



How to Pronounce Knife

Souvankham Thammavongsa

‘She thought of what else he didn’t know.
What else she would have to find out for
herself.’

THE NOTE HAD BEEN typed out, folded over two times, and pinned to the child's chest. It could not be missed. And as she did with all the other notes that went home with the child, her mother removed the pin and threw it away. If the contents were important, a phone call would be made to the home. And there had been no such call.

The family lived in a small apartment with two rooms. On the wall of the main room was a tiny painting with a brown bend at the centre. That brown bend was supposed to be a bridge, and the blots of red and orange brushed in around it were supposed to be trees. The child's father had painted this, but he didn't paint anymore. When he came home from work, the first thing he always did was kick off his shoes. Then he'd hand over a newspaper to the child, who unfolded sheets on the floor, forming a square, and around that square they sat down to have dinner.

For dinner, it was cabbage and chitterlings. The butcher either threw the stuff away or had it out on display for cheap, so the child's mother bought bags and bags from him and put them in the fridge. There were so many ways to cook these: in a broth with ginger and noodles, grilled over charcoal fire, stewed with fresh dill, or the way the child liked them best—baked in the oven with lemongrass and salt. When she took these dishes to school, other children would tease her about the smell. She shot back, "You wouldn't know a good thing even if five hundred pounds of it came and sat on your face!"

When they all sat down for dinner, the child thought of the notes her mother threw away, and about bringing one to her father. There had been so many last week, maybe it was important. She listened as her father worried about his pay and his friends and how they were all making their living here in this new country. He said his friends, who were educated and had great jobs in Laos, now found themselves picking worms or being managed by pimple-faced teenagers. They'd had to begin all over again, as if the life they led before didn't count.

The child got up, found the note in the garbage, and brought it to her father.

He waved the note away. "Later." He said this in Lao. Then, as if remembering something important, he added, "Don't speak Lao and don't tell anyone you are Lao. It's no good to tell people where you're from." The child looked

at the centre of her father's chest, where, on this T-shirt, four letters stood side by side: LAOS.

A FEW DAYS AFTER THAT, there was some commotion in the classroom. All the girls showed up wearing different variations of pink, and the boys had on dark suits and little knotted ties. Miss Choi, the grade one teacher, was wearing a purple dress dotted with a print of tiny white flowers and shoes with little heels. The child looked down at her green jogging suit. The green was dark, like the green of broccoli, and the fabric at the knees was a few shades lighter and kept their shape even when she was standing straight up. In this scene of pink and sparkles and matching purses and black bow ties and pressed collars, she saw she was not like the others.

Miss Choi, always scanning the room for something out of place, noticed the green that the child was wearing and her eyes widened. She came running over and said, "Joy. Did you get your parents to read the note we sent home with you?"

"No," she lied, looking at the floor where her blue shoes fitted themselves inside the space of a small square tile. She didn't want to lie, but there was no point in embarrassing her parents. The day went as planned. And in the class photo, the child was seated a little off to the side, with the grade and year sign placed in front of her. The sign was always right in the middle of these

photos, but the photographer had to do something to hide the dirt on the child's shoes. Above that sign, she smiled.

When her mother came to get her after school, she asked why all the other children were dressed up this way, but the child didn't tell her. She lied, saying in Lao, "I don't know. Look at them, all fancy. It's just an ordinary day."

THE CHILD CAME HOME with a book. It was for her to read on her own, for practice. The book the child was given had pictures and a few words. The pictures were supposed to explain what was going on with the words, but there was this one word that didn't have a picture. It was there on the page by itself, and when she pronounced each letter, the word didn't sound like anything real. She didn't know how to pronounce it.

After dinner, the three of them sat down together on the bare floor, watching television side by side. From behind, the child knew she looked like her father. Her hair had been cut short in the shape of a bowl. The child's shoulders drooped and her spine bent like there was some weight she was carrying there, like she knew what a day of hard work was all about. Before long the television pictures changed into vertical stripes the colour of a rainbow, and her parents would soon go to bed. Most nights, the child followed, but tonight she was bothered

by what she didn't know and wanted to know it. She opened the book and went looking for that word. The one that didn't sound like anything she knew.

That one.

