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These stories are part of a cycle of stories that shares a central character whose life has been ravaged by war.

FLOWERS FOR AMERICA, STORIES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
FLOWERS FOR AMERICA.....	1
IN A WAY WE COULDN'T BE LOVED	49

FLOWERS FOR AMERICA

It is much worse today, but even back then, if you looked closely, you could see the orchid sellers on Rue Setthathilath among the ders in the empty spaces between the trees, in the shadows of doorways, on street corners trying to sell their orchids. The sellers fought for spots by hotels where the ders stay because they made the most money there. When my daughter, Gaolia, and I pass the orchid sellers on the streets of Vientiane, I hurt for them. There was a time when this country wasn't like this.

"Do not call them orchid sellers," Gaolia tells me, twenty-eight years old, a graduate of Vientiane Professional Development College. She translates travel brochures and interprets for visitors to Laos at the Bamboo Travel Agency in Vientiane, so she says she has the right to correct my English.

But I tell her, Who paid for you to learn English? "Listen to me," I beg when she talks over me. "I am your mother." But she is never listening to the things I am never saying.

"Call them florists," she tells me, "because it is nicer that way. Mother." We live in Vientiane, in a building with five floors, and to look like city people Gaolia has cut her hair short like a boy's. And all the reading she has done has made her need glasses for her eyes. She is married and pregnant with her first baby, and we are walking so she can

digest dinner. We can't agree if we prefer a baby boy or baby girl. Gaolia say it doesn't matter, but I think it does.

When you are given your orchid, it is with you for life. People will know you by it, know the orchid's shape and smell and color. People will know if you have given one away or sold it because the orchid collectors talk among themselves. That is why the rarer it is, the more valuable. Orchids are beautiful because they are shaped like the human body—you can cut them in half and the two sides will look the same. One of my friend's daughters has a beautiful White Orchid for Itch—which looks like butterfly wings and has a red center—before she sold it to a collector for 1.5 million kip, which was only like \$150 back then, but the money could last you for two, three months.

All orchids have a very special side to them, too. For example, there are some orchids that pregnant women can't grow, like mine. The women may plant the seeds in the dirt, but the seeds won't sprout, so the women need to let a man plant it in the soil for them. Grandma Joua and Mother told me this, and it is true. Before my husband went to war the second time, I tried to plant more of my own orchids, and they wouldn't grow. Then, on the morning he was supposed to leave, I begged him to help me plant my seeds before he went, so that by the time he came back there would be orchids all around the hut we live in, and he planted the seeds right by the root of the mother orchid behind our hut, and months later the little orchids burst through the ground, and by fall, when my husband came back from the fighting, the orchids were in bloom—red and soft.

I took his arm to lead him to the back of the house to show him, but he pulled his arm away. "We need to get to Thailand now," he said. The General had been told the Americans were pulling out, and he warned that everyone should leave before the communists came. Then my husband saw my big stomach, and I said it was a boy because I knew that would make him happy—and he did smile—but then walked away, saying, "We need to hurry before the baby comes."

I gave birth to Gaolia in 1978 in the Phanat Nikoum refugee camp. When we fled our home the year before, my husband's parents didn't leave with us. They waited because they believed things wouldn't be as bad as everyone thought when the communists arrived. When Gaolia was one year old, my husband heard from the new people arriving in camp that his parents had disappeared into the jungle and were trying to join us in Thailand. He told me this at night as we lay facing each other, Gaolia asleep between us. He had told me he was going after them.

"What do we do if you don't come back?"

"Why think that way?"

"What am I to think?" I wanted to yell at him, but I didn't want to wake up our daughter. He turned on his back and looked at the ceiling. A few minutes of quiet passed before I reached and turned his face and held it between my hands. The small metal shed the refugee people gave us was very dark, with no window, only a door to go in and out. I heard us all three breathing.

He said, "You can follow your family to America." This burned my insides like hot metal. This time, I turned on my back. I had married him and was part of his family now. Saying that was like he wanted to divorce me and send me back to my parents. I breathed loud out of my nose because it was too much to use my mouth. He said, "I'm their son. Do I leave them?"

"Yes!" I cried. "Yes!" Gaolia started and stirred but didn't cry; maybe she knew to save her tears for later. Even in the dark, I could see what my husband was supposed to do: stay with his wife and daughter. But he was a man who walked the straight and narrow path of a son—help your parents, protect your family, marry, have children, raise your grandchildren—and I knew no matter what I said to him, he was going to leave me because helping your parents was the first thing you learned to do and the first thing you get to let go. But they were still alive, and he couldn't just let go yet.

The next night, I held my husband's arm tight and tried to give him our daughter to hold with my other arm—I pushed Gaolia at him—but he would not take her, and he pulled away and disappeared under the camp fence and crossed the river to find his parents. I cried and held my daughter's face next to mine, her skin soft like a pillow, then her face got wet with my tears, and she started to cry because my tears itched her when they dried on her face. I had forgotten everything my mother told me from long ago. She said to me once never cry on a baby's face because, if your tears get in a baby's eyes, the baby will feel what you feel. I put my daughter down on the bed and sat away from her so I could cry by myself, and she cried by herself. I didn't know how to stop for a long time. For a long time, I couldn't even hold my own daughter.

Seven months after my husband left, his parents arrived in Phanat Nikoum. They were bones and walked slow. What I know is what they have told me. They traveled with the last group of people from our village. They said my husband found them and led them through the jungle until the communists spotted them, and my husband had again picked up a gun which made him a soldier. He drew the communists away from the group with two other men from the village.

"You are so stupid," I said to my in-laws. I said nothing else to them for many days. I didn't want to listen to them and was a bad daughter-in-law, and they had every right to beat me, but they didn't. I knew they were waiting for a son, and I for a husband, and so we all waited in silence together. My husband was still in the jungle, I was convinced, and was still fighting the war and only waited for the perfect time to return to me. When my in-laws filed the paperwork and left for America, I decided to stay. They even offered to claim Gaolia on the papers as their own daughter and take her ahead with them. I told them no. She was mine, and she will wait with me.

My parents thought they could convince me to go to America, and though they got to the refugee camp before my in-laws, they left two years later.

"Can't you see," Father said, "your in-laws have already left. They know your husband is dead."

"That is because they don't love him," I said.

"It's not love," he said. "If it is love, why did he leave his wife and child?"

"Would you have asked your son to do the same?"

Father explained that it was the in-law's decision to stay and wait. "If I made that same decision, I wouldn't expect help. I wouldn't even let my children know, so they wouldn't come help. I would rather my children get to a better land. I've lived a full life, but my children haven't. Now you need to think the same about Gaolia." I was only twenty-one years old and knew I had many years left to live. Like the in-laws, my parents offered to take my daughter, but again I told them no.

The morning they left for the airport in Bangkok, Father said, "You have such a hard heart." I didn't know if he meant I was courageous, which is one meaning, or stubborn and calloused not to think about my daughter, which is another meaning. Even now, I think, he meant both.

In 1984, a few months after everyone I knew left, I thought about Father's words for a long time, and I borrowed a cassette recorder and made a cassette for them. I told them I had decided to go back to Laos. I sent them my words, and I took six-year-old Gaolia and, in secret, walked out of the refugee camp and to the opposite shore of Vientiane, from the Thailand side, and hired a boat to take us into the city. My daughter cried and said to me she didn't want to go. I told her to be quiet otherwise the Thai border police would hear us, and who knows what they would do to young a mother and her daughter. Or the bad spirits would hear her cry, come find her, and make her sick and die, so she could be theirs. Did she want to die? I held her hand tighter than when I held my husband's before he left. "Don't you want to see your father?" I said. She said she didn't have a father, that her father died a long time ago because that's what everyone told

her. Those words hurt me as much as if she said she hated me. Hurt me again like when my husband tried to send me back to my family. I had to be strong and not slap her and make her cry more. But I wanted to go back and find my husband, to be in the same land as his spirit if he was dead, and my daughter was to go with me whatever I need to do, even if I had to drag her until her knees showed bones.

I first saw Mr. Cha from behind. He was walking with his sons down the road. I had learned of an empty hut at the outskirts of Vientiane, in Ban Phonkham village, far enough from the city that it was surrounded by trees but still had schools. I thought it was a woman I was looking at because of the shoulder-length blond hair, a woman whose figure, toughened by work, was stringy and hard like a man's. The Laotian lady in the hut across the dirt road saw me staring and said, "He is a single man."

"That is a man?" I said, and flushed hot when she nodded. I suspected there were empty huts elsewhere in the village, but I had been directed here by the other war refugees because they thought I would make a good match with Mr. Cha. "No, I am too poor to keep a man," I said to the Laotian lady.

"Let him support you," she said with a sly smile.

"Support me living in this?" I pointed to the hut he walked out of and then to the hut next door, which was to be my own. All our huts were made of wood—some planed lumber, some round cut poles. The roofs were wood with a top layer of straw. Around each hut, people blocked off a small courtyard with round wooden poles so they could

have a private place to chop wood or husk rice or pluck chickens or kill and gut a pig or keep animals.

"What is wrong with this?" the lady said. "Not good enough for you?" She rested her arms on her round hips and waited for my answer. She looked threatening because I was very thin.

"No," I said. "That is not it." I looked over her shoulder at her two daughters and one son. There was a small, black fat-stomach pig in a pen in the corner of her courtyard. "My husband is coming back," I said.

The refugees had told me that with good luck I might talk to Mr. Cha about a job at the rubber farm where he worked. Here, it isn't polite to knock on the doors of people you don't know, so you wait until the people you want to talk to are out in the open and you walk up and talk to them. But I had heard music coming out from his house and my plan was to catch him while he was outside and ask him if I could use his cassette player. He was chopping firewood in his courtyard when I walked over.

"How are you?" I said from the dirt road, a few feet away from the gate door.

He put his ax down and tucked his blond hair behind his ears. "How are you?" he said, walking toward me. His arms had big veins like the rough bark of the wood he was chopping.

"I hear you have a cassette player"—I held out my cassette—"and was wondering if I can listen to this? Just arrived." I lied.

"From who?" he said. "A boyfriend in America?"

"Family in America," I corrected him. I held out a five kip note. Offering money was my way of being polite because I was certain he would reject the payment. Otherwise I wouldn't have risked giving away fifteen percent of the money I had. I looked across the small alley that separated our houses, and Gaolia was standing in the doorway, where I had told her to stay.

Mr. Cha invited me into the courtyard and offered me a seat. The chair was a stump by the front door. He went inside the hut and came back out with a Sony cassette player/recorder. He asked if I had used one before, and I nodded. "Don't press the red button or you'll record over your cassette," he reminded me. He returned to chopping wood, and I stood and yelled for Gaolia to come over and we listened to the tape.

One of the first things my family sent me from America was a long feather-filled coat. You can squeeze it down into the size of a small ball, but when you let go, it becomes big again. When I first put it on, it reminded me of the final time my family held me in their arms. The coat is in my closet now, and when I miss them, I put it on. Sometimes, Gaolia will see me with the coat on and ask why I was wearing it when it was hot outside.

But my daughter doesn't know that when I remember my family's hug I see their faces—my brothers' and sisters' faces. Mother's and Father's, too. Sometimes, I even see the face of my husband. When I do, his face becomes a blur because of my tears, but I feel his body and remember the tone of his words, and I know I have returned to familiar

arms, familiar sounds. I can't help it when I make noises with my crying because this reality is something I've missed for a very long time.

When my family sent me packages from America, they also included a cassette with their messages for me. Usually, they said the same things: Mother would begin by telling me the month, day, and year in America—eighth month, eleventh day, 1984—then she'd tell me how everybody was doing, what new has happened, who got married or was with child. Then she gave me an update on Father, who didn't talk much in these cassettes. Sometimes, when I could find the money to phone my parents, he would pick up the phone, and only then did I hear his voice. The next speaker would be my oldest sister, then the speakers went down to my youngest sister—I have three of them. They'd tell me what was happening with their own families and maybe mentioned more about my parents, which I take to be more accurate than what Mother had told me—but on this tape from 1984, everyone agreed that America had been good to them so far. It would be great to me, too, they said. Then my sisters-in-law spoke, not in any particular order but in whatever order the cassette was passed on to them; sometimes, my brothers—I have three, too—recorded a message, and they, because Father had given up trying to convince me to go to America, would lecture me about how much better my life would be, that I shouldn't think about myself but my daughter.

On the other side of the cassette, my in-laws spoke.

Everyone who spoke on the cassette would cry because whenever they had to speak to me they were forced to think of me back in Thailand, and then back in Laos. They had to think of a land that no longer had a place for them to exist, not in flesh or

name, not even in spirit. All of them always wished me well, even if they had been yelling at me, and told me how much money, if any, they had sent because they wanted me to note who'd sent how much. Maybe they believed the person who sent the most loved me the most, and sometimes I felt they were telling me so I would know who to repay when I saw them again.

Last on the cassette, Grandma Joua's voice would come on, and in that tape from 1984, her message was similar to everyone else's. Sometimes, though, she said some very funny truths or told me her secret thoughts about everyone, then I wondered if anybody had listened to the cassette and maybe cut out parts of Grandma Joua's message or if they respected her so much they allowed her words to remain as she spoke them.

It was toward the end of the tape, when Grandma Joua's voice came on, that Mr. Cha wiped his brow with his forearm covered with woodchips and shavings, and turned his ears toward the cassette player. Grandma Joua sounded like she was in front of me and speaking only to me, but Mr. Cha, stopping to listen, made me feel like I was giving up a secret. Grandma Joua said she was healthy but lonely. She ended her message with a plea for me to come visit her because she thought she might die soon.

"All of them over there and they allow her to get lonely?" Mr. Cha said. "They've forgotten who they are or what's important if that's true." I shushed him and he leaned against his ax.

After the cassette ended, I asked Mr. Cha if he knew Grandma Joua.

"Everyone knows Grandma Joua," he said.

We were both quiet for a minute, and Gaolia was leaning back and forth in between my legs, playing with the cassette.

"This is my luck to be a war widow with a daughter," I said, catching breaths through my nose because I had started to cry when Grandma Joua started speaking.

"I have worse luck," said Mr. Cha. "I am a man and have two sons." And he was right because he would have to find the money for his sons to marry. He told me his wife died eight years earlier from what the Laotian doctor said was blood poisoning. Before her death, Mr. Cha's family lived okay, had meat to go with their vegetable at dinner. But now, they only ate rice, sometimes only rice with fish paste, or rice and sugar.

