

The Magic Fish

Trung Le Nguyen







THE
MAGIC
FISH

Trung Le Nguyen



The first 168 pages of this book were drawn traditionally on card-stock printer paper with a combination of Micron fine liners and Staedtler pigment liners. The remaining pages were drawn using a Cintiq tablet in Adobe Photoshop, and subsequent colors were also applied in Photoshop.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Summary: "Tide fish ain't they fish. But Tide's still enjoy reading his favorite stories with his parents from the books he borrows from the local library. It's hard enough trying to communicate with your parents as a kid, but for Tide, he doesn't even have the right words because his parents are struggling with their English. Is there a Vietnamese word for what he's going through? Is there a way to tell them he's gay?" — Provided by publisher.

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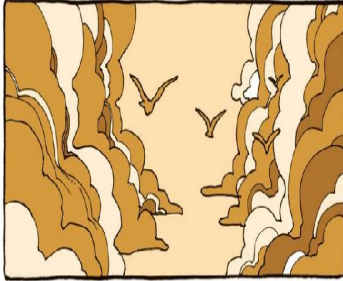
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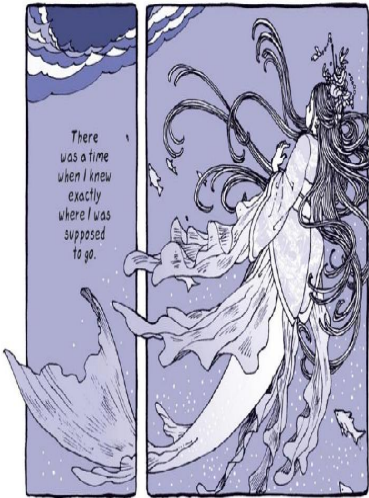


For my parents





I'm always a little lost these days.



There was a time when I knew exactly where I was supposed to go.



To me, language is a map to help you figure out where you are. If you can't read the map, you're lost.

<You have to read them exactly as they're written this time.>

But it's fun! There are so many versions, anyway.



<I know, but I'm trying to read the words as closely as I can. For practice.>

<Okay.>

You can't help others when you're lost.

<I want us to speak the same languages.>

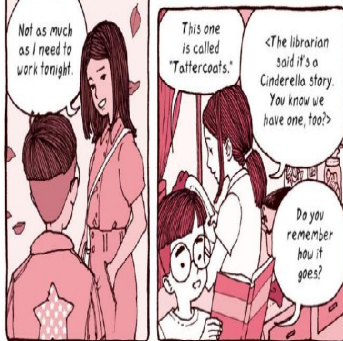
Don't we already!



<It's not balanced! You speak mostly English, while I speak mostly Vietnamese.>

#balance ...

I wonder if I'll ever find my way home.









... and never returned.



Little Alera was left in the care of her aunt, who raised her ...

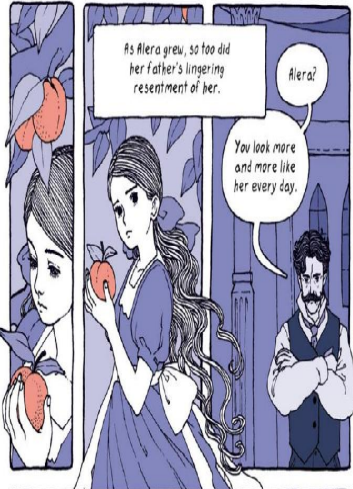
Auntie, where is my mother? Where did she go?

... while her father spent his days at sea ...

Your mother is a sea princess. Your father broke a very important promise to her, and so she had to return to the ocean.



... searching in vain for his wife.



As Alera grew, so too did her father's lingering resentment of her.

Alera?

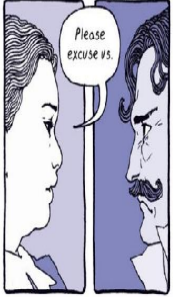
You look more and more like her every day.



Alera, my girl!

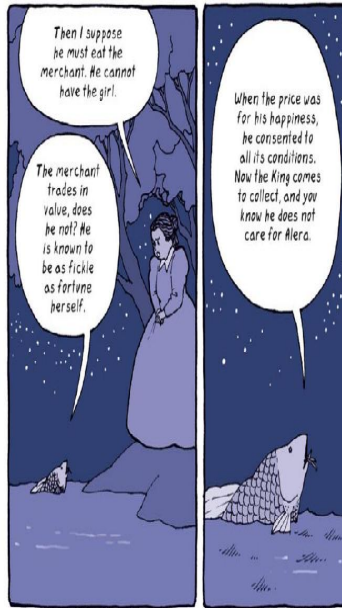
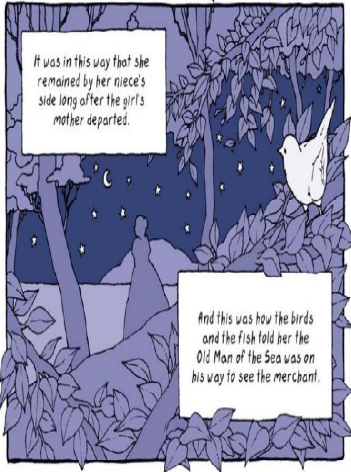
You promised to help me make those peach torts. The flour won't sift itself.

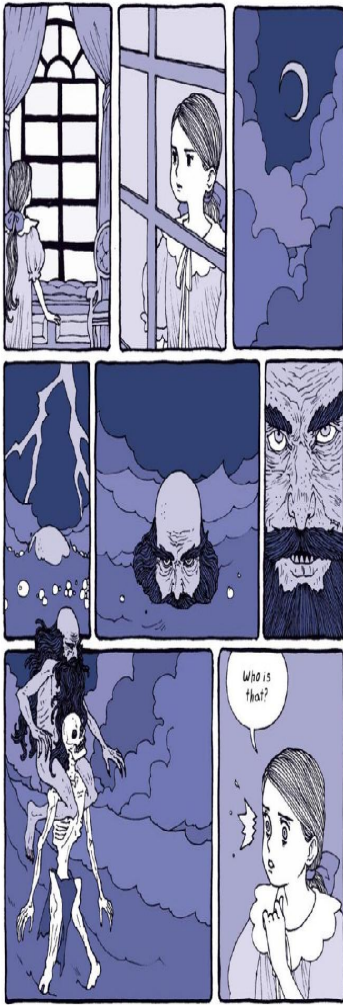
Come along.

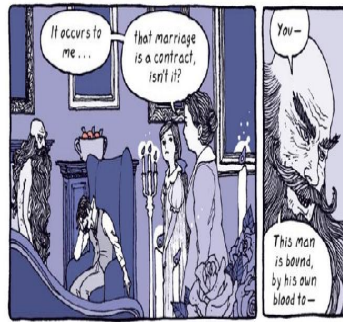
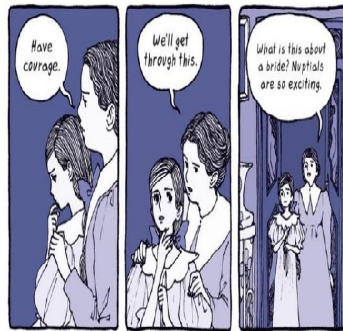
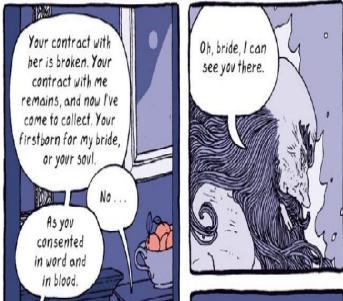


Please excuse us.



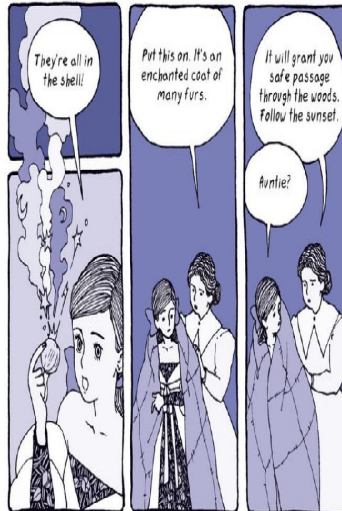




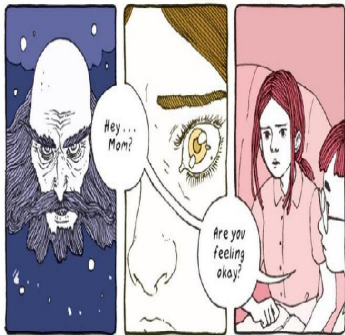


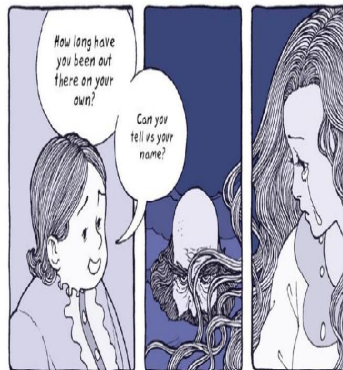


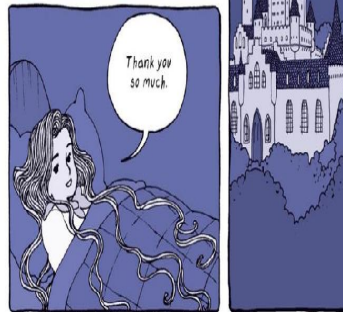
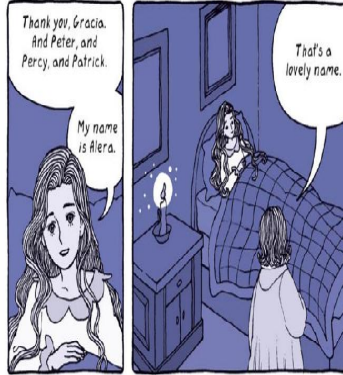
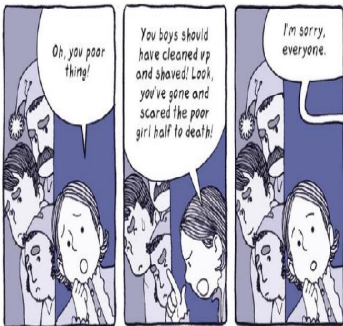


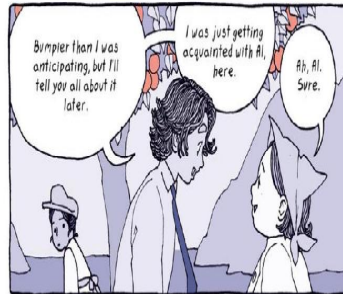


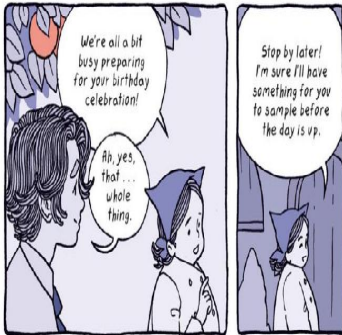




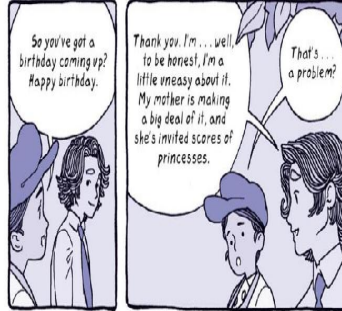








Stop by later! I'm sure I'll have something for you to sample before the day is up.



