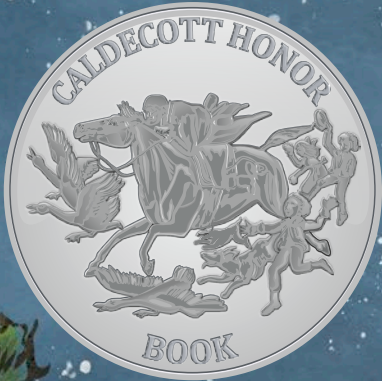
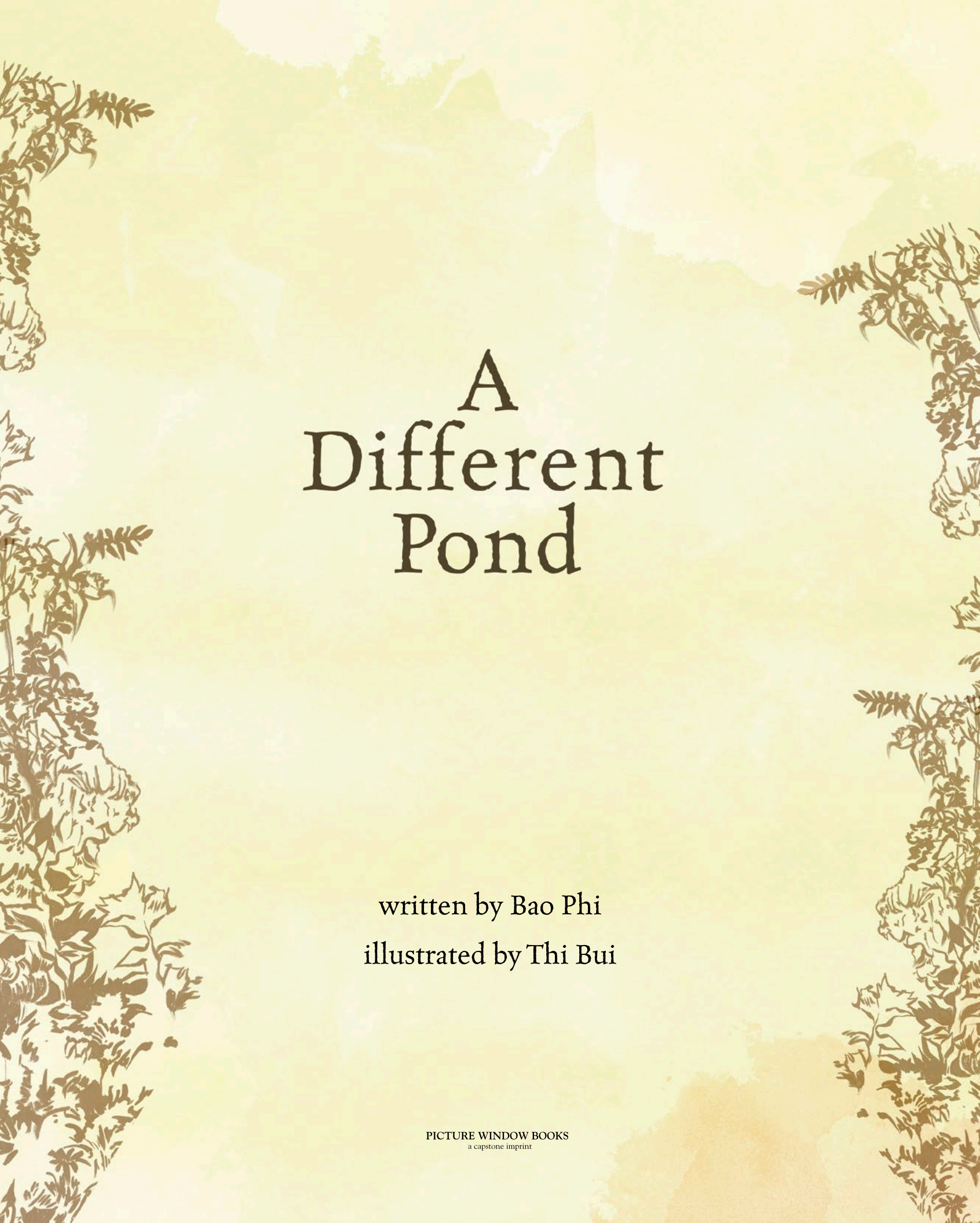


