

KHMOURG NAKRY: A GHOST'S STORY

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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Submitted to the Undergraduate Research Scholars program at
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by Research Advisor:

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May 2020

Major: Visualization

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	1
DEDICATION.....	3
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
SECTION	
I. RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT	5
Familial Background.....	5
Project Content Description.....	6
Intentional Empathy.....	6
II. LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES	10
Postmemory and Oral History	10
Political Context and Scholar Denial.....	11
Khmer Rouge and the Labor Camps.....	14
Spiritual Beliefs	18
III. EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE.....	20
IV. REFLECTION	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	24
CREATIVE ARTIFACT	26
Story.....	26
Plot.....	34

ABSTRACT

Khmourg Nakry: A Ghost's Story

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This creative thesis takes the form of a short story and accompanying expanded plotline. The analysis and creative artifact study a self-described lack of understanding about half of my ethnic culture. This is within the context of my own identity as a half-anglo American daughter of a Cambodian refugee. The intentional craft of empathy as it pertains to creative writing is forefront in my methodology. The story, inspired by true events told by my own mother, follows the accounts of a khmourg (ghost) with an attachment to a family in a Cambodian labor camp in the 1970s under the communist Khmer Rouge regime. By writing from three perspectives—the ghost, the girl who woke her up, and the girl's American-Cambodian daughter decades in future—research in the context of artistic creation asks to what extent does storytelling shape perceptions of traumatic historical events, specifically in following generations who struggle to identify themselves with a past they inherited but didn't experience except in postmemory. While slightly disconnected from my family history by the intended fantastical elements, this study and accompanying artifacts are an in-depth look into my own understandings of cultural empathy. My family histories, complete with first-hand accounts from those very close to me, are the foundation for my study of postmemory within the context of the Khmer Rouge Genocide. I'm

not generalizing the community as a whole. I'm making personal observations based in the oral history of one family and my own psychological standpoint as I try to study the development of my own empathy.

DEDICATION

This work in its entirety is dedicated to my mother, Bopha Chan Hough; my grandmother, Thim Thach; and my mother's siblings who went through the horror with her:

Uncle Titia, Meng Navy, and Meng Tari.

I especially dedicate this to Meng Tari who I never got to meet.

I also want to thank the unnamed men and women who left life-changing moments with my family on multiple occasions:

The farmer and his wife who told my mom to give them her kettle, which they filled with cooked rice and fish.

The old man, a soldier from the old regime, who showed my mom, Titia, and Navy how to look for landmines.

The royal lady (a duchess) my mother met in a refugee camp and later named me after.

And many others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my advisor, Dr. Lowell Mick White, for his guidance and patience throughout this project. This thesis would not have happened without his encouragement to push through my setbacks and be proud of what I have accomplished. I am so glad I decided to take that first Creative Writing course years ago.

I also thank all the cohorts of the 2019 Aggie Creative Collective (Kyrie Garlic, John Heselton, Zoe Sherman, Amy Guzman, Hannah McNease, Katie Pattison, and Rae Sequin). This couldn't have happened without them and their support. I wish them all the best on their future projects.

Thank you everyone on the LAUNCH team for running the logistics of this opportunity.

There is a special thanks addressed to my dad, for being the voice of reason when my brain occasionally panicked.

SECTION I

RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

“I had another dream. My daughter was with me. I’m sure it was my daughter. But not you or [your sister]. We were running. From shadows. And the shadows chased us like ghosts.”

-My Mother, *early one morning to one of her only two daughters*

Familial Background

My mother and her family lived in Phnom Penh, Cambodia in a traditional wooden house on stilts raised high enough for an elephant to walk under. Houses in Cambodian rural and suburban areas were commonly built this way to avoid flooding, much like beachfront properties along the United States’ coastlines. In 1973, her family moved to a military compound in Battambang where my grandmother was a guard with nurse duties. My mother, Bopha, had just turned twelve when Khmer Rouge soldiers under the command of a man who changed his name from Soloth Sar to Pol Pot overtook Phnom Penh in 1975 after the end of a five-year civil war.

The soldiers, commonly called *yothea*, killed anyone they suspected of being the Enemy, which included all educated people, monks, and people who worked for the previous government. Glasses—a sign of education and wealth—were a death sentence.

My grandparents both worked for the government and were separated. Mentioned before, Grandma was a guard with nurse duties in a Battambang prison, and Grandpa was an investigator in Siem Reap for the Cambodia version of the CIA. The Khmer Rouge killed my grandfather when they took Siem Reap in 1975. Meanwhile, where my grandmother worked, the soldiers released Khmer Rouge prisoners of war and murdered the staff. My grandmother and her four children were almost murdered that day. But my grandma was kind in her work and had treated

her patients as human beings, and they let her go even as they killed the other nurses and guards. Later she would have to play dumb and teach her children how to lie and do the same.

Over the next several years, my mother saw Khmer Rouge murder, rape, and reduce her fellow human-beings to abused animals too terrified to do anything while loved ones died before their eyes. She walked by the mass graves filled with men, women, and little children. She lost her childhood and much more to obscene violence, greed, and evil. More than forty-five years later, I am attempting to piece together an incomplete understanding of my mother's life. I'm studying her oral history and my family's post-memory while using fiction to explore an intentional craft of empathy and how it pertains to traumatic historical events.

Project Content Description

This project will explore the culture of Cambodia and the attempted destruction and perversion of it during this period while asking to what extent fiction and storytelling can influence empathy between generations in the context of parent-child relationships. I make no effort to generalize all Cambodian survivor families or anyone who may find correlations with details I write, fictional or otherwise. However, I mean to create observational commentary based on my personal experience, which can then lend an emotional context to the history of Cambodia and its people. I emphasize the spiritual beliefs of the Khmer people. Old folktales, ancestral spirits, ghosts, demons. All will have a part, simultaneously distant from the horrors and yet immediate witnesses. By using folklore and the supernatural, I wish to utilize fantastical elements to study empathetic commentary as a craft.

Intentional Empathy

What makes a historical fiction wrapped in a context of so much trauma still appealing? I argue that there are some books and movies that an audience may only want to experience once

because the emotional message is so heavy it drains the psyche. I didn't get a chance to read the book, but *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, for example, had such a tragic ending I don't want to watch the movie again. But that's all right. The message was there, and the horror of the Holocaust was portrayed in a way that devastated the emotions into driving home the trauma of something very real that humanity suffered by its own hand.