Thank you. I'm... well, to be honest, I'm a little uneasy about it. My mother is making a big deal of it, and she's invited scores of princesses.

That's... a problem?



That sounds stressful.

I'm sure she's only looking out for me in her way.

Not on my birthday.

You know how mothers can be.



Not really. Mine's gone.

Oh! I'm so sorry.

It's fine! I was very young at the time. I only have hazy memories of her.



My aunt took care of me.

She was the closest thing I had to a mom for most of my life. I really miss her.

Ah! I'm sorry for carrying on. I'm sure you have a lot to do before the day is up.

It's no trouble!



I'm glad we could course correct. I felt like we got off on the wrong foot at first. Friends!

Friends.



Do you miss Grandma?

I do. Every day.

But we can see her again soon! Now that we're citizens, we can travel. Won't that be exciting?

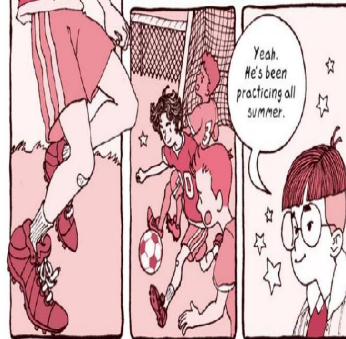


<Hello? Di Nhung, it's me, Hiên. Hi! Are you well, Di? I'm doing very well, too. Is Ms there?>

<Can you put her on? I want to say hello.>



<Oh? I'm sorry to hear that. Don't wake her up—she needs her rest. Yes. Yes, Di. Tell her I called. And tell her I miss her.>







Yeah, yeah, I getcha. But consider telling him. We've all been friends since the fourth grade!

And I know you don't like keeping secrets from us.

I did tell you. That's enough for now.

You haven't told your folks yet?



I'm sure your parents would understand if you told them.

Ah... I'm really not sure. What if they already know and they're in denial?

What if they don't love me anymore?



I mean, I want to. I tried looking up how to tell them at the library. The librarian and I couldn't find the word for it in Vietnamese.

It felt weird technically coming out to the librarian before I even told my parents. It's all weird.



Triển, that won't happen.

It could. I read that it happens sometimes.

At any rate, I can't tell them yet.

My grandma's not doing well, and my mom's worried sick. She's got a lot going on.

I don't think she'd take it well right now.





In the days leading up to the party, Alera found herself swept up in all the excitement.



There was a lot to be done, and Alera threw herself into her work.



By now she was feeling right at home.



It's true! It's like a little cake that looks like a dewdrop, clear as crystal. You've got to try one someday.



That sounds absolutely unreal.

Well, what's your favorite dessert? What makes it special?

It's gotta be...



... My aunt Velvet's special peach tarts.

Nothing tastes more like a late-summer evening by the ocean than her peach tarts.

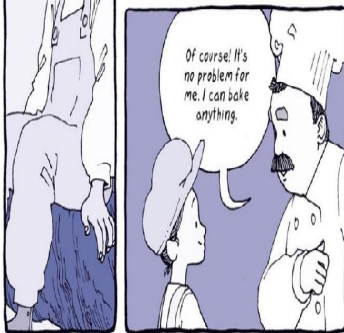
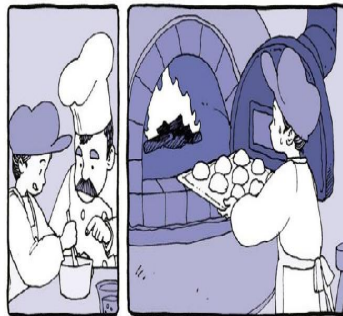
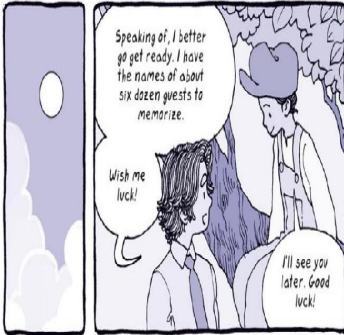


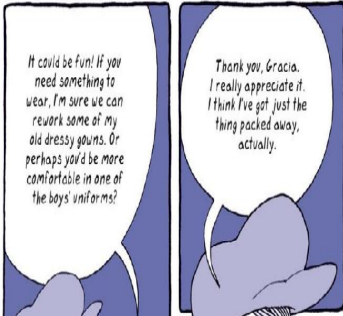
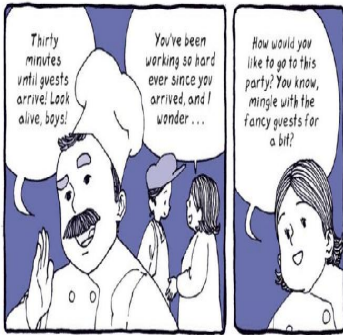
You can try it! I can make a tray for the party.

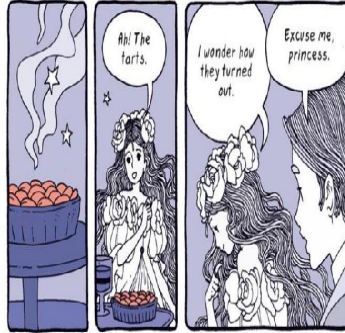
That would be great! Thanks. Ah!



Certainly.

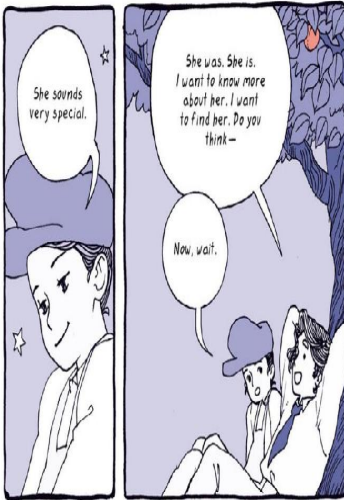


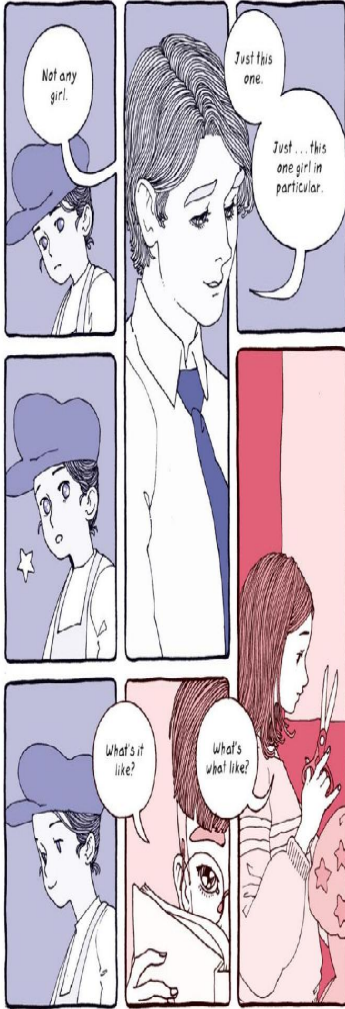


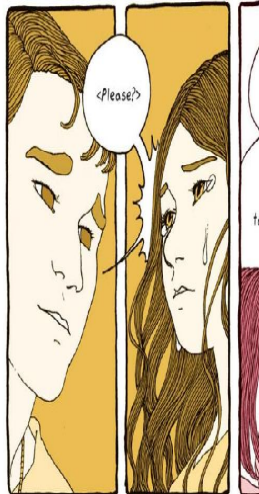


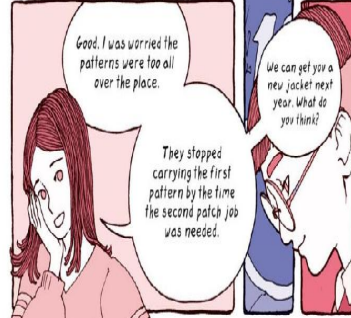
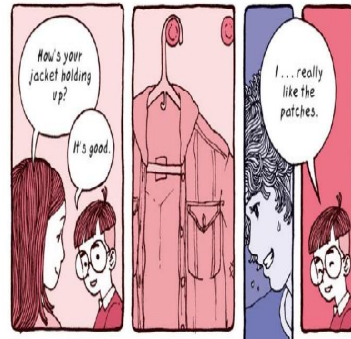
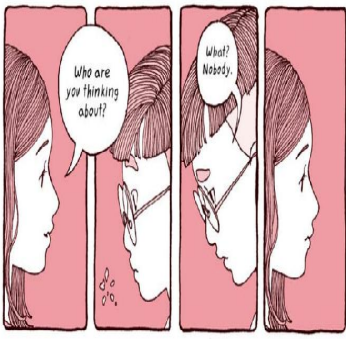
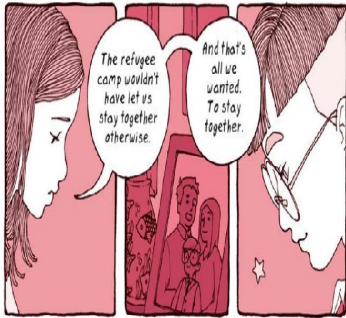