"I was born with my bad luck," I said. I told him that Grandma Joua said my birth began under a black sky. It was early morning, and the mountain fog had not risen from where it slept on the ground overnight. The air smelled like the ground was turned and ready to be planted. Walking on the grass was like walking through a puddle of water, and when Grandma Joua finally arrived at our house—woken by my father early that morning—she had tied her sarong in the middle, between her legs. Her skirt became a sort of baggy pants and the hem of her sarong was heavy with water. When I was born that morning in the fifth month of 1962, I wasn't breathing. Grandma Joua was the village medicine woman and had delivered many babies before. I came out blue, and when she saw me, she didn't tell my mother, who, after she had pushed me out of her, let her head fall down onto the rolled bed sheets that were used as pillows. Grandma Joua was scared because she had never seen a blue baby before. Babies were either crying when they were born or they were dead, she said, but she could feel my heart under my

chest. Grandma Joua untied her sarong and wiped my face with the wet hem, then she covered my mouth and nose with her own mouth and sucked hard and deep. She sucked three or four mouthful and spat them out. I finally cried, and she wrapped me in one of my mother's shirts. Because I'm now a mother and know how it looks when a baby is born, I asked Grandma Joua once before she moved if she was disgusted with me. She said she didn't have time to think. It was something any mother would do for any helpless child. Two days later, Grandma Joua and my mother decided to give me the Red Silk Orchid of Fi Kha—Fi Kha was the old city my mother's father is from—as the symbol of my birth. They named me Maiker Pha. It is because I almost died as a baby that Grandma Joua has kept watch over me even though she isn't my grandmother. She says she needs to know when I will need someone to breathe life into me again in the future.

Again I offered Mr. Cha the five kip, but he shook his head. "What do you do?" I said, seeing my chance.

He told me that he worked at a rubber-tree farm. He helped clear the forest of trees and burned the old stumps out of the ground. Soon, he said, they would start planting the rubber trees, and after that he guessed many of the workers would be let go. I didn't ask him that night if he might help me get a job with the farm since he was already worried about his job. Instead, we talked about his sons, who were thirteen and twelve, and he didn't know if he could keep finding the money to pay for their school. They were at the age where they could work with him and bring in money for the family

and save a little, too, so that when they were about twenty years old they might have enough for a wife, but he didn't want to pull them out of school.

"You are a woman," he said. "You have better luck than me already. A man is good for four things in this world. Harvesting meat from the land, doing the heavy-lifting involved in living, making babies, and fighting wars. I was good at all of those. But now, I only do heavy-lifting. I don't get to be a man much anymore in this broken country. You have been a widow now for five years," he said. "Why don't you remarry?"

I said, "I'm hoping for a rich Hmong-American to marry me." He laughed, but I knew he thought maybe I was serious. Serious enough that Mr. Cha knew not to ask me to marry him. I could barely support Gaolia, and there was no way I was going to support one man and his two sons, too. "Why didn't you go to America?" I said.

"I wanted to continue to fight," he said. "So I can hunt in the forest and eat what I kill. So my wife and I could work in the field and sell what we planted and enjoy it together. So I could climb two hours to the top of a mountain and drink from a spring there before the water runs down to the rest of the world at the bottom." There was a dreamy look in his eyes and a smile on his face like he didn't believe the truth of his own words. "In America you don't get to do any of these things," he said. The sky had turned to copper by this time and made the trees around our houses look like rust and our houses glowed like gold. "Sure, in America, you get meat to eat, and everybody says you don't have to work and the government won't let you starve. But if that is so—to live off the

government—why did we fight the communists, if not to keep this life that lets us feel like a man?"

"What about peace of mind?" I said. "Not to worry that you will starve or that your children will grow up like you?"

"What is wrong with our children being like us? We are like our parents, no?"

"But isn't that why we fought the war?" I said. "Because our parents knew something out there was better than what they had?"

"Maybe," he said. "Sooner or later, we all become orchid farmers."

"Be quiet. I would never get my hands dirty by doing such a thing." My mother and father had said I was their laziest daughter, never helping out in the fields. I stayed home and did the housework and looked after the children in the village when their own parents were out farming. But I raised enough of my own orchids and helped Gaolia with hers that I knew how to raise them.

"At least we will be working," Mr. Cha said to me, laughing. "What are you going to do?"

I told him I didn't know.

Days later, after I dropped Gaolia off at her four-room school, I walked into Vientiane to find a job. The streets then were still clear of orchid sellers, though deeper in the city shops sold them. I asked storekeepers if they had any cleaning jobs, went to the wealthier neighborhoods to see if the people who lived there needed a housekeeper but most wanted only single live-in help. I was willing to cook and sell food by the side

of the road, stick my arm in lye and fat to make soap, dig through the trash for recyclables. Sometimes I waited by the Buddhist temples and asked the monks for change and saved whatever food they gave me. Three weeks into our lives in Ban Phonkham, still with no job, I picked up Gaolia and told her teacher that I would have to pull her out of school.

"Not even a month yet," he said. "How is she to learn?"

When Gaolia heard, she looked at me with her mouth open like she was holding an egg inside. Her teacher pulled me away from her.

"She is a good student," he said quietly. "You need to do whatever you can to keep her in school." I told him I had asked around until my throat was so dry I thought about scooping up water from a roadside puddle to drink. "Consider becoming an orchid seller." He nodded his head as if this was something profound he had just thought of, the very thing that gave life. "I will be your first customer," he said.

I turned away from him because I knew if I hesitated and waited there he would think I was considering it. I snatched Gaolia by the hand and hurried away from him.

"Am I not coming back?" she said.

"You're going to a new school," I said, keeping my words short so she couldn't hear the quiver in my voice. "New teacher. Better school. You will be smarter when you graduate this new school."

"I already have two friends," she said.

I handed her the red-bean bun the monks had given me. "Eat this and be quiet."

She unwrapped the plastic wrapping of the bun with her teeth and ate it with one hand since I held the other. When she finished eating, she said, "Ma, I need something to drink."

"Swallow your spit for awhile unless you want to drink urine."

"I really need water," she said. "I ate too fast." She started hiccupping and I thought she might choke and die on me—and what type of mother would I be if I let my daughter die in front of me?—so I hit her on the back three times. I dragged her toward the house, hopping over the tire tracks in the road, and she started to cry, and I knew the running didn't help her need for water. She stopped suddenly and slipped out of my hand, gasping for air, and I ran back to her and took her arm. By this time we were almost home, and after hitting her three more times on the back, I looked up and saw the Laotian lady judging at me from the open gate of her courtyard.

"What did she do that was so bad?" she said.

"She is thirsty," I said.

"And you hit her?"

"I'm her mother," I said. "I'm helping her."

"By hitting her because she is thirsty?"

I turned away from the Laotian lady and let go of Gaolia's hand because I had no perch in my life to argue from, and the thought of how she had put it shamed me hot—I had hit my daughter because I didn't have any water to give her when she needed it.

Later in the evening, I heard a knock by the courtyard gate. I didn't want to see who it was. Besides, it was rude since I didn't know many people in the village. Didn't

the stranger see I wanted to hide my poverty? When I opened the front door, the Laotian lady stood by the gate.

"Husband said tomorrow you go fishing with me," she said. "Wake up early. There is plenty water by the river." She grinned.

I nodded, though I was terrified of the river. Because I am a woman, I never learned to swim. Fishing was a man's job, but I hoped to learn fast. When we crossed the Mekong into Thailand, I had made my husband hire a small boat for us. I knew many people who died in the river when they tried to swim across. But since I took my daughter back to Laos, I knew I had no other choice.

I told Gaolia she would have to wait a month until I made enough money to pay for a new school. "You work on what you have learned so far when I'm not home," I told her early the next morning before going off with the Laotian lady. "Don't go outside and don't open the door for anyone."

On the new cassette, Mother said it was the tenth month, fourteenth day of 1985. She told me they bought clothing in big black plastic bags from the thrift store for twenty-five cents without knowing what was inside—they liked the surprise and disappointment. She said Father had gained weight and one of my sisters had a new baby. Because of the new baby, everyone said they didn't have much money to send, but please accept the ten dollars from each. Grandma Joua said her son was in his second year at the university, but she sent twenty dollars because she wanted my Gaolia to stay in school. All of them again yelled at me for leaving the refugee camp. Stupid, they said.

Even if you didn't come, you should have stayed so at least you would still be allowed to come. But America had probably made them forget how in the refugee camp they treated you like animals. They told me there were other ways to cross the ocean. "There are many men here. You find one you like and marry him, so you and your daughter can come over." But I didn't want a man to tell Gaolia she was to get married, have children, and not go to school. She would be disappointed in me, even more so because I'd dragged her back to a past way of life to wait for her father.

Mr. Cha lost his job with the tree farm, and I had a good job as a fisherwoman. The Laotian lady, who told me to call her Mrs. Kethavong, and her husband owned two boats, and after seeing me drag Gaolia home that day, Mrs. Kethavong said she felt sorry and convinced her husband to let me help.

"How did you convince your husband?" I asked that first day as we got into the boat.

"We have two boats," she said. "More boats, more fish, more money. Even my husband is smart enough to know that." Mrs. Kethavong and I worked one boat, while her husband worked the other.

"Thank you," I said because I didn't know what else to say to someone who might have saved my life. The first three months, I went out with an old inner tube tied to me. After making some money, I bought a small life jacket. It seems odd now how little things safeguard life: the fishing position Mrs. Kethavong offered, the life jacket which

would buoy me if I fell overboard, would save my life so I could sustain my daughter's life, which, as it is doing now, is providing life for the child in her belly.

"You work hard. That is all I ask," Mrs. Kethavong said. We trolled the wooden boat out to the deeper, calmer breaks—this river wasn't the Mekong but a smaller river that brought water from a mountain lake to the Mekong. "Also, a wife has other ways of convincing her husband." Mrs. Kethavong stood up in the narrow boat, shifted her solid trunks from side to side like a dancer, rocking the boat until I thought we were going to fall over and drown. She let out a loud laugh when she saw the fear in my face. "Don't pretend you don't know what I am talking about," she said.

Mrs. Kethavong and I floated four nets and pulled them up after every hour. Sometimes, we caught only seven or eight fish. Once, we caught forty-two fish in one net. At two in the afternoon, we took our catch to her sister's booth in the market place near the center of Vientiane. What fish didn't sell after two days on ice, we brought home, smoked them, kept a bit for ourselves, and took the rest back to the sister's, so at anytime there were always fresh fish and dried fish for sale.

One day as we waited for the hour to come before we pulled in the nets, Mrs. Kethavong asked me why I haven't remarried.

"What can I do?" I said. "I am already married."

"Yes," Mrs. Kethavong said. "A lifetime ago."

"No, this lifetime." But I knew what she meant. My marriage was a marriage of waiting. In 1985, my husband and I had been married for ten years, but we were together—I counted—only thirty-nine months. We made a life between the times he was

away at war and when he found his way home, and he always remembered to hide his gun in the jungle so no one suspected he was a soldier. I was used to life without him, but I always expected he would return and we would continue as husband and wife. I never told my husband I loved him, and he never told me. In the space around us, there was no room to tell people you loved them. It was jungle, and the jungle was filled with rumors the communists were coming, were close, if not already here. There was no space for words because the wrong ears could hear them and give you away, so my husband and I tried to treat each other tenderly, and not be so rough when we talked to each other. When we were together, we tried to be happy. That was enough.

To Mrs. Kethavong I said, "What if I remarry, and he comes back?" If I were a man, it was okay to have more than one wife, but I was born a woman. I had come back to Laos as a woman to wait for my husband, and the thought of remarrying wasn't in my mind.

I made enough money to put Gaolia in a new school with the three Kethavong children, a little further away in Vientiane and more expensive, but there they were teaching the students English.

Mr. Cha's sons started trading labor for money with the farmers in the countryside, and sometimes he joined them. They were fed small amounts of rice, and Mr. Cha refused to ask his sons for their earnings to help with anything because he figured if the teens knew how to work for money they had in mind what they were going to spend it on already. Mr. Cha's hair had grown halfway down his back by this time.

On the days he didn't go out into the countryside, he walked to Vientiane, as I had the year before, looking for a job.

One day, Mr. Cha came back with his golden hair muddied, his nose bloodied and slightly crooked, and a lip fat and swollen as a sow's teat.

"This time I wasn't quick enough," he said. "I ran into a grandmother pulling a cart of vegetables and stopped to help her." He pressed his lip with his thumb and forefinger, and winced from it. At least he was nice enough to help the old lady up, I thought. "I never thought I would become a thief." He felt the bruise along the right side his face from the temple to the corner of his lip. "I only steal food. Nothing else," he said.

I brought a bowl of water and a hand towel. He came into the courtyard of my house and sat on a stool, kicking out his legs. The five black hens I had managed to buy ran from him.

"Up," I said, tapping the bottom of his chin. He leaned back and tilted his head, looked at me. This was the closest I'd been to a man since my husband left to fetch his parents. Mr. Cha's eyes were light brown, the color of green tea. I wiped away the dirt on the side of his face. The pain was black against his skin like a disease. And I felt the pain, too, because it was a disease the war had given everyone. I couldn't look him in the eyes because it made me uncomfortable, but I wanted to because they were so different, and knowing this—that I wanted to look—made me want to smile.

"Close your eyes," I told him.

"What for?" he said.

"So I can see your face better."

"What about me? Then I can't see."

"Close them," I said. "There is nothing to see." I ran the towel across his eyes so he would close them.

"What if I can't see and my hand happens to do this," he said. He put his hand on my outer thigh, and my body flinched.

"Stop it," I said, and ground the towel into his lip. His hands shot up to grab my wrist and still my hands. "That is what happens when you don't respect me. You get hurt."

He opened his eyes to look at me, to see how my face was, to see if maybe I might be smiling, but my face was still. I could see the pain had put tears in his eyes, and I felt bad about what I'd done, about how I was seeing this man cry, and I made my fingers into a fork to pretend to poke him in the eyes until he closed them again.

With one hand I held the side of his face gently. I was reminded of how I had held my husband's face that last time. With the other hand, I pressed the towel into Mr. Cha's face firmly, so he wouldn't notice what my other hand was doing.

"This is good pain," he said as I finished and started to pour water down his hair, which I'd untangled. "Reminds me of the pain in the war when my feet were rotting with blisters, my shoulders ached from the pack full of rice, ammo, and water—all a man needs in life, really. Sometimes, your foot got stuck in a hole or rolled over a tree root, and you always slept on the most uncomfortable ground because, there, the enemy didn't want to look. It was tough, but I felt like a man."