A Different Pond



written by Bao Phi
illustrated by Thi Bui



A Different Pond

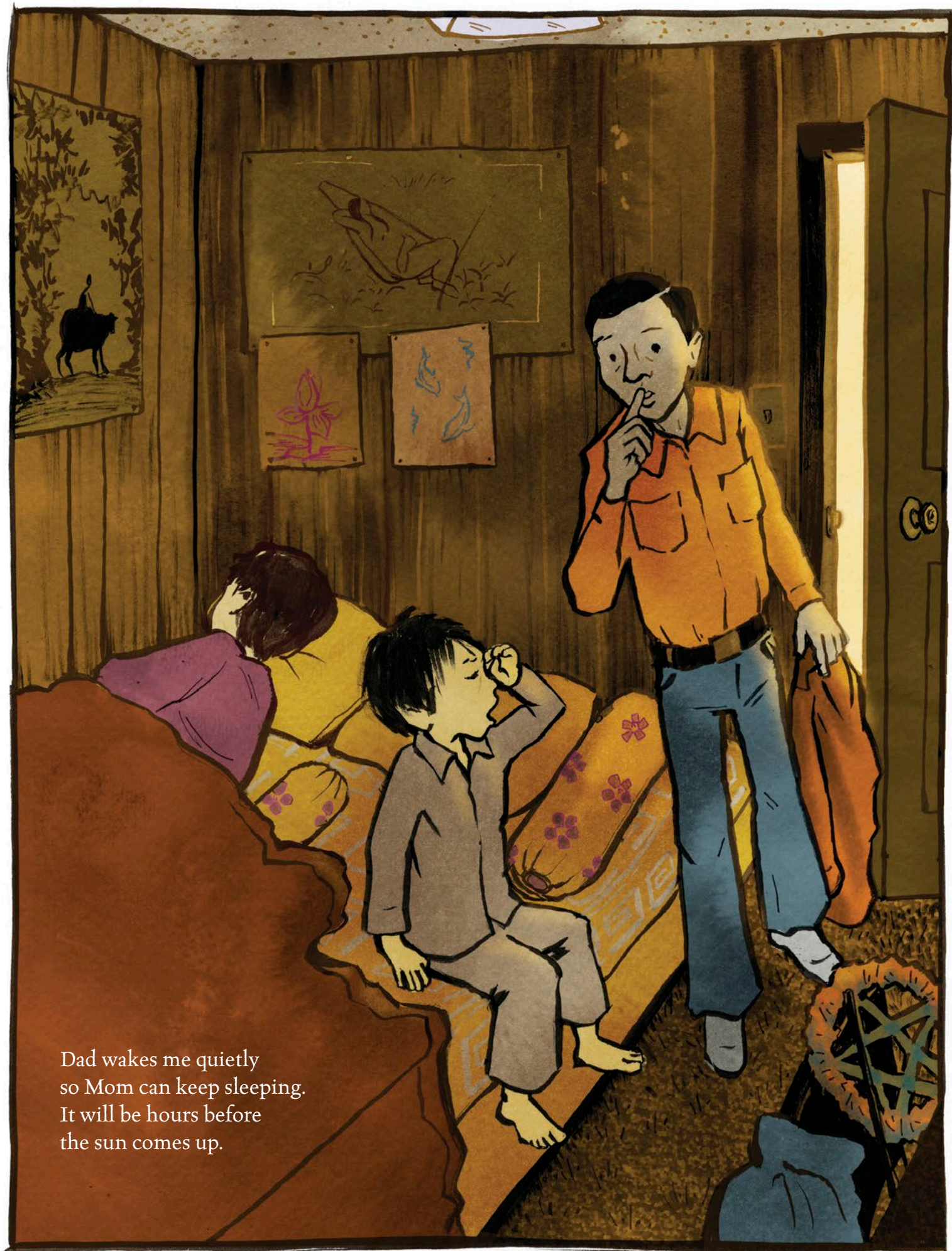
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PICTURE WINDOW BOOKS
a capstone imprint



For my family, and for refugees everywhere.
—B.P.