Then of course, some people *must* tell stories of strength and survival because there is no other choice but to refuse to let death hang over them. The tragedy is still too close. My grandmother, my aunts and uncle, and my mother are all still very much alive and remembering the horrors they went through. Many people died in Cambodia, and it's always a little shock when I tell someone that my mother was in a concentration camp. They are usually confused for a few seconds before I clarify, but I got their attention. There is more context for a "concentration camp" in Western society than a communal working village. Those two words immediately bring up ideas of genocide and Hitler. People very quickly understand the negative context when I'm talking about my mother's trauma. The details are different. The politics and intent of the governments were initially different. But in the end, people still died, and the terror is relatable enough that the context can be used to help tell a story. Not many people in the United States even know about what happened to Cambodia, but more people know about the Holocaust.

However, consumption of historical fiction and oral history, even with a previous context to help, is still less immersive than producing it. I grew up hearing my mother's stories to the point that there were some aspects I took for granted because I had heard them so many times. I had become desensitized to some things. That realization prompted this project as a way to be intentional about how I understand and view my family and heritage. For example, while I did

know that most Americans didn't know about Cambodia and, if they did, usually lumped it in with their understanding of the Vietnam War, I was not aware of the denialist canon that surrounded academia specifically talking about the Khmer Rouge.

Writing historical fiction comes with its own set of risks. Unintentional revisionism. Misinterpretation of real events. Accidentally disrespecting the dead. This project made cultural research difficult because my mother has been in the United States longer than she was in Cambodia. She doesn't always remember the sort of details that can bring in just enough reality to make the fiction immersive. While writing the creative artifact, I had to take short cuts and use mannerisms and speech patterns that sounded more familiar to English speakers as if the narrator of the story was speaking English instead of Khmer. I had to take responsibility for the projected familiarity I was trying to cultivate with the intended audience. This was to reach the end goal of a showing the more profound truth looking at themes of family and motherhood within the story's surface-theme of survival.

From a psychological standpoint, it is a writer's job to hook the reader and make them care about the characters in a story. With traumatic historical fiction, there's an added pressure to balance painful realities with the love of a character. The plot may sell the story, but the audience stays for the character that they love and are willing to stick around for despite how uncomfortably painful the reality of the context may be. Readers want someone to empathize with. However, the writers are their own first test subjects. The process of fitting the pieces of two cultures together in a way that is meaningful to both cultures creates problems. These problems create opportunities to learn more about the culture the writer is less familiar with. Writing about another culture etches far deeper connections of empathy with a past and history than consuming the works of someone else does. However, the writer must be open to

corrections and comfortable in the fact they may very well get things wrong. The act of storytelling is by its nature an intentional and immersive emotional connection between the Teller, the Listener, and the Message. By taking on the active role of Teller, a story's Message is further cemented in memory and understanding than when only previously consumed by the passive role of Listener.

SECTION II

LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

“I had another dream. I don’t remember much of this one. We were in village and there was a tiger in the village somewhere. I was looking for someone, but I’m not sure who.”

-My Mother, *years ago*

Postmemory and Oral History

My mother and grandmother never kept a journal, least not one I’ve ever seen. They would not have been able to keep a journal during the occupation. Being able to write and read was forbidden and punishable by death. Thus, most of my sources are oral histories that have been pieced together over the years with other works and traditional research to patch anachronistic holes. “Context” is a word that may be used often as a reference to my goal to provide evidence and shed light on multiple angles of my mother’s life. While the creative artifact is fiction, at its base, it is a culmination of many true stories and experiences supported by historical fact.

Through the plot section of the creative artifact are author notes that denote which events are recounted nearly word-for-word from true-to-life stories my mother has told. The intent of this is to break possible conditioning of readers who, knowing the story itself is fiction, may discount certain events as unrealistic or exaggerated for drama and storytelling when the events actually happened. For example, while the perspective of a ghost may be wholly fictional, the story of my uncle sneaking out of the children’s compound and hiding in a pile of laundry is based on truth.

Political Context and Scholar Denial

Prior to 1979 and several years following Vietnam's invasion into Cambodia, the view of the Khmer Rouge by scholars was typically favorable, citing hope for a successful socialist society and further condemnation of U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia. In 1995, Sophal Ear wrote an undergraduate political science honors thesis titled *The Khmer Rouge Canon 1975-1979: The Standard Total Academic View on Cambodia*. In it, he studies the discourse of Western academics during the period of Khmer Rouge control (6). He analyzed the writing of many journalists, historians, and political science experts, who all had outside perspectives of the situation and had no way to see for themselves what exactly was going on within Cambodia's borders. Ear came to two main conclusions as to why academics were so skeptical of the atrocities claimed by the small number of refugees that had managed to escape during those four years and more importantly why the Western scholars were typically sympathetic to the Khmer Rouge. They saw themselves as enlightened revolutionists and were detached from the emotional human experience at the benefit of ideal theory. Ear critiques most of the academics he studied as those "who thought nothing strange of romanticizing peasants and revolutions from arms-length" (97). Ear's thesis brought to light a pattern of assumption and unintentional lack of effort by some scholars to empathize with the individual hardships of the Khmer people they claimed to support. They had romantic revolutionary ideas of what was going on behind closed borders and it wasn't until more refugees began to pour into Western countries carrying stories of brutality echoing the Holocaust that views began to shift. Individual stories had to pass through several iterations before the acceptance was wide enough that the consensus shifted. Even then, the distrust for anything the media reported was deeply rooted in polarizing

debates surrounding government lies, propaganda, and what constituted as necessary costs for the growth of a better society.

For some, the evidence that began to deconstruct their stance came in the form of corroborated accounts from many face-to-face interviews. The narrative began to be injected with more real heartbreak and less idealized theory. Human names and faces appeared alongside the claims of torture and starvation and redistribution of property.

Dr. Ben Kiernan, Director of Genocide Studies at Yale University, wrote many books dedicated to the politics and upper scale events surrounding the Khmer Rouge and Democratic Kampuchea era. Initially, he was a defender of Khmer Rouge idealism, but in 1978 after interviewing more than 500 refugees and former Khmer Rouge members, he reversed his stance. Ear even quotes something Kiernan wrote in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*.

