

# WATERCRESS



ANDREA WANG

PICTURES BY JASON CHIN

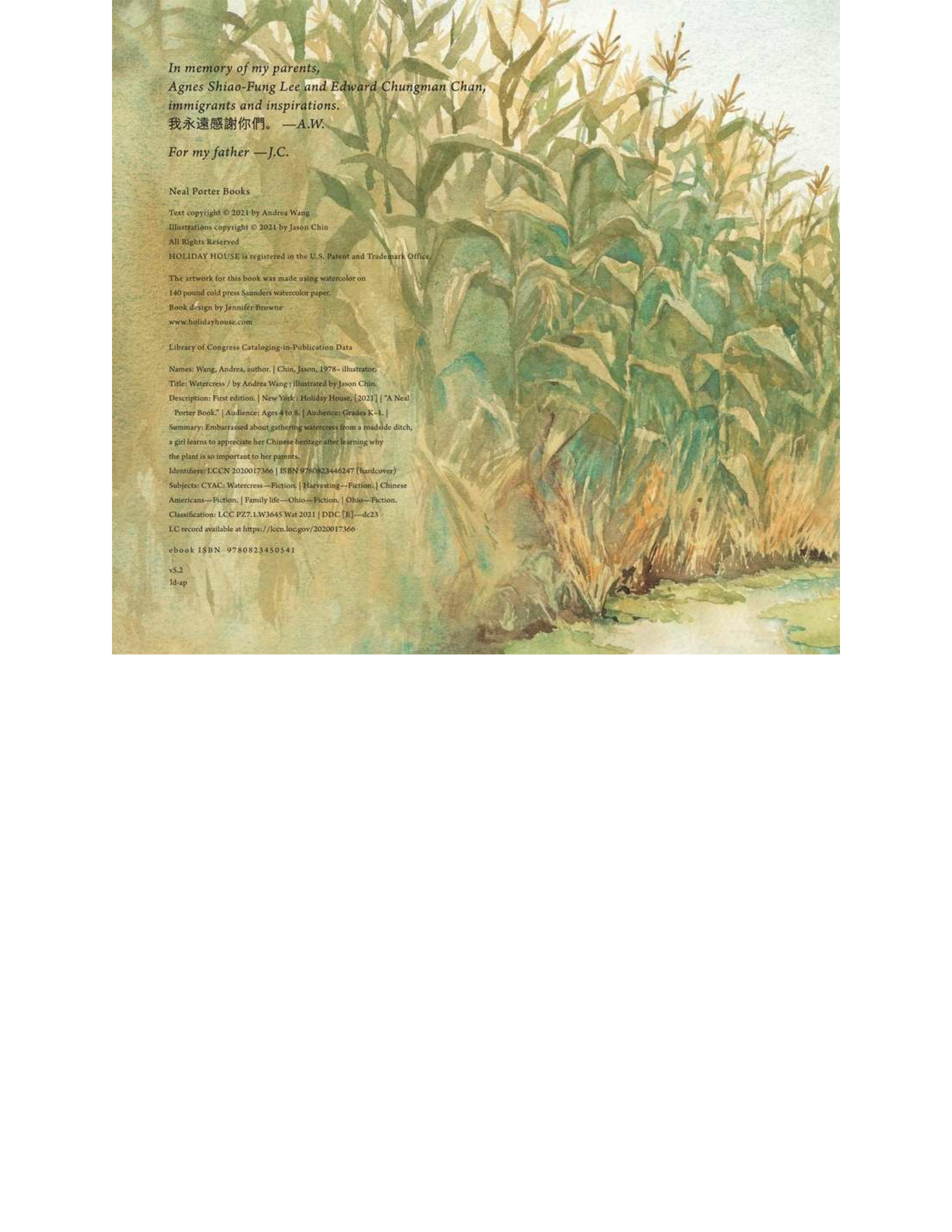




WATER

ANDREA WANG





*In memory of my parents,  
Agnes Shiao-Fung Lee and Edward Chungman Chan,  
immigrants and inspirations.  
我永遠感謝你們。 —A.W.*

*For my father —J.C.*

Neal Porter Books

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The artwork for this book was made using watercolor on  
140 pound cold press Saunders watercolor paper.

Book design by Jennifer Browne

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Summary: Embarrassed about gathering watercress from a roadside ditch,  
a girl learns to appreciate her Chinese heritage after learning why  
the plant is so important to her parents.

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NEAL PORTER BOOKS  
HOLIDAY HOUSE / NEW YORK

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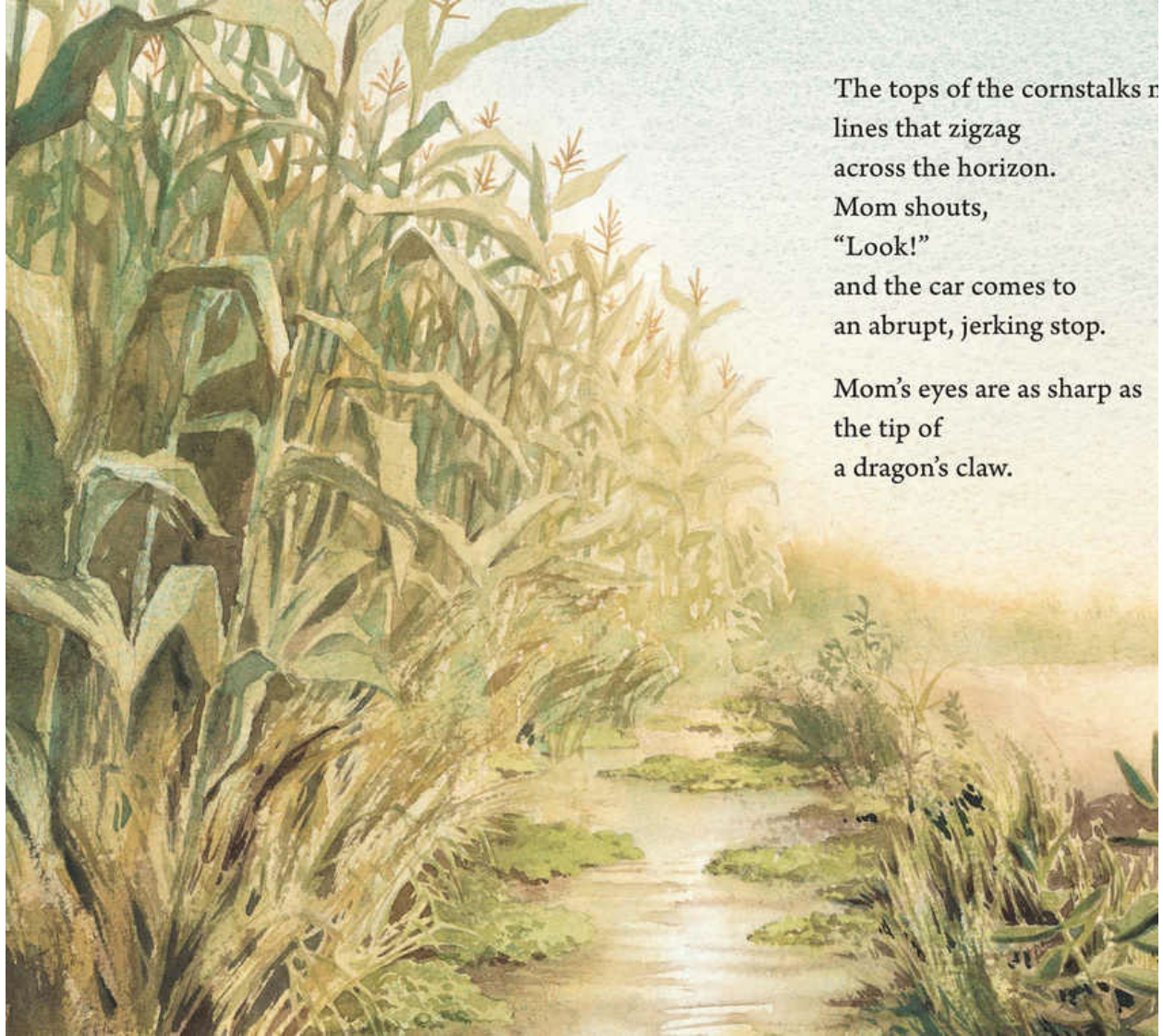
**W**e are in the old Pontiac,  
the red paint faded by years of  
glinting Ohio sun,  
pelting rain,  
and biting snow.











The tops of the cornstalks rise  
lines that zigzag  
across the horizon.

Mom shouts,  
“Look!”  
and the car comes to  
an abrupt, jerking stop.

Mom’s eyes are as sharp as  
the tip of  
a dragon’s claw.



nake

Dad's eyes grow wide.  
"Watercress!" they exclaim,  
two voices  
heavy with memories.