It was her last chance before her father went to sleep. He was the only one in their home who knew how to read. She brought the book to him and pointed to the word, asked what it was. He leaned over it and said, "Kah-nnn-eye-ffff. It's kahneyff." That's what it was, what it sounded like to him.

THE NEXT DAY, Miss Choi gathered the whole class together to sit around the green carpet at the front of the room. She did this when she wanted to get someone to read out loud. Sometimes a student would volunteer and sometimes she would point at someone, but on this day Miss Choi looked around and found the child.

"Joy, you haven't read yet. Why don't you get your book and read for us."

The child started reading and everything went along just fine until she got to that word. It was only five letters, but there might as well have been twenty there. She said it the way her father had told her, but she knew it was wrong because Miss Choi would not turn the page. Instead, she pointed to the word and tapped at the page as if by doing so the correct sound would spill out. But the child didn't know how to pronounce it.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Finally, a yellow-haired girl in the class called out, "It's *knife*! The *k* is silent," and rolled her eyes as if there was nothing easier in the world to know.

This girl had blue eyes and freckles dotted around her nose. This girl's mother was always seen in the parking lot after school honking in a big shiny black car with a *V* and a *W* holding each other inside a circle. Her mother owned a black fur coat and walked in heels like it was Picture Day every day. This girl was like everyone else in the class, reading loud and clear, winning prizes. The child was the only one not to have won one yet. On this very day, Miss Choi added a red yo-yo to the sack. Had the child known what that word was, that red yo-yo would have been hers, but now it would remain locked in the top drawer of Miss Choi's desk.

LATER THAT NIGHT, the child looks over at her father during dinner. How he picks up each grain of rice with his chopsticks, not dropping a single one. How he eats, clearing away everything in his bowl. How small and shrunken he seems.

The child does not tell him the *k* in *knife* is silent. She doesn't tell him about being in the principal's office, about being told of rules and how things are the way they are. It was just a letter, she was told, but that single letter, out there alone, and in the front, was why she was in the office in the first place. She doesn't tell how she

had insisted the letter *k* was not silent. It couldn't be, and she had argued and argued, "It's in the front! The first one! It should have a sound!" and then she screamed as if they had taken some important thing away. She never gave up on what her father said, on that first sound there. And none of them, with all their lifetimes of reading and good education, could explain it.

As she watches her father eat his dinner, she thinks of what else he doesn't know. What else she would have to find out for herself. She wants to tell her father that some letters, even though they are there, we do not say them, but she decides now is not the time to say such a thing. Instead she tells her father only that she had won something.

At the end of the school day, Miss Choi was waiting for her by the door. She asked the child to follow her to the front desk, where she unlocked the top drawer and pulled out the red velvet sack. "Pick one," she said. And the child reached inside and grabbed at the first thing her fingers touched. It was a puzzle with an airplane in the sky.

When she shows her father the prize, he is delighted because, in some way, he has won it too. They take the prize, all the little pieces of it, and start forming the edge, the blue sky, the other pieces, the middle. The whole picture, they fill those in later.

**The Edge of the World by
Souvankham Thammavongsa**

WHEN I WAS ABOUT FOUR, my mother and I spent our days sitting side by side on the couch, watching soap operas and eating chocolates and laughing. My mother's laugh was loud and wild. She never covered her mouth, which would open so wide I could see the half-chewed chocolate mashed up against the inside of her cheek. She would only laugh this way when we were alone. With my father or in the company of others, she would giggle and put a hand over her mouth. I wanted everyone to see what I saw when we were alone.

My mother learned to speak English watching these soaps, and soon she started practising what she learned. When my father didn't feel like eating, she would ask who he had been eating his meals with that he had no appetite? When a sock went missing from the dryer, she would ask where it went, and when he had no answer, she would accuse him of having an affair.

My father didn't take my mother seriously. He tried to keep their talk light, saying he sure wished he wasn't so busy working and that life really was as full of opportunities for affairs as she imagined it to be. But he would turn serious afterwards, saying, "You don't know, do you. What it's like for me at work. They all talk so fast in English. Barking at me all the time about keeping up. Sometimes I don't even feel like a human being."

My parents didn't spend much time alone, and when they did, there were no Lao bars or cafés or restaurants for them to go out to. Occasionally, we were invited over to get-togethers at the homes of other Lao refugees. There were those who had been here a long time, like us, and there were those who had just arrived. These parties were where everyone went to dance and listen to music, play cards and eat, reminisce and talk about old times. They would laugh all night—sad, faint bursts of air—and shake their heads in disbelief at what they had made of themselves in this new country.

