

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Bunkong Tuon: Three Poems

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, February 7th, 2018

On a Motorbike in Saigon

An old friend from graduate school
came to pick me up on his motorbike.
He tossed a helmet at me, revved
up the engine, and said, "Let's go!"
I hopped on, both hands gripping
the seat, as we swerved with traffic.
He was trying to make small talk,
then asked where I'd like to eat.
"I don't care," I yelled back,
screaming against the noise
of motorbikes, cars, and buses,
against the rain and lightning,
against the road's slickness.
I answered, "The closer, the better."
He thought a bit, then said,

"Think of this as a video game.
You turn left. You dodge right.
It's all fun." I said, "Except
my life is on the line. And
I need to get back home and
see my wife and daughter."

We stopped at an intersection.
No one was making eye contact.
Engines hummed to the song
the rain made, then everyone
began revving, like some mating
ritual. The bikes inched forward
before the lights even changed.
"This is madness!" I said.
My friend laughed,
then began quizzing me
on the Vietnamese

I had learned that day.
Before I could answer

he cut in front of a taxi
and sped away from impact.
I heard someone honk,
watched a taxi fly by us.
A prayer overcame me:
“Oh fuck, oh fuck, fuck me.”

*

After a Letter from Cambodia Delivering News of Father’s Death

At seventeen, you were already weary.
The world sat heavy on your shoulders.
You were a tiny red bird,
wings broken and beaks cracked.
There were no songs to sing.
You thought about using a gun
but that would leave a mess
for your poor grandmother
to clean up.
The rope was cheap
but suffocating.
Pills were the way to go,
painless and clean.
Maybe it was fate,
or the body’s will was stronger
than your own.
Maybe the cosmos was not ready
to reabsorb your energy.
You escaped that night
vomiting all the pills you took,
head between knees, weeping.

Years later
you met your wife,
had a child,
a daughter whose smiles
lit up the stars,
a daughter who taught
you the joyful songs
you were meant
to sing.

*

Crossing the Street in Hà N?i

Don't wait for when it's safe
to cross. There will never be a time.
Walk slowly, deliberately.
Mindful of your breath,
do not make sudden changes
in any directions.
You have to trust the motorcyclists.
Make eye contact with those nearing
you. Don't be brave, don't be scared,
don't be stupid. Remember, each
breath is sacred, a drop in the cosmic
ocean. If this is too much, look for
a native nearby, walk beside her,
cross when she crosses.
That's it, easy does it.
You're almost there.
Twenty more steps to go.
God help you.

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