For the working class and all the young dudes.
—T.B.



Dad wakes me quietly
so Mom can keep sleeping.
It will be hours before
the sun comes up.



In the kitchen the bare bulb is burning. Dad has been up for a while, making sandwiches and packing the car.



"Can I help?"
I ask.

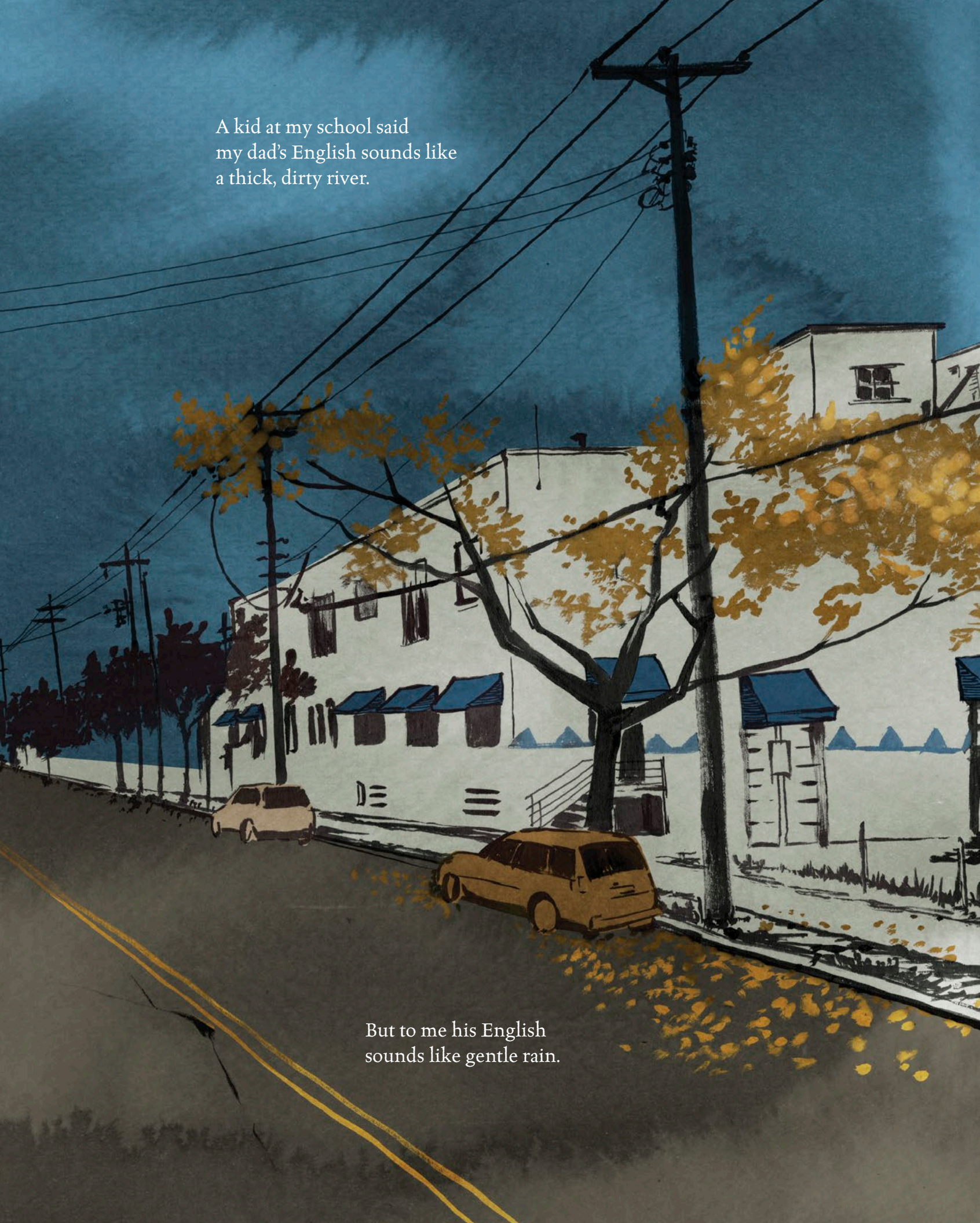
"Sure," my dad whispers
and hands me the tackle box.