I was wrong about ... the brutal authoritarian trend within the revolutionary movement after 1973 was not simply a grass-roots reaction, and expression of popular outrage at the killing and destruction of the countryside by U.S. bombs, although that helped it along decisively. There can be no doubting that the evidence also points clearly to a systematic use of violence against the population by that chauvinist section of the revolutionary movement that was led by Pol Pot. In my opinion this violence was employed in the service of a nationalist revivalism that had little concern for the living conditions of the Khmer people, or the humanitarian socialist ideals that had inspired the broader Kampuchean revolutionary movement. [Emphasis added.] (Kiernan 19).

This declaration was a major change from 1977 when Kiernan and his wife, among others, published in *News from Kampuchea*, a newsletter which goal evolved from keeping Cambodian

immigrants in Australia appraised of current events in Cambodia to “[refuting] the imperialist media” (Ear 95).

The evidence that changed Kiernan’s mind came from a multitude of stories that said the same thing repeatedly. Pain and cruelty. Nothing says Kiernan did not sympathize with refugees as human beings. But within his writings, evidence had to come from first-hand accounts with stories that matched with human voices and the emotion behind them. When attached to a death toll, a number like three million is still a number, as chilling as it is. But the empathy comes from personal, emotionally charged stories like hearing a woman talk in grim detail about her little sister starving to death. Or similarly, a man’s story about his wife and young son’s brutal murder in front of his very eyes. The latter is Chileng Pa’s story.

In 2008 anthropologist Carol Mortland helped Chileng Pa get his story down in English words. Chileng Pa did most of the work while he was in jail after being convicted of fraud by the U.S. Government. The government suspected Cambodian refugees of exaggerating their persecution in order to receive federal benefits (Pa 247). Pa refused to take a plea bargain as he was sure he was innocent and had not intentionally defrauded anyone. He was subsequently found guilty of 16 counts of mail fraud (248). When I told my mother about this story after reading Pa’s book, she was angry at the implication of denialist policies on the U.S. Government’s part. She had dealt with racism ever since she immigrated as a refugee when she was eighteen and it was a disheartening reminder that her troubles and the troubles of other refugees didn’t stop when she escaped Cambodia.

In Cambodian culture, it isn’t acceptable to express too much displeasure or complain too much to another person. Both situations run the risk of a person “losing their face” or causing another person to lose theirs. “Losing face” meant the loss of reputation and honor. Telling her

story to strangers or showing weakness while she struggled through American high school to prove she wasn't stupid might have been too much for my mother. She dealt with the racism and told her story to close friends, but the pain was too fresh to write down at the time. When she applied to nursing school, the admissions counselor of a Midwest state university told my mother that she needed to apply to a vocational school and possibly work in a factory with her mother because college was "too much" for her. The counselor implied my mother wasn't smart enough to be a nurse. Mom wanted to say some rude things. Instead, she went ahead and got a nursing degree, likely from a *different* university. She worked hard despite other people making assumptions of her ability. After I told her about Chileng Pa, she was understandably upset to hear that the country that saved her life and gave her the chance to fight for herself didn't believe all the pain she and her people had gone through.

Khmer Rouge and the Labor Camps

Interviews with my mother are long, and often I try not to interrupt. I just let her talk. It has been over forty years since the events she describes. Even she admits that her memory isn't perfect. Between 1975 and 1981, the years blend. Time was impossible to keep. Her months deteriorated as every day ticked by the same as the last. Only the seasons switching between dry and monsoon were the markers. Still, many moments stick with her, even if the order of events blurred. She remembers her mother coming home that first day and uprooting the family. This was April 17th, four days after the Khmer New Year. The same day, the Khmer Rouge told the citizens by megaphones and trucks to evacuate because the United States was going to bomb the city. This was a lie and a tactic to decentralize ethnic groups and make it difficult for any dissidents to organize (Kiernan 64). However, it was believable *enough*. Over the previous five years, the U.S. had been bombing the Cambodian countryside to destabilize the supply runs of

North Vietnam into South Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge executed citizens who refused, labeling them as the enemy or government workers who were misleading the other citizens. Many of these soldiers were young teens from farmer families. Many suffered from the U.S. bombing campaign directly. It was easy for them to decide to join the Khmer Rouge. My mother, along with everyone else, was told they would be returning in three days when it was safe.

The Khmer Rouge announced to the evacuees that everyone who used to be a government worker in any form were required to identify themselves and/or register at local villages when they arrived. My grandmother, who is still alive today, used to be a guard at a prison in Battambang. If the Khmer Rouge found out after that first day, they would have killed her. My grandmother initially misunderstood the order or the expectation to report herself. She walked herself and her four children for several days and nights with the rest of the ordinary citizens. They arrived in a remote village at the base of a mountain and set up camp. By then, my grandmother had an idea that having the government workers identify themselves was a trick. The Khmer Rouge separated government personnel and soldiers (that were not killed that first day) by rank and sent them away for “re-education.” Most of these people were executed or tortured in makeshift prisons. At her most basic concern, Grandma didn’t want to leave her children so didn’t report to the local village leaders. They were city refugees for six months when food started to run out. Grandma traded gold and cloth she had in exchange for food from farmers who lived in the village, many of whom worked for the Khmer Rouge. She could get away with it then.

I have been unable to pinpoint the location geographically, but my mother flags her memories of the different places her family were moved by using mountains. For example, its official name may be different, but the half-year or so in that remote village was near a mountain

in the Battambang rural province called Crocodile Mountain or Phnom Krapeu (phnom=mountain, krapue=crocodile). She recalled that there were a lot of Khmer Rouge that were hidden up in the mountain and that they would take people up there that never returned. When living conditions severely deteriorate, my grandmother asked one of the Khmer Rouge leaders for help and work so her children wouldn't starve. She told them that she used to be a vegetable vendor. She said she was not a soldier or worked for any type of the previous government. The leader believed her and sent her and the four children to a town/phoum called Dohn Tear. There the work was in a factory making burlap rice sacks. Food became scarcer as the rules and cruelty increased. They were there for a year or so when a large group, my mother and her family included, were transferred to another village near Grandfather Mountain or Phnom Ta Pday. That village was far more like a concentration camp. There was backbreaking work in the rice patties from early morning to late at night. Rest was precious, and many people were sick.