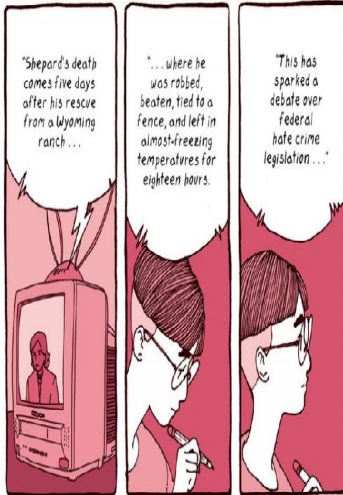




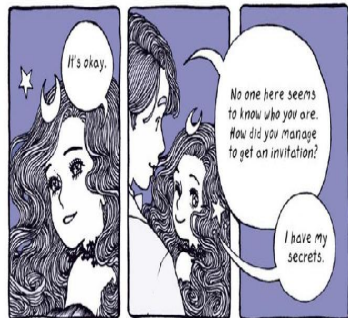
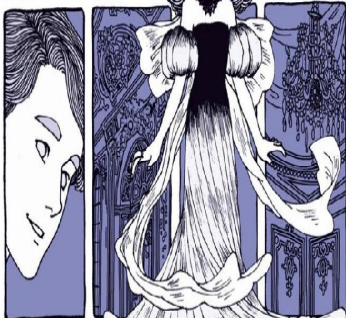
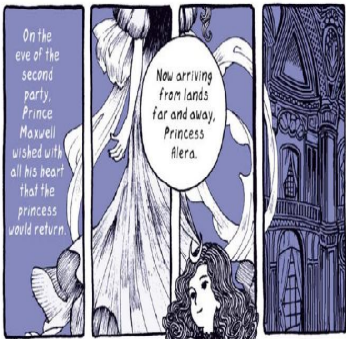




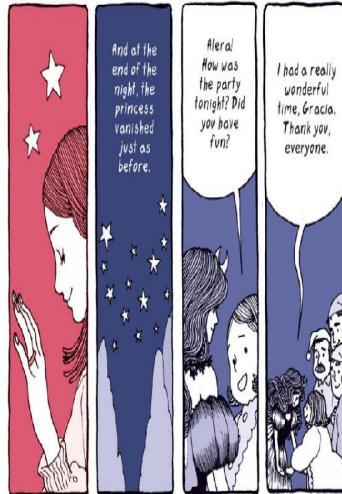








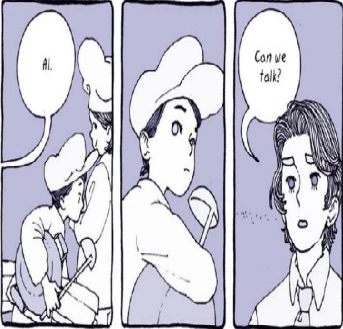
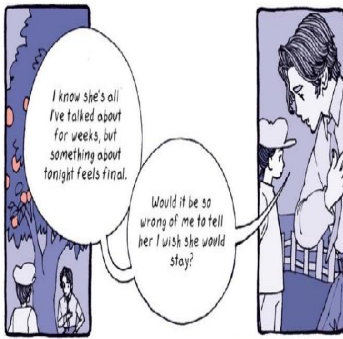


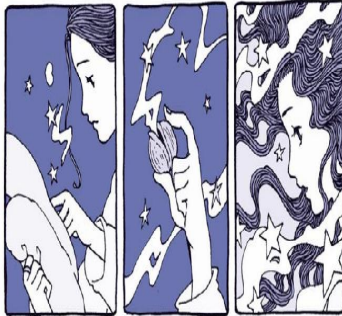




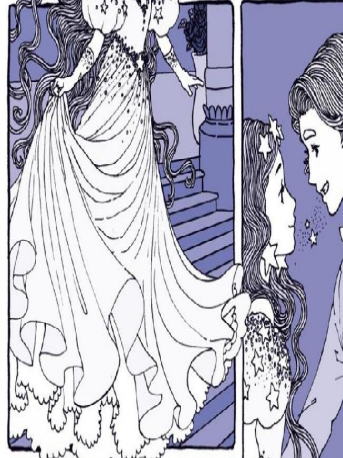




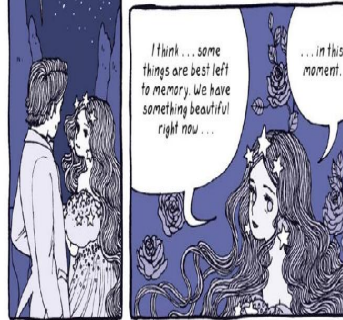


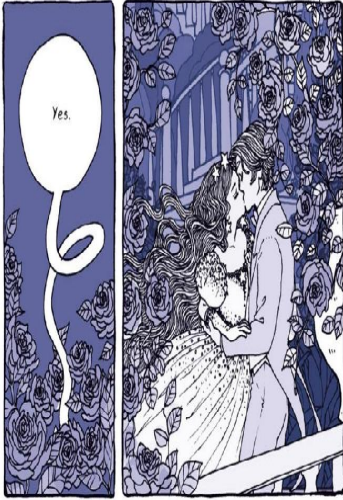


As before,
Maxwell took
her hand.



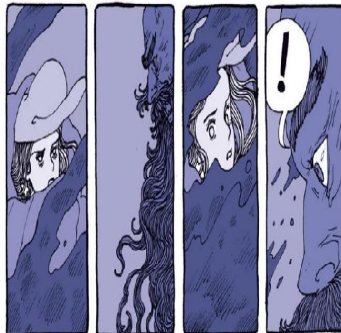
And as before, everything else
seemed to fade away as they
danced through the night.









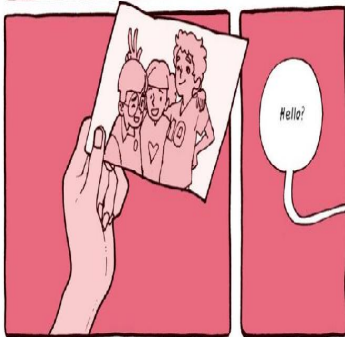
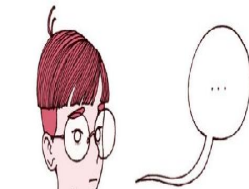


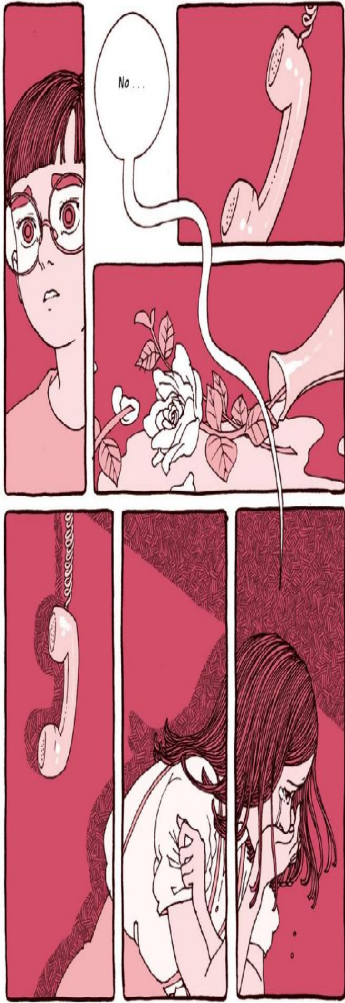


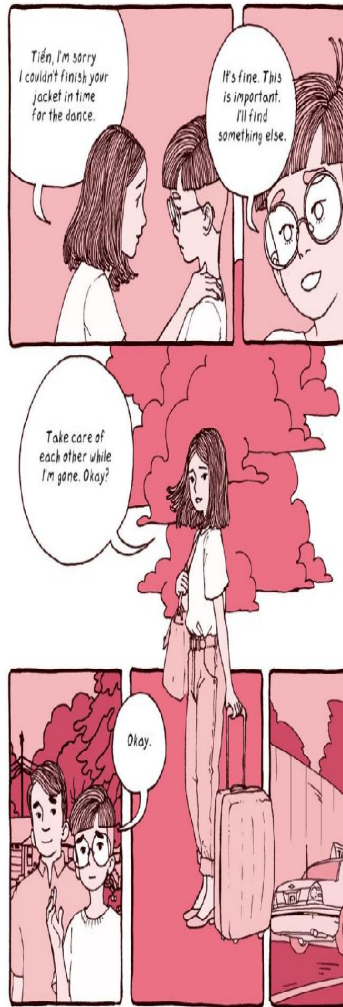


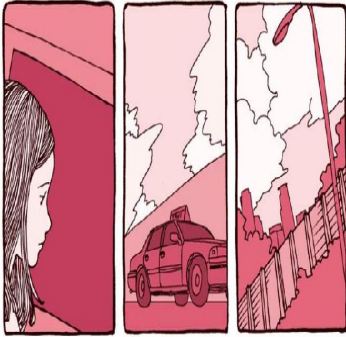


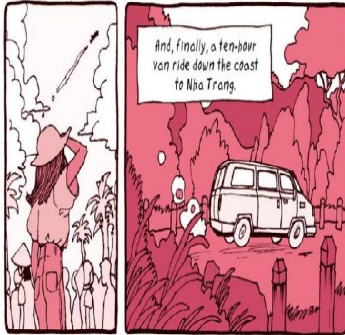


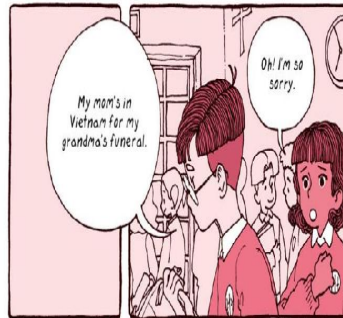












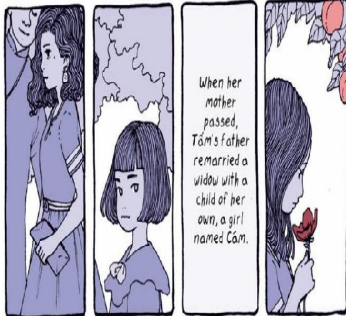




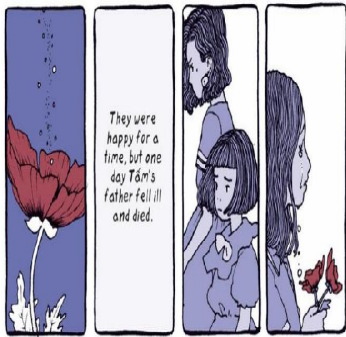




Once, perhaps not so long ago, there was a girl, sweet and kind, beloved by her mother and father. She was called Tãm.