My parents went to these parties to hear the news from back home or to ask what had happened to those they left behind. Who was still there? Was their house still standing? And if they made it out of Laos, which refugee camp did they end up in? How long were they there? And where did they land? When my parents read the newspaper or watched the evening news, they never heard anything about what was happening in their country. It was almost as if it didn't exist.

My father was often at the centre of these parties. A wave of laughter would crash in from the living room and when I peered inside he would be there, telling everyone his stories. The one everyone seemed to love to hear him tell was the "Yes, sir" story, and even though they had all heard it before, he would begin the story as if they hadn't. He told them how he said "Yes, sir!" in English at work whenever anyone told him what to do, but he said it with the tone and force of a "Fuck you!" Then he marched around the room and saluted everyone like a dutiful soldier, saying in English, "Yes, *sir!* Yes, *sir!* Yes, *sir!*" each time. He cackled with glee at how the people at work thought he was so polite and nice.

My mother watched and listened to all of this from the kitchen, but she never joined in. She kept to herself, eating a plate of food while surrounded by Tupperware, glass casserole dishes, steaming pots, simmering pans, plastic forks and spoons and paper plates. I stayed there with her, and she told me what each dish was and how it was supposed to be cooked. She pointed out that some of the key ingredients were missing and said that none of the dishes could live up to her memory of the real thing. She said the food in Laos just tasted better and that maybe someday when I was older we could go back and visit. She said all this to me in Lao.

A woman in the kitchen overheard her and said, "Your child understands Lao?" My mother was proud that I could still have something from the old country

even though I had never been there. But the woman said to her, "Oh no, no! Oy! You better start speaking English with her. How's she going to fit in once she gets to school?!" When the woman left the kitchen, we laughed at her, how worried sick she seemed about not fitting in with everybody, as if that was a thing to want.

Later, my mother encouraged me to go and play with the other kids at the party. They were rowdy and running around and speaking English with one another. I wanted to play with them, but they kept pushing me on the arm and telling me I was "it." I did not know what "it" was, but every time I tried to get near one of them, any time I came close, they'd run from me like they didn't want to play with me at all. After a while I went back to the kitchen, and when my mother saw me return she asked what had happened, why I came back so soon. I told her, "All they do is speak English. I don't know what they're playing." Then she paused a moment and said, "Maybe it's something they learned at school. You'll learn too, when you go."

The closest my mother came to having friends were the cashiers at the Goodwill. They were friendly and knew her by name, and they'd let her wander the aisles there for hours. They might only have been doing their jobs, but my mother didn't see it that way. Once, she brought them egg rolls wrapped in aluminum foil, and they took them to the backroom to eat while we picked through the clothing together. But the way my mother

walked by the racks, with a hand trailing behind her, it was as if she wasn't really looking for anything she wanted. It made me wonder if she might have wanted to be invited to the backroom to enjoy the food. To distract her from thinking about her egg rolls, I grabbed a yellow dress and brought it to her. I said, "What do you think of this colour?" She looked at the price tag—one dollar—and nodded. Before we left the store, my mother glanced back at the cashiers. She said to me, "You think they liked it?"

ONCE I STARTED SCHOOL, my mother watched the soaps alone and told me about them when I came home. There was always an affair, a long-lost twin, someone in a coma, a handsome doctor. After a while, I didn't want to hear about them anymore. I started reading books, and my mother would come sit with me and have me read them to her. She would ask questions about the drawings inside. The books she liked best were the scratch-and-sniff ones, and the ones where animals popped out at you. Each time I pulled the paper tab and a cat or a dog jumped out, she would draw in her breath, surprised and delighted by such a thing. There was one book about a sheep, with a cotton patch inside. My mother would pet the cotton with her finger as if it was alive.

At night, she would bring a book to my bed and insist I read it to her. There were not too many words inside.