The Khmer Rouge separated children 5-16 years of age from parents. "Angkar will take care of your children," they said. Children were re-educated in "schools" and taught that Angkar was their true parent. They were supposed to report the disloyalty of their real parents to the government. Many were trained as soldiers. The Khmer Rouge systematically used the children to destroy the love and trust within a family that was the basis of most of Khmer culture. My mother's family didn't see each other all the time. My Uncle Titia regularly escaped from the "The Children Center" because he missed his mom. He was always beat when caught. This happened on more than one occasion. Titia was a stubborn nine-year-old even when threatened with death. Around then was when my mother's little sister died from starvation. Tari was so malnourished that she suffered from rectum prolapse. My grandmother often had to put Tari's

intestines back in place after Tari stood up from sitting. I normally wouldn't include this description, but it is a shockingly clear memory for my mother, and I don't wish to sanitize details or events she feels strongly about.

“She had been very sick a long time. Sleep was always difficult. Probably because of where we had to build the shack where we slept. I was told it was built over the old village graveyard. One morning [your] grandma whispered to her ‘Tari, my darling girl...’” Around here, my mother's description always starts to lose coherency, and she stops. But I know what happened next. I've rarely seen my mother cry, and in my recent memory it has only been when she talks about her sister's death.

Tari was five years old when she died. Bopha, my mother, didn't go into details of the burial and in the context of this undergraduate thesis, I felt it wasn't ethical to press for details given the fast-paced nature of our interviews. However, she was never shy about detailing the physical atrocities she saw. As mentioned above, my mother described in detail the ailments Tari went through as her little body turned on itself, attempting to keep her alive.

My grandmother, Thim, spent many days sacrificing her ration of food so she could stay with her youngest and keep her clean. This left Bopha, her other little sister (Navy), and her little brother (Titia) to share their rations, which were barely enough for one person as it was. Storing food or eating anything other than what they were given was strictly prohibited. My mother also described a grove of trees close to the camp where she knew the Khmer Rouge like to shoot people who were caught breaking the rules, like hiding food. The government's philosophy said that it was better a possible innocent die than to let a traitor live accidentally. There was a pile of bodies always rotting under the trees. Everyone had to pretend like it didn't exist. Sometimes Bopha had to walk by and hold her breath because the winds shifted, and the smell would sweep

along the path. She tells me these things, but silently draws the line talking about what happened to Tari after she died.

These days my mother goes through periods where she obsessively watches World War II documentaries, particularly if they focus on the Holocaust and Hitler. She often compares many of the ideologies and experiences portrayed as those she suffered through. It's a bizarre feeling to be watching a movie like Angelina Jolie's film adaptation of *First the Killed my Father* and hear my mother make chilling comments with absolute certainty about what the main character is going through. She watches these to understand how human beings can treat each other like animals. There are not nearly as many documentaries about the Khmer Rouge as there are about the Nazis, but my mother's desire to understand what happened to her scratches for anything related.

Spiritual Beliefs

My mother doesn't necessarily believe in souls of the dead staying behind. But she does have several clear stories of ghost encounters that happened during the war. She's more of the belief that these were demons or spirits that were never human to begin with. She disturbed a ghost pulling up a thorn bush over its grave. A man by a river was heard, but he didn't really exist. Spirits were upset by the shacks built over a graveyard. However, during the Khmer Rouge's regime, organized spiritual beliefs were disbanded and made illegal. One of Pol Pot's eight points he made for his plan during an assembly in 1975 was to "defrock all Buddhist monks and put them to work growing rice" (Kiernan 55). There was no place for loyalty or faith put in any other establishment but the "Organization," as the children were continually taught. There was no loyalty allowed for parents, ancestors, traditions, or religion. Nothing could be

more powerful than Angkar. Many monks were executed. With the destruction of schools, libraries, and history, it has been a struggle over the years to regain the knowledge lost.

Most of the population before the Khmer Rouge took over were Buddhist, and that's about the same today as culture continues to recover. However, regardless of most people's main belief—usually Buddhism, Catholicism, or Islam—there are many additional beliefs in ancestral spirits and deities that can affect everyday life, especially in rural areas. It's not uncommon to expect children who have lost parents to offer respects to shrines. They do this at the warning of their parents and ancestor spirits bringing them misfortune. Some believe spirits are tied to sections of forest, specific villages, or even rivers. To anger them is sometimes to risk one's life and health.

SECTION III

EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT/VENUE

My research was presented twice. The first time was during the LAUNCH Undergraduate Research Summer Poster Session on July 31, 2019 at Texas A&M University. I include this presentation even if it wasn't conducted during the official work-months of my thesis between September 2019 and April 2020 because what I learned from the event contributes to my experience in this program. The second—and requirement filling—presentation was a dramatic reading for the Texas A&M University English Department on November 13, 2019, arranged by Dr. Lowell Mick White to showcase the current work of several students while offering a chance for faculty and peers in the audience to ask questions.

SECTION IV

REFLECTION

The Aggie Creative Collective has probably been one of the best experiences of my university career. Working on a project that took the better part of a year from start to finish shifted my perspective of what learning should look like, both in terms of outlook and outcome. Choosing a subject matter that was very important to me was an integral part of relearning how to learn.

For the poster session, I clearly didn't know what I was doing. I adopted a poster idea that another researcher experimented with as an innovative design. The intent was to quickly give the passerby all the information they needed to decide if they wanted to stop and learn more about the subject, while at the same time being detailed enough in content that the presenter could easily showcase their evidence. The poster included a large "quick glance" area that was designed to explain what the project was about in three seconds. It had two sidebars with small text and facts that I could look at to aid in my presentation. A QR code at the bottom was supposed to send people who wanted more information to a website post I made for the poster session. It certainly looked unique, but I was not aware I was expected to use Texas A&M University and LAUNCH branding. I do think the design I chose was useful if it was properly executed, but the colors for the backgrounds I chose were too distracting. My entire poster gave off an unprofessional air. In any future poster sessions, I want to improve my use of the same design principles, but with more thought put into appeal and acceptance by those who expect a more traditional format.

During my reading in November, I was very nervous about the state of my thesis and I didn't have as much time to practice as I liked. I was also very exhausted that day and I noticed how my voice was not as smooth as when I presented during the summer at the end of the Aggie Creative Collective program. However, I performed some new material for the creative artifact and was pleased with the feedback I received. The questions were insightful, and several gave me new ideas for how to approach voice in my pursuit of crafting empathy from readers.