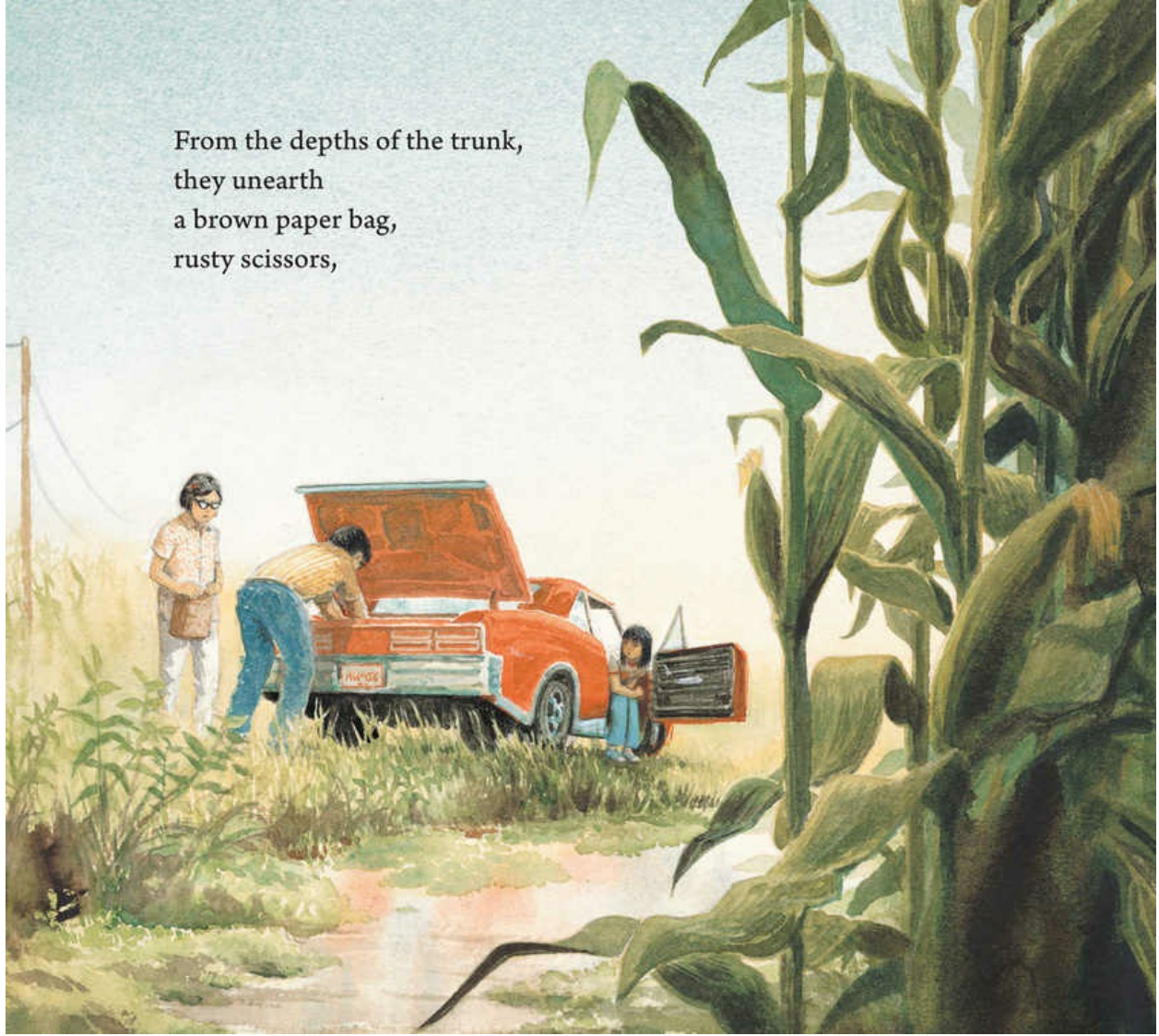


Dad's eyes grow wide.  
"Watercress!" they exclaim,  
two voices  
heavy with memories.





From the depths of the trunk,  
they unearth  
a brown paper bag,  
rusty scissors,



and a longing for  
China.



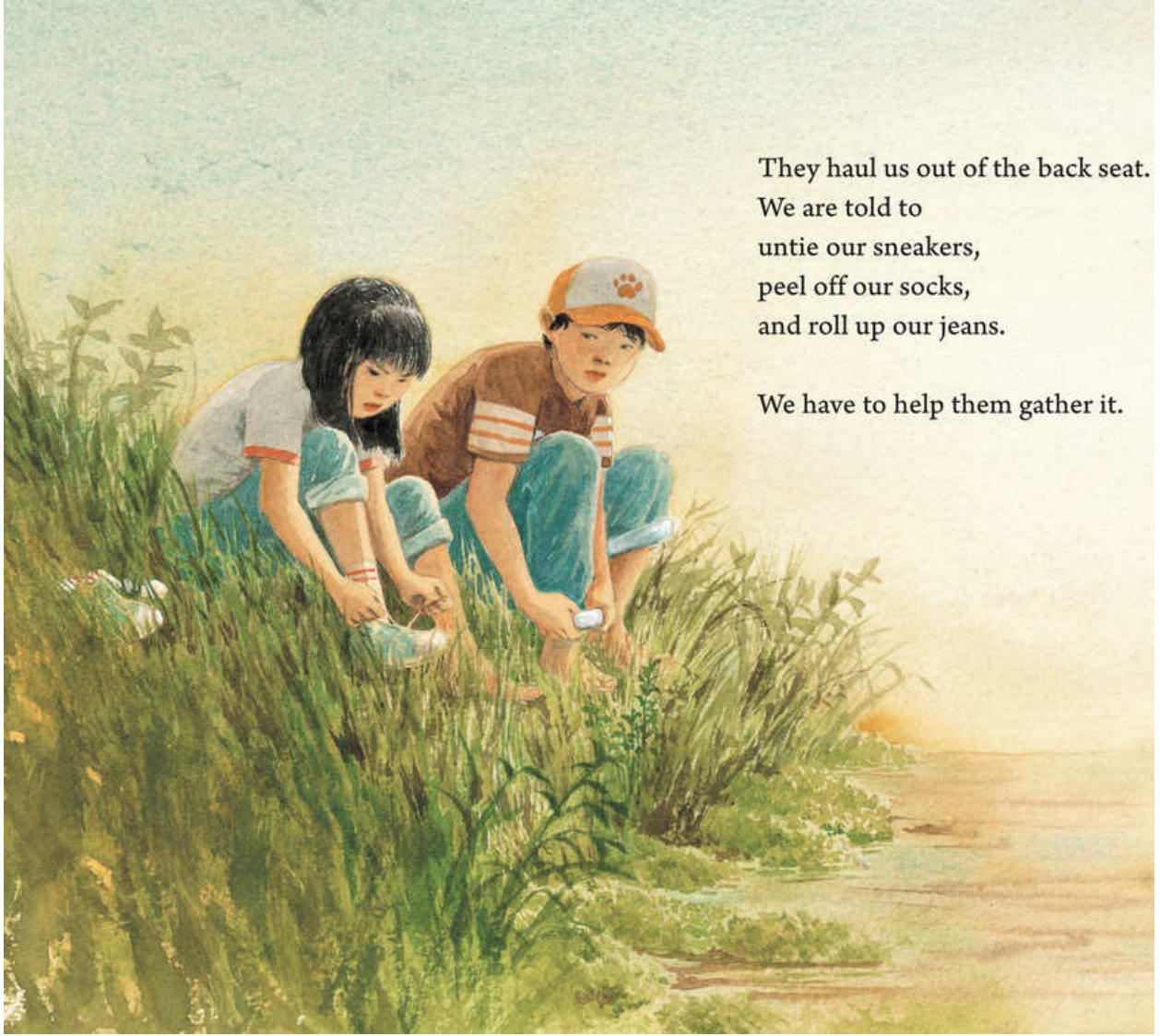


and a longing for  
China.



They haul us out of the back seat.  
We are told to  
untie our sneakers,  
peel off our socks,  
and roll up our jeans.

We have to help them gather it.







The water in  
It stings my  
and the mud  
up between



The water in the ditch is cold.  
It stings my ankles  
and the mud squelches  
up between my toes.



A car passes by  
and I duck my head  
hoping it's  
no one I know.