Sometimes she'd fall asleep right away, but when she didn't, I would make up stories for her. "No one is ever alone in the world," I said. "There is always a friend somewhere for everyone." She must have been twenty-four then, but she seemed much younger—and smaller. I watched over her, and when she shivered I pulled a blanket up to cover her, trying not to wake her. Sometimes she had nightmares. I could tell by how she was breathing—short, panicked breaths. I would reach out and stroke her hair, tell her things would be all right, though I didn't know if they would be or what it meant to say those words. I just knew it helped to say them.

I never thought to ask my mother why she slept in my room most nights. I was just glad not to be alone in the dark.

ONE SATURDAY MORNING, we wandered into the toy section of the Goodwill, and my mother picked something out for me. It was a map of the world, a puzzle, a thousand cardboard pieces inside a paper box for fifty cents. Each piece had a unique shape that fit into another. The point was to find the other pieces that fit into it somewhere in this pile of shapes and lock them together.

When we got home and I sat down to work on the puzzle, she did not pick up a piece or try to help me put it together. Instead, she watched me and what I did. She'd say, "That one doesn't go there. Try another one."

When one fit, she'd say, "Every piece belongs somewhere, doesn't it."

I worked on the puzzle when I came home from school, and piece by piece, I put the colours together. First the blues, which stood for the oceans. Then the reds, greens, oranges, yellows, and pinks of all the many different countries. Weeks later, there were only a handful of pieces left, and when I put in the last piece, I announced, with pride, "Ma, I'm finished!"

My mother peered at the puzzle and pointed at a green spot, said that was where she was from. A tiny country on the lower far right. Then she pointed to where we were at this moment, a large pink area at the top far left. After a moment, she pointed to the puzzle's edge and then to the floor, where there was nothing. "It's dangerous there," she said. "You fall off."

"No, you don't," I said. "The world is round. It's like a ball."

But my mother insisted, "That's not right."

Still, I continued, "When you get to the edge you just come right back around to the other side."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"My teacher says. Miss Soo says." There was a globe on Miss Soo's desk at school, and whenever she talked about the oceans or the continents or plate tectonics, she would point to those features on it. I didn't know if what Miss Soo was telling me was true. I hadn't thought to ask.

"It's flat," my mother said, touching the map. "Like this." Then she swept the puzzle to the floor with her palm. All the connected pieces broke off from each other, the hours lost in a single gesture. "Just because I never went to school doesn't mean I don't know things."

I thought of what my mother knew then. She knew about war, what it felt like to be shot at in the dark, what death looked like up close in your arms, what a bomb could destroy. Those were things I didn't know about, and it was all right not to know them, living where we did now, in a country where nothing like that happened. There was a lot I did not know.

We were different people, and we understood that then.

A FEW WEEKS AFTER, we went to the park. It was cold and the grass was yellow underneath a lumpy sheet of ice. Earlier, I had been reading and my mother had been watching television. She usually found a show to make her laugh, but that day she couldn't settle on one. She kept pressing the button on the remote control, flipping to the next channel, and then the next, until she started all over again.

I rushed over to the swings, hopped on the seat of one, and pumped my legs so I shot myself high into the air. My mother sat on a park bench alone, in her blue winter coat, facing me. She was not far. I called to her to pay attention to me, to see how high I was going all by

myself, but her head was turned away, her eyes focused on something else.

I stopped swinging and turned to see what she was looking at, the swing slowly coming to a halt. A man had run out of an apartment building in his boxers and a white T-shirt. He seemed flustered, in a hurry, as though he had not planned to be outside in the cold dressed like that.

A woman dressed in a pantsuit had followed him out. Heels tapping on the sidewalk like a pencil on a table.

The man glanced behind him, stopped, and screamed, "It's over. We're finished!" When the woman tried to embrace him, he refused, batting away her arms.

I walked over to where my mother was and stood right in front of her, blocking her view of the couple. I said, "Let's go home." She looked up at me and there were tears in her eyes. "It's snowing," she said and glanced away. She said it once, like that. In a small clear voice. *It's snowing.* But the way she said it made it seem like it was not about snow at all. Something that I can't ever know about her. Then my mother looked up at me again and said, "I never have to worry about you, do I." I nodded, even though I wasn't sure if it was really a question.

Soon after, sometime in the night when I was asleep, she walked out the door with a suitcase. My father saw her leave, he told me. And he did nothing.

ALL THIS WAS YEARS AGO, but I can still feel the sadness of that time, waiting for her to come back. I know now what I couldn't have known then—she wouldn't just be gone, she'd stay gone. I don't think about why she left. It doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that she did. What more is there to think about than that?