For example, one audience member asked how I handled language in my story. I explained the intentional use of not italicizing Khmer words, speckling them in the dialogue of characters to reject a psychological "othering" while presenting the two languages as equally as my abilities allowed. The questions also gave me the idea of purposely using incorrect English grammar in the character's voices. The ghost/khmourg's native language is Khmer and she, Nakry, is the narrator. However, Nakry can speak some English. While the story is written as if being told by a native English speaker for the sake of relatability with the target audience, some grammar mistakes are used to illustrate the character's "true" difficulty with English. I've noticed that my mother often forgets to use articles in her speech, especially when she's stressed or recounting something. Khmer, and most Southeast Asia languages, don't have articles, like "the" and "a/an." I've occasional left these articles out of a sentence even at the cost of being grammatically incorrect.

On a day to day basis I was not prepared for the kind of second-hand trauma I was facing. I am *very* aware of my mother's life, but every day the subject is broached I learn something new. A name slides into place. Geography settles. Months and years slot into each other and the progression of events make just a little more sense. But it was a struggle to read memoirs and watch movies based in the same settings my mother described because every time something

awful happened, I couldn't help but put my mother in their place. It was hard, mentality and emotionally, to negotiate. And yet, despite the emotional tax, I don't feel discouraged from taking this research further or starting another equally or more challenging project and learning from my mistakes.

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CREATIVE ARTIFACT

Story

The forest was noisy in its own way. Birds called. Rats ran through the brush. I swear I heard larger animals shifting through the leaves in the distance. But I hope they sensed me and were frightened enough that they would stay away. Even snakes basking on logs and half-asleep turned away from my presence.

Better the rustle of leaves than voices of men.

He had been quiet for a few hours, so when Rasmey spoke I startled and glanced down at the little boy. I cast him a single look over before I lifted my eyes to scan the jungle in our path again. I hadn't even heard what he said. I fiddled with a checkered scarf around my neck, but I wasn't uncomfortable in the suffocating heat. I wasn't anything, to be honest. I wasn't hot or cold or in pain or relaxed. Rasmey was a different story, I knew. I was almost afraid to ask how he felt.

"Bong Nakry?" he asked again, tugging my sleeve.

The sensation of anything physical was always surprising and I slapped his hand away, pointedly ignoring the "big sister" title.

"What," I said a little snappishly before I forced myself to try again. "Ah...what, oun?" The endearing name slipped out and I winced at how automatic it was. I was deep in this lie.

The little boy looked at me pleadingly, trying his best to put on a straight face so not to embarrass himself. The thin gold bracelet on his too-small wrist flashed when the sun peeked through the thick foliage. He was holding the bangle in place with his free hand as we walked.

His little face had twisted in determination the moment I gave it to him “for safekeeping.” He was so serious about taking care of it for me. He promised not to lose it. Good thing, as it would mean certain death for him if he did. We’d both be stuck in the middle of the jungle searching the underbrush for it until a tiger ate him. It wasn’t like I could just tell him to head west and wish him the best either. Whatever the case, I would prefer not to be trapped alone in the forest, stuck to the only piece of jewelry I was buried with.

“Will Meir be angry with me for running away from the school again?” Rasmey said, quietly. His mother had been angry at him the last time he left the “school” compound to see her, Mliss, and Chantrea. His mother, Sothy, scolded him and said the soldiers would have shot him if they thought to check the pile of clothes she hid him under. He hadn’t meant to make his mother and sisters cry, I knew that. He missed them so much.

I tried not to think about it.

He thought it wasn’t fair that people with guns wouldn’t let him stay with his family.

This little boy’s idea of fairness was so naïve I didn’t like to think about it either.

And yet, he ran away from his compound again. But Chantrea was sick and Rasmey worried.

I suspected he didn’t understand what he was risking seeing his dying sister. The next time he ran away from his compound, I caught him before he could even step inside the shack to see them sleeping. I had told him they were moved to another village without his knowledge. I promised to take him there, so that’s where he thought we were going.

He barely complained about the discomfort, and we had been walking since it was dark. His malnourished body pulled the childish roundness away from his face as sweat hung from the

tip of his nose and his small lungs worked their hardest. The black baggy clothes clung to his body, soaked in sweat and the slight rain we had that morning.

And he talked.

He hoped they didn't have a school in the new village. He even asked me if there was more food in the new village too.

I lied, even though I knew all the villages, these *prisons*, were as bad as the next. The only ones who ate well were the yothea. They sat around smoking, laughing with their guns propped up near them. They mocked everyone else. Sometimes they threw scraps at people.

“Will Meir be angry?” Rasmey asked again.

“She'll be happy to see you,” I said, the lie pulling at something in my chest.

But it got a smile from Rasmey. “Will we be at the new village soon, Mit Neary?”

I cringed. As uncomfortable as it was, I would rather he call me his big sister than “comrade” or whatever the translation was. He probably thought he was in trouble for saying “bong” after I slapped his hand. “No. You don't call me Mit Neary. You only call girls your age that if they're friends”

“Can I still say Bong? Even if you aren't my sister?”

I hesitated. He was never going to see his elder sisters again. How could I refuse? He got a short nod as a response.

Not for the first time, I questioned if this was the right thing to do. Without Rasmey accidentally talking about aeroplanes and other things that would get them killed, his family had a better chance of survival.

As did he.

I would find a nice family in Thailand who wouldn't protest an orphan showing up on their doorstep without a word of Thai on his tongue and half dead from overwork and starvation. They would take him in and love him and hopefully Rasmey would forget the hell he lived.

"Bong."

"Eh? What? What is it *now*?" I said.

"I'm so tired. Can we please rest?" the little boy said.

I opened my mouth to snap a "no" at him.

He looked at the ground with his sunken eyes and gaunt face, refusing to look up at me out of respect. Or was it fear? He had been beaten within an inch of his life by a soldier. He had seen people die. This little boy was afraid of *me*.

"We..." I hesitated.

Sun was high. Heat was steaming us with the moisture from the dirt.

"We'll stop once we find someplace. I promise."

Rasmey nodded and didn't complain for hours.

I halted at a weak shout as he tripped by following my steps. I didn't care where *I* walked. My feet passed through vines and thorns with no problem. I waited as he struggled.

"I'm sorry Rasmey. Just a little longer."

"I'm so tired, Bong Nakry. Can you carry me?"

"I can't. I really can't. You can do this, oun."

He shook his head, tears falling.