"I thought you said stealing didn't make you feel like a man," I said, squeezing my hands down his long gold hair, which was even softer when dirty than mine was when clean.

"But this pain does."

I handed him a towel with a few holes in it. "This towel isn't the cleanest," I said, "but you need to bathe before you can get a cleaner one."

"I haven't complained," he said. He dried off his hair, then wrung out the towel and hung it over the top post of my fence.

"Since you are a thief now," I said before he left, "go steal me a rooster." At night, I had been letting my hens out of the courtyard so they could get covered by a neighbor's wandering rooster, but nothing good had come of it yet. "I will give you eggs to start a flock. So you won't have to stop being a man and steal anymore. Unless you like the pain."

By 1990, I sometimes brought over a bag of dried fish for Mr. Cha and his sons.

"It was a good thing my wife died when she died," he said one day.

"Why say such a thing?" I said. I reminded him of his sons, how they needed a mother even if they were poor, as I knew Gaolia needed a father.

"Now, I would never feel like a man again, not with all these women making money around me."

"Quiet," I said. "It's hard for everyone." I wondered if he would feel like a man if his wife were alive and became an orchid seller as long as she didn't make more money

than he did. "You want me to take back the fish?" I reached for the bag I had placed on the small table in his house.

"My sons wouldn't want that," he said.

"Right," I said. "Your sons wouldn't want that." I left the fish on the table. "Can I use your cassette player to make a cassette?"

"Does that work?" I was quiet because I didn't know what he meant. "How much can you get from them with every cassette you send?"

"I don't ever ask for money," I said.

"So that is how you do it. Maybe it works because you are a woman."

"Mostly the money is from my husband's family," I said. "I think it is because of guilt."

"A woman is a good cause for guilt," he said.

I listened to the words on the cassette from two months earlier one final time. On the tape, Grandma Joua talked about her son. She told me how her son had brought her so much shame in America, how he had ran off with a girl with the same last name.

Mr. Cha shook his head when he heard this.

Grandma Joua started to cry on the cassette, and I imagined the tears following the wrinkles in her face. She had a husband who went to war and never came back, too. On the cassette, Grandma Joua started speaking fast, and it sounded like she was speaking a different language. This fast talk made my body shake all over.

"What is she saying?" Mr. Cha said. I rewound the tape and listened to this part over twice before I caught on.

"She is speaking about her own shame," I said to Mr. Cha.

"The son running off?"

"You don't know?" I said.

"I haven't seen Grandma Joua now in a very long time," he said. "Not since I was twelve."

I told him Grandma Joua was wondering if her daughter would be different, would she have loved her more by obeying her if she were alive.

"I didn't know she had a daughter," he said.

I paused the tape, and told him about the dark night in year 1971 when Grandma Joua fled to Thailand with the Lee, Her, and Vang families, four years before us. When she walked away from the group to use the bathroom in the bush, she was captured and beaten by someone. This was only the second night they were in the jungle, and the night was so black, Grandma Joua said, she could only remember the stink of the man's breath, like bad milk, before he knocked her out and raped her. She hadn't screamed for the others because she didn't want them to run into an ambush. The three families had left so early for Thailand they didn't believe the communists were already patrolling the jungles. After that, they hid during the day and moved slowly only at night. When Grandma Joua gave birth nine months later, they were still in the jungle because they had run back and forth and then tried to go the long way down the country. Because the baby girl cried a lot, she used opium to quiet her but had to abandon the baby in the jungle. She needed to save her son.

"I'd kill that guy if I knew who he was," Mr. Cha said.

"Mai," Grandma Joua said on the tape before it ended, "I keep all your cassettes because I am the last one to get them and no one else wants them. I listen to them when I am lonely, and sometimes I am lonely for only the people from the old country."

I knew I should save their cassettes too, but I didn't have the money even to buy one cassette every year, and each time as I erased their words and covered their voices with my own, I felt I was replacing a cause for happiness—their voices, their love, the tears—with my words of a tough life in Laos. If I cried during a recording, I always made sure not to let them hear so they wouldn't think I regretted my decision. In the cassette I sent in 1990, I told them that those who left for America were now rich enough to return for a visit. And they brought with them a love and longing for the fresh orchids of Laos. In all of the world, I heard the returnees saying, the orchids of Laos were the best. And like a watered well-lit plant, all along the corners of Vientiane orchid sellers sprung up, selling orchids of all color and fragrance. I also told them orchid selling had become a money-making business because the *ders* were also visiting Laos for the orchids, now that they didn't feel their white-skinned lives endangered by the communist government anymore. The orchid collectors came because they knew they could have orchids for very cheap, for only like 30,000 kip—about three America dollars—the prices low because there were so many sellers.

The orchid collectors started coming out of Vientiane and into Ban Phonkham, I said into the recorder. You saw young *ders* as often as old. The war widows, mothers, grandmothers, and even the young teenagers who were pushed by their parents to learn the business because it promised food—all of them now had a job that made them more

money than any man could make. Many neighbors in Ban Phonkham still grew vegetables on their little plots, but some had learned to survive solely on what the orchids provided.

I said these collectors came dressed in pants with lines down the middle of the legs, shirts with ties, gold watches. When we saw them coming, Mrs. Kethavong would help me scare them away. We yelled at them first—"Go away! We are fish people! We have no orchids for sale!"—and if that didn't work she would go and bring around her husband's pig-hunting dogs because she has two daughters, too. Sometimes the men would say okay, okay, we are hungry for fish to calm us down, and we would tie up the dogs and sell the men fish and charge them more. They always paid with cash that they took out of their back pocket, a fold in middle of the money so it looked more than it was. They smiled when we looked at the money and asked where they could find the beautiful orchids that Laos had to offer. They would say, "We want to bring orchids back home to show our wives." That was sometimes true because some collectors kept more than one type of orchid, but I knew they were mostly lying—most men would never bring home another orchid to their wives in America.

I warned my family on the cassette: If you hear these orchid collectors coming back and saying, "Wow, it hasn't changed!"—know that they are lying. America has put a green blind over their eyes if they can't see how much we have changed.

I didn't tell my family that Gaolia asked me why we couldn't go to America, too, since everyone who had come back had so much money. I didn't tell them I pushed Gaolia inside the hut once when she wouldn't stay inside. Later, when the men were

gone, Gaolia had asked why the men were always talking about orchids. "They take little girls and make them awful," I said to her. But my Gaolia has a stubborn mouth, and she said, "Why are old women selling orchids, too? Don't they know it's awful?" She was twelve years old, and I told her it wasn't orchids the men were after. "Oh," she said and walked away before I could finish explaining about the sex part. "Don't you want to hear it?" I said, but she waved me off, as though I had confirmed something for her and her understanding of the world was complete then, and she didn't need a mother to explain it to her anymore.

When I finished talking into the recorder, I told Gaolia to come and say a few words. She always said the same thing: This is Gaolia, daughter of Yee and Maiker Pha. It has been a long time since I talked to you. I hope everyone is living well. We are okay—just the two of us. Pa hasn't returned, but we will see him soon. I don't know what I will do when I see him. I don't know if he will remember me or if I will know him. I am in grade seven and would like to study English to be a translator so when you visit I can talk to you in your language. I can read and write in English, but I speak it slowly. If we have just a bit more money maybe I can go to the next grade. Maybe if I am lucky.

These were the only times my daughter used her father's name.

In 1993, my family told me to keep Gaolia away from the orchid collectors. Grandma Joua warned evil was everywhere, even in America. She said there was a bad man who recently arrived in America, and she didn't understand why he didn't die in

Laos. She said evil crosses back and forth because it has a home in both countries, and I agreed with her. It allowed them to have two faces.

That was the year Mr. Cha's oldest son, Bee, who had turned twenty-one, which was old to be without a wife, went to the Harvest Festival and kept another man's daughter out longer than normal. When Bee walked the girl home, the man asked him who his father was, and didn't he know it was late? Did he intend to marry his daughter since he kept her out so late? Bee said he would like to get married but didn't have the money, and they were only talking. But you don't really know with children—they have their ways, just like adults have theirs. Anyway, the man went to the village elders, who settled issues of justice and restored honor, and the elders determined that if Bee didn't come up with the bride price and marry the girl, he would be fined for soiling her. The fine was set at \$75, about 500,000 kip, which Mr. Cha didn't have, and the father of the girl was asking for a bride price of \$2,050. If Mr. Cha and Bee refused both options, the father of the girl had threatened to go to the police and lodge a complaint of rape against Bee. The man could promise a little handout if they threw Bee in jail—or if Mr. Cha had money he could have paid them off and be done with the problem.

Mr. Cha asked me what he should do, and I said did the children want to get married? And he said yes because they were at the points in their lives to want a spouse. Bee liked the girl—she was a short girl with dark skin and was a very calm speaker who knew how to talk to the elders and was patient with everyone. I told him to pay the bride price. Why waste it?

"He will give me two years to come up with the money," Mr. Cha said. With father and sons working and a daughter-in-law taking care of things at home and maybe even working herself, they might come up with half of the price.

"Come up with at least half," I said, "and maybe he'll give you an extension."

Mr. Cha thought over this some more, but, of course, the decision had been made for him already—and all he was doing was calculating to see what was possible and impossible, and even in his mind, as it was in mine, the calculations showed the impossibility of him saving even half of the bride price. Still, it was the financially sound and honorable thing to do to marry the girl.

In one year, Mr. Cha and his sons and the daughter-in-law managed to pay \$620 and Mr. Cha was confident, since they had been good to the girl, that her father would see they were decent, hardworking people and not slave owners who wanted a daughter-in-law for the only purpose of having her wait on them.

And then the curse of sons hit Mr. Cha again the next year. The younger son, Say, was caught doing husband-and-wife duties with his sweetheart beyond the path that snaked into the forest. The girl had snuck out of the house at night under Say's urgings. Because this family only had one daughter, she was more expensive than Bee's wife. And unlike Bee, who met his wife at the festival and may have accidentally talked a little too long into the night with her, Say and his sweetheart had gone through a ten-month courtship. But what is rare is very few people get to marry for love, even now. So the father of the girl set a bride price of \$6,500—so high that even Hmong-American men were scared of the price. Though some people in the village said the father of the girl

was nice to set such a low fee—a modest \$20 penalty—it didn't take long for us to discover why. The father didn't even talk to the village elders before announcing the fee. Say was in love with this girl and argued with Mr. Cha that whatever and however long it took he would come up with the bride price. But Mr. Cha said they couldn't afford it, and this time, he walked over to the girl's house when Say was away at work one day and paid the penalty to the father.

One day not long after, the girl, Maida, came home and saw an orchid collector sitting with her parents in their hut. They told her the man wanted to buy her orchids. She ran over to Mr. Cha's house, but they refused to let her in because they feared being fined again. She begged and cried, then walked over to our house when she saw Gaolia out. Maida was only fourteen, but she had a woman's shape already. She had a solid frame to have babies and do the tough work of a countrywoman. She told Gaolia she didn't raise her orchids to sell to a Hmong-American man. She said she had given them to Say already, wanted only to give them to him, the only man she loved. She refused to go home, and I didn't want Mr. Cha to be fined so I walked to her house and told her parents she was in my home. That was when I saw the ugly man, who was more than fifty. Short, with gold teeth, and he had a big mole on his forehead.

When her mother came and dragged her home by the hair two days later, Maida saw that her parents had a brand-new stove and bed. The man with the mole sat on a new chair. She went behind the hanging bed sheet which made for her a small private space in their small hut and refused to see the man. "Do you want your father and mother and

brothers to go hungry?" her mother said. "Are you so coldhearted to think only for yourself?"

Maida wrote a letter, walked out the door of the house when her parents took the man to visit some of his distant family in another part of the village, and gave the letter to Gaolia to give to Say. She knew if she didn't leave the man was going to join her behind the sheet that night. It was early night when you could still make out the shape of people, and when Maida turned to go, she saw Say standing in the doorway of his house, but he turned away because her parents had sent word to Mr. Cha that somebody had paid money already for her, and Mr. Cha and Say were not to touch her. Say told Maida he didn't love her anymore because it was too costly to do so. She told him he was a weak boy. Why wasn't he fighting for her? Wasn't he a man? But poor farmer boys can't win fights with rich orchid collectors. Maida went down to the river and threw herself in, and she floated away while she held on to her orchids.

She was strong to be in love so much like that even when her boyfriend refused her, I thought. But Gaolia said, "You only see two ways in the world."

"How many ways are there?" I said.

"Keeping your orchids won't fill your stomach," she said. She was fifteen and believed she knew what was necessary to survive in the world already—even though she cried about Maida's death.

"Her family wasn't starving," I said. "It was her orchids, her decision. Not her parents." Gaolia turned away from me, her sign that she didn't want to argue with me.

"Your father wouldn't have asked you to do that." Which I was sure was the truth. "You don't have to worry about food," I said. "I'll find food for us."

In the cassette from 1995, Mother said the Lee family who took care of Grandma Joua had put her in one room of the house after she became sick because she didn't have much energy to stand and walk anymore. Her face was like wrinkled paper, and they had cut her white hair short like a man's—they said it was easier to clean. Grandma Joua was starting to lose her mind, Mother said, sometimes yelling awful stuff at everyone, about her past, about her husband and son. Grandma Joua talked even when nobody was near, like she was talking to spirits. Mother said she'd tried to tell everyone they should forgive Grandma Joua because she's old and didn't know what was nice and what wasn't, and what was real and wasn't real anymore.

But when I reached Grandma Joua's section of the tape, she said she'd not been cursing anyone. She had become a church person five years earlier, and she was only speaking to God. The Lees had put her in a room because they didn't want to listen to the truth. They told her she was crazy, she said. But I got no sense of that as I listened to her voice. She sounded exactly like she did when she was twenty. Grandma Joua said only one person in the world cared for her now: the Lee's only daughter, Lily—which my daughter told me was the name of a flower. But Lily was growing up, and Grandma Joua was afraid she would soon marry and move away.

The young heart is tough and can overcome first love, and in the early half of 1996, Say fell in love with another girl. "Father," he said this time, "if you don't help me marry this one I'll kill myself." By then, Mr. Cha had found a job driving ders in a small motorcycle cab out into the countryside in search of untouched orchids. He told me he felt bad when they asked him where they might find orchid sellers because he knew the growers in the countryside didn't advertise and some didn't sell—but sometimes the money was too much and they were persuaded to. The ones who wanted to sell or who did sell would secretly ask for buyers from Mr. Cha, and they would tip him if the ders or Hmong-Americans were generous. Sometimes the buyers also tipped Mr. Cha—but all he made still wasn't enough to pay for Say's wife, whose bride price was \$4,300.

