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Book Review: The Doctor Will Fix It by Bunkong Tuon

John Brantingham · Wednesday, June 10th, 2020

Bunkong Tuon's poetry collection, *The Doctor Will Fix It*, follows his journey from the time that he becomes a father to his daughter Chanda until she is about three years old. She is a force that fills him with hope despite the fact that he is a Cambodian refugee who has lost family members and must face racism and being an outsider every day. This is a collection that at times might have slipped into sentimentality if Tuon had not been so focused on pointing out that the joys of parenthood are what makes life in an often hostile world possible. He is constantly battling that hostility and the despair that might accompany it by staying focused on that which matters to him.

The spirit of the collection might be found most clearly in his poem, "My Mother on Her Deathbed," in which he remembers his mother's death in a Thai refugee camp in his youth. Eventually, his uncle is beaten in this camp and his grandmother turns to grief. They are moved to the United States where he becomes "a reminder of a war / that tore families apart" (53) to the people of his new home. It is at this moment that he demonstrates the power and importance of focusing on the present, on the hope of the future rather than the loss of the past.

> But these memories
> are wiped clean.
> All is forgiven.
> A flower blooms
> in the desert
> when my daughter
> hugs me (53-54).

His daughter becomes the reason that he lives, in the way that daughters do for many parents, but also a powerful reminder that while life can take much away from him, it doesn't have to take away his humanity. If he focuses on her and his love for her, he will not lose what is essentially him.

That is not to say that all of the poems of this collection exudes hope. Some are full of the terror that threatens to steal his humanity. My favorite poem of the collection is "Coffee," where Tuon as a father in a country full of guns deals with the jitters that he naturally gets from both coffee and his anxieties. Lines like "Hands shake just the same / Body jitters to some invisible music" (71) and "I haven't slept in a thousand years / and I'm only 45" (71) clarify how he is reacting to the world around him. He is caught up in a political world that disturbs him. He criticizes the left: "the

left turns so far left / that they take on the mantle of the right" (71). He has greater criticisms for the right:

> A year ago, the president signed a bill
> making it easier for those suffering
> from mental illness to buy guns (71)

In this poem, his love for his daughter does not fix anything, but she gives him something to hold as he faces the darkness of the United States.

Tuon's *The Doctor Will Fix It* is an exceptional book that gives us a way to look to the past and gives us a way to move on without trying to fix the past. Instead, it shows us how to hold on to the future.

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