the fingers people in the Hmong community were going to point at me to show their children what a slut looked like. I thought about my cousins and friends whose parents would not approve of their association with me. I saw my baby being called a bastard and growing up without a father. I thought about the fact that in the future, if a Hmong man was willing to love my child and me, his parents would perhaps do everything in their power to break the relationship. I saw disappointment in my brothers' eyes. I saw the way they would try to help and defend me against other people's judgments. I thought of my mother and how people were going to glower at her and say it was her fault for not

remarrying, for not having a man in charge of the family. I knew of the burdens a new baby would bring to my mother, who wouldn't complain, but would end up babysitting while I worked or attended school.

When I finally started the engine and steered back onto the road, I knew my decision. This was America, not Laos, and yet things were not all that different.

On the afternoon Chimeng was to pick me up to bring me home as his wife, I dressed in a pair of black slacks and a nice sweater with lace trimmings around the hem. My mother was sitting at the kitchen table, looking at her checkbook.

"Mom, I'm going out," I said. In the usual Hmong custom, I didn't tell her that I was going off to get married.

She looked up and held my gaze. Somehow, she already knew. My mother always had a way of knowing what was on my mind.

She said, "You're doing the right thing."

"By the standards of our culture. Yes, I know."

"Were you happy here? Tell me I gave you a decent life, even without a father."

I smiled. "Yes, mom, you gave me very good life."

I hugged my mother and went outside where Chimeng was waiting in his car. He drove me to his house on the other side of town. Two of his uncles came out to greet me as their new *nyab*, or daughter-in-law, and then they departed to go inform my mother and relatives that I was now a part of Chimeng's family; I no longer belonged to my own clan.

By the front door of Chimeng's house, I stepped over a squawking chicken held tight by Chimeng's mother, a ritual to introduce the bride to spirits of the groom's family.

I walked through the door of their home and onto the path of marriage, of motherhood, and of traditions deeply rooted in the ground. I walked and did not drown. Neither did my baby.