Mr. Cha brought over his cassette player one day. He said he heard I'd received a cassette from America. He put the player on my table, and I went to my corner of the hut and searched in my bag for the cassette. When I came back he was crying, which made me uncomfortable because the only times I ever saw Hmong men cry were at funerals. If I were my mother, I would have scolded him to stop acting like a woman. I asked instead, "Who passed away?"

He didn't answer me at once. The tears rolled down his bony, tough-skinned cheek, and his nose started running. When he caught his breath, he told me he made \$400 that day. I was so happy for him I started crying too—I didn't make \$400 in two years! I was glad these were tears of happiness.

But I was curious, so I said, "Made, found, or stole?" Because no one I knew made \$400 in a day.

"Made," he said. "I earned it."

"How?"

He told me two ders asked him to drive them into the countryside. He asked if they were looking for orchids.

"No," they said. "Just drive us around to see the country."

"Opium? Heroin?"

"Keep driving," they said.

After awhile, further into the countryside, they asked him to pull over at a roadside grill stand for lunch. They bought Mr. Cha a bowl of rice and two grilled beef strips to eat and a water to drink. Afterward, they told him they wanted to visit a Buddhist temple, and Mr. Cha took them in the direction of the closest one.

They asked where he got his yellow hair from—was his father a blond der?

"No, no," Mr. Cha said. "We have yellow hair too—going back hundreds and hundreds of years." Mr. Cha told them the folklore of the Hmong warrior who fought the Chinese. The warrior did so great in battle the spirits rewarded him with gold hair, Mr. Cha said, but I didn't recall hearing that story from my parents or grandparents. I wondered if Mr. Cha had created a story for his hair because he felt ashamed of the color.

One of two men—the skinny, white-haired one—touched his hair, Mr. Cha continued. Then the other—skinny and old and bald—held Mr. Cha's hair in his hand like he was weighing how valuable it might be.

"You have beautiful hair," the white-haired man said. He held Mr. Cha's hair up to his nose and smelled it. Mr. Cha said he could feel the end of his hair get sucked up

into the wet inside of the man's nose. "How would you like to turn back into the city," the white-haired man said after smelling it, "and have a drink with us at our hotel?"

"We'll pay you for any lost business for the day," the old man promised.

So Mr. Cha turned his cab around and went back to hotel because if he didn't have to drive his cab in the heat for the money then he didn't want to. He said he thought they might buy his hair, which, if they had wanted it, he was willing to cut it off.

The ders sat to the left and right of Mr. Cha and drank. Mr. Cha said the hot weather sank the liquor right into his intestines even though he had eaten lunch. The ders talked with each other over him, sometimes looking at him, both reaching and touching his hair. An hour passed and the old man asked if Mr. Cha would like to make some money.

"How much?" Mr. Cha said.

"Two hundred from me. Two hundred from him. Four total."

"Four hundred American dollars?" Mr. Cha said.

"Yes," they said.

"What do I do?"

"First, we go upstairs to our room," the old man said.

Mr. Cha said when they got to their room they counted out the money—in American dollars—into a pile and handed it to him.

At this point in his story, Mr. Cha started to cry again. He said as soon as he counted the money, could feel how heavy it was in his hand, he was willing to do anything except die to keep it. I didn't ask what happened next. I didn't need to urge him

on. I was quiet because I was thinking of my own husband, and I stood and went to start dinner.

"Is this too much for you to listen to?" Mr. Cha said.

"No," I said. "Whatever you did, it was for your sons. You are a good father. You try your best without a wife." I wanted to believe that my husband knew I was trying my best for our daughter.

Mr. Cha was quiet and, after a few minutes, walked out of my house as if I had insulted him by lying to him in his face. What he didn't know was that I had come to agree with him about one thing, and I needed to walk away because I didn't want him to see me acknowledge that he was correct.

A few days later, I told Mrs. Kethavong I needed a one-day break. I went to Mr. Moua, a village elder, who knew the funeral rituals and who also played the kenj, the bamboo instrument that leads the dead home. I paid him money to go with me into the jungle. Into my bamboo backpack, I placed a cold cooked chicken wrapped in a bag, boiled eggs, an arrow and bow, a knife, a small paper umbrella, some cold rice, a small bottle of rice wine. Gaolia shouldered a backpack full of paper money I had bought in Vientiane. We had spent the evening before folding the money into boats. When we started walking, Mr. Moua asked me where we were going. The truth was that I didn't know. We turned into the path everyone took into the jungle. In one hand, Mr. Moua held his kenj upside down, so it wouldn't get tangled in the trees. His other hand held the

gong. Though I didn't know where we were going, I was letting my heart tell me when to stop. I only knew I needed to get higher and closer to the mountains.

"My back and feet hurt," Gaolia said, stopping to open a bottle of water after we had been on the trail one hour.

I stopped, in the lead, and looked back at her. "Don't be disrespectful," I said to her. "The money you are carrying is important. Don't curse it." Gaolia's hair was loose and hung down her sweaty face. She looked away when she saw me walk toward her, then poured water on her face. I wanted to yell at her that she was wasting drinking water, and not water to wash her face with, but I didn't. I knew she knew what we were doing, and maybe she was stopping, slowing us down because she didn't want to believe it too.

"I wasn't trying to curse it, Ma" she said. "I wouldn't do that."

I walked up to her and held her face in my dirty hands, moved her hair away, so I could see her better. She is dark-skinned like her father, but I saw myself in her face, the curve of her cheek, the round of her chin. There was a time when I had walked into the forest with a pack on my back for this man too.

"Oh, Ma," Gaolia said when she saw me wiping away my tears. "We have loved him long enough, will love him forever. We respected his memory."

I nodded at my daughter because hearing it from her made me feel better, made me believe it more than if it had come from anyone else.

When I turned back to lead us, I apologized to Mr. Moua. "We women are holding you up."

"Don't apologize," he said. "I know what it is like to retrace your past. It is better to go slow, that way you are sure you won't miss a step or get lost."

Up in a flatland high in the mountains, a ground of Laos probably flattened by bombs, not so far from the top, after five hours of walking, my skin warm and wet through my shirt, I slipped off my pack. The bottoms of my feet stung with blisters. Beside a small creek that ran from somewhere higher in the mountains, I took out the things I brought. I asked Gaolia to help me build a small altar with river stones. I stuck incense sticks into the spaces between the stones and lit them. I took out two bowls, filled one with rice and eggs, and in the other, I placed the chicken. I poured a small glass of wine and placed it between the bowls. I placed the arrow and bow, knife, and umbrella by the ground before the altar.

I looked at Mr. Moua and said, "We do it here."

His eyes became small, like he was wondering if I knew what I was doing, to see if I might change my mind.

"His name is Yee Pha," I said. "He was born in Fi Khou. He is the son of Hue and Maihoua Pha who lives in America now. He is a dead of the war. I am a poor woman with a daughter. This is all I have money for."

Mr. Moua nodded his head. "Do not worry, young daughter." He poured some wine in a cup and poured it on the ground and asked our spirits to hear him, and then he started to call my husband's spirit with the chant of the dead. He held his kenj between his hands. I moved and stood closer to the creek with the gong. As he chanted and played the kenj to lead my husband home, I told Gaolia to burn the paper money and let

the ash drift down the creek. Wherever the ash washed upon and whatever it touched, whether five feet from me or five million, I wished that my husband would find it and know it is from his wife and daughter.

"Rise," I said and hit the gong to let him know. "Hear the music from Mr. Moua's kenj. It is playing to lead you home from where the war has laid you down.

"Rise," I said. "Follow it through the jungle on trails you cut on those nights you were by yourself.

"Rise," I said. "Leave your gun. Rise and follow the trail to the village where you found me, where I gave you a cucumber. Rise and go on. Follow the path we walked when I decided to become your wife back to your village, now covered with high weeds because there is no more feet of our people to make them flat anymore. Rise, do not tire. I walk behind you, and if the fortunes are good, our daughter will be long before she follows us on this road. Rise and walk between your neighbors' houses. You are almost there. Walk. Push open the door of your parents' house from long ago. Hear the blow of the kenj. This is your first home, the place where you are born.

"Rise," I said.

Within a month, Mr. Cha had made enough money to pay off his daughters-in-law's bride prices. Within two months, he had made enough to buy a house that sat on a stone-block foundation, with three bedrooms and a slate floor courtyard. The house was in a different section of Vientiane, and I had to walk from Ban Phonkham to the river

where I fished, then take a boat to cross the river, then walk another ten minutes before I got there.

I knew Mr. Cha had started using opium, but I hadn't said anything to him. The day Bee came and got me was the day Mr. Cha had awakened from a high that made him cough blood. He was on the floor of his bedroom and smiled at me when he saw me. There was dried blood at the ends of his smile. He had cut off his yellow hair and shaved his head, the bulging black veins underneath his skin pulsed like a snake around his skull.

"Maiker," he said. "It is my destiny to see you." The lines of his face and the cracks of his hand were lined black with dirt and opium tar. I could smell he had soiled himself.

"How long has he smelled like this?" I said, turning to Bee and Say and their wives, who stood behind me, looking at Mr. Cha.

"Four days," Say said. "We stopped giving him food on day two since he refused to get up and use the bathroom."

"Boil some water," I said to the wives. I pushed past the brothers and placed the big plastic tub they used for rinsing vegetables in the living room. I filled it halfway with cold water and waited for the hot water. Inside Mr. Cha's bedroom, I instructed the brothers to help their father up. When they pulled his shirt over his head, I saw his chest bone and thin ripples along his stomach. His pants were heavy with piss and shit, and though he smelled more awful than a dead man, I didn't flinch.

"It is too much, Auntie," said Say. He backed up and walked out of the room.

"You remember how your wife is in this house," I yelled after him.

Bee stood by the door, wanting to follow his younger brother. "I need something to cover my nose and mouth," he said.

He came back with his younger brother, both masked with T-shirts up to their eyes. I leaned Mr. Cha over, told the brothers to hold him while I stripped off his pants. The two halves of his buttocks were caked brown as though he had been sitting in muddy ground. I rolled up the dirty pants, then the shirt over it, and used the dry part of the bundle to wipe what I could from the back of Mr. Cha's thighs. I took an empty rice bag from where there were a few hung on a hook and placed the dirty clothes inside.

"Father," Say said. "This is too disgusting."

"Too disgusting?" I said. "Would you give up everything to have your old father back? Would you give up your wife?"

The wives brought over the hot water and stood by the door. Say's wife looked at him, waited for an answer.

"Would you?" I said. "You talk, but I want you to think if you can be the man your father is. Think if you can do what he did."

I moved out of the way so the brothers could carry their father into the living room. The wives poured the hot water into the tub, and the water flooded over the rim and muddied the ground when Mr. Cha was placed into it. I told the brothers to wash their father, and I entered Mr. Cha's bedroom and instructed the wives to help me clean. We took off the sheets, covers, and pillowcases, and Say's wife took these outside to wash. I set Mr. Cha's opium pipe on a high ledge where he kept pictures of his dead wife

next to three canisters of coffee. I opened the window in his room and put his small rotating fan on a chair near the door.

The brothers dumped the dirty water outside and rinsed their father off with a new tub of warm water, dried him off, and sat him by the fire. Mr. Cha's skin was wrinkled and white, and he was shivering, but I couldn't tell if he needed his opium or if he was cold.

I took a stool and sat across the fire from him. He had only a towel over his shoulders, but his legs were closed.

"I have observed and come to a conclusion," he said. "You want to know? It is about the country." Bee's wife came over and handed him a cup of tea to help warm him up.

I had my own opinions, but I wanted him to talk. If he could keep his head clear and talk, maybe he would think less of his pipe. "What?" I said.

He shifted on his low stool, crossed his legs at the ankle, and the towel slipped from his private. The sight of it struck me. Earlier, because of the smell, it hadn't crossed my mind that I haven't seen a man's private since my husband left to find his parents. I was disgusted by the sight of it, but also I felt a tingling and tightening in my stomach. "This country has changed," he said. "This isn't what we fought for."

"No," I said. "But we are the brave ones. We are the ones who stayed behind." Reminiscing with Mr. Cha made me feel like an old woman seeing an old man after so many years, and now we were doing an old thing of thinking about days long ago.

"Back then we were brave," he said. "But now, I think, we were stupid not to leave." He took a sip of the tea and shook his head. "Stupid, we were. Fighting put you under the der's whip. Staying put you under the der's weight. They came into the country and did things that won't go away. Even after the communists came and chased them off, what they left behind still haunts you." He was looking into the fire, and I wondered if he still knew he was talking to me. "Stealing and begging for money. May as well have sold our spirits—if there is such a thing." Mr. Cha's shivers calmed as he talked, and I started rocking in my stool. "You still think that is true, though, don't you?" he said. "You still think I am a man?"

"Yes," I said. I didn't lie to him.

"I don't feel like it," he said. Across the fire, his eyes glistened as he admitted this personal failure. "My own sons don't respect me in my own house."

"One day when they become fathers, they'll see," I said. "They'll see for sure how fast the world changes."

"I wish I were a woman. It would have been so much easier."

"No," I said. "It is never easy, not even for a woman."

He looked up at me. "Gaolia, is she about to graduate?"

I told him yes. I told him how I didn't know where I was going to find the money to send her to vocational school to complete the training needed to be qualified as an interpreter. We had sent a cassette to America, but there wasn't much hope in it anymore. Gaolia was going to be eighteen soon, and people believed she was quickly becoming too old for marriage.

Mr. Cha nodded as I was talking, but I didn't know if he agreed or understood. Say brought Mr. Cha a T-shirt and shorts, but he waved him away. Say left the clothing by Mr. Cha's feet. He sipped his tea in silence, and after a few minutes, he planted his feet on the ground and stood. The towel fell to the ground. "I want to show you something," he said. He went into his room and came back out with cash. He handed it to Bee and told the sons to take their wives to buy something for dinner and an American suit.

"Tie and pocket square," he said. "Find one that will fit and look nice on me. I am beginning to feel like a new man."

After they left, he came out of his room with two coffee canisters. His private hung from the bottom of his stomach like the purple tongue of a goat. He took out a few bags of opium from the canisters, then deeper into the canisters he reached. "All I have left," he said, showing me six tight rolls of cash held with green rubber bands. "Is half enough?"

"Enough for what?" I said.

He told me for Gaolia's schooling. "Ten thousand here," he said.