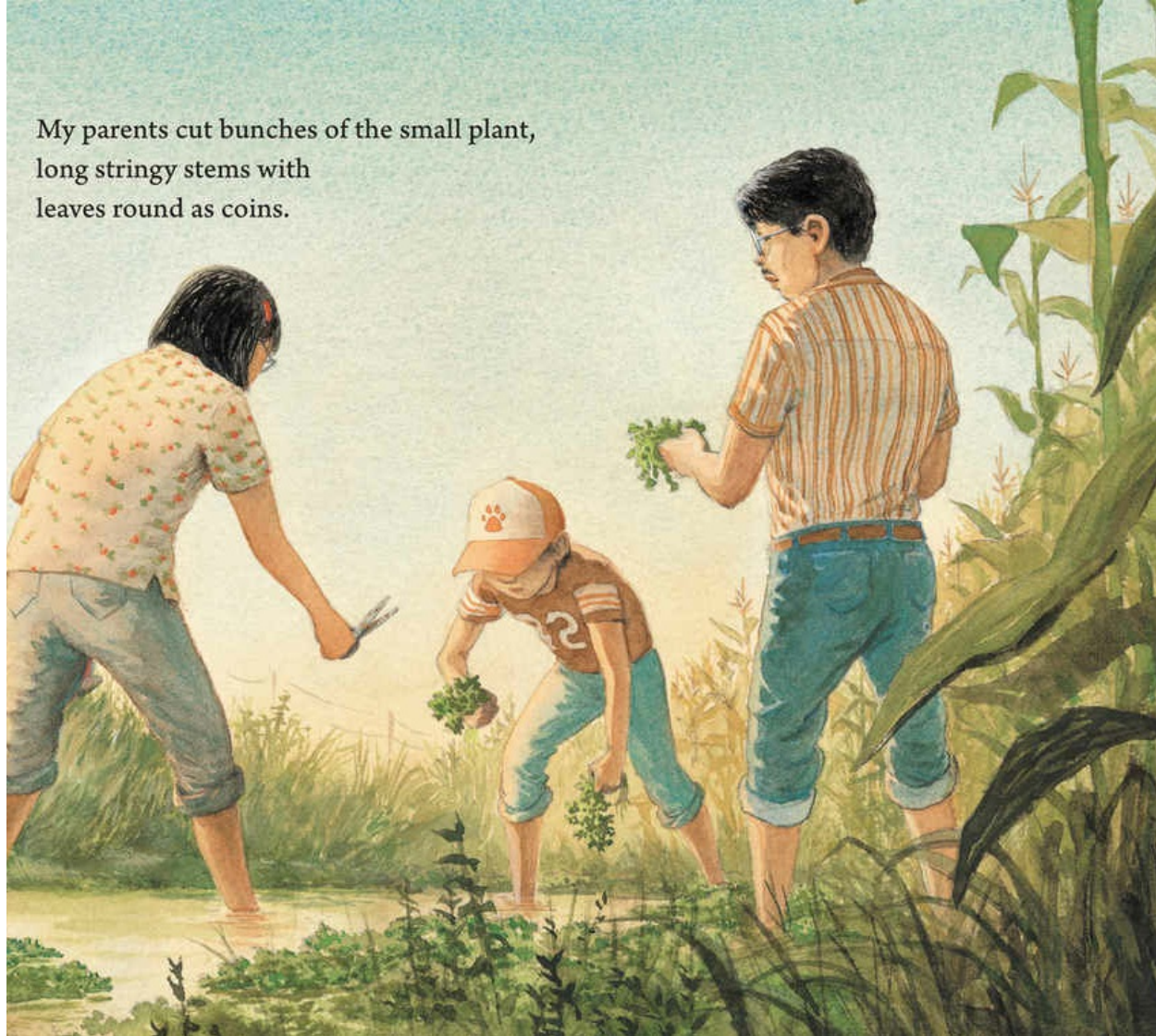


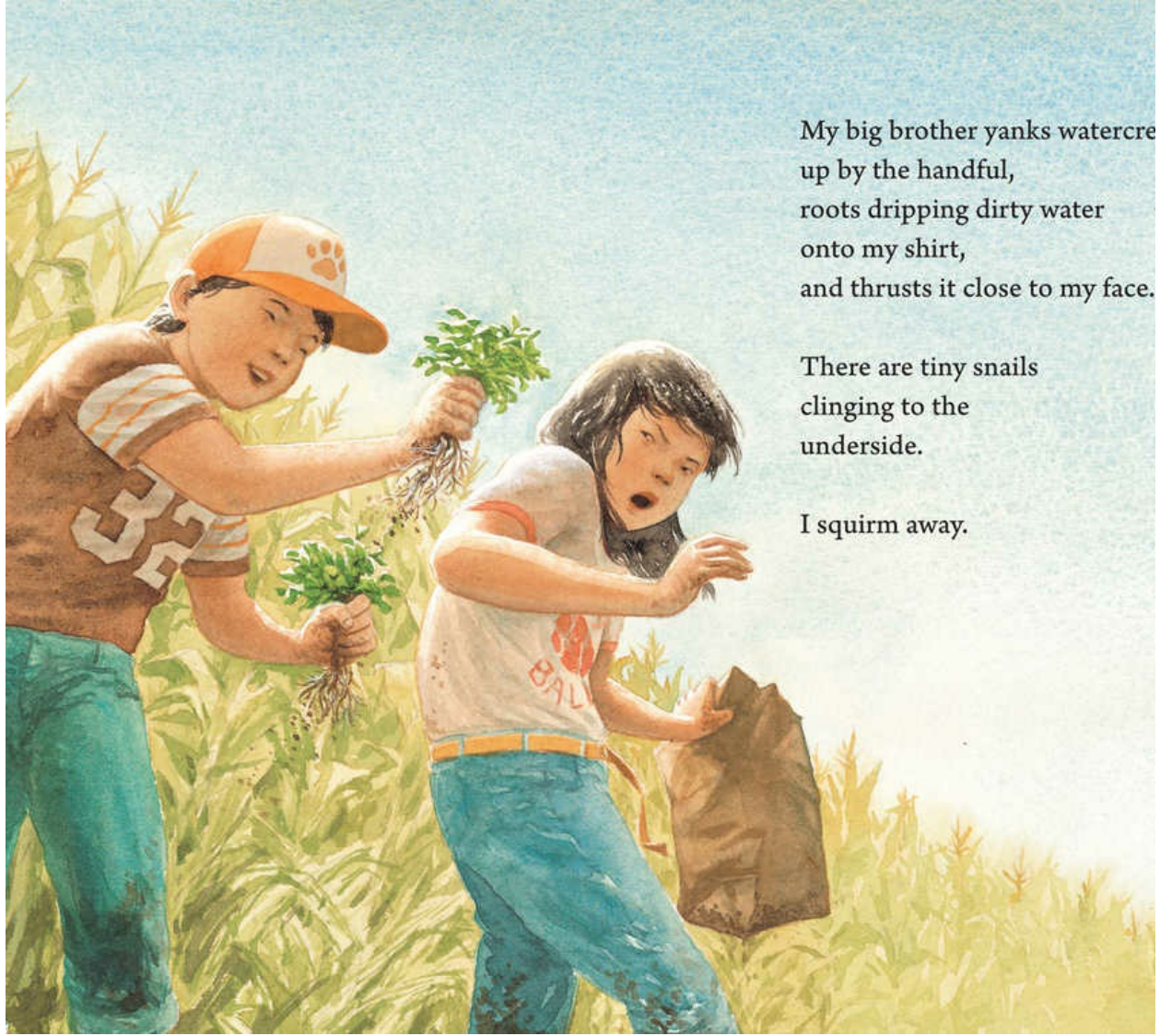
My parents cut bunches of the small plant,  
long stringy stems with  
leaves round as coins.





My parents cut bunches of the small plant,  
long stringy stems with  
leaves round as coins.





My big brother yanks watercre  
up by the handful,  
roots dripping dirty water  
onto my shirt,  
and thrusts it close to my face.

There are tiny snails  
clinging to the  
underside.

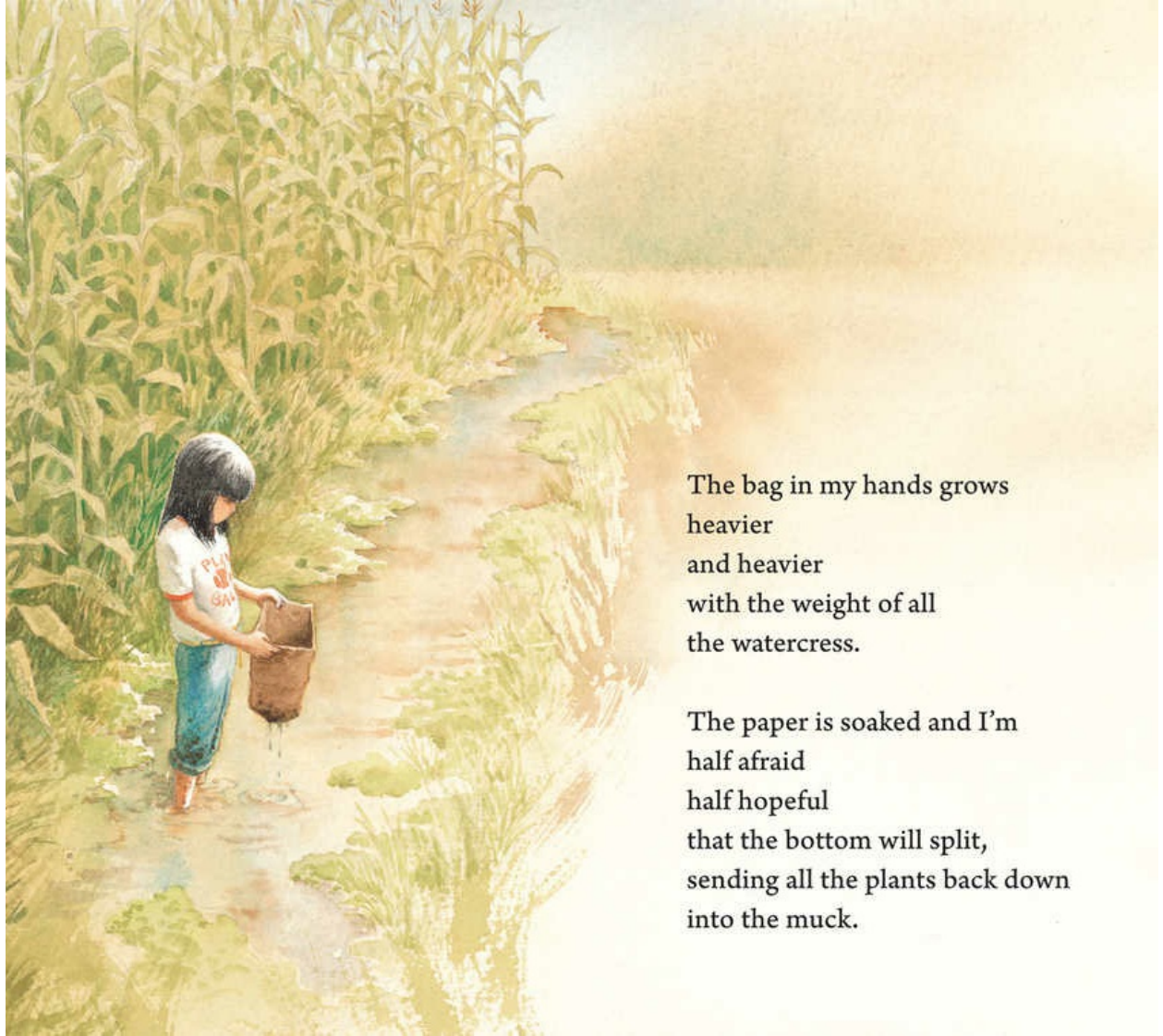
I squirm away.