When her mother passed, Tãm's father remarried a widow with a child of her own, a girl named Cãm.



They were happy for a time, but one day Tãm's father fell ill and died.

Her stepmother's grief turned to anger, and that anger was directed at Tãm.

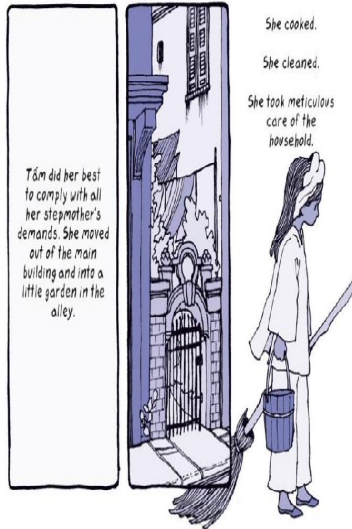


Do you love me, Tãm?

Yes, Stepmother, I do.

Then you will do everything I ask of you?

Yes, Stepmother, I will.

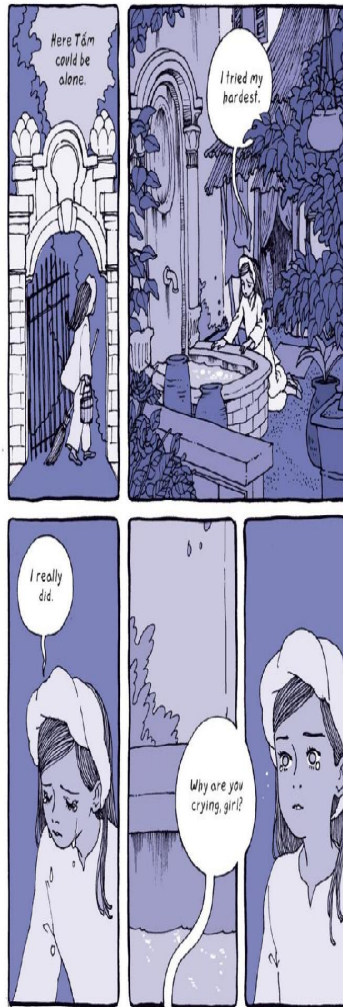


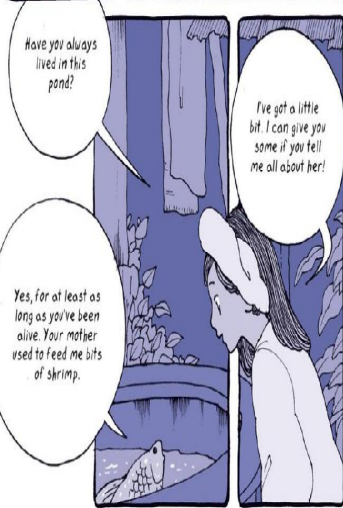
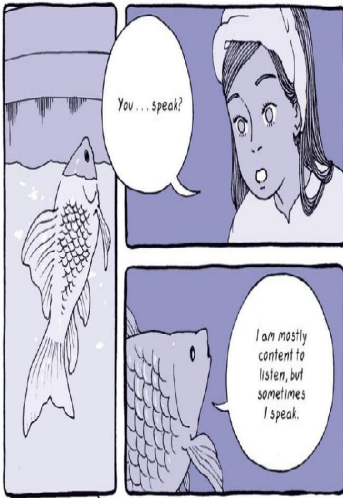
She cooked.

She cleaned.

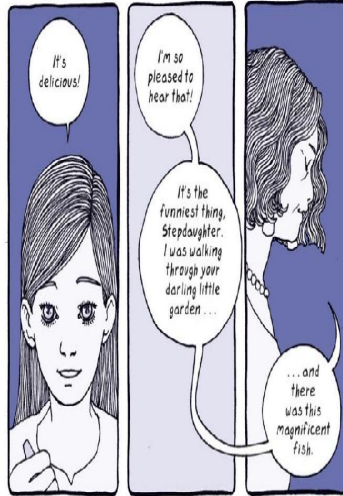
She took meticulous care of the household.

Tãm did her best to comply with all her stepmother's demands. She moved out of the main building and into a little garden in the alley.