Half was more than enough. "Half would buy us a new life," I said. I thought to tell him that Gaolia's complete schooling would cost only \$750, but he had started to count the money. He rolled up what looked to be five thousand dollars and bound it with two rubber bands.

"Can you—" he said, "allow me to feel like a man? Just once more." He handed me the money, rolled tight like a cylinder of metal, and it felt heavy, a grenade in my

hand. After he gave me the money, he pulled on the tip of his private, pulled it long and let it spring back short like a rubber band.

I latched the front door shut. I untied my sarong and laid it on the ground by the fire. My thighs were white and thin. The wrinkles on my stomach from carrying Gaolia had smoothed away years before. I didn't want to do it in his bedroom. I was afraid I would throw up from the smell that lingered there. I told him to put on a condom, then I let him do to me whatever he needed to do to feel like a man again.

It was all over by the time Mr. Cha's sons returned home with a new black suit and a grilled duck for dinner. I excused myself, told them I needed to get home, because it was late, because I needed to cross the river still before getting there.

It didn't surprise me when, a few days later, I received news that Mr. Cha had killed himself. Bee said he dressed himself up in the suit, tied a string around his neck, then smoked opium while standing until he passed out. When we were done that day on the floor of his house, Mr. Cha made me promise that I would make sure his sons gave him a proper burial. So I dressed in a new sarong and carried out my duty: told his sons what to do, the proper way to do it; watched over his body so no one would deface it out of envy or hatred, out of long-held grudges or the feeling that he, as a man, had betrayed us all by becoming the der's woman.

I did it because, once, there was a land where men were men, and women were women, and women, when their men were at war, could take a man's place, and people would respect and honor that. But now, in this land, broken by war, watered with blood,

where they said the trees, when cut in half, showed scars that they too had witnessed the war that had happened here, women were still women, and when a woman needed to become a man to survive, she could still do that. But a man was no longer a man. All the great men had died or are dying after the war, and what was left was nothing but women. And men made the worse women of all, I knew that much. I did it because a good, honest man needed to be reminded of his goodness, of the fact that he was still a man. And that when a man does not feel he is a man, it hurts him more than all the tragedies of a war. I did it because I needed to feel like a woman, who, though I have taken to being a man for my daughter, still needed to feel like a woman. But I did it all, because I knew, as I did on that day I took my daughter and walked to the top of the river to say good-bye to her father, that I was glad my husband had not lived to see the ways of the world turned backwards, that he was born and died a man and never got to know these confusing times. I did it because for the first time in my life I was glad my husband was dead. I did it so I would know my daughter will never know how it feels to be an orchid farmer and stand on the corner and sell her flowers for America.

These are the words I have practiced in my head, the words I will tell my daughter if she asks. But my daughter and I speak in silence, and what I have yet to say, she already knows, as I know what she is going to do when I voice it for her: she is going to get up from the sofa, or chair, and walk away. Because she doesn't want to hear? Because she doesn't think it is a big deal? She will walk away, go into the kitchen, and start dinner because there is food that needs to be cooked. She will start dinner, because that is the only thing to do.

IN A WAY WE COULDN'T BE LOVED

Pa smelled the smoke first as we walked into the house after working on the rocket. It wasn't the usual bitter smell that curled in the corners of the house. Not the usual smell that hung on my clothes as dust motes or lint would. It wasn't the smell of burning leaves and brush which was normal for that time of the year. "What is that?" Pa said, taking deep breaths. The burning material wasn't manmade. We were met with a smoldering rug when Pa pushed opened Ma's bedroom door. The fire detector in the hall went off as more smoke escaped the room, and I ran for the fire extinguisher underneath the kitchen sink. When I returned, Pa was stomp-swiping the rug with his feet. I aimed the nozzle, pulled the pin, and squeezed the lever—something I had longed to do. The white extinguisher smoke ballooned around Pa up to his waist. He looked like he was sinking into something Ma had created.

"It's finished," he said above the loud swooshing. "Stop." He jammed Ma's pipe into the cigar box where she kept her supply of opium by her nightstand. Ma was conscious enough to grab his arm when he turned to walk out of the room. He threw the cigar box down, grabbed Ma's wrist with his free hand and peeled her grip from his arm.

"You stupid—" he said, shaking his head. Ma looked at him with her face of skin on bone. "You want to kill our neighbors? Burn down our house? Orphan our son?" Our neighbors in the flat upstairs were a family of Evangelists with two daughters.

"Our son," Ma said, laughing weakly. It sounded like a question.

Pa raised his hand, then looked at me. "Tell me to do it," he said. "You want me to?"

Ma eyed me, daring me to say yes. But how could I when she'd told me the opium helped her with a great pain? I didn't want her to hurt any more. There was dribble running from the corner of her mouth and I had to look away. I grabbed Pa's upraised arm, and sensing the torque in it, grabbed it with the other hand, too, just in case.

"Do it," Ma said. She was sitting up in her bed but was teetering, as though she couldn't keep her balance and wanted to lie down, though she was in Pa's hold.

"Let go, Zong," Pa said.

"You first," I said. Pa tried to shake his arm free, but I held tight.

"Tell your son to let go," Pa said to Ma, then looked back at me. "I won't unless you tell me to." Though he'd never struck Ma before, I didn't trust enough that maybe he wouldn't this time.

"Let him go. Let's see what he does." Ma wiped the dribble with her wrist but only managed to smear it across her cheek.

I let go of Pa's arm, and after Pa looked Ma over, he dropped her wrist and walked out of her bedroom and entered his own.

"Hand me my box," Ma said.

I collected her kit—pipe, burner, glass Bayer tube in which she stored her opium, steel rod—into the cigar box and placed it on the nightstand. After seeing the box put back where it needed to be, Ma collapsed into the bed.

"You want me to roll up the rug and take it out?" I said.

"Leave it," she mumbled. "Keep it as a sign of how close I came to death." She giggled like a little girl, and I was tempted to strike her with my own hand.

The County of Miskader lies slightly south of the 43rd north parallel. On average, five tornadoes per year were known to touch down in the county since people started keeping track of such things. The house Pa bought—a brick, flat-roofed, two-story prairie-style duplex—was over a century old, built to withstand the elements of this Wisconsin county. The house sat on thirteen acres bordered on both sides by a line of spruce. The land in back of the house extended 600 yards before being cut by a line of barbwire fencing, and beyond that, gently rolling hills planted in soybean extended to the horizon. A great view, we thought. Two years after moving in, when Pa and I re-bricked the entrance to the cellar, which was in the back of the house, we left a two inch gap in the brick grated with heavy-gauge rodent fencing to keep out the mice and rats and, therefore, deter the cats, so that we might one day see the cloud monster that made the county famous among southeastern Wisconsin counties.

Fifty yards in back of the house was a quonset shed, twenty feet high in the middle, where the previous owners stored their combines and planters. Pa and I used it as a hangar to build our rocket. We had welded a Vultee SNV Valiant to the cylinder of a reinforced recycled grain silo that served as the external tank. The Valiant would be our orbiter once we got into space. Though the rocket lay on its side in a sailboat trailer—the trailer providing the perfect nook for the girth of the rocket—it left only five feet of clearance between the top of the Valiant and the top of the our hangar. When the rocket

was ready, Pa said, we would hitch the trailer to his truck, pull it into the field, and winch it straight up.

It took some time for Pa to acquire the parts—recycled commercial water heaters—we would use for the boosters of the rocket. He placed the winning bid at an industrial parts disposal auction. We lugged the two cylinders home, and Pa called in sick for two days so we could weld them to the rocket. By then, we had constructed a collapsible rotating crane and bolted it to the concrete floor to help with raising and lowering the heavy pieces of our rocket into place. By then, Pa had also taught me to drive, and I was only months older than ten years.

At the end of the second day spent attaching the boosters, the Evangelist father informed us from the second-floor porch that the easiest way to heaven was to believe in the Lord. He kept a trimmed mustache and was always dressed in a black Singapore-collared tunic, black slacks, and loafers. Looking at him above, I thought he seemed comfortable to be preaching from such lofty heights.

"That might be so," Pa said, "but what if I'm not aiming to get to heaven?"

"All of God's children should want to go to heaven." A few days after the Evangelist family moved into the flat four years ago, this stocky man brought his daughters to the hangar to watch us work. Pa and I were in the middle of welding the support braces into the hollow of the external tank. "These sparks are hotter than the fires of hell," Pa said, warning them to keep back. I was outfitted like a robot and sat on the crane as ballast. "God will protect us," the father said, but when the sparks started flying, he pulled the sisters toward the opening of the hangar.

Six tomcats sat against the double doors of the cellar, their eyes glazing over with the light of the kitchen bright behind us when we opened the back door. The cool autumn air, a smell of sweet rot on it, quickly entered my body. The cats started their trolling just as Pa's workday began, leaning their sides and backs against the cellar doors and spraying it in front of the other cats. Pa was a welder and worked the third-shift job for the extra-dollar bonus. He saw the cats every night when he left for work at ten and came home at six, when they'd scatter, he said, because the sun was rising. Pa growled a warning from the door, but the cats didn't move. They licked their paws and fell back to waiting until Pa charged them, and they sprung away like rabbits.

"Go ahead and kill them," Ma said from the door behind me. I didn't hear her come up.

Pa looked at me, then over my shoulder.

"Kill them and see what happens to your dick," Ma said.

"Don't listen to her," Pa said, turning toward his pickup, his lunchbox and thermos in hand.

I watched until the backlights of his pickup disappeared and asked Ma what she meant. "Kill a cat and it'll come shred your testicles," Ma said. "Unless you lop off the head and bury it apart from the body." Back in her old village there had lived a crazy man who tortured many cats to death, and they came back in spirit and tore his privates into shreds. How do you know you have to cut off the head, I wanted to know, but Ma

had already gone back inside after she finished her story. I thought to ask Grandma Joua if this was true the next time I saw her, if I could remember.

"That's ignorance," a voice from above said. "Things for only nonbelievers." I leaned over the edge of the porch and looked above. The Evangelist father's face looked down at me. "I don't mean to call your mother a liar—maybe that did happen in her village—but there's an explanation." How can you explain away a dead man with shredded private parts and dead cats? The sisters' faces appeared on either side of their father's, then his face disappeared and the black sky appeared between the sisters.

"You want to come up?" Nuelee said. She was fourteen, the older of the two. It was a clear night, ideal for star watching. The sisters slept in the room directly above mine. Through one of the holes in the floor and ceiling that allowed the pipes to run water up from the boiler to the radiator, we'd strung a length of twine and attached two bells at either end. Whenever one of us couldn't sleep, we'd ring the other's bell and, if a response was given, meet on the second-floor porch. There was nothing secretive about our late-night meetings. Ma and Pa were too busy avoiding each other to care if I woke in the middle of the night to go above. The Evangelist parents didn't mind as long as their daughters didn't move from the porch at that time of the night. "I trust you, daughters," the father yelled whenever the sisters walked out of the house. The parents also didn't mind since whenever I went up, I'd bring my scopes. They enjoyed looking through my Newtonian Astrograph Reflector, the most powerful of my three telescopes, at the moon and other planets. Everyone wanted to see Saturn's rings. Depending on the season, the rings would be almost impossible to make out—they were simply black lines

dividing the planet. I had thought about asking if the parents believed in space, if they believed something else might exist out there, something other than God. Mars, the mother said, looked like a fireball.

"Zong!" Ma's voice reached out to me from inside the house.

I looked up at the sisters. "Not tonight," I said, and entered the house. Pa bought me my first telescope, a Sky-Watcher Heritage, when I was five. "Your mother's like the moon," he said the first night we were on the roof with the Sky-Watcher. Eventually, I came to understand the telescope was Pa's way of suggesting I make a life he would've wanted for himself.

Ma was sitting on the edge of her bed, probing the charred rug with her toes. "I want you to do something for me," she said, "but don't tell your father."

I nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Grab the box," she said. The cigar box was less than three feet from her on the nightstand where I left it. "Grab it," she said when I didn't move. I grabbed the box. "Open it," she said. I lifted the lid. "Clean out the pipe, then put a little on the rod, and burn it for me."

"What?" I said.

"I've decided after that little scare that every time I smoke you're going to light it for me. That way I know you're watching over me."

"Have you gone crazy?"

"I'm asking you to help me."

"Help you die," I said.

"When you're not here," she said, "I won't smoke. You take the box with you, hide it."

"You'll just get more from your men," I said. The world knew Ma had visitors at night when Pa was at work. They walked through the front door and into her bedroom with the opium. I'm not sure when the visits started but they seemed to have been going on for a time. When the men were expected over, Ma would lock me in my room. On those nights, I'd hear Ma's laughter and muffled talking, and she would sound like a normal mother.

"You don't know a damn thing," Ma said. "If I remember correctly, I pushed you out of me. Have the scars to prove it. Still feel the pain of it. Don't you judge me," she said, looking away. "Sit down and light it for me."

I opened the two windows in her bedroom, before prepping her smoke by rolling a tacky ball of opium onto the tip of the metal rod. When I held the tip against the flame of the burner, the opium evaporated into fumes, which Ma, lying on her bed, caught under the cup of her pipe, and she held the fumes in her lungs for close to ten seconds before blowing out the smoke into a balled-up shirt.

After five or six long pulls on her pipe, she said, "How's your space thing coming?" I told her nothing about our rocket. I hoped she'd come out to the hangar once and see what we had built. She pulled herself toward her pillows and curled into the blanket. I made sure the burner was snuffed out before placing it in the cigar box. I took the box with me.

Days later, Pa was sitting at the kitchen table when I returned home from school. Odd, since he usually was asleep for his shift. Ma appeared in the kitchen.

"My own son has turned me in," she said. "You promised!"

"Where's the cigar box?" Pa said.

"It's in the cellar," I said. "Underneath a board in the ground." I had hidden it there because I didn't trust Ma. "What's going on?"

"Your Assistant Principal called wondering if you were okay," Ma said. "One of your teachers reported you smelled funny."

Pa took a deep breath and left the kitchen for his bedroom before I could hear him exhale.

"They wanted to know if you were using drugs." Ma took the seat Pa had vacated.

"What did you say to them?"

"What do you think?" Ma said. "Go get the box."

"What for?" I said.

"I need a smoke," she said, bouncing her feet on the floor.

"Let's do it in the cellar," I said.

"I won't be able to walk back up. Are you going to carry me?"

"I'll be down below." I walked outside and pulled open the doors to the cellar. If she couldn't get back up later, I'd leave her lying underground.