The bag in my  
heavier  
and heavier  
with the weight  
the watercress.

The paper is so  
half afraid  
half hopeful  
that the bottom  
sending all the  
into the muck.

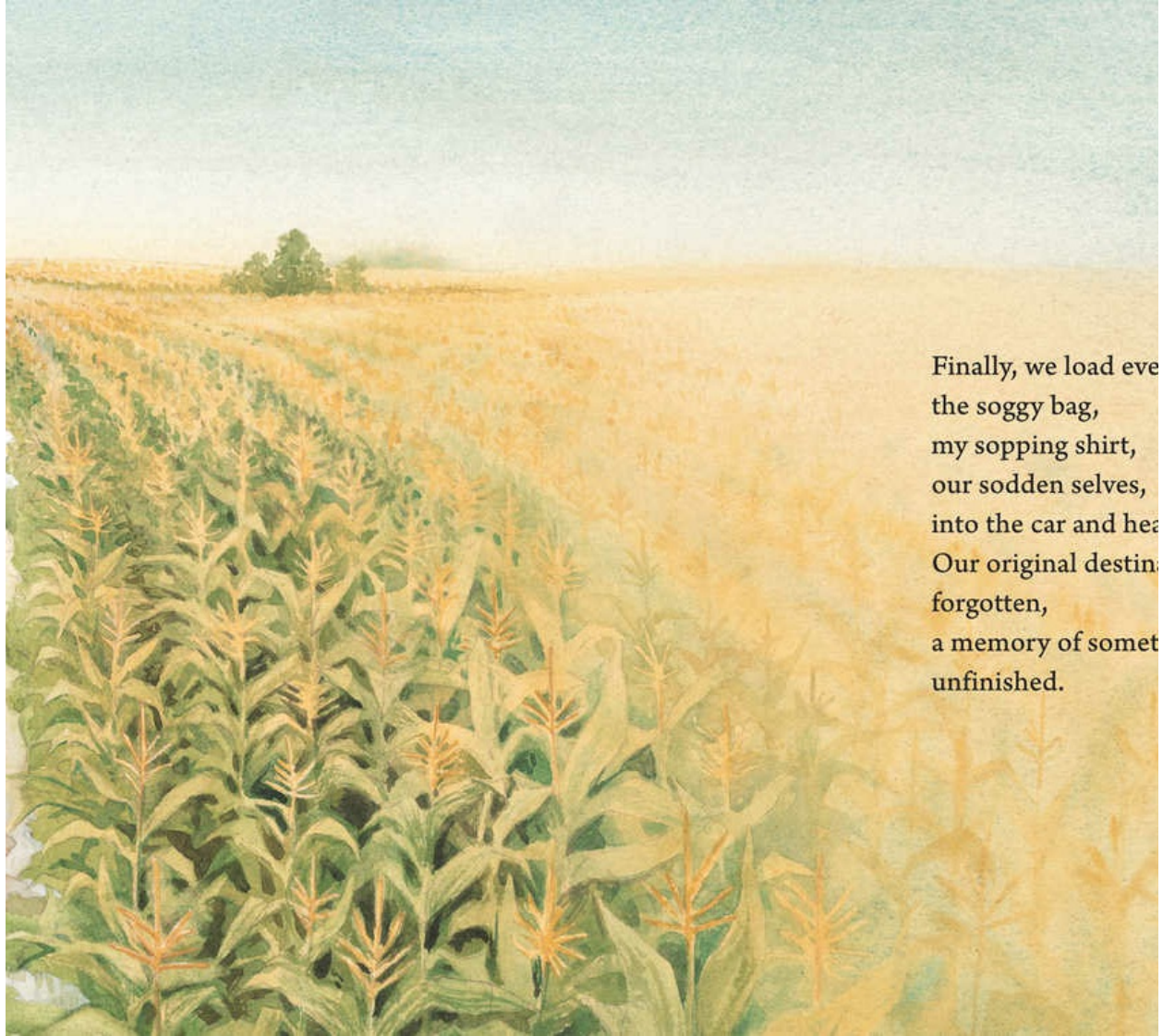


The bag in my hands grows  
heavier  
and heavier  
with the weight of all  
the watercress.

The paper is soaked and I'm  
half afraid  
half hopeful  
that the bottom will split,  
sending all the plants back down  
into the muck.

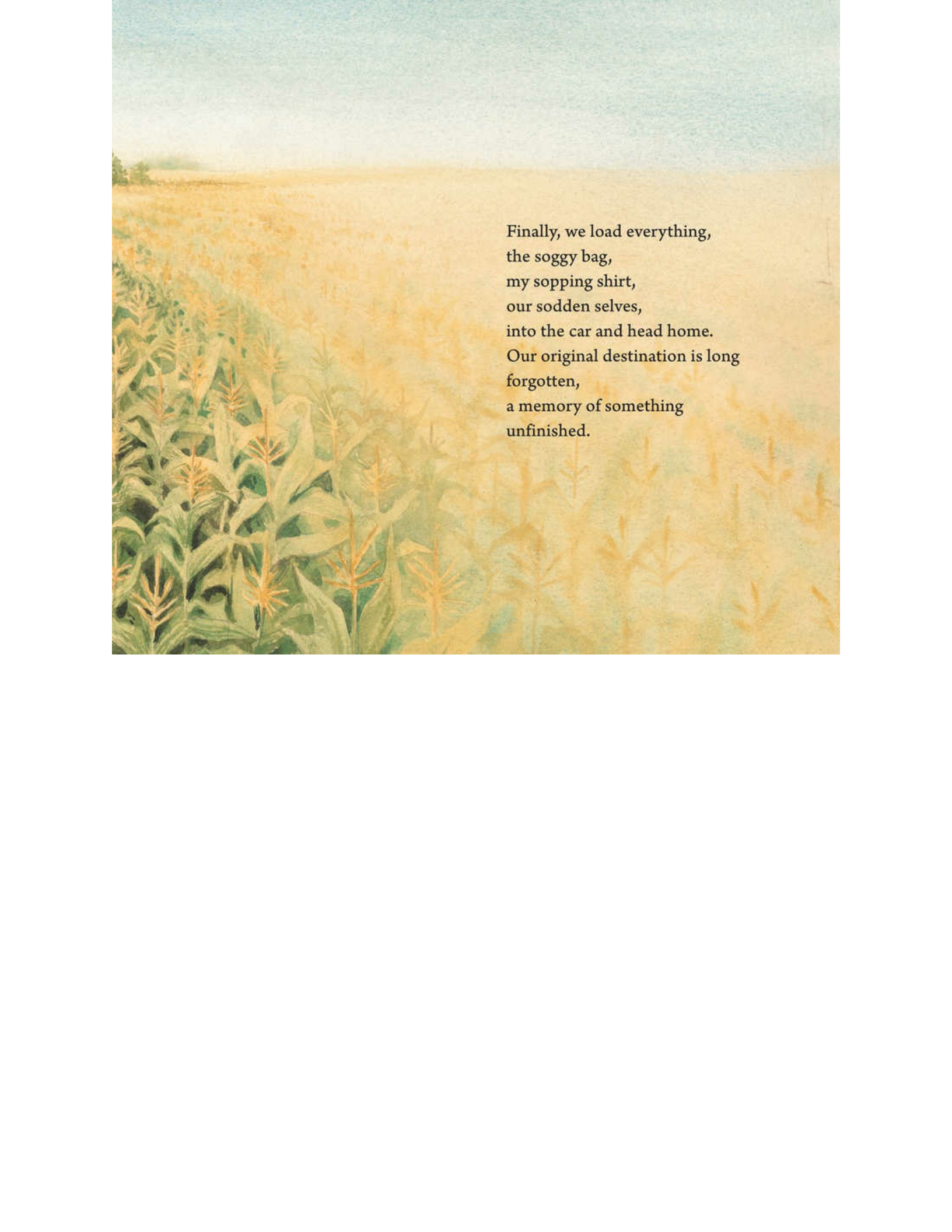






Finally, we load even  
the soggy bag,  
my sopping shirt,  
our sodden selves,  
into the car and head  
Our original destination  
forgotten,  
a memory of something  
unfinished.