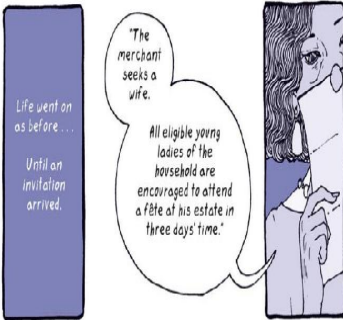




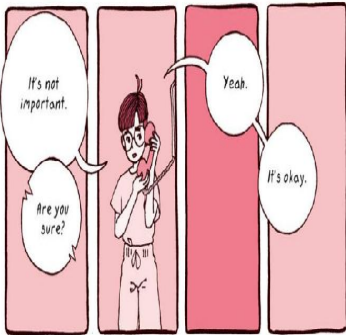


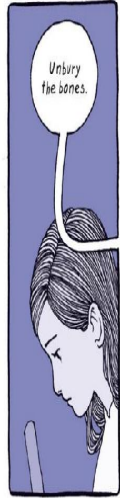


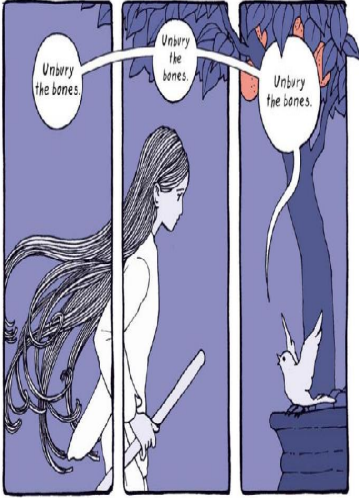


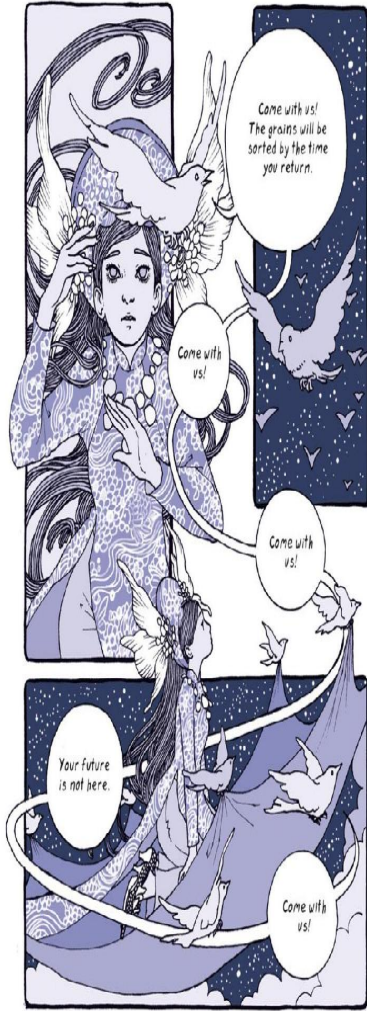


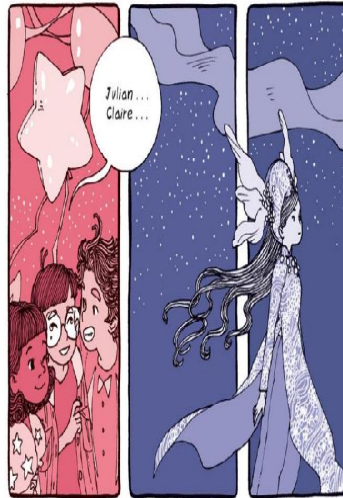






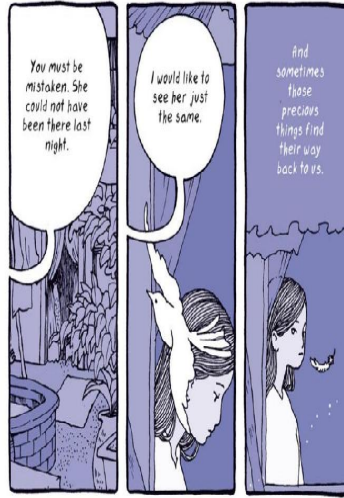


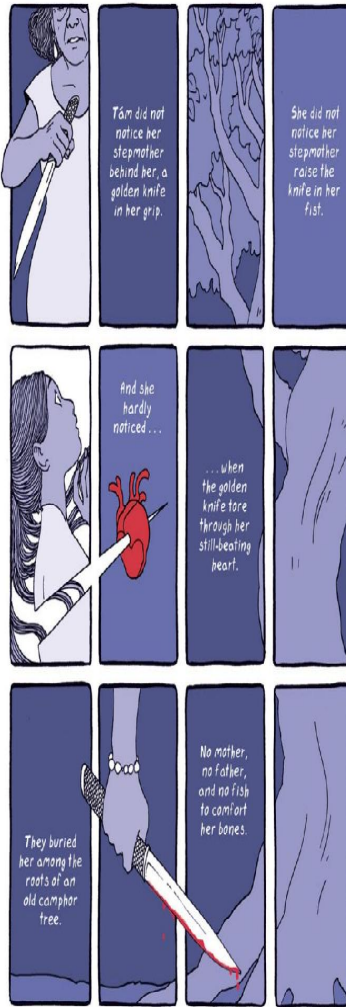


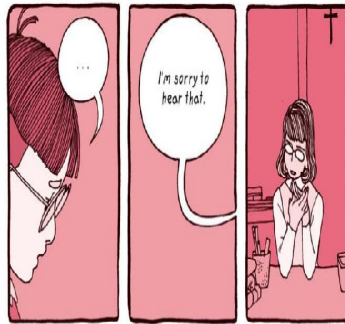


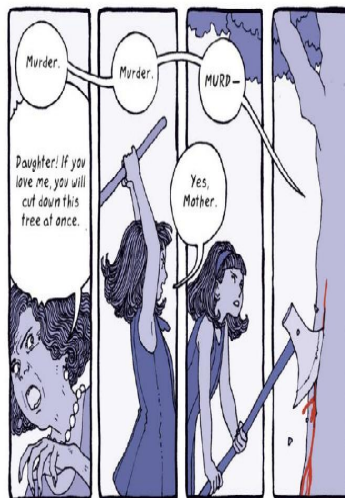
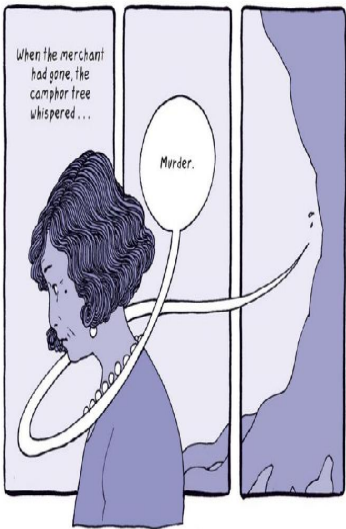
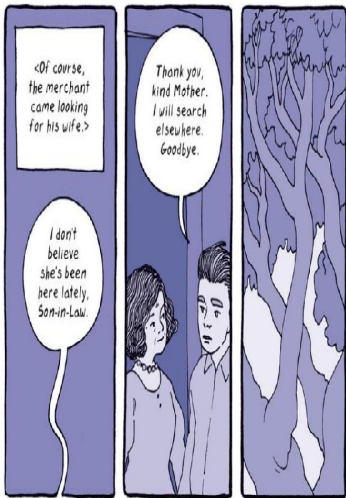


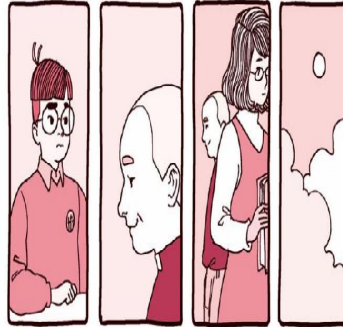


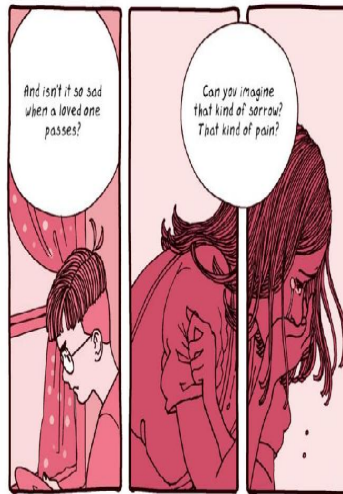
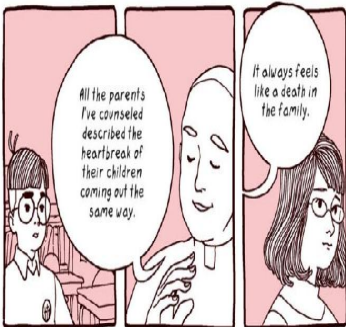


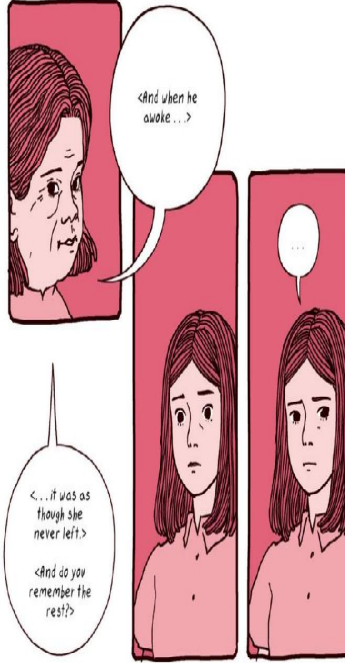














<No, I don't.>

<My Vietnamese is weakening, every day. I'm changing.>

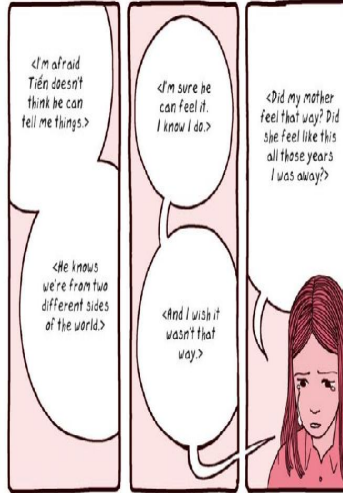


<My past and present selves speak two different languages.>

<It feels like I died on that boat. And I'm still stuck in the middle of the ocean.>

<Far away from my mother...>

<... and far away from my son.>



<I'm afraid Tiên doesn't think he can tell me things.>

<I'm sure he can feel it. I know I do.>

<Did my mother feel that way? Did she feel like this all those years I was away?>

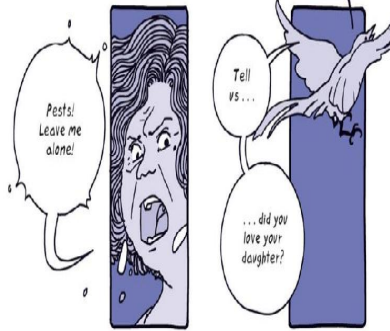
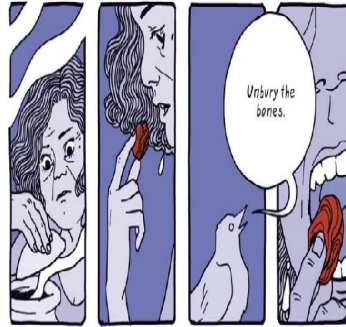
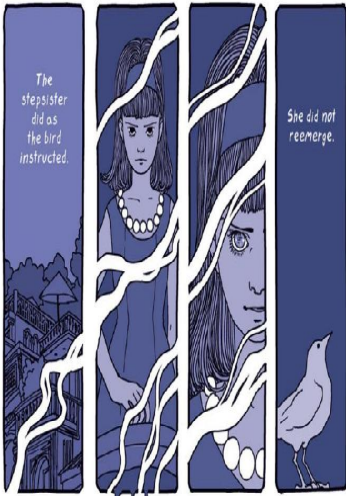
<He knows we're from two different sides of the world.>

<And I wish it wasn't that way.>



<Well, if you don't know the ending, then I'll have to take us there.>

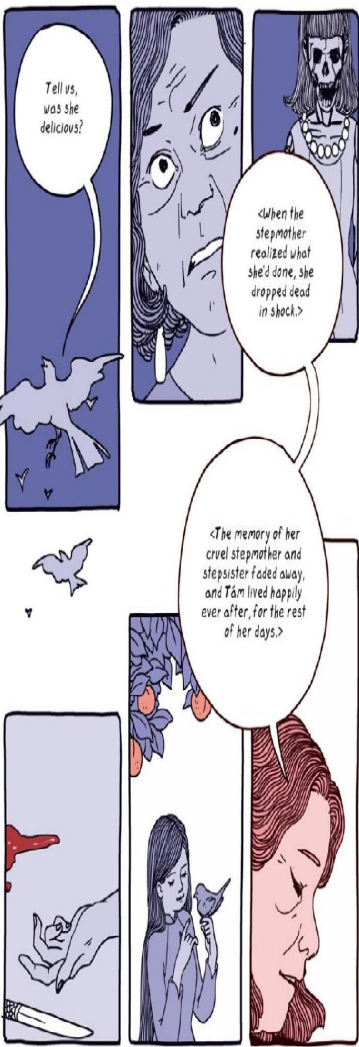






Tell us, was she good?

You little demons!

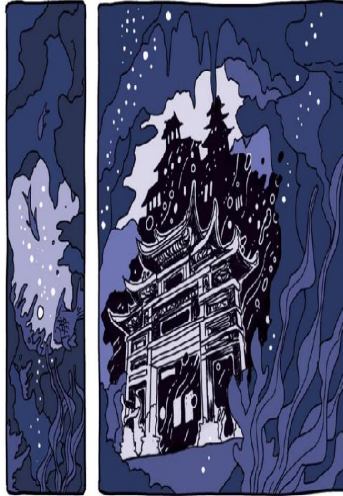
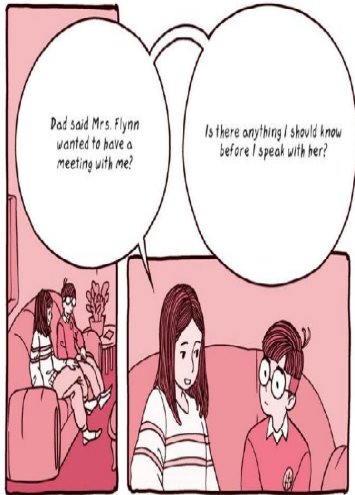


Tell us, was she delicious?

<When the stepmother realized what she'd done, she dropped dead in shock.>

<The memory of her cruel stepmother and stepsister faded away, and Tam lived happily ever after, for the rest of her days.>







It was ruled by
a mighty king...

... who had
six charming
daughters.

When each princess came of age, she would explore the surface world and return with a story for her younger sisters.