Often, I dream of seeing her face, still young like she was then, and although I can't remember the sound of my mother's voice, she is always trying to tell me something, her lips wrapped around shapes I can't hear. The dream might last only a few seconds, but that's all it takes, really, to undo the time that has passed and has been put between us. I wake from these dreams raw, a child still, though I am forty-five now, and grieve the loss of her again and again.

My father did not grieve. He had done all of this life's grieving when he became a refugee. To lose your love, to be abandoned by your wife was a thing of luxury even—it meant you were alive.

THE OTHER NIGHT, I saw an image of the Earth on the evening news. I had seen it many times before, and although my mother was not there, I spoke to her anyway as if she was. "See? It really is round. Now we know for sure." I said it out loud again, and even though it disappeared, I knew what I said had become a sound in the world.

Afterwards, I went to the bathroom mirror and stared at the back of my mouth. I opened my mouth wide, saw the hot, wet, pink flesh, and the dark centre where my voice came out of, and I laughed, loud and wild. The sound went into the air vent, and I imagined people living in the building wondering to themselves where a sound like that came from, what could make a woman laugh like that at this hour of the night.

Worms by Souvankham Thammavongsa

I REMEMBER THAT MORNING because I woke up to such dark. It was my mother who woke me. She came into my room and said I could help earn a little extra money now.

She'd gotten me a job with her out at the hog farm. She was dressed in dark-blue jogging clothes. She threw a matching pair at me and told me to get dressed. Then, when I was standing on the front steps, waiting for her to lock up, she handed me two soup cans with the labels peeled off. They were filled with uncooked rice. I never thought to ask what this all was for, I just went along with it, still groggy from sleep.

MY MOTHER DROVE US—it was just me and her—out to the hog farm. Driving was something she liked to do. She got her licence not long ago. She had failed the test four times, but she kept going back until she passed.

She had bought the car from our neighbour. Their daughter was going off to college, someplace far, so the girl couldn't take her car with her. It was bright orange and shaped like a jelly bean. It had tinted windows my mother didn't need. We drove out in the quiet, no radio on, the car's headlights leading us into the dark. I had the window down because I wanted the cold air to wake me.

I didn't know what kind of job my mother had signed us up for, dressed like this at one in the morning. I had heard from a friend that there are always jobs at the hog farm, for those who can handle it. You can clean the shit from the floor, or clean the hogs when they're still alive, just before they put them out on the line. Or you can rub the male ones to get them excited to mate. I didn't want that to be my job and hoped my mother hadn't signed me up for anything like that. But a job is a job, and even one like that, you could still have your dignity.

MY FIRST DAY on the job wasn't a good one. I did everything wrong. What I was asked to do didn't turn out to be so easy.

Me and my mother were the only women. There were about fifteen men, and they were all Lao like us. We were what people called us—nice. I had seen these men before at the card parties my mother went to. She cooked meals with their wives in the kitchen. When we all sat down to eat on those nights, everyone would talk about

their work, their bosses, how hard it was back home, how they all came to the country we live in now—but no one cried or talked sad. They all laughed. The sadder the story, the louder the laughter. Always a competition. You'd try to one-up the person who'd come before you with an even more tragic story and a louder laugh. But no one was laughing here. Every face was serious.

Out in the field, my mother put on something like a headlamp—small, with a red light—that freed up her hands. She took out the soup cans with the rice in them and handed one to me. I followed her and tried to do what she did. To begin, she scanned the field and picked a spot far from the other workers. They talked, she said, and the sound of their talk kept their worm count low.

Then she squatted and placed the soup can on the ground near her ankle. When she moved forward, she'd also move the can so it was always within reach, shadowing her. We were supposed to wear gloves, but my mother didn't. She said you got a better grip this way. After each pick I watched her dip her hands into the soup can and rub the tips of her fingers in the uncooked rice. That was how she kept her fingers dry. She told me her hands were always cold, but she had to keep them the same temperature as the worms otherwise they could feel the heat of her hands and slip away before she got close to them.