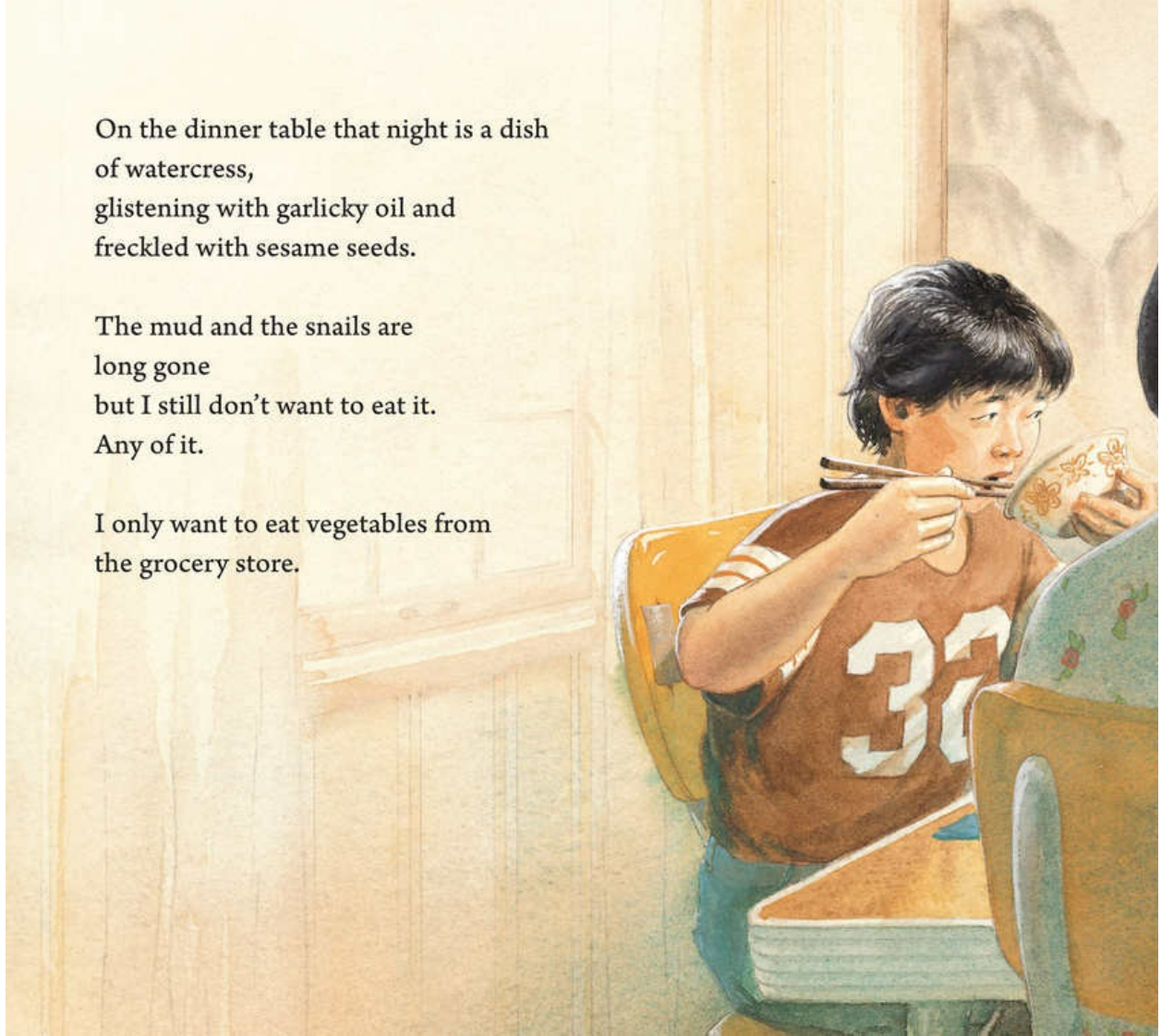
The background of the page is a painting. It depicts a wide, flat landscape of a field, likely a cornfield, stretching to a distant horizon. The field is a mix of vibrant green and golden-yellow, suggesting different stages of growth or perhaps a reflection of light. In the immediate foreground, on the left side, there is a more detailed row of corn plants with large green leaves and prominent yellow tassels. The sky above is a soft, pale blue, blending into the horizon. The overall style is impressionistic, with visible brushstrokes and a soft, hazy atmosphere.

Finally, we load everything,  
the soggy bag,  
my sopping shirt,  
our sodden selves,  
into the car and head home.  
Our original destination is long  
forgotten,  
a memory of something  
unfinished.

On the dinner table that night is a dish  
of watercress,  
glistening with garlicky oil and  
freckled with sesame seeds.

The mud and the snails are  
long gone  
but I still don't want to eat it.  
Any of it.

I only want to eat vegetables from  
the grocery store.







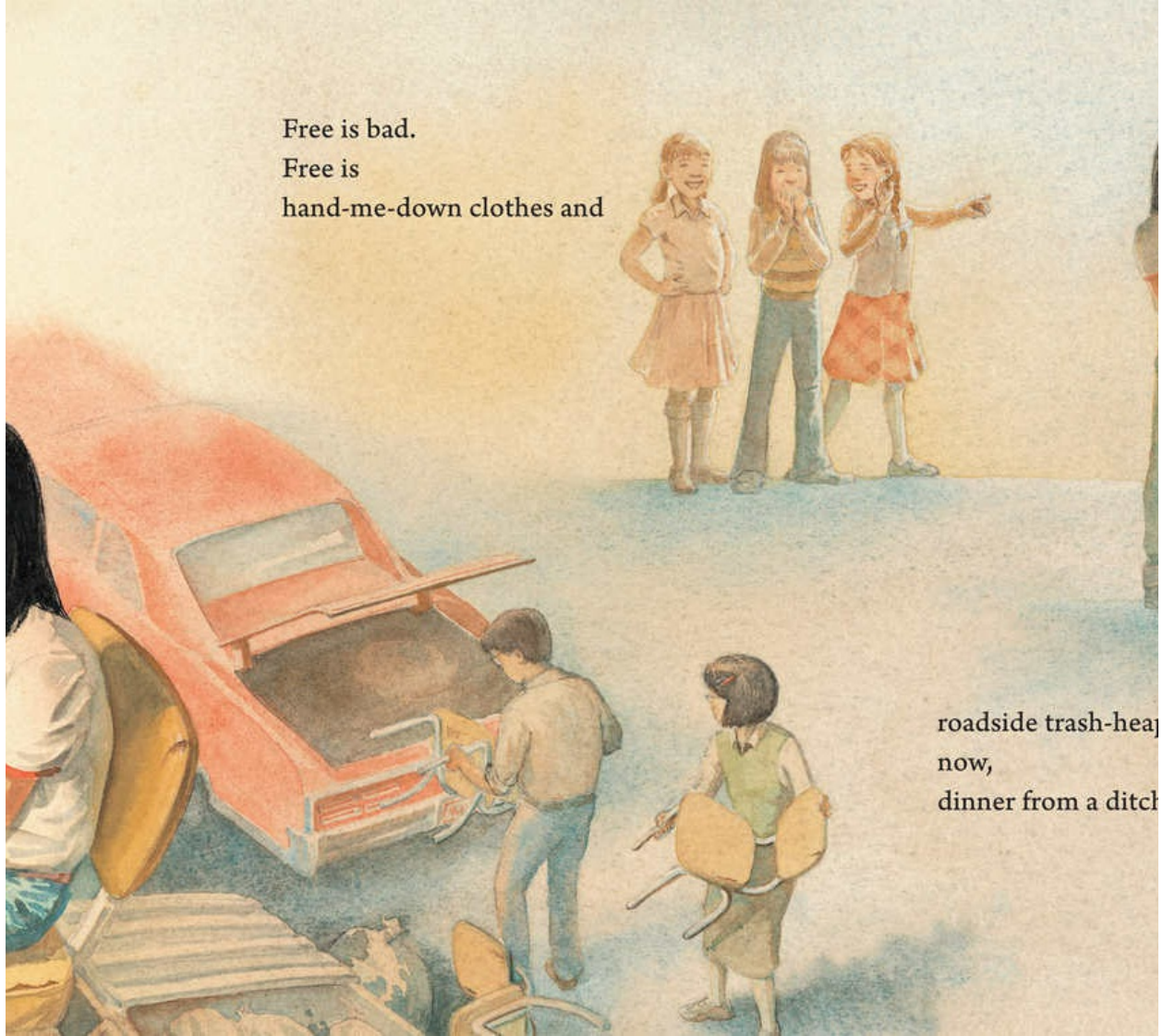




Mom and Dad press me to try some.  
"It is fresh," Dad says.  
"It is free," Mom says.  
I shake my head.