We sat on the stairs leading into the cellar with the doors closed above our heads. Ma blew her smoke through the grate in the bricks. "Can you do something for your mother?" The wind had picked up and sucked away the smoke she blew out.

"What is it, Ma?" The pipe was warm in my hand. I was tempted to put it to my lips and see what I was missing.

"Ask your girlfriend to come pray for me. It'll be good for me."

"She's not my girlfriend," I said.

"I'm afraid to ask the father. Afraid he won't come unless I'm serious. Let's start small—with the daughters. You think you can do that for me?"

I laughed. "I can't take you seriously," I said. "You're right—the father would never come." I sniffed the cup of the pipe.

"I need to cover my bases," she said. "You know, in case—"

"In case what?" I spotted the first cat of the night dashing into the hangar.

"You want me to say it?"

I didn't want to think about her dying. Her presence hadn't been felt in my life enough for me to want that. Her absence was already something that nothing could take away.

Pa grew frustrated when we couldn't establish a good seal on the external tank so we could pressurize it once we were blasted underway and headed into space and toward the moon. Pa checked and re-checked the seams he had welded, but somehow, when the aluminum tubing leading air into the cavity was opened and the exhaust was tightened,

the gauges refused to register any difference in air pressure. We drove the pickup truck to the edge of our property 600 hundred yards away, and sat there for two hours while the industrial-sized air compressor pumped air into the external tank. "If this doesn't work," Pa said, as we waited for the alarm and light he had rigged to sound and flash, "I don't know what else to do." He leaned over the steering wheel, focusing his eyes on the rocket. If we couldn't get this part of the inside of the rocket working, we couldn't move on to the installation of the electric and hydrogen lines, and running fuel lines to our boosters.

After the two hours, we drove toward the hangar. Pa unplugged the air compressor. He checked the gauges, shook his head. When he opened the exhaust valve, I heard nothing escape from it, only Pa's loud sigh.

"We'll have to rethink this," Pa said. "Get more books."

Some nights, I'd hear the sisters laughing at one, two in the morning. I wondered what they were laughing about, and I'd imagine entire conversations with an imaginary sibling. What was worse for a mother: a whore or an opium addict? Did one eventually become the other? Was it okay to not love your mother? And my brother or sister—it didn't matter which—and I would laugh into the night about the girls upstairs who spoke in tongues. The sisters usually prayed before they slept, and in the moments when they were worked up, their voices pressed through the hardwood floor, through the wooden slats holding up the drywall and down on me, pinning me against my bed with their fervor. Their passion suggested life on Earth was too harsh to bear, that they couldn't wait to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I wish I knew what they were saying, wished I

could speak their language. I remember getting on my knees, praying that night as I'd seen it done on television, as I imagine the sisters doing it above me every night. I waited until the sisters unleashed their alien words, and I said a quick prayer, hoping to slip in my requests with theirs, hoping somehow that when I woke up the next day the pressurization issue with the rocket would have fixed itself.

The quickest way into town was to follow Highland, turn onto 13th Street and take the path that lead beyond the dead end into the woods. Half a mile on, the path forks— one lead out onto the athletic fields of the school, the other out onto the river walk and, next to it, Washington Park and the swimming pool. The Lees' house was the last house on the dead-end street, and was marked by Mr. Lee's new yellow semi truck in the front of the house when he was home. Big Hat, one of his sons, had told me his father's old truck had been blown off the road by a twister in Nebraska while he huddled underneath an overpass. The Lees were a large family, ten children in all. Pa said if our pickup couldn't muscle the rocket trailer out of the hangar we might ask Mr. Lee if he could help when the time came.

That spring, when the sisters and I walked into the woods to go to school, we saw Mrs. Lee rocking a new baby, the only girl of the family, on the porch. Mrs. Lee was dark and tall, with wide hips, the complete opposite of Ma. She looked as though she could bear a lot of things. To help with the children, Grandma Joua would come over with her only son, and she was always over. A boxy woman, she looked as young as Mrs. Lee, though she must have been nearing eighty then. When we walked by,

Grandma Joua would call out to me if she was outside. I'd stop and talk, to be polite, but the sisters hurried on. Grandma Joua asked about Ma, how she and Pa were getting along. I didn't give her more than Ma was doing fine, she slept most of the day, and she avoided Pa.

"Then he's given up," Grandma Joua said in late March. I told her we were building a rocket, and she laughed, jiggling the folds of her neck. "Then he hasn't given up," she said. "It'll be okay, no matter what. Sooner your father gives up, the better," she said, smirking.

I turned away because I knew that smirk. When people in town asked about Ma, I'd tell them how she was doing, and they'd ask about Pa, and routinely shake their heads at my answer. To them, Pa was a brainless face. They weren't too shy to share that Pa should put Ma in her place, that she needed to learn how to be a proper wife, that he needed to buy a gun and kill those cats.

"I'm an orphan and I turned out okay," Grandma Joua said. "You have at least one parent, so you're twice more lucky."

The sisters disappeared into the woods. They didn't like it when I stopped to talk to Grandma Joua. When we walked home from school, if the Lee boys were around, Nuelee would pull Maihoua closer, position themselves on the other side of me and quicken their pace. According to Nuelee, the Lees were the biggest worshippers of the devil in town. By that, she meant the Lees still held to the religion of the old country. Grandfather Lee was a fourth-generation shaman, and people said Grandma Joua was his great-great-aunt, though she was younger than him. He had raised her after she was

orphaned as a baby. Nuelee had another reason for avoiding the Lee boys. The third oldest, Rocky, kept trying to talk to her, had said to her after the spring tornado drill at school, "You too good for me, bitch?" when she walked away from him in the hallway. They were both high-school freshmen that year. Rocky had a few suspensions on his school record, once for spray-painting a dick and balls on the hood of the gym teacher's car. If the Lee boys were in front of us when we walked home, we would slow our pace or linger around school or, sometimes, walk over to Publics Street and take the long way home. Oftentimes, though, because there were so many of them, the Lee boys walked home in groups, and we'd be caught in the middle, not knowing if we should overtake the group ahead of us or allow the group behind us to pass and wait longer before getting home—it usually depended on which group Rocky was in.

"I don't know," I said to Grandma Joua. I refused to take account of what I had for fear I'd know what I had to lose. "I hope that's true."

"You're too young to know," she said. "I hope you never do." She walked away from the fence, picked up one of the toddling Lee brothers, who nudged his face into her breasts like she was his mother, and carried him inside.

The sisters' prayers occurred when their parents were at a church meeting and Pa had gone to the library to return a book. Ma, bathed and in a clean black skirt and violet blouse, kneeled in the living room and looked up at the sisters.

"You're just going to watch?" Ma said, turning to me as I stood by the entrance of the room. "We'll have better luck if we receive the prayers together." The sisters were quiet regarding Ma's assumption.

I fell to my knees next to Ma. I had only heard and felt the sisters' prayers through the ceiling, had never quite seen it, so I wasn't sure what to expect. Each of the sisters placed one of their palms on our bowed heads and raised the other. Their prayers began at the same time and started simple enough. They told God who Ma and I were, that we were asking to be blessed and forgiven, and needed strength to fight our battles, that we were on our knees to ask for mercy. I felt the tension in Maihoua's body through the hand she had on my head, could sense the spasm through her curled fingers. The sisters began chanting hallelujah, and then from somewhere deep within each of them came garbled sounds. The bassful energy they prayed with shocked my body, and Maihoua's hand filled with a strength I hadn't thought women could possess. I opened my eyes. The sisters jumped and shouted for God to rid our bodies of the impurities of sin with such force that they showered my face with spit, causing me to do the only thing I could do: I laughed. Ma turned her body toward me, but I shut my eyes and started shaking my head under a hand which came to rest every time Maihoua fell back to Earth, laughed at what I'd seen and what I was hearing. Then I felt Ma's slap on my cheek and opened my eyes to see the sisters looking down at us, their hands retreating from our heads.

"Amen," the sisters said, lowering their still-raised arms.

"I'm sorry," Ma said. "He's so disrespectful."

"We were done anyway," Nuelee said. I wondered if her quick answer was the revelation that this had happened before at other prayer sessions for the damned.

"Thank you," Ma said.

Nuelee nudged Maihoua toward the door and neither looked back before exiting our flat for their own upstairs. I wanted them to stop and ask if I'd be up later that night with my telescopes.

"You laugh at your own mother for trying," Ma said before following the sisters out of the back door. I chose not to follow her, the sting of the slap still on my cheek, but I could hear the doors opening to the cellar.

On the weekend before the last day of school, Pa backed his pickup truck toward the hangar. He came out with his hand extended for a handshake.

"We need to work on that," he said. It was the first time Pa had shaken my hand. I was used to beginning and ending each building day with a salute. Pa had taught me to greet him that way in preparation for our walk on launch day dressed in our bubble helmets. Pa didn't serve in the military like other men of his generation, but he took saluting seriously. Ma said he was spared because he was the oldest of his parents' sons; plus they were wealthy. But Pa wanted to be part of the war and fly T-28 fighter planes, she added. My grandparents, instead of letting Pa go to war, married him to Ma and sent them on their way to America. For all Ma went through, I'm surprised she doesn't badmouth Pa. Even I can see he was a good father, she said.

"You found the right parts?" I said to Pa after he let go of my hand and headed for the hanger. We hadn't touched the rocket since September. The robins had long returned to their nests in the rafters of the hangar, feeding their naked chicks worms and carrying chick droppings away with their beaks, and I was eager to get back to work on the rocket.

He returned with the circular saw and lowered the bed door on the truck.

Using plywood and wooden posts we trimmed to fit into the slots in the sides of the pickup, we erected walls that came to the top of Pa's truck. We bolted on a slightly pitched tin roof to allow runoff, fashioned doors with plexiglass windows so Pa could see out his rearview at what he was leaving behind as he drove. I wondered which important part of the rocket he had found and needed to haul that required us to build these walls.

"Put the tools away and drive back to the house," he said after he grabbed a book, *Underwater Welding*, from the passenger seat. Would we need to submerge the rocket in water to see where the leak was, like what you'd do to a flat tire? Pa flipped through the pages as he walked toward the house. His head down and his hands out in front of him, he looked as if he was cuffed by the book and was being led away.

After I wound up the extension cord for the drill and circular saw, put up the ratchet and nuts, the rivet crimper, locked the tool box, I climbed into the pickup truck. The setting sun was bright behind the left side of the house, and I was forced to squint, my head slightly turned to the right to avoid looking directly at it, and all I could see by the eye of that side was the shadowed half of the house as I drove toward it.

The last day of school in mid-June was warm, and I was glad to be rid of the tie Ma had forced on me. That morning, she'd looked me over and thrown the blue paisley tie at me. "Don't look like a bum," she said. I had wanted to yell that she should listen to her own advice.

When Pa greeted me before the graduation ceremony, he extended his arm again for a handshake. This time I noticed his hand was rough and wide—the tips of my fingers barely curled under the bottom of his palm.

"What do you want to do now?" he said afterwards in the car. "Get married?" I had only graduated from middle school, but we knew a few people my age with spouses already. Ma married when she was fourteen, at the age Nuelee was now. We were stopped at a red light. Pa scratched his head, and I noted for the first time that he'd started balding. "Let's work on that again," he said and reached out his hand. The stop-and-go light hadn't changed, and I looked at his hand momentarily before taking it. My fingers bunched together in his grip, and he shook his head. "A little more work and we should be good."

"The rocket?" I said.

The light switched to green, and Pa eased off the brakes and slowly we entered into the intersection. We seemed stuck there as Pa's hand reached for the power button of the truck stereo—from the speakers, a few words about a store-closing sale the next weekend—then he turned it off. Pa wasn't one to listen to the radio while he drove, and the times I'd tried to turn it on he'd swatted my hands, saying he needed to concentrate. When the driver in the car behind us honked his horn, Pa stepped on the gas and the truck

spun its back wheels, swinging the backend to our left into oncoming traffic before the wheels caught and we shot off.

"You're an adult now. You know that, right?" He turned into the parking lot of McDonald's. I didn't know when he ate lunch at work, but I knew there would be nothing at home for us to eat. "And after that," he said, "we'll go straight into space." After *what*, I wondered. Pa parked the truck. "To the moon," he corrected. His voice was weak, the volume low, which made it sound like he hadn't said *moon*; instead, he sounded like a dejected cow. Had he given up after all these years on the rocket? It was the moon we needed to get to he had told me when we started building the rocket.

When Pa was younger, during the summer months, he'd sleep with his family in their field hut. My great-grandmother's words about how the stars came to be in the sky so entranced him that on those nights, while he was supposed to be resting for the next day's labors, he watched the sky until the stars faded. "I've wondered what those stars are," he said once. "What they mean." When Pa got to talking about stars and space, it seemed to me he was the one speaking in tongues.

We got out of the pickup and shook hands one more time. Pa nodded, squeezed my forearm with his other hand, then slipped his hand out of mine, breaking our hold.

The morning after school ended, I convinced the sisters to walk to the pool with me to check the open-swim hours. After the prayer session and the slap, they'd stopped walking with me to and from school.

"Did we get you in trouble?" Nuelee finally said when we were a few blocks from the house.

"Is that why you guys have been avoiding me?" I said. "I thought you were mad at me." There was a gold haze to the morning light.

"You're not the first one to laugh at us," Nuelee said.

"Mom says we should forgive," Maihoua said, "since everyone doesn't understand God's words."

I told them they might have thought it pained me, that slap, or that I would be ashamed of being slapped at thirteen, but Ma and I were only making the best of what we had left, and what we had wasn't enough to change what we both had come to expect from each other, because Ma started using again without my help, though she did so in the cellar. One of her men had even brought over an old army cot and set it up in the cellar.

Even by the pool, you could smell the stench of rotting fish. Killing carp was a local pastime on the Miskader River. The Town of Duberg and DNR advised that when you catch a carp you toss it in the plastic bins along the river unless you intend on eating it. People snagged them with weighted treble hooks, spear and bow hunted them—which were all legal. Big Hat was the Lee brother who was my age, a year in school behind Rocky and Nuelee, and a regular on the riverbanks. He had a five-gallon paint bucket full of white bass next to him. We sidestepped the fishing tackle and people littering the path that bordered the river.

"You want some?" Big Hat said when I peered into his bucket. "Mom says I should stop—pulled around seven hundred so far this season—but it's fun." The sisters walked right by him.

"They're just being good Christian girls," I said when he looked after them, his baseball cap unsnapped in the back.

"I'm not my brother," he yelled.

I found a broken check-shaped stick and speared ten fish under their gills and out their mouths, thanked him, and ran after the sisters.

