

# 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*.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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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