My eyes darted around, looking for anything that could help. Snails or bugs that I could force him to eat. Water on a leaf.

A grouping of moss covered stone caught my eye and I nearly cried out in glee.

“Oun, get up. Get up,” I said.

Rasmey must have heard the excitement in my voice being he looked at me in confusion.

“Come on.” I reached out my hand and he tried to grasp it. It passed through a few times, until I managed to concentrate enough that I could claw out a hold between my misty hand and his made of flesh and bone.

I dragged him through the brush to the steps of the wat.

Once upon a time, the land around was a village. This spot in the jungle, hundreds of years ago, was the home of religious ceremony and prayers.

The wat was no longer the gloried Hindu temple it used to be. The forest was slowly claiming the stone for itself. Man took them from the earth, but the earth was patient and would take them back. A massive tree was growing straight through the ancient structure, twisting through the cracks, destabilizing the foundation, and all around making the wat a shell of a building that could just as easily kill Rasmey from a cave in as give him shelter.

“Come on. Inside.” I ushered the boy.

Many, many hours later and Rasmey was still asleep.

I almost woke him. Once. Twice. Every time I glanced at the sun through the leaves that hung over the wat, I was reminded of a ticking clock I couldn't see. My grandfather had a watch. He taught me how to tell time when I was very little. There wasn't much use for it, but I was so proud to know something the other children in the village didn't.

People weren't allowed to have watches these days. Their minutes belonged to Angkar. They had no need to tell time. Just get up when you're told, eat when you're told, and sleep when you're told. And *yet*...

My lips curled in disgust at a thought.

The yothea had watches. Some of them. They were mostly likely stolen from people told to give up their possessions to Angkar. To the government. To the “Organization.” The idiots probably didn’t even know how to tell time. Most couldn’t even read.

I was rudely yanked out of my thoughts by noises in the twilight. The sun was setting fast and with a bit of annoyance I realized I had wasted a whole day letting Rasmey sleep. We might have been to Thailand by now.

A shadow flashed in the encroaching darkness and I stood up, pointlessly shaking non-existent dust from my sarong.

“AY!” I shouted, clapping my hands as I charged a few steps at the wild dogs. I saw their eyes glint in the dying light.

They froze and I shouted again. They could see me. Animals were funny that way.

This time they scattered.

Nothing was eating Rasmey tonight or I was going to be *pissed*. I certainly wouldn’t get karma for saving his life then.

Now what to do about the night? It might get cool. If I could convince him to wake up just long enough to gather some leaves and...

I halted as I turned around, the warm glow from a fire inside the temple burning away my ideas. I ran back inside and for a very long minute, what I was seeing didn’t comprehend in my already scattered mind.

Rasmey smiled at me. “Aroun soursday,” he greeted.

“Rasmey, did *you* do this?” I asked. I circled around the fire that seemed like it sprang up from the stone itself. There were no leaves burning, much less any wood.

Rasmey shook his head and I had the barest desire to grab him and drag him away from the impossible fire.

“The pretty ladies...” He quietly pointed and if I didn’t know better, I might have thought he was amused as my eyes lifted to study the reliefs carved into the walls of the wat.

I cautiously walked to the wall and my fingers traced the air in front of the statues.

“*They* started the fire?” I asked.

Rasmey just nodded while the apsaras continued to stay frozen in their heavenly dance and the devatas stood stoically, quietly guarding the temple we had trespassed in.

“I-I don’t...Oun, are you *sure*?” What kind of stupid question was that? I didn’t start the fire. I couldn’t. And I doubted an eight-year-old could.

Rasmey didn’t see the shock in my eyes and just nodded to my question. He pointed at the spot next to him and I carefully lowered myself until I too was sitting.

I still couldn’t feel the heat and for once I was jealous. It looked so inviting, just springing out of the floor like the tree that burst through the temple.

“Are you dead, Bong Nakry?”

At this point I wasn’t even worried that I was found out. The “pretty ladies” had probably told him. I stared at the reliefs as their carved eyes stared straight ahead, uncaring about my discomfort.

“Yes, Rasmey.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did the soldiers kill you?”

“No, I died a very long time ago. Maybe around when your meir was born.”

That concept wasn’t landing well. He probably was confused why I looked his eldest sister’s age, not anything older than his mother.

“How did you die though?”

I was very quiet. How did I explain that? I never had to tell anyone how I had died before. And how did I explain I died in childbirth? I didn't know anything about children. Was he old enough to understand? He had seen people die. He had seen suffering, but this was *specific*.

“I was killed,” I said.

It was blissfully quiet, and I thought the boy was falling asleep again.

“Do you forgive them?” he mumbled.

I didn't know. I didn't know if I did.

I don't know my child's name or whether it was a boy or a girl.

“Why?”

It was Rasmey's turn to be quiet. He knit his words together. I could almost see them forming in his little head.

“What if...” he whispered. “What if we can't get to the other village in time. What if Trea dies before I can say goodbye?”

My quiet heart felt like it was as heavy as the stones hanging above our heads.

“We had medicine back home,” Rasmey said, “I want to go home. Do they have medicine at the new village, Bong?”

“I...don't know...” I said quietly. I absently poked his hand, the dull sensation strange.

The bracelet glinted in the firelit.

“I think I will...” Rasmey said.

“Will what, oun?”

“If Chantrea dies, I think I’ll forgive the yothea. There’s too much hate. They hate us too much.” He slurred his words as sleep came for him again. “I don’t want to add to it. So, I think I’ll forgive them for hurting me and Meir and Trea and Mliss…”

I cut him off, concentrating as hard as I could to pull him a little closer. I couldn’t offer any warmth. The fire was a better companion.

But still, Rasmey kept dropping off to sleep half on my lap.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” I said and let him have his peace while it lasted.

Plotline

The following is an expanded plotline detailing the narrative events surrounding the previous scene.

Lucille, a teenager in Kansas, accidentally wakes up a ghost when she finds a little box of trinkets in her grandmother’s possession and spills the contents while forcing the box open.