The streetlights look brighter
and the roads aren't so busy
before the sun comes up.
Dad turns on the heater
and tells me stories.



A kid at my school said
my dad's English sounds like
a thick, dirty river.

But to me his English
sounds like gentle rain.





We stop at the bait
store on Lake Street.
It always seems
to be open.

"You're here early today,"
the bait man says.


"I got a second job," my dad
explains. "I have to work this
morning."

"On a Saturday?"
the bait man asks.

My dad nods.




I feel the bag of
minnows move.
They swim
like silver arrows
in my hands.

A stylized illustration of a car on a bridge at night. The car is a light blue color and is positioned on a bridge that spans a body of water. The bridge has a simple wooden railing. The background is a dark blue night sky with some white stars. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted trees and bushes. A sign is visible in the lower left corner, partially obscured by the foliage. The overall style is that of a children's book illustration, with a focus on color and simple shapes.

It's still dark when we get to the pond.
We park the car and climb over
the divider between
the road and the trees.

POSTED
NO TRESPASSING
KEEP OUT



My dad holds my hand and walks
ahead through the tangle and scrub.
“Step where I step,” he says.

I am thinking about what Dad told the
bait man. “If you got another job, why
do we still have to fish for food?” I ask.


“Everything in America costs a lot of
money,” he explains. I feel callouses
on his hand when he squeezes mine.

Sometimes a Hmong man is at the pond.
He speaks English like my dad and likes
to tell funny jokes.



Sometimes there is a black man there, too.
He shows me his colorful lure collection.



An illustration of a man and a young boy fishing at night. The man, wearing a brown jacket and blue pants, holds a fishing rod. The boy, wearing a blue jacket and striped pants, stands next to him. They are on a sandy bank with a white bucket and a yellow lantern nearby. The background features dark foliage and a deep blue sky filled with numerous white stars. The water in the foreground is dark blue with some reflections.

This time it is just
me and my dad.

It is a little bit cold. I rub my hands together,
yawn, and look up to see faint stars like freckles.

As Dad sets up in a clearing,
I gather small, thin twigs for a fire.
They need to be dry and clean.



I count
one,
two,
three,
four,
five,
six,
seven,
eight,
nine,
ten,
and then ten more
for later.



I put some rocks in a circle
and set up the twigs.
"Like a volcano,"
Dad reminds me.

I set one end of each twig down,
the other up, leaning them in
so they rest against each other
and hold each other up.



I get it to light
with just one match.
Dad nods.




"You want to put a minnow
on the hook?" Dad asks.



I want to help, but I shake my head no.
I don't want to hurt that little fish,
even if I know it's about to be eaten
by a bigger one.




An illustration of a man and a young boy fishing by a river at night. The man, wearing a brown jacket and light blue trousers, stands with his hand on the boy's shoulder. The boy, in a blue jacket and brown pants, holds a fishing rod. They are on a sandy bank next to a large, dark tree. In the background, a city skyline is visible across the water under a dark blue sky with a full moon. A bridge with a brown railing is in the foreground.

My dad smiles.
He isn't upset with me.

Dad hands me a sandwich, cold bologna
between two pieces of bread.
“Careful of the spicy stuff,” he says.
There’s half a peppercorn,
like a moon split in two,
studded into the meat.







"I used to fish by a pond like this
one when I was a boy in Vietnam,"
Dad says, biting into his sandwich.

"With your brother?" I ask.
He nods, then looks away.

Dad tells me about the
war, but only sometimes.
He and his brother fought
side by side. One day, his
brother didn't come home.