As she crept along, she pulled worms out of the cool earth with her bare hands and dropped them into the Styrofoam cups that were attached to her lower legs with

a scrunchie. Everyone had their own way of attaching the cups to themselves. Some tied them to their legs with cloth or rubber bands; others had sewn pockets onto the bottoms of their pants. Inside the cups were a few strands of fresh grass so the first pick of worms had a bit of cushion and wouldn't land so hard. It also gave the worms something familiar to feel, so they wouldn't panic and squirm around, injuring themselves. In half an hour, my mother had gone back and forth across the field four times and had already dumped eight Styrofoam cups into a large Styrofoam box, next to which was a man in charge, keeping count of her harvest.

At first, I forgot my can of uncooked rice as I moved along the line and let the slime build up on my hands, making it difficult for me to hold on to anything. I wasted time looking for the can in the field and forgot where exactly I had last picked. I didn't stay bent down and close to the earth. Every time I picked, I stood up, and by the time I got my fingers back to the ground again, all the worms were gone. They heard me coming. So I tried to stay crouched down like my mother. Even then, when I found a batch and pulled at them, they did not come out of the ground smooth and whole, but in pieces. I had pulled too hard and their bodies were broken.

The easiest way to get your numbers to be good was to find a mound of worms, all roped together and mating. When you got one of those, speed was everything, as the worms below that pile start to crawl back into the

earth. But my mother got those too. She pulled at them slowly and steadily, giving the worms enough time to let go of what ground they were crawling back to and come out whole into her hand. She filled her Styrofoam cups easily, with all their bodies intact.

I didn't like how the worms felt in my hands, so cold and slimy, and raw. There was no mistaking they were alive. They never stopped slinking and slithering around, stretching their bodies out into such a length that I wasn't even sure these were worms I had just picked. I could feel their bodies pulse and throb and tickle in my hands, and they would jab at me with a head or tail—I couldn't tell which, both ends looked the same to me. I wanted to scream, to yell out about how gross it all was, and to throw them back to the ground, but I didn't want to shame my mother in front of everyone. So I held on. This was a job wanted by many, and I was lucky my mom got me in.

AS WE DROVE BACK home later that morning, still in the dark, my mother said, "That was fun, wasn't it? Picking together like that." When I didn't say anything, she added, "You didn't do so good on your first day, huh?"

I had picked only two cups compared with what was probably my mother's hundreds. It had taken so long for me to fill the cups that the worms I picked piled up and crushed my earlier pickings. I hadn't realized the weight of them would be too much. I had a bunch of dead worms

no one was going to pay for. They had to be alive to be worth something.

"Next time. Next time you'll get more," my mother said. "Everyone does bad on their first day."

I thought of my father then, what he would think of us doing this, picking worms. What he would say. My father was a good man. No one who knew him had a bad thing to say about him. He died early in my life. I can hardly see his face in my mind anymore. I do remember that he used to call me Ugly. My mother said he called me that so my looks wouldn't go to my head. She said the time for thinking about looks was after you get educated and work a good job. Then looks, if they're any good, are worth something to you. But you couldn't do it the other way around.

I often wondered if my mother would marry again. Most of the people we knew were married or had someone. When I asked if she was ever lonely and sad, listening to her Elvis tapes late at night in her room, she said, "What do you want me to do? Get one of them white guys? Can you imagine. They probably will want me to say things like 'Me lope you long tie' and pump me like one of them hogs. I got my pride and I ain't lowering it for no man. I rather be alone."

YOU COULD SAY I was spoiled. I'd never had a job before, but I was fourteen, getting to be that age where it was

costing my mother money to have me around. I got good grades, and so she had this idea that I might go to college someday.

Back in her country, she had never gone to school. She said a family had to have money for that, and even when there was money it went to her brothers. "Wasted it all on them, if you ask me," she said. She had seen schoolgirls in their white-collared shirts and navy-blue skirts walking to school while she sat and looked after the chickens in the yard. She was responsible for chasing all the chickens back to her property. It wasn't a hard job. It was just something her family needed done.

"I was a peasant girl. You don't know anything about that. I wanted to be wearing one of them navy-blue skirts and white-collared shirts, but I knew it wasn't going to happen for me. But it's going to happen for you. You're going to be one of them navy-blue-skirt-white-collared-wearing girls going to school. I might not have been one of them myself, but I brought someone into the world who will be. I sure can be proud of that."

I didn't tell my mother they don't wear uniforms in college here. I wanted her to have her dreams.