Nakry, the ghost, begins to tell Lucille her story. Nakry died in childbirth in the 1940s. She hated her family for abandoning her to die in disgrace when she was pregnant against her will. She hates mothers. When she died, she was angry to learn she wasn’t getting a second chance at life and instead of being reincarnated like she believed as a Buddhist, she finds that she’s a ghost. She closed her eyes and cut off from the rest of the world to let it pass by, too angry to do anything about it. Many years later she is disturbed by someone damaging a bush that had grown over her grave. (This is based off a true story of my mom accidentally messing with the thorn bush over a grave while looking for firewood. In Cambodia, if the ground was too hard to dig a grave deep enough, a thorn bush was planted to keep wild dogs from digging up the body. My mom didn’t realize it was grave immediately.) Nakry feels physical pain for the first time in years. Out of curiosity she follows the girl who was breaking up the bush for firewood

back to the village, passing dead bodies that the girl doesn't even look at. She discovers what has happened to her country and learns about the Khmer Rouge.

Nakry leaves and returns to her grave content on ignoring what was going on. She pauses to look at the dead bodies, under a grove of trees a little into the forest. The rain had washed away the pitiful layer of dirt and the exposed bones are a shocking contrast to chirping birds, a soft breeze, and gently swaying branches.

Mliss, the girl, learns about a black market for extra food. It's possible to bribe the yothea for a little extra rice if you give them a bit of gold. (This is inspired by reality.) It's risky, as money and trade are illegal, but Mliss' sister is very sick, and Mliss considers how she can find gold. Later her mother comments on the "funeral" of a neighbor and mentions how the dead person used to have a wedding ring she kept hidden. The jewelry is gone but if that lady still had it, she would have wanted to be buried with it. Instead, it's probably been chopped up to trade in pieces for barely a handful of rice while the soldiers laugh about their blood riches. Mliss has the idea to rob the grave she found when looking for firewood on the off chance whoever is buried there from long ago has some jewelry on them that Mliss can use to feed her family. She sneaks out in the middle of the night and digs up Nakry's grave, finding her bones, Nakry's clothes, and a single gold bracelet.

Nakry is angry and follows the girl back, ignoring demons and ahps wandering around in the darkness. She's forced to follow because she's attached to the bracelet and it's also the only thing she has left of her brother, who buried it with her secretly. She runs into the village god, who is old and sickly. He suggests to Nakry that the theft was a gift and a sign that helping the girl and her family survive may give her good karma posthumously and she may find rest. Nakry considers her choices and reasons that if her bracelet is cut up and sold by Mliss then she'll be

unable to help the family anymore after that. She'll either must follow the gold, or be stuck back at her grave, and unable to follow if Mliss leaves the village. With that knowledge, Nakry steals the bracelet and hides it elsewhere in the shack where Mliss lives, wrapped in a scrap of krama (a scarf) that was on her dead body. She keeps a close watch on it, so it's never found.

Mliss panics when she "loses" the bracelet as she thinks someone else might have found it and any moment soldiers may walk in and kill her family and her. (This is based off a time my grandma lost a large diamond because someone stole it.) She is anxious for a while but eventual the danger passes, and she assumes someone else stole it for themselves to sell on the black market. She goes on surviving as Nakry watches, trying to figure out the best way to get the karma she wants.

There are three others in Mliss' family. She's the oldest child. Her younger sister is Chantrea and her little brother is Rasmey. Children can see Nakry, but if she's careful and doesn't draw attention to herself, they'll not notice any details about her, and she'll be ignored. During a conversation with some other children about birds, Rasmey mentions how he had flown once, in an aeroplane. Nakry sees how Mliss panics and knows something's wrong but not exactly what. Mliss tells the others that Rasmey is confused. He very young and only saw an aeroplane fly overhead and he just pretended to be on it. He was being ridiculous. They were fruit sellers before coming to the village. They wouldn't have money to ride in a plane, of course. (This happened. My Uncle Titia was talking to a Khmer Rouge child and my mother had to say her brother imagined it when the other boy asked her about it. Titia didn't understand certain words could get them killed.) Later Mliss drags her and her brother to their mother and explains what happen. Their mother then proceeds to scold Rasmey telling him never to speak of their life before. That life didn't exist. They never had a nice house. She sold vegetables in the city as a

vendor. Their father *wasn't* a government official and none of them knew how to read. She's very harsh to the little boy and tells them they will die if the soldiers learn anything about their family. Mliss is crying and her mother yells at her. Do not show weakness. Dry your tears. They will shoot us for them.

Their mother cries when she is alone.

Shortly after, Rasmey is sent away to the "school," which was just another compound nearby where they teach the children to spy on their parents and be loyal to the government and Pol Pot. The soldiers allowed Mliss, her sister, and her mother to stay in one place because Chantrea is ill.

In the middle of the night Rasmey sneaks away from his compound because he misses them. Soon after, soldiers come in and drag him away. His mother runs after them sucking up and essentially guilt trips the child-soldiers into letting him go. (This happened, except they went so far as to tie Uncle Titia to a tree at the foot of the mountain next a mass grave that was a visible pit of bones. He was between nine and eleven at the time.)

Nakry overhears the soldiers talking about how they'll just kill the boy the next time.

They are very casual about it.

Nakry eavesdrops on villagers talking about someone who tried to run away west to the Thai border but was caught and killed. Later that day, Rasmey ran away from his compound again because Chantrea is so sick and he missed his meir (mama). Mliss and their mother are resting after work that day and hide Rasmey under a pile of soiled clothes when the guards come. He isn't found and Mliss sneaks him back to the compound under a guise that they're delivering supplies. (The hiding in a pile of clothes really happened. The soldier even checked the pile, but

Uncle Titia was so small, thin, and very still that they somehow didn't see him. He was so frightened he was drenched in sweat when he got out.)

Rasmey does it again because he's very worried about Chantrea but this time Nakry catches him before he goes inside the shack. She makes the decision to kidnap him, telling him his mother and sisters have moved and are in another village, but she'll take him to them. He believes her and she gives him her bracelet to hold onto so she can stay with him. She has the idea that she'll leave him with a nice family in Thailand who can take care of him and without Rasmey putting the family in danger, they'll all be fine now and she might finally find rest and a way out of this terrible world with the karma of saving their lives.

They successfully get out of the village with Nakry holding his hand with the bracelet. The next morning soldiers come looking but his family are surprised. They discover he's run away. The soldiers laugh that he's probably already dead.

Chantrea wants to go looking for him and so does Mliss but their mother says there isn't anything they can do. He's lost. This angers the girls.

That night, Mliss whispers to Chantrea that she's going to go find Rasmey and bring him back and she promises that they'll both be back safe. Chantrea says she'll be okay and in a few days, she and mama can get back to work. They have no food since someone has to stay behind to take care of her and people are only given food if they work. Mliss promises she won't be long.