An illustration of a man and a young boy fishing at night. The man, wearing a brown jacket and blue pants, is pulling on a fishing rod. The boy, wearing a blue jacket and dark pants, stands next to him. They are on a sandy bank next to a dark blue pond. A fishing bobber is visible in the water. In the background, there are dark trees and bushes. A small fire or light source is visible on the bank. The sky is dark and cloudy.

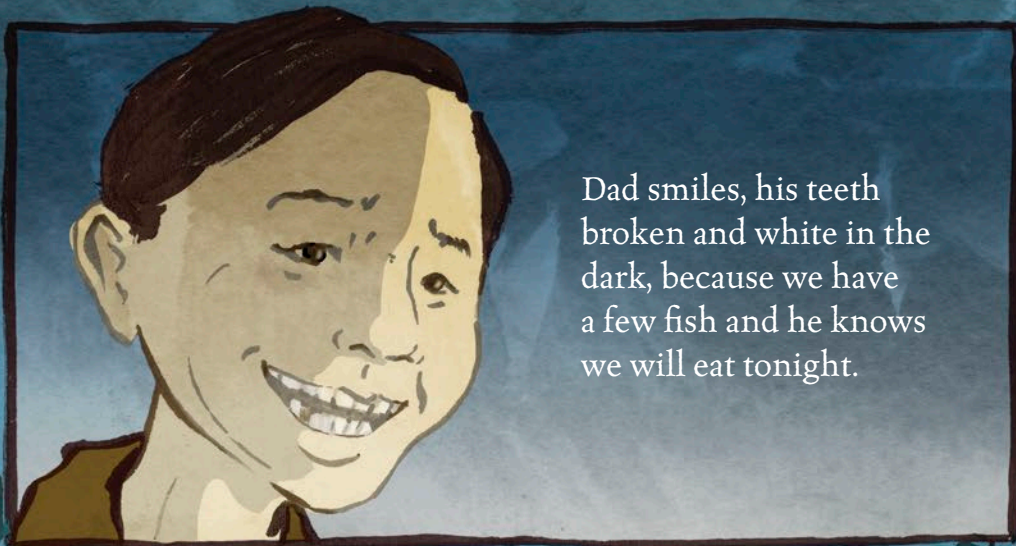
The bobber dips in the dark and Dad pulls.
"Got one!" he says, almost shouting.

A close-up illustration of a young boy with dark hair, wearing a blue jacket, pointing his right index finger towards the pond. The background is a dark, textured blue, suggesting the water or a night sky.

A crappie!
And soon another.
"Can I help?" I ask.

He nods and I use two hands to help guide the fish into the bucket. The fish feels slimy and rough at the same time. Dad laughs at the funny face I make.





Dad smiles, his teeth
broken and white in the
dark, because we have
a few fish and he knows
we will eat tonight.

Time to go home. Dad must get ready
for work. He washes his hands with
a small nub of green and white soap.
Then I do the same.





I look at the trees as we walk back to the car. I wonder what the trees look like at that other pond, in the country my dad comes from.



By the time we get home, the sunlight
coming through the windows is just
a faint tint, blue and gray instead of gold.

At home Mom looks tired, but she smiles
at the fish in the big white bucket.



My dad changes his
clothes and gets ready
to go to work.



He pats me on the back and says to Mom,
"Our boy did a good job with the fire today."

"You learn so quickly!" Mom says.
Then she asks me to help with the fish
before she has to go to work, too.



I'm sad that she and Dad must leave, but not too sad. I know that later on they will both come home.

"Look after your baby brother," Mom reminds my brothers and sisters. She means me. Then she gets on her bike and goes to work.

