

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Bunkong Tuon: Three Poems

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, August 10th, 2016

Born a few years before the Khmer Rouge takeover of Cambodia in 1975, Bunkong Tuon remembered very little of the atrocities committed under Pol Pol rule. He left with his grandmother and extended family for refugee camps in Thailand in 1979, and grew up in Malden, Massachusetts in the 1980s. He is Associate Professor of English at Union College, in Schenectady, NY. His work has appeared in *Poetry Quarterly*, *New York Quarterly*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Chiron Review*, *The Más Tequila Review*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *Misfit*, among others. His first full-length collection, *Gruel*, was published by NYQ Books in 2015. He is currently working on a new project tentatively titled *Lessons*.

The Cast

On the pier's edge
my right arm arches,
I reach back and back
pointing the fishing rod
to Revere Beach
where we landed thirty
years ago with our names
and immigration numbers.
Then I let the line go
past Long Beach
where I found my voice,
crossing the Pacific,
flying over Viet Nam,
landing in Battambang,
my birthplace.
I reel in slowly,
counting the words
and syllables,
taking in the green fields
and baby buffaloes,
the children running
to greet their father

returning home
from a day of planting rice
in muddy water.
I reel until the hook
catches Grandpa's
coconut tree.
With all of me I pull
legs pushing the ground,
trying to tell you
how sweet that
coconut juice tasted,
how it entered
my body and stays.

Five in the Morning

An empty
Ramen bowl lies
on the kitchen table.
My eyelids
are heavy
with dew.
I am trying to write
about our first snow
in America: cold and soft,
about our sponsor
who took us in
his home and church
before we told him
we were Buddhist
and never saw him again,
about my aunt crying
because the bus driver
didn't say anything
when those teenagers,
her son's age, spat
and told her to go home,
about a cousin who asked,
"Why do they hate us?
What did we ever do to them?"
about my uncle who loved
his Christian boss so much
he named his first child after her,
about waking up one morning
to find an entire refugee family
sleeping in our living room
because my uncle said

to remember always
 where we had been,
 about Grandma dreaming
 of returning to *Srok Khmer*
 to be with her sister,
 about eating
 only white rice
 browned with soy sauce,
 about fishing
 with an old Coke can
 wrapped in nylon string,
 about waking up
 at five in the morning
 from the noise
 two uncles made
 as they carried
 a Styrofoam cooler
 filled with carp
 the size of my thighs
 flopping on top of each other
 my aunts and grandmother
 at the cutting boards
 gutting and cleaning the fish.

Just Wait and See

A friend said,
 “Strangers will go out
 of their way for you.”
 Another chimed in,
 “When I was pregnant
 we were at this diner.
 The owner came over
 with a glass of milk.
 I said, ‘We didn’t order this.’
 He smiled, ‘For baby.’”
 My wife had been waiting
 for such moments
 but they never came.
 Once a young man parked
 his black Toyota Tundra
 at the entrance of Price Chopper,
 with the windows down,
 Megadeth blasting, cigarette
 smoke everywhere.
 His girlfriend came out
 of the grocery store, leaned

into the window, kissed him,
showing her taught midriff.
My wife walked around them.
At a checkout line the cashier
asked, "How many months
along are you?"
Before she could answer
a young woman behind her
said, "Don't ask her that!"
The two women
who could be
mother and daughter
began arguing
about the etiquette
of assuming a visibly
pregnant woman
to be pregnant.
My wife picked up
her grocery bags
and left quickly,
baby kicking.

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