Mliss steals rice, a tin bottle, and a bowl from some yothea, knowing that if she's found with them, they'll kill her. She leaves.

In the jungle, Nakry and Rasmey stop at a ruined temple for Rasmey to rest and the boy complains. He's wet, barefoot, and covered in mosquito bites. Nakry snaps that's there's nothing

she can do. She doesn't sleep as a ghost and at night she scares away some wild dogs that would have eaten Rasmey. She goes back inside and is shocked to see a fire. Rasmey explains that two pretty ladies gave it to him. He then points to an apsara and devata, religious reliefs carved into the walls. Nakry doesn't know how to respond to that and just worries that they're being watched by spirits. Even as a ghost she doesn't necessarily see all spirits or devas.

It rains and Nakry decides to stay there in the hopes it will stop soon. It's the very beginning of monsoon season so it's possible. In the early morning the fire suddenly goes out and Nakry hears yelling outside the temple. A man runs past and is suddenly shot. He's on the ground. The soldiers laugh at him and spit at him, mocking the man for betraying Angkar. One cuts off his fingers and Nakry, horrified, hides Rasmey so he doesn't see. The men debate on whether to send him to the prison as he could confess to know more enemies. One of the boys then shoots the man in the face and when the others ask, he just shrugs and says he was tired chasing. They debate what to do with the body and they decide to leave it there. The animals will eat him soon enough. It's dark and the men decide to stay in the temple for the night. Nakry sneaks Rasmey out a side entrance and hides him in a tree a little way away. He's scared about what he saw and about Nakry leaving but she just goes back to the temple. There she comes upon a temple devata and an ahp arguing. An ahp is a horrible looking creature that is like a vampire or Chupacabra in function, but physically looks like a floating woman's head with the organs hanging in the air from the neck. The ahp is hungry and has already drained the blood and eaten the flesh of the dead man. She wants more and to enter the temple to kill the soldiers because their blood smells no better than an animal's but the devata wishes to keep the evil out and refuses to remove the sharp thorn bushes around the temple that the ahp is afraid of. Nakry worries about the ahp finding Rasmey and offers to lure the men out. While the ahp eats, Nakry

and Rasmey can get far enough away. The devata says nothing. The ahp is suspicious as she doesn't see how a ghost with no physical form can help. She refuses and before she can lose interest and go off into the forest (possibly finding Rasmey) Nakry finally explains that she can bait the men with a boy that's with her. The ahp threatens to go find and attack the boy instead but Nakry convinces her that the blood of the soldiers would taste much better and there's so much more of it than in one little boy. The ahp asks why she doesn't just eat the child to sate herself and wait for a night when the men are unprotected. Nakry retorts that these soldiers are only staying in the temple for the night and that they will soon be in better shelter and much harder to kill before sunrise if there are many people around. She knows the ahp must not get caught because she must return her head and organs to her body before sunrise. Otherwise, she dies an agonizing death. She has the privacy, but it won't last. The chance of a meal this big will never come again. Will she toss it away for one little child whose blood isn't polluted with murder?

The ahp takes the offer and Nakry leaves.

Nakry gets Rasmey and tells him to scream as loud as he can. The soldiers wake up and rush out and see him but the ahp attacks. In the confusion, Nakry grabs Rasmey by the wrist that has the bracelet and runs.

Rasmey cries. He misses his family and is very scared. Nakry tries her best to comfort him and finds she cares about the pain he's going through because of her decision to kidnap him. She realizes that it isn't really karma she wants or reincarnation, but that she doesn't want to be alone anymore and her pain stems from the fact she died alone and rejected by her family.

Mliss has been walking for many days. She has many blisters and sores. She stops in an abandoned village where she finds some corpses. She still looks through the houses in hope

she'll find something useful. She almost runs into a small group of soldiers talking. She sees two run out of the tree line screaming for help. They are bleeding profusely, and the injuries are infected. Her mother suddenly grabs her. They hide in an abandoned hut and pray the soldiers don't look in the tiny structure. They don't move for hours, staying completely silent. They overhear the soldiers talking about the Vietnamese invading. The next morning, the soldiers finally leave but Mliss and her mother still wait until it's dark again to leave. Sothy tells Mliss that Chantrea died soon after Mliss left and then Sothy went to find her other two children, even if they may be dead and she may be killed for escaping. It's a miracle she found Mliss. The next morning, they run into a small group of people who had split away from a Khmer Rouge camp running from the Vietnamese and they agree to let the pair come along. They get to a large swamp and the guide tells them that on the other side was the Thai border but between them are landmines. They can't make any noise or the soldiers who might be in the tree line will shoot. The mud sinks their feet to the ankles. An old soldier from the previous regime who was lucky enough to hide his identity doesn't want to follow the path the first group takes. He says people are too noisy. He takes Mliss and Sothy, showing them where to step and how to spot a mine. An explosion goes off with group ahead. (This really happened to my mother. She and her mother were dragging her siblings across a minefield and a man who used to be a soldier in Lon Nol's government helped them. A mine really did go off with the group ahead.)

They get to a camp along the Cambodia/Thailand set up by another Cambodian faction that resisted the Khmer Rouge. Mliss and her mother are shocked to find Rasmey. They listen to his story about the girl who helped bring him, but it sounds like he went crazy. Several weeks later, the Thai tell people they will be sending them back into Cambodia. However, there's a truck with a man offering to take anyone to a UN camp if they could pay him. The family has no

money. Asking around, no one is willing to trade anything. Rasmey shows Mliss the bracelet and she's shocked, quietly asking where he got it as she remembers where it came from. He said the nice girl who brought him gave it to him. "She said to give it to you," he says. "She said it's not good karma to steal from my grave but she said you need it more so you can have it."

Back in the present day, Lucille reacts to what Nakry implies at the end. Nakry cries and says how she knew that would mean she was alone again, but if they were to survive, she decided the best chance they had was to get on that bus and go as far away as possible. She didn't want to say goodbye to Rasmey so she went back to her grave, closed her eyes and went away from the world again, trusting Mliss and her mother could break up the pieces for what they needed. Lucille asks how Nakry could be there, years later with her, but the ghost doesn't know. Later that night Lucille digs in the dirt of her grandmother's garden and finds a single gold chain link she had dropped when she first opened the little box.