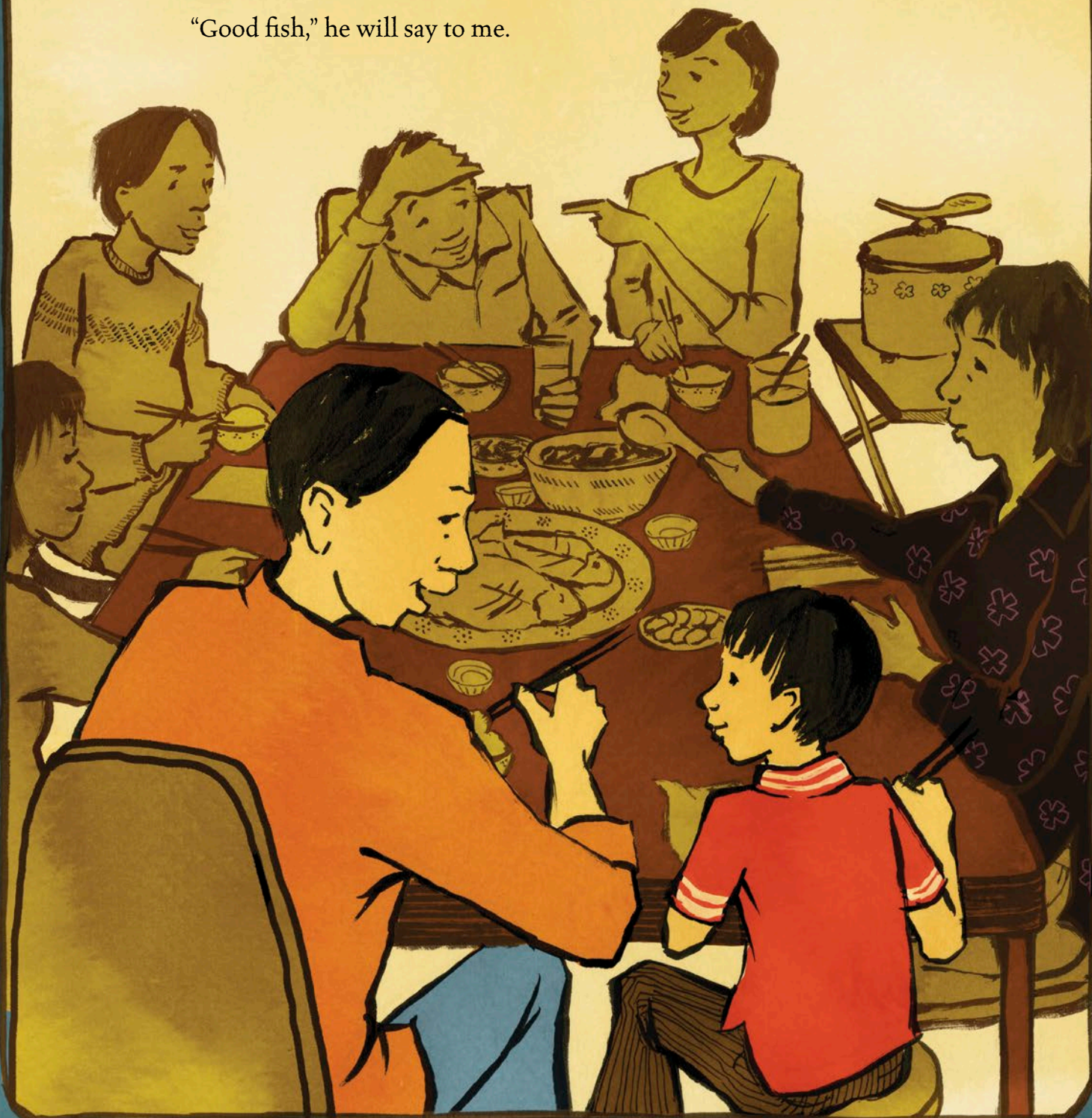



I am not a baby, I think to myself.
I helped catch dinner.

Tonight, when we are all home, Dad will put rice in the cooker,
and Mom will fry the fish on both sides until they are crispy.
I will bring out the jar of fish sauce that has flecks of
chili pepper and carrots floating on top.

At the table, my brothers and sisters will tell funny stories.
Mom will ask about their homework. Dad will nod and smile
and eat with his eyes half closed.

"Good fish," he will say to me.