There are
magnificent
cities
fall as
mountains!

Columns of
bursting flame
fill the sky!

Magic
powered
by fire and
lightning!

Boats
that float
between the
clouds and
the stars!



And with each passing year,
the youngest princess imagined
how wonderful it must be to live
on the other side of the water.



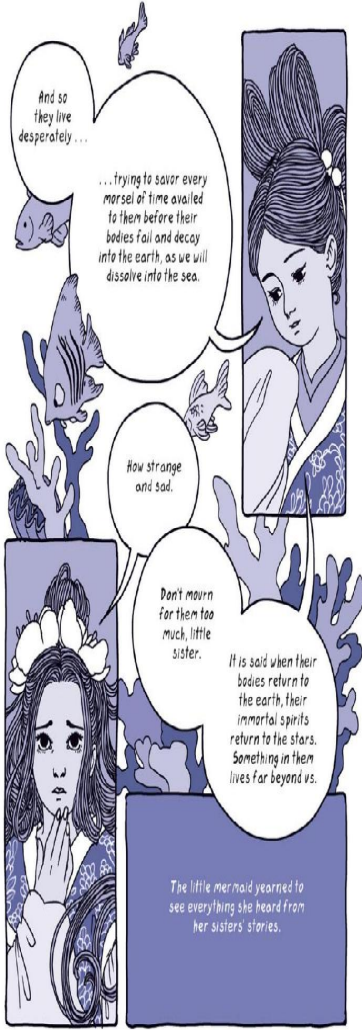
And the people up there have such short, urgent lives.

Every living moment is saturated with meaning.

How long do they live?

Barely a century!

Whole human generations live and die before we even begin to see our twilight years.



And so they live desperately...

...trying to savor every morsel of time availed to them before their bodies fall and decay into the earth, as we will dissolve into the sea.

How strange and sad.

Don't mourn for them too much, little sister.

It is said when their bodies return to the earth, their immortal spirits return to the stars. Something in them lives far beyond us.

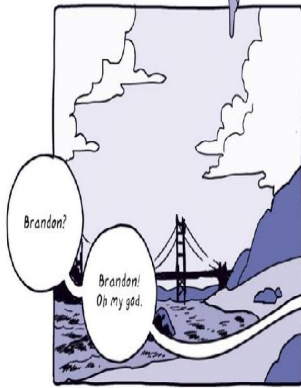
The little mermaid yearned to see everything she heard from her sisters' stories.

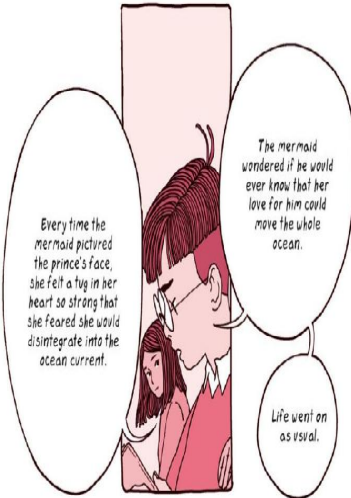






And she knew then how it must feel to want to live desperately.





Every time the mermaid pictured the prince's face, she felt a tug in her heart so strong that she feared she would disintegrate into the ocean current.

The mermaid wondered if he would ever know that her love for him could move the whole ocean.

Life went on as usual.

She and her sisters spent their days exploring the waters by the shores and collected human treasures from sunken ships.



And still, the warm beat of the prince's frail human heart occupied all of her thoughts.

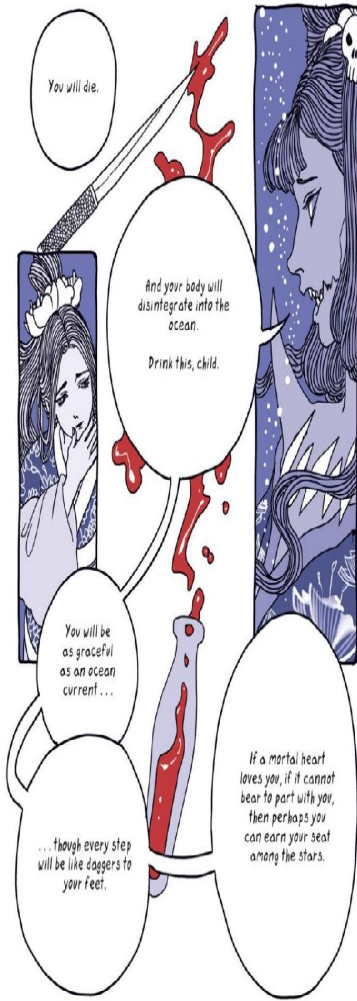


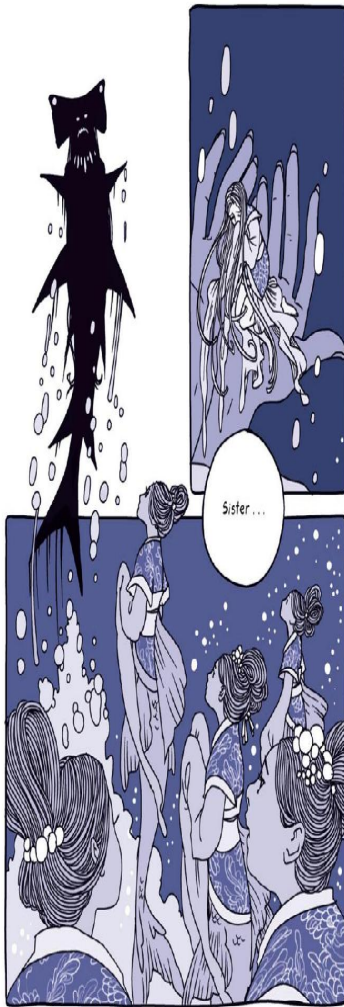
When the longing was too heavy for her to bear, she sought the help of the oracle of the ocean, an ancient mermaid who knew many secret things.



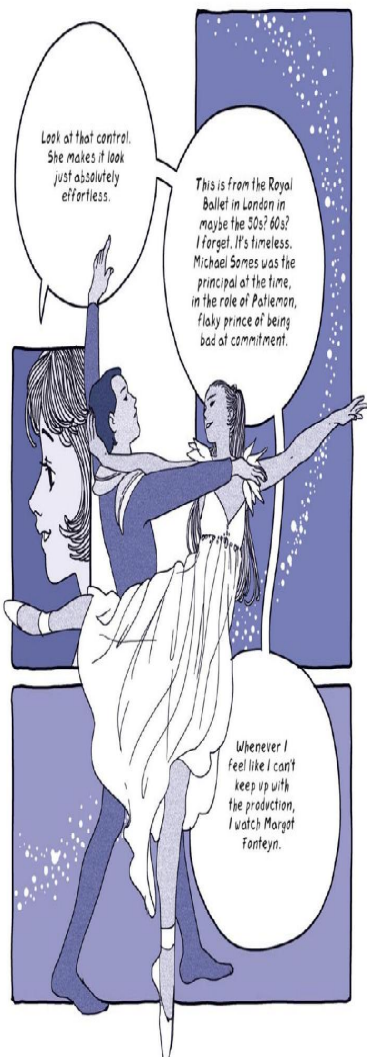
Few knew to seek her counsel ...
... and fewer still would dare to try.







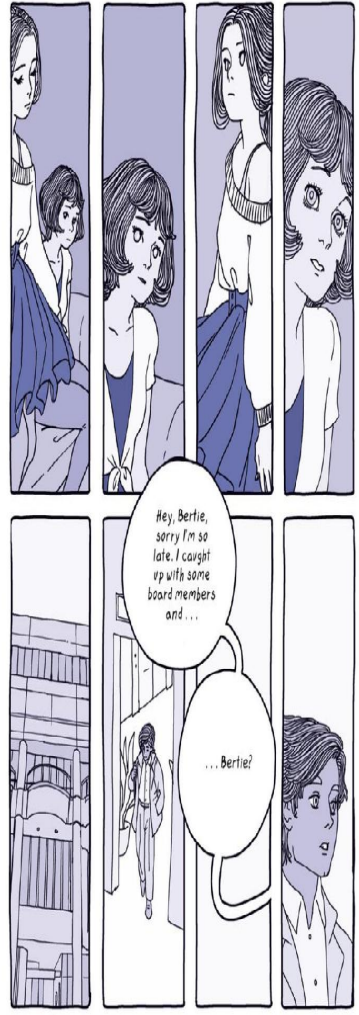




Look at that control. She makes it look just absolutely effortless.

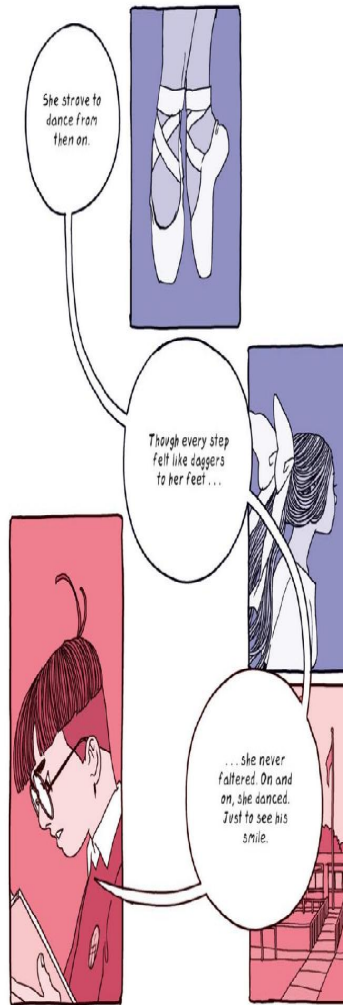
This is from the Royal Ballet in London in maybe the 50s? 60s? I forget. It's timeless. Michael Somes was the principal of the time, in the role of Pasiemon, flosky prince of being bad at commitment.