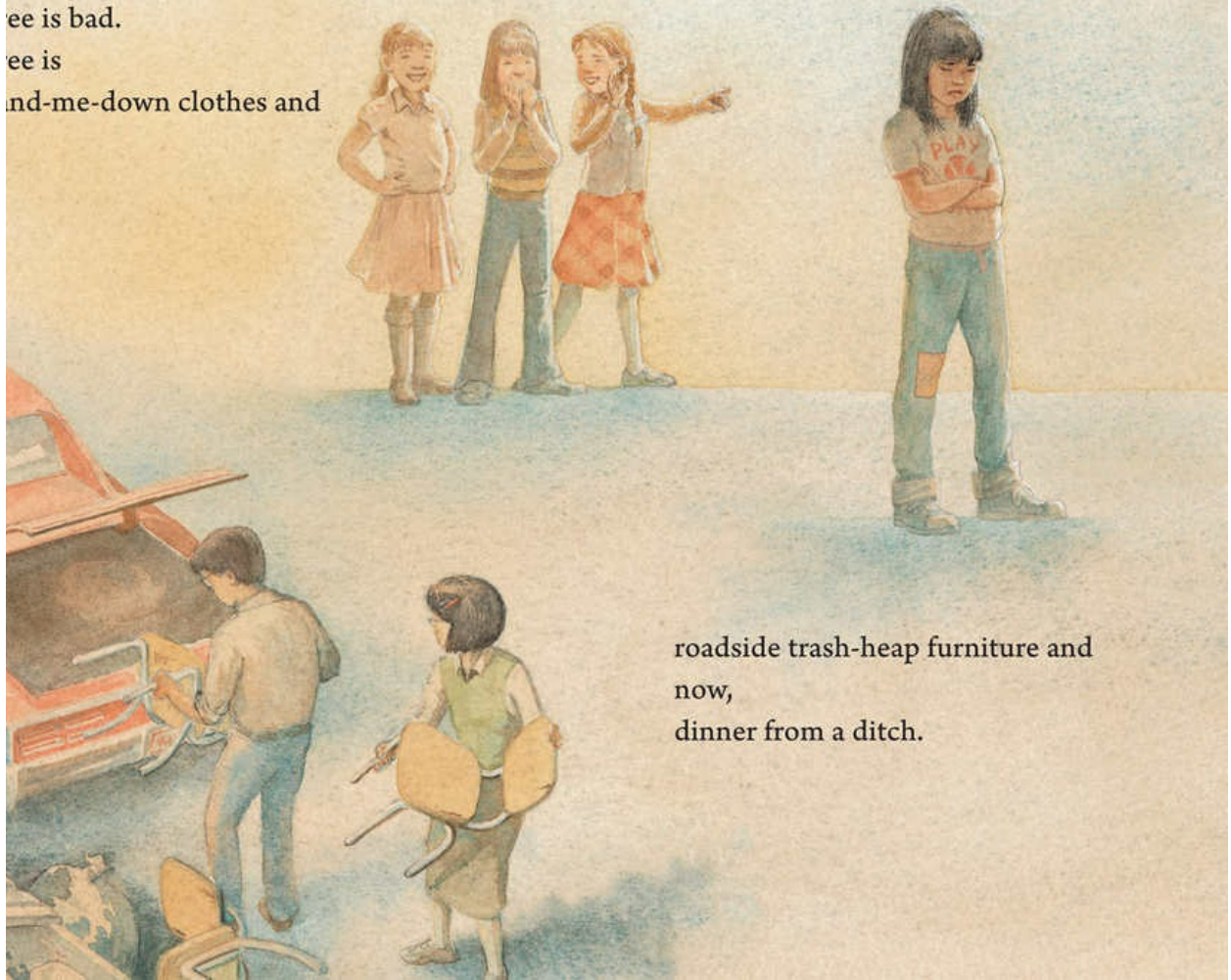
Free is bad.  
Free is  
hand-me-down clothes and



roadside trash-heaps  
now,  
dinner from a ditch

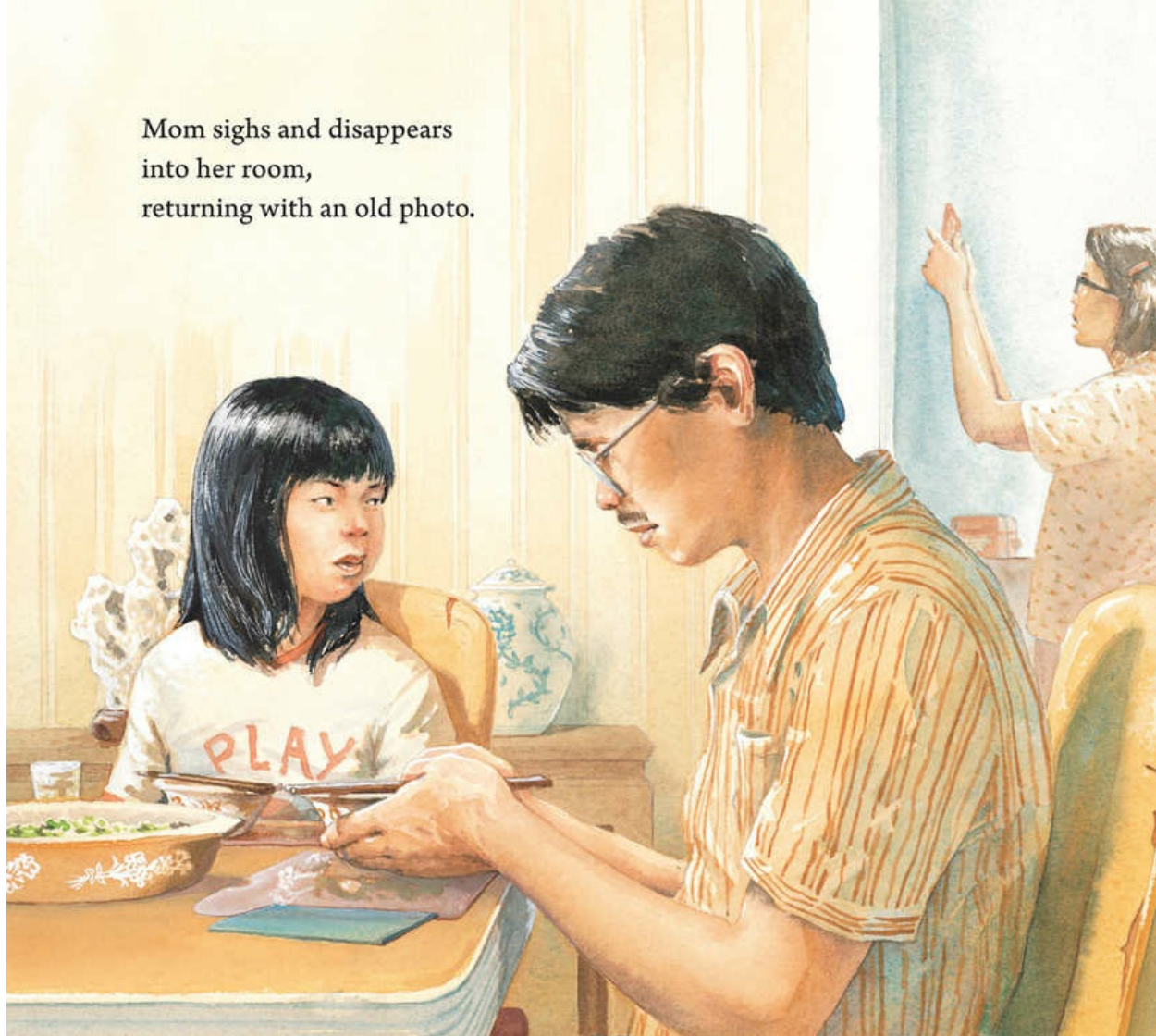


ee is bad.  
ee is  
nd-me-down clothes and



roadside trash-heap furniture and  
now,  
dinner from a ditch.

Mom sighs and disappears  
into her room,  
returning with an old photo.







"My family," she says,  
"from before."

We stare.

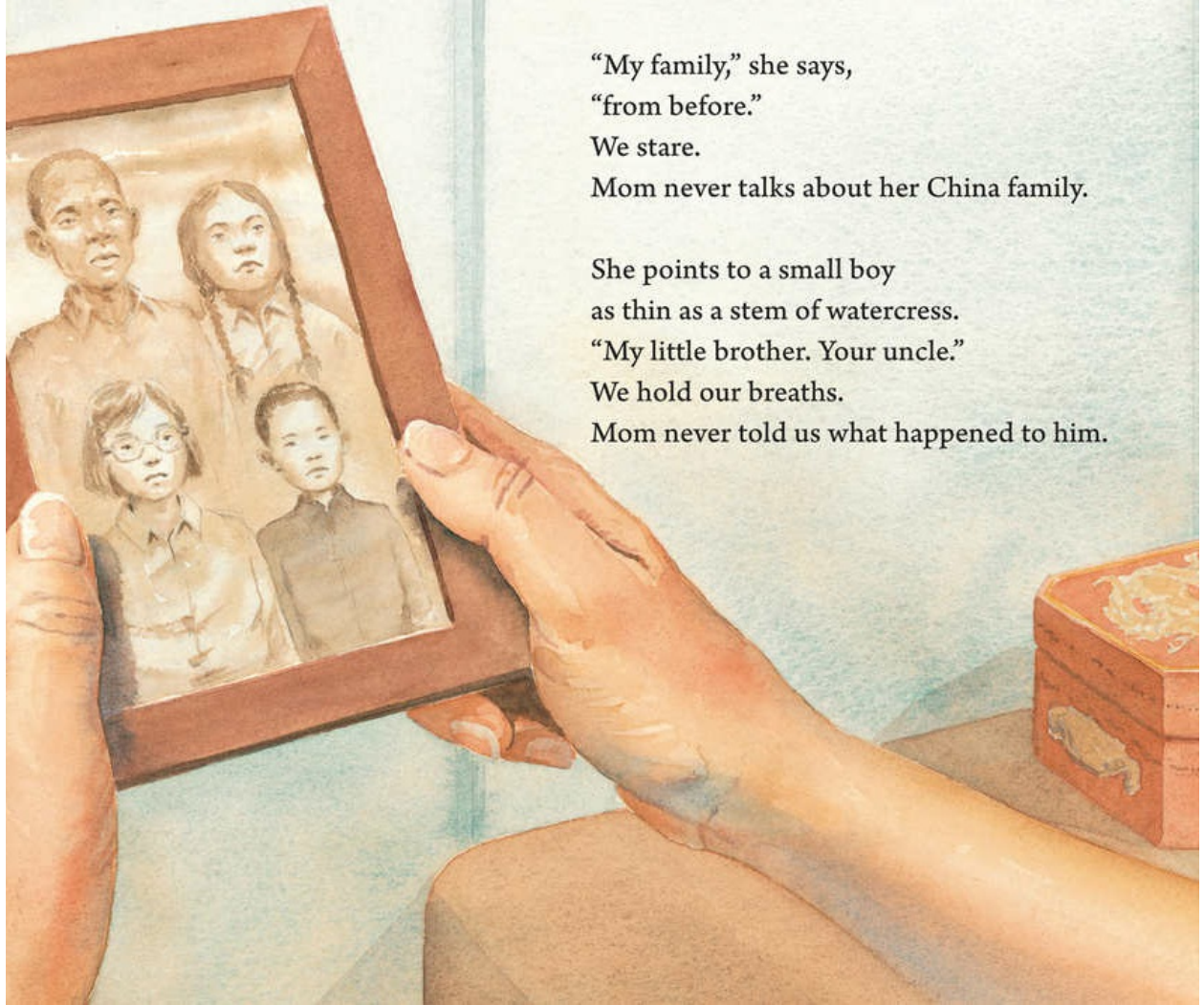
Mom never talks about h

She points to a small boy  
as thin as a stem of water

"My little brother. Your i

We hold our breaths.