Back at home, the sisters and I cleaned the fish under the spigot at the back of the house. We threw the red gills, guts, and air sacs, white and round like dirigibles, in a bucket and entered the house. I still had slime and blood on my hands when Ma called for me from her bedroom.

"When are you guys going to finish that rocket?" Nuelee said when I walked back into the kitchen after a stop in Pa's bedroom where Ma said a note was waiting for me. She had tied her hair into a bun before we had started gutting the fish, but it was loose now, a few long strands shielding her face. The roots of her hair were black, but six inches from her scalp it turned brown. The oil in the frying pan popped.

I put the folded note in my back pocket, and through the open kitchen window, I looked at the hangar. I didn't know if I should tell Nuelee the rocket would never be finished. Dark clouds, built up by the heat of the day, were moving in. A few cats had already nosed out an easy dinner and were digging at the bucket of fish guts. It angered me that I would have to clean up what the cats picked over, so I grabbed my soccer ball

from my room, shushed the sisters, and hurled the ball out the window. An orange-striped cat sprung into the air with a painful yowl, its hair on ends, before falling back to the ground and slinking away. We laughed until the fish was cooked.

"I'm dying," I said. The sisters looked at me perplexed. I told them Ma's story about the cats, but the sisters laughed at me, their mouths full of fish.

"I bet you won't be laughing at my funeral," I said.

"No," Nuelee said. "We'll pray for you." She didn't know what Ma had told me in her room: Pa hadn't returned home from work that morning. She didn't know about the note in my pocket.

When the sisters didn't stop laughing, I held my palms out at them, prayed that God would shut them the fuck up, then I rolled my tongue around my fish oily mouth, pushed my palms into the sky as if asking for mercy, and bounced on my toes a little dance, stomping my feet to get my words above their laughter.

"I'm a sinner," I said. "I am guilty. Show me mercy, please, oh Lord." I wanted to look as crazy as they had looked to me.

The sisters grew quiet, looked at me with their big all-believing eyes. "You don't have to be mean," Nuelee said. "Even if you don't believe."

I sprinted out of the door in pursuit of what I believed, in the direction the cat had dragged itself.

When I was ten, Pa and I got the idea to turn my bedroom into a planetarium after a visit to the travelling NASA exhibit at Discovery World in Milwaukee. The curators

had blackened the foyer of the building and sealed off the view of the domed ceiling with large black screens. Using bright spotlights and filters, they projected onto the screens the constellations of the Northern Hemisphere. Ma said she didn't want to be involved in what we were doing, so Pa and I went at it alone, using glossy black paint for the ceiling of my room. While we painted, when the sisters walked in their room above, I could feel the shake of the universe through the end of my paint roller. Using an astronomy map as a reference, stencils, glow-in-the-dark white paint, and fine brushes, Pa and I brushed the major constellations onto the black ceiling. In daylight, the black ceiling cast a shadow over the room. At night, the glowing stars reminded me that Pa and I had created a world of our own. The moon, three fingers away from Earth beamed at us. That distance, I thought then, could only get smaller the older I get, the larger my fingers grew.

"Who created this?" Maihoua said when I showed the sisters my room the next day.

"Pa did." Which was true since he did most of the work. He had envisioned this space and brought it together. When I pulled the heavy shades we had put up and turned off the lights, the sisters said in unison, "Cool."

Ma never entered my room to see what we'd done.

Months after we painted the ceiling, I was awakened by muffled laughter from Ma's bedroom. I rung the bell, could hear it ringing above, but got no answer. I decided to paint the walls of my room black with the leftover paint. I was finished by the time Pa returned home, but it took him five days before he discovered what I had done. My bedroom was a cave.

"How can you see?" Pa asked. Even with the light on, the room was dark.

"I don't want to see," I said. "I only sleep in here."

"We can't have all this darkness over your head," Pa said. I think that's when Pa changed. We repainted my room. Space—the ceiling, the walls—were now white, the stars black. The stars came out during the day, and night was starless—everything turned backwards. Earth and moon became separated by a sliver of white space.

It was windy and raining hard by the time I gave up my search for the cat and returned home. I was also afraid a tornado might descend and swallow me up in the dark. I heard the voices of the sisters upstairs. I wanted to pull the string and ring the bell, thought maybe I'd go outside into the rain and apologize. But the sisters' heels on the floor that night sounded like a gavel when they chased each other around their room, and later, their prayers were a judgment on my short life, one in which I'd been sentence to a solitary life.

Pa's note said: Finish the rocket. Mind your mother's cats. Don't let them get you.

From the second-floor porch, we shined our lights and watched cat eyes flit across the back yard near the hangar. The cats came to the carp we'd fetched from a bin by the river and hung from the rafters, appearing and disappearing into the tree line that marked our property from our neighbors. Through my Minolta binoculars, the carp was visible in a cone of yellow light. The cats sat on their legs and stretched for the carp dripping

slime. This was the third night, and still we didn't see the orange cat I'd hit with the soccer ball. Each of those nights, we heard Ma's visitors opening and closing the front door. I wondered if maybe we should be paying more attention to the front door. I was tempted to peek around the corner and catch them in my sights.

When the phone rang in our flat below, I made such a quick movement to go answer it that the cats sprinted off into the darkness, though they were half a football field away. It was Aunt Hlee, Ma's older sister. She said she'd heard about Pa and wanted to talk to Ma. I told her Ma was busy.

"Real busy," I said when Aunt Hlee persisted. I didn't want to knock on Ma's door and have something revealed to me that I would rather keep in the dark.

"Tell her she has no reason to smoke anymore," Aunt Hlee said. She asked how I was doing. "You miss your mother?"

"She's here all the time," I said. "Of course I don't miss her." The line was silent for a few seconds, long enough for me to think over my answer. "Yes," I said, knowing that was the right answer.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Tell her I'm sorry for what happened, for what our parents did to her."

"What happened?" I said.

"Stuff parents put their children through," she said. "Okay?" She hung up before I could ask her to clarify about the stuff Ma had been through.

With Pa gone, there was no one to tell me I couldn't paint flames at the tail end of the rocket and shark teeth on the nose. On the second day, the sisters came out to help me. It took four days, and we agreed the flame was too red and not yellow enough. "It'll look like one blazing fireball going through the sky," I said as we sat in the cockpit of the Valiant. I wondered what the moon would look like on approach, and I was reminded of Pa. On full moon nights, back in the old country, he said, he would climb to the highest point in the surrounding mountains and watch the orange globe of the moon rise at the edge of the world, huge and perfect in its roundness at birth, then get smaller as it rose into the sky until it glowed bone-white against the black of night. All that space for something so small to travel. The moon was Pa's favorite thing to follow with the telescopes. "If other people can get there, why can't we?" he said. "Your mother is like the moon," he said. "Craters, craters, craters. But from far away, perfect." It was sad knowing space had a different meaning for Ma: It was cold, empty, and dark. She preferred her room full of smoke. I asked Pa if knew Ma was hurting. "That's why we need to build this rocket," he said, concern in his voice, I remember, as if the building of the rocket was the only life-vest he could offer Ma. "Is she dying?" I said.

When the nightly stakeouts on the second-floor porch didn't attract the cat, I forced the sisters into a low-hanging beech tree in a small clearing in the woods. Our shoes and socks were soaked with morning dew. I strung a carp from the branch of another tree. We passed my binoculars and monoscope back and forth in silence.

"This is the craziest thing ever," Nuelee said after a few hours had gone by. Her hands shot up to cover her mouth. I wondered if she realized her outburst had compromised our watch or if she caught herself ridiculing my belief again. I didn't expect her to understand. Ma's story suggested only a man's life was affected by the cats. How would Nuelee feel if her womanhood was in a constant state of threat or had been taken away before she would need it?

We climbed down at noon when we all became too thirsty to sit still. The morning had been overcast and muggy, but now where the clouds broke, whiteheads ballooning higher, the sun shone through, heating up an already hot day.

"We could go swimming," Nuelee said as we sat in the shade of the beech tree. The sun glittered through its purple-gray leaves. I pulled out Ma's lighter and the Bayer tube of opium from my pocket. "Why'd you bring that?"

"Thought I'd keep it from Ma." I flicked the lighter and watched the flame grow long and disappear into the sunlight. I ran my thumb through the flame to feel the smooth roundness of its shape, each pass slower than the one before to test how slow I could go without burning myself. On the seventh pass, the flame bit the edges of my thumb, causing me to jerk my hand away.

"Play with fire and you're bound to get burned," Nuelee said.

I pulled out Ma's pipe from my sock and placed it between my lips. I found it difficult to breathe through the pipe and couldn't understand why Ma would suffer each long drag in exchange for an easy breath. I thought about Ma's lips on the pipe, wondered if I should feel anything—affection, maybe—knowing my lips were where

hers had once been. Had Ma had ever been kissed, if not by Pa, maybe someone else? Maybe that thought was why I flicked the lighter and held the flame to pipe and inhaled, the air warm as I pulled it in.

"It's empty," I said, showing the sisters. They continued eyeing me. I thought about Pa's new life, a life without me in it, and my hands worked quickly, flicking the lighter, and foregoing the pipe altogether, I held the long flame next to the brown tacky stuff inside the glass tube until it started fuming and sucked the fumes in deep. On inhaling, my lungs seized and my body shook as I coughed. After the fifth drag, the world grew dark, and the edges of the sisters softened, their facial features blending together, but I knew they were staring at me, were probably praying—for guidance? for me?—so I offered them the glass tube, and feeling the tears welling up, I shut my eyes to the world.

"Are daddy's girls too good?" I said when neither took the tube from me.

"At least we have a daddy," Maihoua said.

After I was able to stop the tears, I faced away from them, and running my thumb through the flames of the lighter again, passing over slower than before, realized I couldn't sense a thing, not even when a wisp of smoke curled around my thumb and disappeared. Nuelee leaned over and snatched the lighter away.

"Let's go," she said to her sister and started running for the path out of the forest.

Maihoua stood up, but I grabbed her leg. In my other hand was the opium tube. Nuelee was a good twenty yards away when she turned back. Maihoua lost her balance as I rose from the ground, her leg still in my hand, and tumbled over into a bush of thistle.

Nuelee's punch landed on my left chest, then she pushed me. And flailing, the tube in my hand thrown against the ground, I fell backwards onto my monoscope and the gnarled roots of the old tree. The metal of the monoscope bent to accommodate my ass.

"Don't fucking hurt my sister, bitch," Nuelee said.

I was stunned motionless by her words, and saw their backs receding into the distance, then disappearing altogether as the path rounded, as if they'd found a slit in my world and decided to exit it for another, one I would never find my way into. When I rolled over to check on the monoscope, I saw I'd cut my palm. Blood dripped down my wrist and forearm, trickling toward the ground. I couldn't feel the pain of the cut, even after I made a few fists with my hand to quicken the flow. I discovered what Ma meant when she told me she smoked to quiet a pain. I felt so alone I could hear the quiet of the forest. It seemed the things that stirred there stilled to focus a good eye on me, as though all were observing a moment of silence for something lost. I slung the binoculars around my neck, found the opium tube, which surprisingly was still intact, and picked up the broken monoscope in my bleeding hand, and ran after the sisters.

They were on the second-floor porch looking down. Their father's singing came through their open doorway of their flat. I uncollared myself from the binoculars and ran up the stairs with the monoscope. The sisters had backed up against the door, and the father looked at me suspiciously through the screen. I wondered if he knew something had happened between us. Tears and sweat darkened the under-eyes of Maihoua. I dropped the bloodied broken parts on the ground next to their feet and turned away.

“Ma!” I yelled inside our flat. She was face down in the pillow. When I tried to talk to her, she shooed me away with her thin arm and threatened to use the coat hanger if I didn't leave her alone.

“Ma,” I said. “I might be dying.”

"What do you think *I'm* doing?" she said.

It was past midnight when I rung the bell. After Nuelee rung back, I went up to meet her. She opened the door and said she didn't have anything to say to me. I told her I hadn't heard their prayers before bed.

"Silent prayers," she said. "We have that, too." She tugged at her long braid. I could smell her shampoo. The thought crossed my mind that I hadn't until then recognized she had a scent. "Works just as well," she said.

"Does it?" I wanted to keep her talking.

"I'm tired," she said.

I wanted to tell her I'd been repeating the same silent prayer for quite some time, that I wish Ma and Pa were in love, that we were a family. I'd grown tired of living and sleeping in shifts so I could keep up with both of their lives, so tired I was missing out on my own. "Ma and Pa aren't in love," I said before she could close the door. I noticed then her thick brows, the roundness of her eyes. "Pa's not coming back." I thought letting someone else know would relieve some of the weight I carried, but it seemed I had only burdened her with a feeling of pity for me. I had wanted to ask if she could help pray Ma into my world, but it started to feel like I was sorry for myself. Feet shuffled

and the outline of a figure appeared behind Nuelee. Her father looked over her shoulder at me.

"Pa isn't coming back, is he?" I said.

Nuelee turned her head and looked at her father for an answer. In the still night air came the deathly sound of cats fighting. I hurried to the edge of the porch to get a closer look in case one might be my cat, but I couldn't make out anything in the dark. The door behind me clicked shut.

I walked, sticking to the places I knew, the few houses with their lights on. Cat eyes flitted past, stalking me from house to house. The night remained warm, but I was too edgy expecting something to happen that I started to shake. I walked the long way to school, ran a few laps on the school track, then went to the town square. The trees, the statue of the bull, the things you knew to be there, could count on being there, weren't contained within the orange glow of the sidewalk lamps running the perimeter of the square. I could see Grandma Joua's trailer up on the hill on the other side of the town, her porch light another star against the sky.

I sat on the bench outside the Chinese takeout restaurant. The clock on the wall inside read quarter to two. The bars down the street were closing, so a last rush of drunks walked over for food. I asked two smokers for a light, and after one of the men handed me his, I took off across the street and town square into an alley, and ducked behind the building. They looked in my direction, too drunk to give chase, and entered the takeout. Maybe at this time of night some things just weren't worth chasing after, I thought.

Squatting behind the building, testing the lighter, I wondered why they were still awake at this time of night. I wondered what they were waiting for. Or who? Maybe they were tired standing watch or keeping vigil. Even if I knew where Pa was, I wasn't certain I'd run after him; if a fire truck sped toward our house, I didn't know if I'd be trailing it. I knew I would eventually return home, though, resigned to whatever awaited me there. Maybe I might walk, after Pa, after the fire truck. I teetered on my toes, and had to stand and lean against the wall. I willed myself not to cry, and knowing I would, I took out the tube, heated it for its fumes, and swallowed.