A child with dark hair is sleeping peacefully on a yellow pillow and blanket. Above the child, a pond is visible with several fish swimming. The water is dark blue, and the background shows stylized trees and foliage in shades of blue and green. The overall scene is dreamlike and serene.

And I will smile and nod,
and later, when we sleep,
we will dream of fish
in faraway ponds.



photo credit: Anna Min

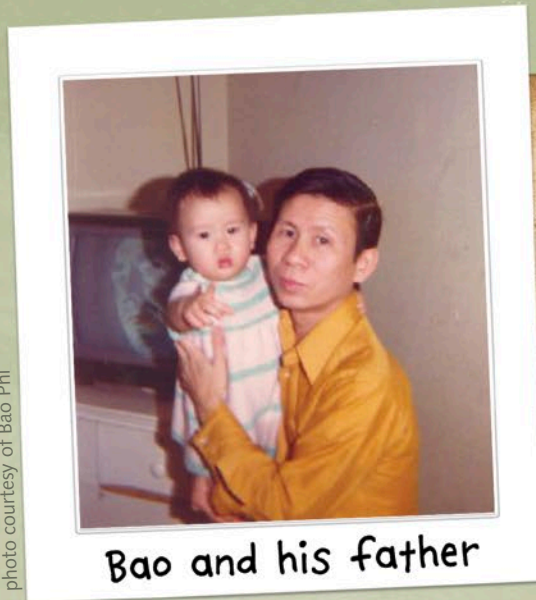


photo courtesy of Bao Phi

Bao Phi was born in Vietnam and raised in the Phillips neighborhood of South Minneapolis. He is an author, a poet, a community organizer, and a father.

Note from Bao Phi

My family came to Minnesota from Vietnam as refugees from war in 1975. I was just a baby when we fled, the youngest of six. My father was a soldier, but not a high-ranking officer, and my mom had worked at the snack shop at a school in Saigon. We lived in the Phillips neighborhood of South Minneapolis, and we didn't have much of anything. Both my parents worked multiple jobs to survive and support us in a country whose people did not understand why we were here at best, and blamed us for the aftermath of the war at worst. My father would sometimes take us fishing

with him, before the sun came up — but for food, not for sport. I was much less appreciative of this experience than the little boy in this story, but now that I am a father myself, I wanted to honor the struggle of my parents. I also want to acknowledge that they sometimes told me difficult stories about the war and where we came from, including death and violence. My parents shared these stories with me, not to scare or harm me, but because these traumas were a part of our lives, and they wanted me to understand. I pass along a version of our story with those same intentions.

photo credit: Gabe Clark



Note from Thi Bui

I must have read *In the Night Kitchen*, the picture book classic by Maurice Sendak, to my son hundreds of times. I always loved the detailed renderings of the kitchen knick-knacks, but it wasn't until illustrating this book that I REALLY saw them. I learned that Sendak collected memorabilia that reminded him of his childhood, and filled his illustrations with them. It made me feel a little sad that I don't have much memorabilia to collect from my childhood. But looking around on the internet, I've found that there ARE others who remember the same odd details that mark an Asian American, and more specifically Vietnamese American, immigrant household. The cookie tin that might contain Danish butter cookies, or Mom's sewing needles and thread. The

photo courtesy of Thi Bui



Thi and her brother

Thi Bui was born in Vietnam and grew up in California and New York. Now all these places are a part of her. She draws and writes and teaches. Her graphic novel, *The Best We Could Do* (Abrams, 2017), is about her mother and father.

free calendar from the Asian grocery store. The gối ôm, or hugging pillow, that my mom sewed for our beds. None of these things exactly represents my Vietnamese heritage; it's more that they add up to hold something of what it was like to be me, and alive, in a specific time and place. I would have liked to put more of these objects in my illustrations, but the irony is that not having a lot of money meant not having a lot of possessions. So the empty spaces hold meaning, too. I want to thank Bao for sharing his treasured photographs and memories of childhood, and for trusting me with them. I hope that we've managed to capture the little slice of life that we experienced, and mirror some of what our readers might have lived.

photos courtesy of Bao Phi

Acknowledgements

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—Bao Phi