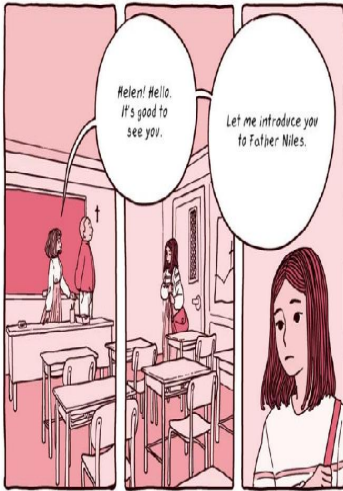
Whenever I feel like I can't keep up with the production, I watch Margot Fonteyn.

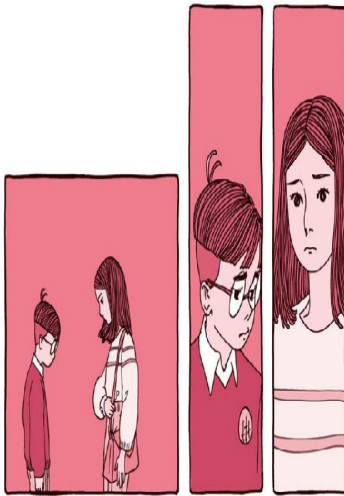


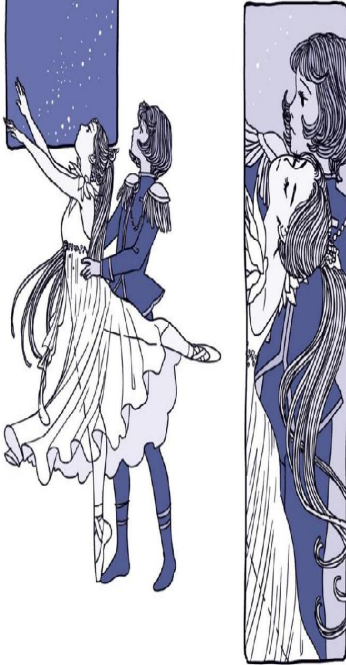
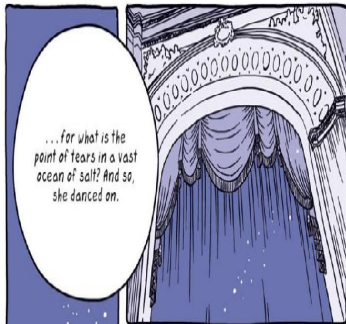
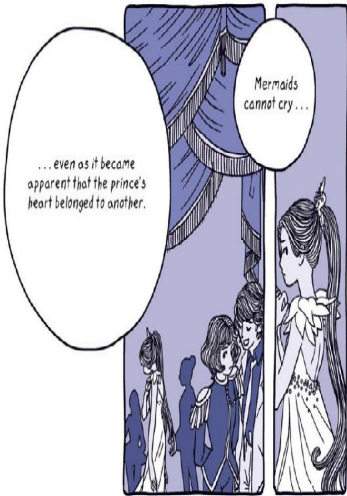
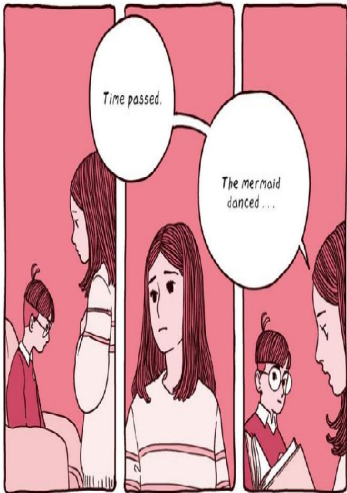
Hey, Bertie, sorry I'm so late. I caught up with some board members and ...

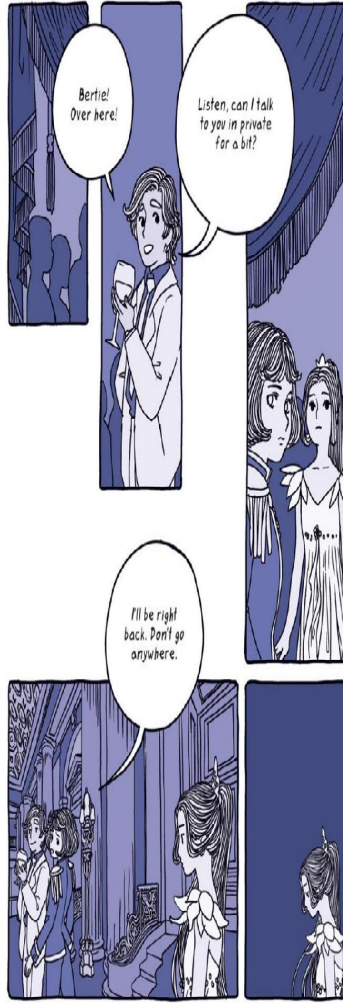
... Bertie?



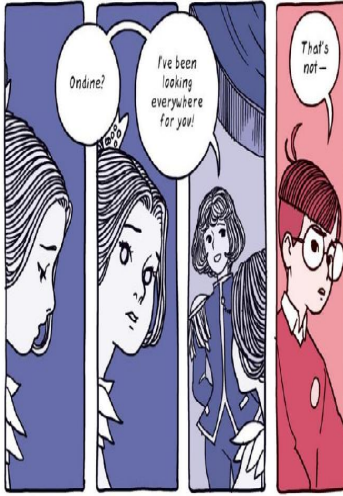
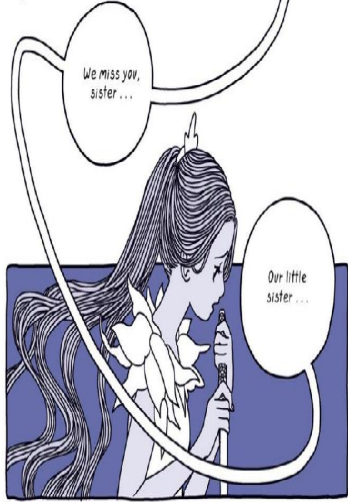


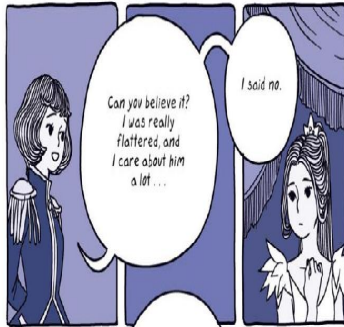


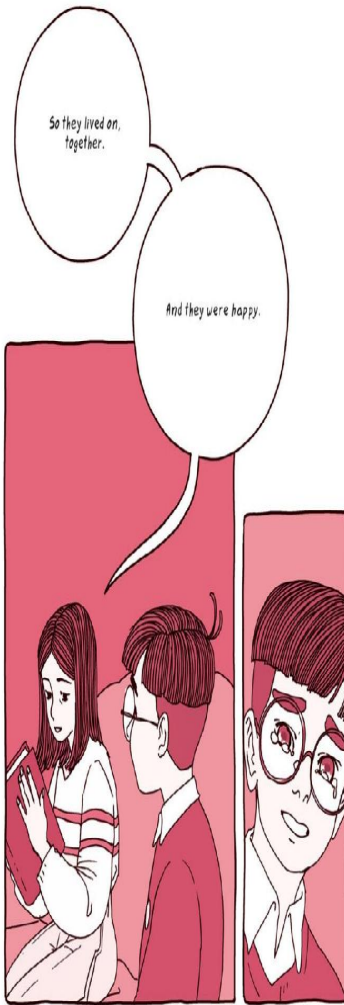














Author's Note

I set out to tell a very small story. One of the odd challenges of writing a story about characters living within any social margins is the gravity of the marginalization itself. It is such a dense thing, seeming to insist that all the pieces of the story should orbit around it. Immigrant stories are like this.

As compassionate readers, we sometimes intellectualize difficult human experiences to keep them at arm's length. There is an appropriate vernacular, a set of vocabulary words in a syllabus, and a common language established for the sake of facilitating dialogue. At our worst, we find the stories of immigration reduced to character tropes employed, for example, by the news for a disaffected viewer. The stories start and end with the arc of an exodus, and we forget that things continue to happen ever after, and that ever after does not happen for everyone all at once. At our best, we want to take a bird's-eye view of the situation in an effort to be as comprehensive as possible.

In this way, immigrants seem to take on the flatness of fairy tale archetypes, as interchangeable pieces in recurring stories of upheaval and diaspora. In both cases, we prefer to look in from the outside. All the quiet yearnings, the ambient heartaches, and the thousand other little indignities of feeling lost in your own tongue are overlooked in our best-intentioned efforts to be broad and comprehensive.

And so I set out to tell a very small story about a boy and his mother figuring out how to express love without the benefit of an appropriate vernacular, a set of vocabulary words in a syllabus, or a common language to facilitate their dialogue. I wanted to explore how stories can serve both as an escape and as an anchor for us in our real lives, and maybe, for at least one story, decenter the gravity of marginalization to tell a story about one of the little pieces that orbit around it.

Acknowledgments

A big thank-you to my partner, J, without whom I would not know whether today was actually a Tuesday. I'd like to emphatically thank my editors, Gina and Whitney, whose infectious enthusiasm makes me excited to turn in every single page. Many thanks to Patrick, our designer, and to Robin, my flatter.

A big thank-you to Kate, my agent, for believing in my work and patiently guiding me through my creative journey. You do marvelous work. To the fine folks in Minneapolis Parks and Recreation, thank you for all you do. I love wandering through Powderhorn on a challenging day.

Trung Le Nguyen,

also known as Tringles, is a comic book artist and illustrator working out of Minnesota. He received his BA from Hamline University, majoring in studio art with a concentration in all painting and minoring in art history. He is particularly fond of fairy tales, kids' cartoons, and rom-coms of all stripes.

The Magic Fish is his debut graphic novel.



Between Words and Pictures

When I was very young, I learned how to read in English and Vietnamese side by side. Since my parents were new immigrants, we developed a weekly tradition of selecting a few books from the library and reading the stories to each other. This way we could ask each other questions and piece together parts of the stories that one or the other of us might have missed. As my parents and I became more comfortable with both languages, we spoke a combination of the two at home—a hybrid, or mixed language.