EVERY SATURDAY MORNING, I went back to that hog farm and picked those worms. The rest of the week, my mom went on her own and picked with the regulars. I got to be real good at it, but not like my mother. She really

was a natural, if ever there was one. She didn't pick like the others. For one thing, she was the only one who took off her shoes and went barefoot. She said, "I don't like them rubber shoes. I know they can hear me coming. My feet don't make noise at all this way." Sometimes she even got to turning off her headlamp and feeling her way through the line. She knew where the worms were without having to see them, picking blind and bringing them back in large numbers. My mother called the worms "shit of the earth." She would always say, "Man, I love shit of the earth," after every pick we did.

When I got tired, she told me to take a break. I'd go sit in the car and watch her in the field. You wouldn't know just by watching them that it was worms everyone was picking. From this distance, it looked like some rich woman had lost a diamond ring and everyone had been ordered to find it. I knew my mother was out there too, although I didn't know where exactly, and I didn't worry about her as it wouldn't be too long before she emerged to hurriedly add to her worm count.

Whenever I had any time to myself, I often got to thinking of my father. You aren't supposed to remember things from when you're two, but I did. All we wanted was to live. To put it into words is to bring back what happened. He was there, his head above the water, pushing me and my mother across the river, and then I looked over and saw his head go under. He came back up once more, and his mouth opened, but he made no sound as he

went under again. I couldn't swim and my mother couldn't either. But somehow she managed to steer us across, holding on to a rubber tire. Afterwards, my mother asked me if I saw what happened to my father, and I said I didn't. I didn't want her to know. Now I like to believe he ended up somewhere in Malaysia. Maybe he lost his memory and was living with a new family. Just to know he is living, that's good enough for me.

The last sound he made wasn't a sound, even.

I DIDN'T WANT to go to the school dance. But my mother insisted. She said I shouldn't miss out on things in life. I knew it was a big deal for her. She made me a pink, bubbly dress, and I tried the thing on for her to get the fit right.

Some guy at school asked if he could take me to the dance. James was his name. I thought he was all right, I guess. He sat next to me in the classes we had together. I didn't understand why. There were other seats free. He drew helicopters on the corner of my notebooks. When I asked why he went and did that for, he said, "So we can fly away together." I erased or crossed them out. When it rained outside, he would turn to me and say, "It's raining," as if it was an important thing in his life, to see that it was raining and to have someone to tell about it.

He was around me a lot because we were paired together for this parenting unit in Family Studies. I

didn't want to be anyone's partner. I wanted to raise the egg we were given on my own, but James said, "I'm not going to let you raise it alone." I didn't turn him down because we got more points that way, working with someone. It was fine with me. It was just an egg, that's all it was.

When James came over to work on the assignment after school, he talked to my mother. She adored him because he looked a little like Elvis. I didn't want her to get too attached to him. I didn't want him to break her heart. I tried to get James to quit our project. I was careless with the egg and dropped it on the floor during the few hours I had alone with it. After that, I thought he'd quit on me and the project, but he said, "It was an accident. Things like that happen in life."

Still, I didn't want James to be so nice to me. I showed him my worm-picking outfit with the slime stains on it, but he didn't find that disgusting at all. He said, "That's awesome! I'd love to go do that with you sometime." I never heard of such a thing. Someone other than my mother who actually wanted to pick worms.

I wanted him to know that it wasn't awesome at all. I wanted him to see that it was hard work and you needed real skill to be a good picker. James was so good at things, I wanted to see him fail at something. I wanted to see him struggle to fill a box, to step on the worms because he didn't know where to look for them, to pull too hard and have their bodies break apart in his hands.

I wanted him to be yelled at when his count was low, and for him to depend on something for his living that he had no control of—the weather.

When I got up at one that Saturday morning, James was already having coffee with my mother in the kitchen. He wore jeans and a plain blue T-shirt. We gave him the can with the rice in it and he said, “Cool. I’m so excited!”

We drove out to the farm and he leaped out of the car. My mom told the farmer that this boy wanted to come along, that he didn’t have to worry about pay because he’d work for free. The farmer liked the idea. He said, “C’mon now. Let’s see what you can do.”