Mom never told us what



"My family," she says,  
"from before."

We stare.

Mom never talks about her China family.

She points to a small boy  
as thin as a stem of watercress.

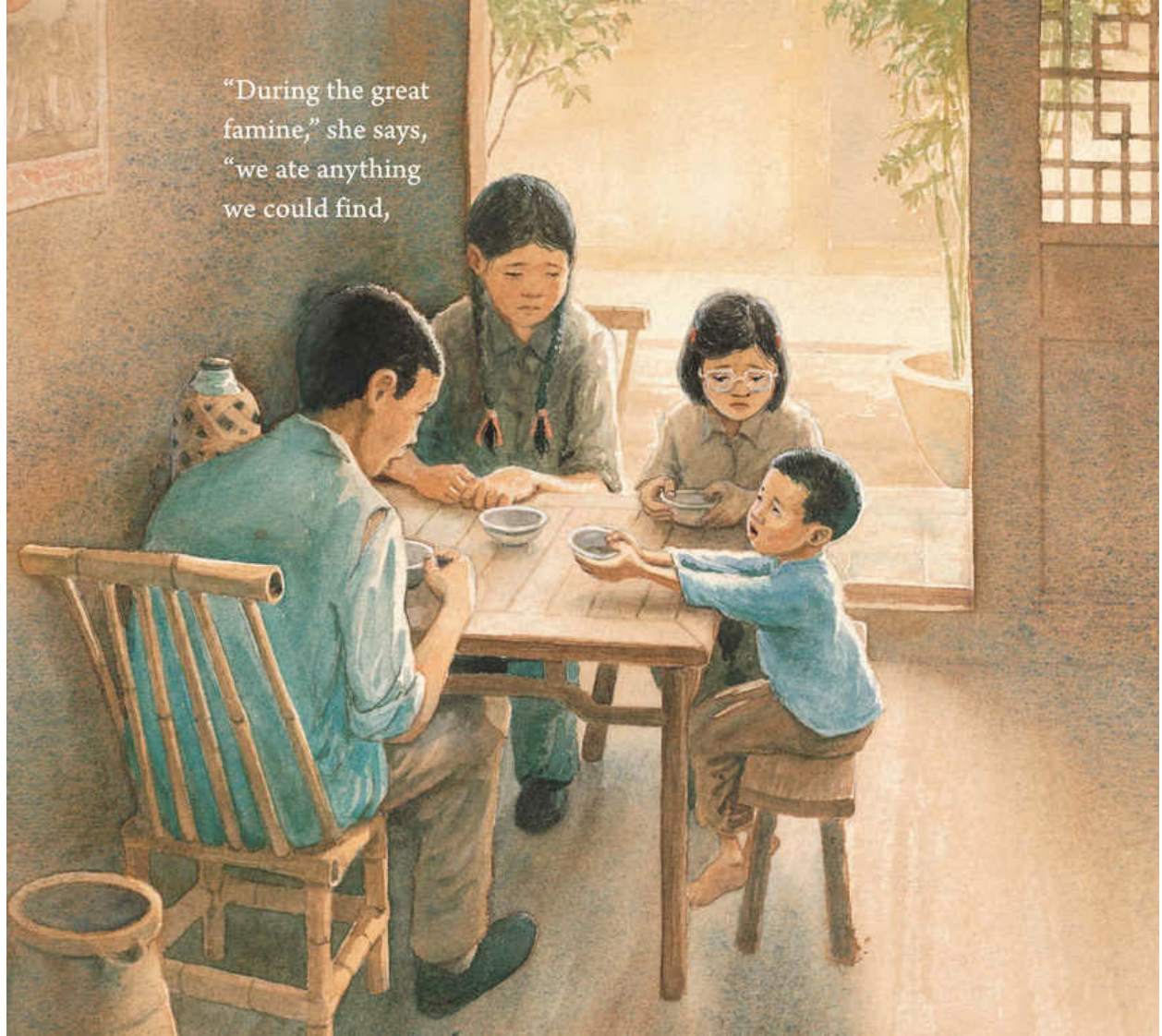
"My little brother. Your uncle."

We hold our breaths.

Mom never told us what happened to him.



"During the great  
famine," she says,  
"we ate anything  
we could find,







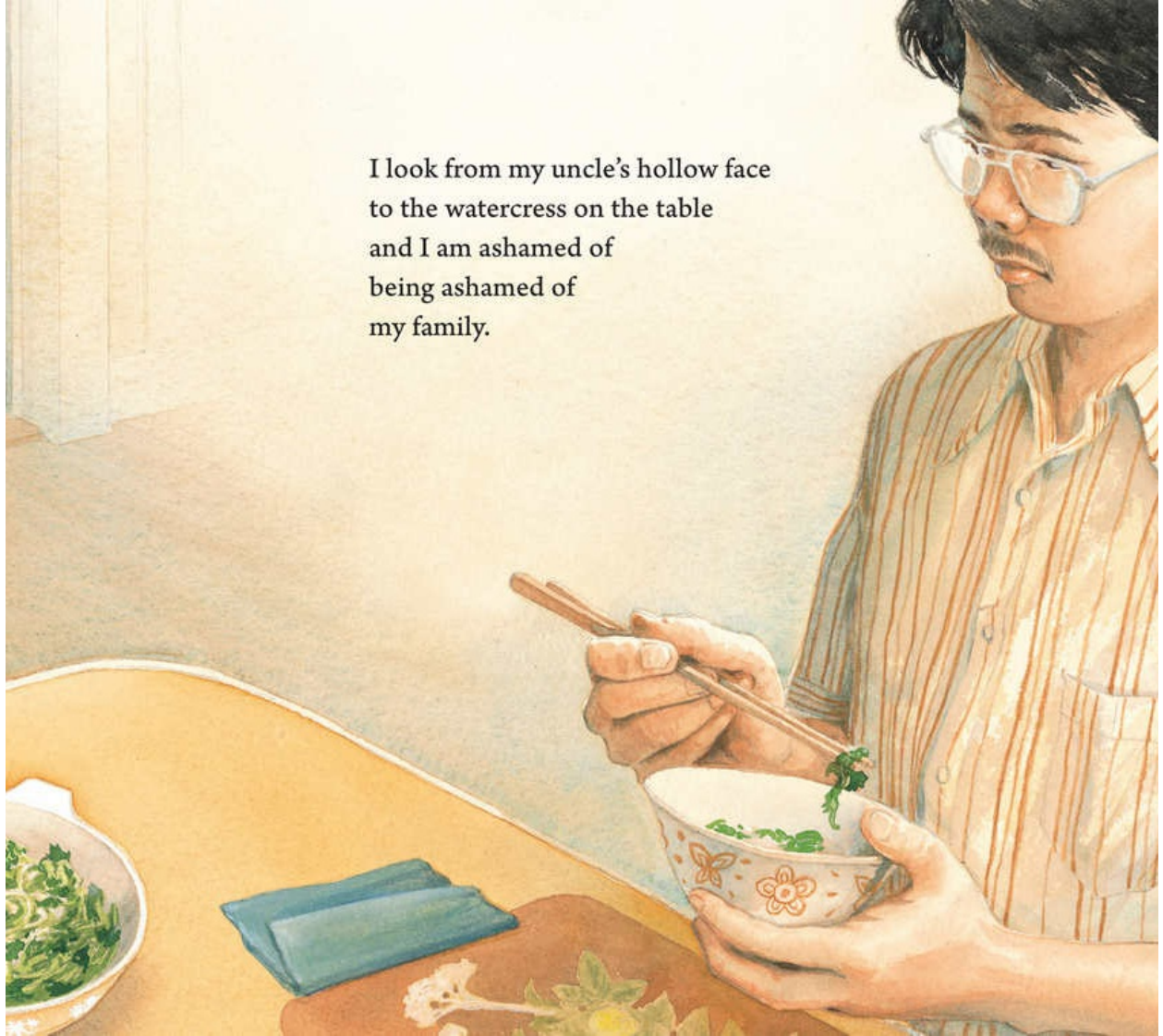


but it was still  
not enough.”