I especially loved illustrated fairy tales because, every once in a while, my parents would read me a story and then tell me that they grew up with one very much like it. I fell in love with the idea that a story could have places of origin and its own lineage, not entirely unlike a person. A fairy tale could move from one region to another, and it would change clothes. It could adopt the customs and beliefs of its new home, and it would still retain much of its core. The notion that a story could adjust to suit a new home was such a hopeful one for an immigrant kid who grew up knowing that he and his parents didn't come from the same places.

As I got older, we continued to borrow illustrated books and fairy tales, but I also started picking up comic books and loved them to bits. The way the stories unfolded felt so natural and dynamic. They reminded me of the way my parents and I would sprinkle English words within our spoken Vietnamese to help bridge the sentiments of two different languages. They never felt like separate, incompatible parts.

People tend to think about comic books as two separate parts—the words and the pictures. In illustrated books, the images support the text, but the text can exist entirely without the pictures. Comic books are just the opposite. Here, the images are the text. Comic books speak a hybrid language between orthography and iconography, written text and pictures. It takes a certain level of proficiency in both languages to get by, but it's a whole and complete reading experience altogether.

As I was making this book, I considered that each character has a different visual vocabulary informed by their personal life experiences. Tiên is a kid growing up in the 1990s in the American Midwest, like me. Tiên's mother, Helen, grew up in post-war Vietnam. Helen's aunt holds on to images of a pre-war, post-colonial Vietnam. The way each character envisions their stories is based on the things they might have seen and known, and I did my best to express this in the clothing and the settings around each of their respective fairy tales.



To contrast Tiên's experience with Helen's, I picked two relatives of the Cinderella fairy tale, the German "Allerleirauh" and the Vietnamese "Tâm Cám." The first fairy tale we encounter is a very loose adaptation of "Allerleirauh," read through the imagination of Tiên. He would be familiar with the stories and images popularized by the toys and cartoons in the mid-to-late 1990s, and his imagination probably hews closely to Western sensibilities about princess stories. The visual vocabulary he brings into the story is cobbled together from decontextualized European visual tropes associated with fairy tales, so many of the details are highly anachronistic, like the dresses worn by Alera, the first story's central character.

The aesthetics of the three dresses fall closely in line with various points in the western history of couture, loosely inspired by different designers over the past century. The Sunlight dress is based on Callot Soeurs pieces from the 1910s. The Moonlight dress is inspired by mid-century Givenchy dresses, like the iconic white dress Audrey Hepburn wore in the 1954 film *Sabrina*. The Starlight dress reflects more contemporary takes on princess dresses that exist in the popular imagination, more or less un tethered from their historical roots.



The fairy tale segment of "Tâm Cám" is set in 1950s Vietnam to suit the visual imagination of Helen's aunt. The buildings and apartments are reminiscent of a French colonial style. Some of the characters are dressed in French-style clothing, which would have been popular at the time. The stepmother and step sister wear fashionable pre-Mod-ern French clothing, and Tâm's magically gifted dress is an áo dài.



The áo dài is considered the Vietnamese national dress, but Vietnam is a country that is colored by the forces of its colonizers. It was occupied by China for about a thousand years, punctuated by some brief periods of independence. Then there was nearly a century of French colonial occupation from the mid-nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth century. All of these transitions affected Vietnamese culture in irreversible ways, and some of it is reflected in the áo dài.

The áo dài might be largely influenced by Chinese clothing from the Ming and Qing dynasties. In the eighteenth century, the áo dài was unisex court clothing, and the garment was much looser. The tightly fitted style of the áo dài first emerged at a Paris fashion show in 1921. It is credited as an innovation of an artist named Nguyễn Cát Tường. Today, the áo dài retains this general design, and I really consider it to be the result of an aesthetic hybrid language.





The last fairy tale is a reworking of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid," and it is told out of Helen's visual imagination. She is a Vietnamese woman who was born toward the end of the Vietnam War and grew up in its aftermath. I decided to make the mermaids' underwater home resemble a Hong Kong wuxia film because I remember my parents showing me some of those movies they had seen from the 1980s dubbed in Vietnamese. The underwater kingdom is specifically influenced by the Tsui Hark film *A Chinese Ghost Story*. The above-water world is based on San Francisco in the 1980s, and the theater in which the mermaid performs is based on the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco.

The mermaid is a stand-in for Helen's experiences, a woman who wanted to escape to another world and manages to make it there at the cost of her ability to communicate. The mermaid's transition from a world that resembles a Hong Kong wuxia film to 1980s San Francisco mirrors the way Helen envisions her own journey from Vietnam to the United States.



I've always thought of "The Little Mermaid" as a story about immigration. Even though Andersen's version is the most widely recognized, it was hardly the first. Some of the characters and names in this comic have been shifted around as a nod to the 1958 ballet *Ondine*, which was based on an 1811 novella by German Romantic writer Friedrich Heinrich Karl de la Motte Fouqué. The dance segments were referenced from footage of Dame Margot Fonteyn as the water sprite Ondine, a role that was explicitly created for her. The mermaid's ballet dress is modeled after Fonteyn's costume for the ballet.

The common thread between the novel, the ballet, and the children's story is the tragedy of the mermaid. She is a figure who attempts to transition between two worlds, and in most instances she fails and dies. I wanted to show Helen recognizing her son's desire for a different narrative. She might not yet be able to discuss the nuances of queerness at length, but that doesn't stop her from doing her best to find a way to make her love and support known, even if she needs to break from tradition and make do with what she knows.



Natural hybrid languages are informal. The uninitiated might hear two broken languages hastily cobbled together, but the interweaving Vietnamese and English hybrid I speak with my family is incredibly special to me.

It's the sound of people from very different worlds doing their best to come together and make each other feel at home.



Bonus artwork

Mother and Son Between Stories

Before I started writing the book, I had drawn a few drafts based on nonnarrative projects I had previously done. This was the very earliest conception of one unified story—the girl in the tattered coat, the girl wearing the fish's dress, and the little mermaid are all present.

Cover Line Art (opposite page)

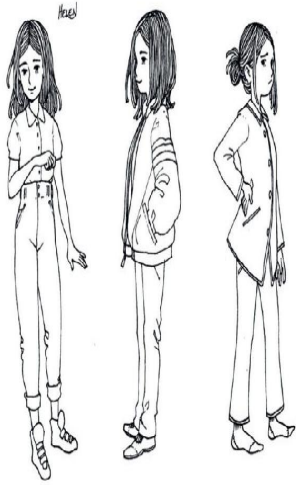
This was a fun image to draw! Our designer, Patrick Crotty, is responsible for the colors on the cover. I drew several small thumbnail illustrations for preferred compositions, and this was the one we selected.





Aiera on the Couch and Aiera Under the Furs

The first fairy tale Tiên reads is "Tattercoats," and that one required the most preparation in terms of drawing. I had conceived of the book as a black-and-white project, so at this stage I was concerned about making sure I could adequately mix very different textures while working in one line weight. I combined stippling and hatching to give the fabrics the illusion of iridescence. I love putting very nitpicky patterns right next to large areas of empty space. It gives the picture nice visual tension. Ultimately, the limited palette in the book helped carry the different textures, so I could rely on color value on top of textures. It really saved my wrist!



REMOVE THE
KISS PROSE
FROM CHAPTERS
... FINISH
WHY DOES
CHARLES



Character Concepts

These character drawings were more for my benefit than anyone else's. I actually started drawing the book before I made these. At some point I realized that it would be easier to have a drawing of these characters pinned up somewhere than to keep referring to finished pages.

As the night captured
Hera found herself
wondering
different side of the
page



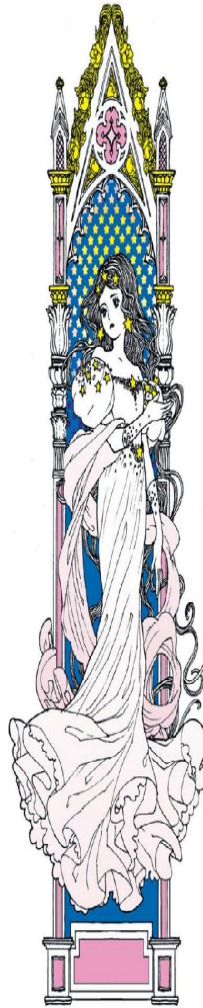
Unfinished Page

The trouble with working traditionally is that sometimes you get too far into a drawing before you realize it doesn't work. I did this a few times before I decided to switch over to digital drawing to help hit my deadlines. I really loved this image of Hera dancing with the prince, but I had composed the page in a way that didn't work with the speech balloons.

Tulip Dress

For "Toltercats," I looked at a lot of contemporary gowns. This was another way for me to practice interpreting real fabrics in a drawing where I was restricted by a rigid line weight. After this drawing, I felt more confident approximating fabrics with nothing but dots and lines. This dress is based on a Dior dress from the fall 2011 couture collection.





Dress of Midnight and Dress of Starlight

These two images were made once I had finalized the look of two of Alera's dresses. I needed images to reference for the book that would stay largely consistent, so I drew these. The background frames are loosely based on some of the architecture from the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence, Italy. They were drawn almost entirely traditionally, and then I cobbled them together digitally.

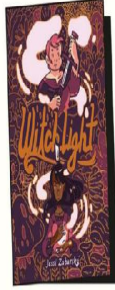
YOUR NEXT FAVORITE GRAPHIC NOVEL



The Magic Fish

by Trung Le Nguyen

How can Tién talk to his parents about being gay when they're struggling with English and he doesn't know the words in Vietnamese?



Witchlight

by Jessi Zabarsky

Leliek's life is plagued by secrets. . . . Can she and Sarja work together to uncover her past and restore her magic?



Suncatcher

by Jose Pimental

Beatriz needs to write the perfect song to save her grandfather's soul—but what will she have to give up in exchange?



The Montague Twins

by Nathan Page and Drew Shannon

Paiz and Alastair Montague are just a couple of mystery-solving twins living an ordinary life. Or so they thought.

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