James wore the little light on his head and started like the rest of us, but it turned out he was just like my mother. His counts were very high for a first-timer because she was the one who trained him on what to do. All the little things that had taken her months and seasons to learn and figure out on her own were given freely to him. She was there guiding him. And he picked with enthusiasm because it was her way, grabbing at those bodies as if it were all a fortune in gold.

Back in Laos, the men who worked in this field had been doctors, teachers, farmers with their own land, like my mom. None had set out for a life spent crouched down in the soft earth, groping for faceless things in the night, this shit of the earth. And they picked like it. James had never been anything else, except a kid. James picked like a man who was free.

NOT LONG AFTER THIS, James, at fourteen, became our manager. The man who owned the business said he wanted someone else to take over for him, and since James spoke English so good he could have the job. He was impressed that James had been willing to work for free the first few times. Said he was an example to all of us.

I looked over at my mother, but I couldn't see anything because it was so dark. I knew what James got was something she wished for herself. She loved this job and she had been at it for much longer than James, but no one had noticed her work at all. And James? He was happy to have a job that paid so well. He didn't wonder if he deserved the job or not. He was fourteen and he was boss.

Now my mother had some things to say about James and him getting to be boss on our drives home. It all came out then. He wasn't riding with us anymore. She said she didn't care how he got to the farm—his parents probably drove him or the farmer went to get him himself. "They help each other out like that, you know." She said, "That was nice, wasn't it? I brought that fucker, and he takes my job. What the fuck. He's a fucking kid. And they accuse us of taking their jobs. Well, you know what? That coulda been my job. My job! And he fucking took it. He doesn't even need the money. What's he going to buy with it that his parents can't

get for him? I've got someone to raise. And why am I so pissed? It's just shit of the earth. Shit of the earth."

James started to change the way we picked. He said rice was something you ate, that it wasn't something to waste. The uncooked rice in our cans was replaced with sawdust. My mother got splinters drying her hands with it. The cuts got infected from the fertilizer in the soil and the sores worsened.

Then James told my mother she couldn't go barefoot anymore. She had to wear the full gear now—the rubber boots and gloves, the crinkly plastic bag with holes cut out for the head and arms. He said, "That's the equipment. You have to wear it." She did, and her harvest numbers fell.

To make up for the lower numbers, she stayed out on the field longer. She began to forget the things she once did so naturally. She didn't move with the same ease and love she had before, and the worms sensed her coming and slunk back into the ground and out of reach. I watched her heart break. She had been the best, but it hadn't mattered. The low count of her harvest now didn't tell you what had happened to the job or how it had changed. And yet the numbers could be used to say a picker was unskilled or lazy. Those things, I knew my mother was not.

THE EVENING OF THE SCHOOL dance came. Although it had only been a few weeks since James first came picking

with us, it felt like a lifetime. So much had changed and become confusing to me. I knew James as boss out at the farm, and I knew James as the fourteen-year-old boy I went to school with. They seemed like different people. When I was at work, I would watch him, waiting for his newfound coldness to turn into something else, the way one waits to be loved, to be recognized as someone to be loved. I didn't look at that face too long because I didn't like what I saw, and maybe what I wanted to see had never been there.

The night of the dance, my mother laid out the pink dress I was supposed to wear on my bed. She wasn't going to be home when he came. She would be out at a card party. "I'm not going to tell you what to do, how to live your life," she said. "You go on now, if you want to go with him to that school dance. But I don't want to be here when he gets here. You know how I feel about it. I can't be nice about it all. It's just not in me. But you, you've got a chance in this life. Pick those worms and get out of this town. Be nice."

James arrived alone. He was dressed in a black tuxedo, hair slicked back, and wearing black shoes that clicked on the concrete. He had, in his hand, a pink thing that flopped. A flower.

I had turned out all the lights. It looked like no one was home. The streetlamp was like a spotlight. I could see the front lawn and when he walked into the light, I

could see his whole face. It was small at first and then it got bigger, his forehead looming closer.

He rang the doorbell. Then he rang it again. When after a few minutes I still did not open the door, he started banging and struggled to turn the knob, but it was locked. He grabbed and pulled at his own hair, and it came loose and wild and undone. I saw it all, standing on the other side of the door, in the dark, watching him in the golden circle that framed the peephole. I did nothing. Not even when I heard him sob. I pressed a finger up to the peephole and held it there. I did not want him to see my open eye.