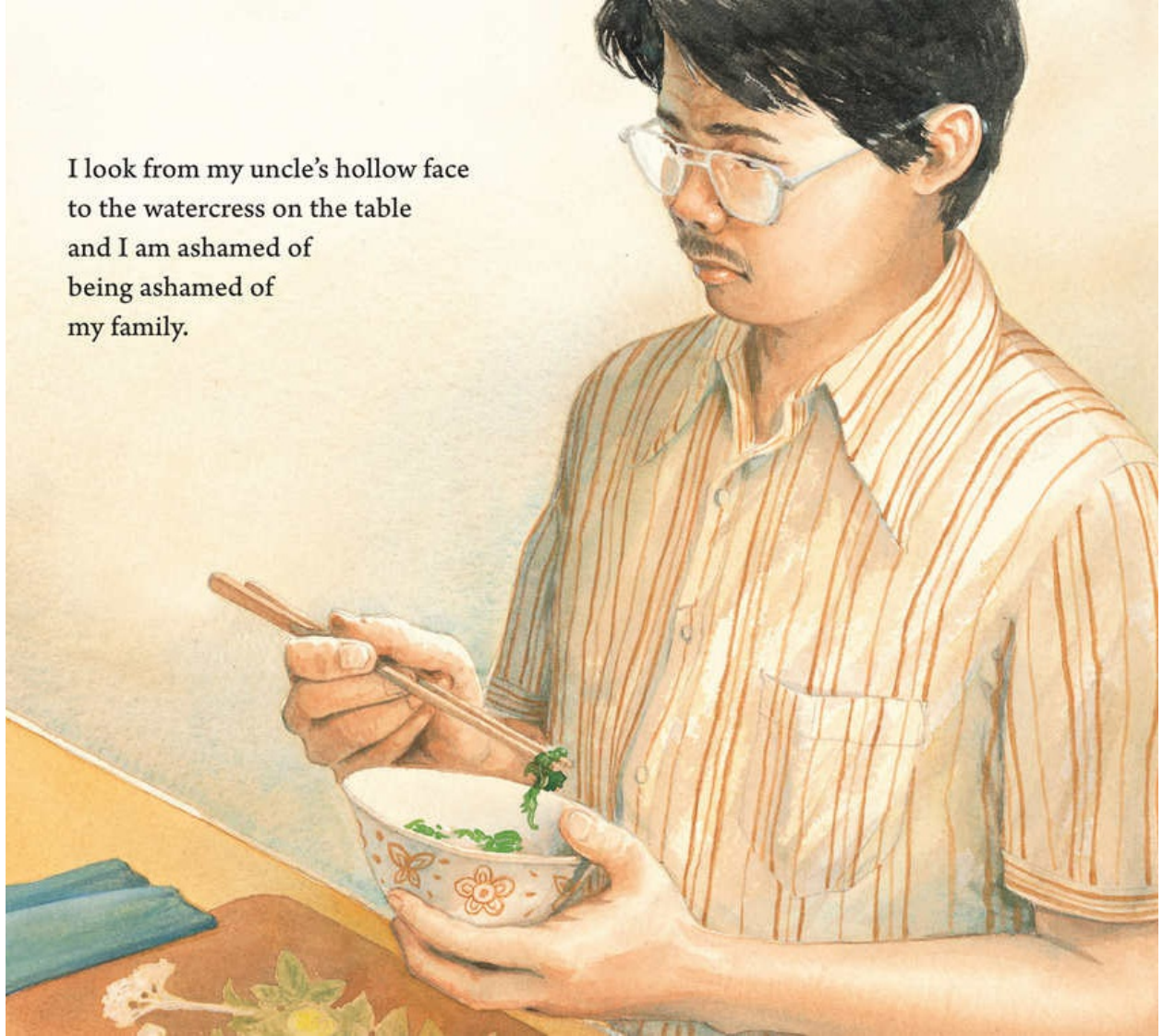




I look from my uncle's hollow face  
to the watercress on the table  
and I am ashamed of  
being ashamed of  
my family.

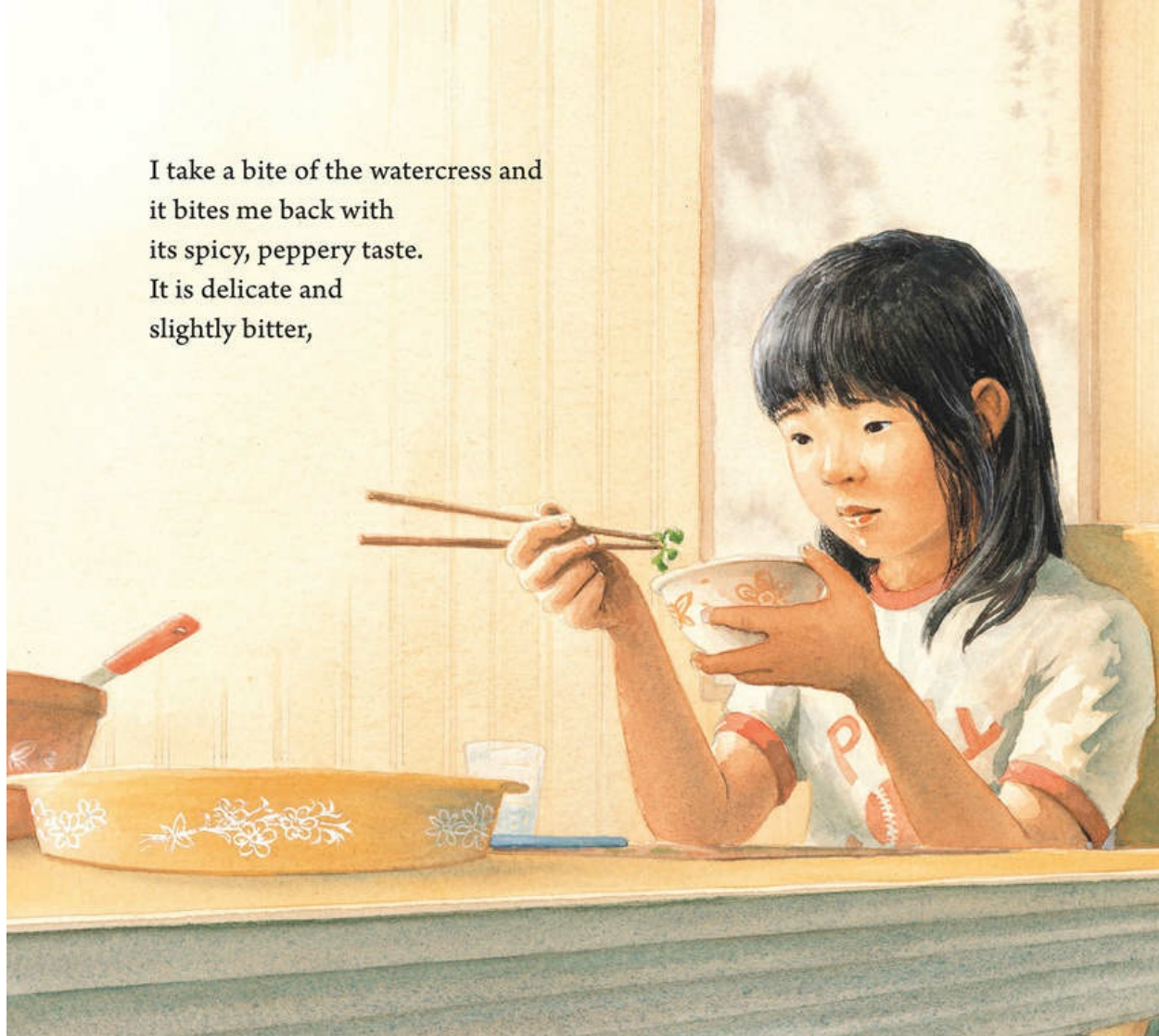


I look from my uncle's hollow face  
to the watercress on the table  
and I am ashamed of  
being ashamed of  
my family.





I take a bite of the watercress and  
it bites me back with  
its spicy, peppery taste.  
It is delicate and  
slightly bitter,



like Mom's memories  
of home.





like Mom's memories  
of home.










Together,  
we eat it  
all  
and make a  
new memory of  
watercress.



Together,  
we eat it  
all  
and make a  
new memory of  
watercress.



#### A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This story is about the power of memory. Not just the beautiful memories, like the ones my mother and father had about eating watercress in China, but also the difficult ones, the memories that are sometimes too painful to share. It starts with my own distressing memory of being made to pick watercress that was growing wild by the side of the road. As the child of Chinese immigrants, growing up in a small, mostly white town in Ohio, I was very aware of how different my family and I were from everyone else. It's hard to feel like you don't belong, and collecting food from a muddy roadside ditch just made that bad feeling more intense for me—something my very practical parents didn't understand.

When I was young, my parents didn't talk about their memories of China, of growing up poor, losing siblings, and surviving war. I don't blame them—these are difficult topics to discuss with children. But it's important, too, for children to understand their family history. Perhaps if I had known about the hardships they had faced, I would have been more compassionate as a child. Maybe I would have felt more empathy and less anger. More pride in my heritage and less shame. Memories have the power to inform, to inspire, and to heal.

This story is both an apology and a love letter to my parents. It's also an encouragement to all children who feel different and to families with difficult pasts—share your memories. Tell your stories. They are essential. —A. W.

#### A NOTE FROM THE ARTIST

When I first read *Watercress*, I was impressed by how Andrea was able to fold so many layers of memory, culture, and emotion into a short text, and I wanted the illustrations to complement each of those layers. I wanted the art to reflect the American and Chinese heritage of the characters. I chose to paint in watercolor because it's common to both Chinese and western art and I used both Chinese and western brushes. The color palette is heavy in yellow ochre, which reminds me of old photographs and 1970s decor, and cerulean blue, which is similar to the blue often used in Chinese paintings. Traditional Chinese landscape paintings feature mountains painted with soft marks that create a dreamlike quality. This technique seemed appropriate for implying memory, so I included many soft washes throughout the book.

It is common for children of immigrants to be unaware of their parents' stories and culture, and to feel out of place, misunderstood, and even angry. My own father, also a child of Chinese immigrants, rejected Chinese food when he was young in an effort to try and fit in. These feelings, especially the anxiety that comes from feeling different, are not limited to immigrants and their children—they are universal. When I was painting, I drew on my own memories of exclusion, loss, and guilt with the hope that they might seep into the art and add another layer to Andrea's remarkable story. —J. C.