After I finished crying, I started my walk home.

A car slowed at the corner and turned on Highland. You don't think about how the smallest things can scare the blood out of you in the dark. The rustling leaves, a screeching seagull, the blast of a horn. Even a suddenly bright light in your direction will make you jump. When the eyes can no longer see, what the mind thinks it sees and what it understands are two different things: a possum will seem like a great mutant rat; a rat like a rabid mouse; a mouse, a fanged roach. The horror of everything is multiplied in a darkness opened to everything in the world. A safe darkness was an absolutely quiet and dark darkness—a darkness in a locked box.

A trailerless semi whistled by, stopped, and the driver-side door opened, and I booked it. Where did you find the darkness guarded at either end by parents? I'd run to it if I knew.

"What're you doing out this late?" a man said. I slowed and turned around. "Oh," he said. "Thought you were one of mine." It was Mr. Lee, probably on his way home after a delivery.

I shook my head, unsure of what to say. He approached me and extended his hand. I took it, held on. He didn't hug me or pat my shoulder. We simply shook hands. I knew I should be feeling something since this act reminded me of Pa, knew his memory would always be accompanied with hurt and betrayal, but still, I wanted to feel it, and I couldn't feel a thing at that moment when Mr. Lee squeezed my palm. Never would I allow anything that could steal the way I feel to enter my body again. He sniffed the air, and I knew he could smell the opium on me. Beside us, the truck chugged like a motorcycle. And the confusion in me wanted to ask him what it was like to survive a tornado.

"Life will be better now," he said as he drove me to his house. "Your mother got what she wanted. It'll get better." I asked him what he meant. "Your mother never wanted to marry your father." After a pause, he said, "I don't think they ever slept together." No wonder the guy had ten kids, I thought, he didn't waste time getting to the sex.

But my mind settled, and I wondered if Pa's decision to leave was made easier because he knew. This knowledge and its consequences were immune to every opiate anyone could take. I was sure of it then as I am sure of it now.

The next morning, Grandma Joua was already over at the Lees, sitting at their kitchen table, drinking tea when I awoke. "I've told Ang to keep you here," she said when she saw me staring at her. Ang was Mrs. Lee. "Let's see what your mother does when she learns you're missing."

"What do you think she'll do?"

"You're asking the wrong question," Grandma Joua said. "It is how soon will she notice you're missing." She sipped her tea and her face looked settled for a fight. "Your father's not coming back," she said. "He's been patient long enough." She frowned and looked at her hands. "Maybe when you get married you can go see him." She turned to me. "You go see him when you're old enough."

"Mr. Lee told me Ma didn't want to marry Pa," I said.

"She didn't." Grandma Joua's eyes were searching. "Her parents forced her. Your father was engaged to your mother's older sister—two years older, bigger and taller. When your father's family came for the sister, she fought them off. She said she'd kill herself if she had to go. She had a boyfriend, but your mother's parents had promised your father's parents one of their daughters. Your mother was the next oldest, and she was old enough to take a husband, though she was small. Your mother said no, but she wasn't strong enough to fight them off, and no one believed your mother was strong-willed enough to kill herself over unhappiness." Ma's oldest sister, Aunt Hlee, had waited until she was twenty-one to marry her love, waited for him to come back from the war.

"Your mother wouldn't have your father," Grandma Joua continued. "He was patient, allowing your mother's body to mature, but she never got much bigger. Then they went to Thailand, and somehow you were born."

I opened my mouth to ask a question, but it didn't come out. I didn't think it mattered anymore whether Pa was my real father. We had tried to build something together, had slotted our worlds into one. The memory of him hurt, and I couldn't tell if it was because I missed him or because I realized I may love him more knowing I wasn't his son. This was something I wanted to feel, something worth living for, if just to feel it over and over again.

"Your mom is smart," Grandma Joua said. "If she was born in America, she would've gone to college, become somebody other than your mother. Nobody would be able to touch her then." Grandma Joua blew on her tea and drank a mouthful before standing up. Some of the Lee brothers were awake, moving back and forth, staring at the intruder in their house. "You'll be alright," she said. "Family takes care of each other."

I thought about telling her my family was down to Ma now, and we weren't speaking.

"You know why your father spent all that time building that fake rocket?" she said. "Because when they were married your mother said she'd only love your father if he was on the moon." She chuckled at the thought and shook her head. "Crazy man, your father." After a long minute to reflect, she added, still shaking her head, "He was trying. At least he was trying, your father."

Before leaving for her trailer that night, Grandma Joua reminded Mr. and Mrs. Lee not to let me leave unless Ma came for me. Grandma Joua stuck out her palm and asked for the opium before she left, and I placed the tube of opium and lighter—all of it—in her hands.

I sat quietly on the couch and watched TV, hoping Ma would come for me, then hoping she wouldn't. I wondered how long it would take her to notice her pipe and opium were missing, if she would notice that first before she noticed I was missing. I had time enough to think about Pa, too, and decided that when I graduated high school, I'd go find him if I didn't end up dead at the paws of a cat. I'd make him feel guilty for not being there to help me search for it.

Grandma Joua didn't allow us to call my house. "If she wants him, she'll find out where he's disappeared to. She'll come." But Grandma Joua was right. After the first day, it wasn't what Ma would do to me that I wanted to know. It was when.

Ma came dressed in a long trench coat, a housedress sticking out from underneath. It was eighty-five degrees outside. Her hair bundled with a plaid scarf, big sunglasses shielding her eyes. She hadn't stepped out of the house all summer. Her face was pale in the sunlight, hair limp with oil. Though we saw her walk up the stoop onto the porch, Grandma Joua said from the kitchen table where she sat for us not to open the door until Ma knocked. Dumbo, the oldest of the Lee boys, opened the door, and I refused to go to her. "You sit on that sofa until she yanks you out of it," Grandma Joua commanded.

"Zong," Ma said, "get your boney neck over here." Her smell, a force field around her, reached me across the room. Dumbo backed away from her, and I saw her framed clearly in the door. She took shallow breaths, from fuming, maybe, or from being unsure of what she was going to do. "Are you asking me to test the thickness of your skin?"

I turned my attention to the TV. I knew she was coming toward me when, out the corner of my eye, I saw everyone scatter. The first slap caught my left ear, mostly behind my head, but in her follow-through her nails scored a stinging line across my neck. I turned to face her.

"Watch who you hit," I said. "Something might just happen."

"When did you learn to speak like a man?" She slapped me squarely on the cheek, but I refused to stand up. She turned and looked at the brothers who'd gathered around. The little ones clung to Grandma Joua. "You want the world to see me like this?" She swung at me again, but only her fingers grazed my face. She gasped because she knew it was a bad swing. Even she recognized she wasn't stable enough to harm me. "You think you can just leave me like your father?"

"Pa didn't leave," I said. "You drove him away. You've ruined my life."

She calmly took off her sunglasses, folded them, and put them into the pocket of her coat. Her eyes were huge, incredulous, and for the first time I saw the sadness in them, how they always seem far away, looking, hoping, perhaps, for some distant life in the future. She looked at Grandma Joua for a long moment, but nothing was said between them.

"I've ruined *your* life?" she finally said to me. Her hand was on my cheek before I could pull my head back. "I've ruined your life?" She repeated the question and ended each with a slap, alternating hands. I didn't answer her. Though the slaps came quicker, they were starting to get weaker. "You and your father have stolen my entire childhood—And you sit there—And say that to me?" This time she punctuated her question with a fist to my nose, and seized my arm with a grip I knew would leave a bruise, a grip so tight I could never pull away. She hoisted me up and dragged me outside.

In that moment, everything else ceased to exist. All was quiet except for the ringing in my left ear, the burning on my face, and Ma's words. There were only the two of us in this world.

"Your father can leave," she said, stumbling down the porch. "But you'll have to die to get away from me."

It was nine blocks home, nine blocks to consider how Pa's leaving had changed things for all of us. Ma yelled things about the bond of a mother and her child. She yelled and choked on her words. I tried to walk faster, to keep abreast of her, so it wouldn't look like I was being dragged by an overdressed, mumbling lunatic woman, and instead like a mother holding the arm of her son.

"Can't you see he was trying, Ma?" I said when her words got caught in a sob. "How heartless could you be? He was trying."

She stopped walking and shook my arm that was in her grasp. "He was trying?" she said. "He could've divorced me and fixed this years ago. Every single day when I

woke up I had to convince myself I forgave the world—my parents, my sister, your father, you—before I could get out of bed, before I could do anything else.” Her tears came out both corners of her eyes, rolled down her cheek, and dropped like rain onto her chest. “Try doing that every day then come and tell me if I’ve tried.” Her resolve cracked and released the things she had held back for so long. Her words became heavy then, and I understood things as they ought to be, as they were. I understood why Pa left, and he could, for Ma was right. He was never a part of her. I understood his need to leave, saw his foresight in it—it was for all our sakes. His absence had created this gulf between me and Ma, and we would have to find a way to bridge that divide. This space vacated by Pa was also a place of hope, if we wanted it to be. It would take great effort for me and Ma to love each other, knowing each had kept so much from the other, and this knowledge would somehow bond us as the rocket and space had bonded Pa to me. I knew the difference between us and Pa was that he tried to love us in a way we couldn't be loved—and maybe that was his shortcoming, why he never laid his hands on me except to shake my hand, why he never came to me, slapped me in the face to make me feel what being wanted felt like, and dragged me to where he was, a distance so great that even the telescopes he left me couldn't cut the vast space between us.

The weatherman warned of an oncoming derecho which stretched from Minnesota to Missouri toward the end of August, a week before school began, but the sisters and I went on our last stakeout anyway because after school started we would no longer have the opportunity. It was getting toward twilight and we planned on staying in

the tree until nightfall, even a few hours into darkness if need be, because we figured our chances were greater then. The wind had been strong all day, and we came close to being blown out of the tree a few times. The microbursts bent the branches we had climbed low enough to touch the ground.

At about eight, the rains started. For a half hour, we managed to stay dry under the leaves but the water dripped through. The beech tree became slippery, forcing us to straddle and cling to its branches. It wasn't until another microburst knocked me out of the tree that I thought we should head home. From the ground, I could see the sisters' outlines when lightening shattered the sky. After Nuelee lowered and dropped herself to the ground, Maihoua started yelling, afraid we were going to leave her. She was the smallest and had climbed highest in the tree. She lowered herself and hung from the branch she'd been straddling, reached with her toe for the closest branch down, but it was slightly too far for her.

"Let go," Nuelee said. She positioned herself under her sister, and I followed. It was a good ten-foot drop. The ground was softened by the rain, but Maihoua didn't trust us to catch her. "Let go now," Nuelee yelled. Another gust shook the tree, taking the decision to let go from Maihoua, and she fell feet first into our faces and shoulders, knocking us down. Dirty and wet, I pulled the sisters up. The ground was too muddy to run. When we came out onto the path, I realized I didn't have my binoculars with me.

In the downpour, a loud wail went off, loud and growing louder. I recognized the sound instantly, but didn't know where the tornado might be. All I knew and all that mattered at that moment was that it wasn't on top of us. Nor close enough to send us

flying yet. Fear drowned all the other sounds. We ran, made progress in between gusts of wind, but Maihoua kept falling behind with the strong headwind. I finally grabbed hold of her hand, and if she had any objections to how I handled her, she didn't share as I dragged her the entire way home.

The Evangelist parents were waiting in the opening of the cellar, the father holding one side of the flap door open against the wind. They were soaked through.

"Mercy of the Almighty," the father said, his tone unbelieving.

I thought he was glad to see us home as I handed him Maihoua, but behind me, I could feel something pulling me away from the open door. Close enough to safety, my ears heard less of the siren and began separating sounds, and what I heard was not the roar of thunder. My ears told me Duberg was being wrenched apart. I had a moment's time with the thought of death then, instinctively, I leaned forward, fought the pull of the wind until the father grabbed my hand. "My mom?" I said. He pulled me underground and barred the door from the inside. He pointed toward the cot where Ma was asleep.

"I brought her down here earlier," he said. "She's just sleeping." After that day Ma dragged me from the Lees', she laid off the opium. For four weeks, she lived in the bathroom since she had constant diarrhea and nausea. The Evangelist mother came down, cleaned Ma whenever she was too weak to do it herself, made a strong tea of special herbs which she watched Ma drink, and prayed over her. After Ma's dependence on the bathroom passed, Ma was given a few sleeping pills to help her get over the lingering urges of withdrawal at night.

Seeing her there, safe in sleep, I finally looked out of the cellar. It was there, churning towards Duberg from the southwest, gluttonous and round. I heard a loud beeping noise from the hanger, a red light flashing, and realized it was the gauge on the external tank registering a change in pressure. Lightning and sparks flashed inside the dark center of the twister. The bent spruce along the side of our property shook like taut strings vibrating, their branches snapping and hurtling into the sky. There was a loud creaking noise, a sound of great pain, before the roof of the hangar flew away with the dark wind.

How I wish Pa was there to witness what happened next. I wish he knew he succeeded. Someday I will tell him this story, the story of how our rocket took off and flew up and back toward the sky. It flew until it disappeared into the vortex of the tornado.

In the dark of the cellar, I realized my hands were being held by the father on my right and Nuelee on my left. I looked over at Ma, peacefully underground, protected from the chaos outside.

The next morning the sky glowed hot orange as if a scourging of evil had taken place and the fire had moved on to some other pestilential land in the east. When I finished combing through what was left of the hangar, I walked to far end of the property. Parts of the rocket were strewn across our neighbor's soybean field. Everything in sight looked as if it had been pushed through a wood chipper.

In the story I tell Pa, I thought then, I'll say the tornado inhaled the rocket into its very center, and carried it higher and higher until it was flung into outer space where it

still orbits. But, of course, looking at the damage, once the tornado had moved on, I was left to clean up the mess.

The father was outside on the second-floor porch singing: "Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings; it is the Lord who rises with healing in His wings." When I got closer to the house, I saw Ma emerging through the opened double doors of the cellar. "When comforts are declining, He grants the soul again season of clear shining, to cheer it after rain." Though the father's singing was constant and off key, I heard Ma clearly.

"Did I miss anything?" she said. Her clothing stuck to her skeletal body like a shroud or a placenta.

"In holy contemplation we sweetly then pursue the theme of God's salvation, and find it ever new." The father's singing became more passionate, rising an octave higher. "Set free from present sorrow, we cheerfully can say even let the unknown morrow bring with it what it may."

"Yes," I said. "You missed death."