

Cultural Daily

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How Literature Saved Me

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, April 26th, 2017

My story begins with loss. My mother, along with many other Cambodians at the time, died from sickness and starvation under the Khmer Rouge regime. In 1979, when Vietnam invaded Cambodia and wrestled power and control from the Khmer Rouge, my family decided to leave for the refugee camps in Thailand. My grandmother went up to my father and told him she was taking me with her. I learned years later, from uncles and aunts, that my grandmother didn't want to leave me behind, a flesh-and-blood reminder of her oldest daughter, to be someone's stepchild, as my father was thinking of remarrying.

My family was the debris of war, scattered from one camp to another until 1981, when a Christian family in Massachusetts sponsored us. I grew up on the East Coast, went to school where I was one of the few Asians in the classroom, and felt estranged, alienated, from my surroundings. At the height of this estrangement, I stole a bottle of pills from the medicine cabinet, hid in the cellar and took as many pills as I could, hoping that my suffering would be extinguished. By chance or fate, I survived and even graduated high school.

In the 1990s, I dropped out of a community college in Boston, fumbled for a few months, then went with my uncle and aunt, who were pursuing the Cambodian version of the American dream in purchasing a donut shop, to live and work in Southern California. I was working as part of a cleaning crew when one morning, for whatever reason, I decided to visit the local library. I browsed alphabetically the aisles, picking up books and putting them back on the shelves, until I came to a Charles Bukowski book, *Play the Piano Drunk like a Percussion Instrument Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit*.

The world according to Bukowski made sense. I was an outsider, so Bukowski's misfits, drunks, loners, and whores didn't make me feel different and alone. I could relate to their struggles of being on the cultural margins. Bukowski's language was clean and direct; absent of adornment, it felt honest and real.

Soon, Bukowski introduced me to other authors: Fante, Hemingway, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. They in turn introduced me to other works that inspired and influenced their writing. I now had my own constellation of writers and poets who spoke to me. I wanted to write and tell my stories, but I didn't know how to construct, let alone craft, a proper sentence. I enrolled myself in Long Beach City College, then transferred to California State University, and nearly a decade after my Bukowski discovery, moved back to the East Coast to attend graduate school at the University of Massachusetts. I am now a professor of English in Upstate NY.

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I have told this story countless times before in classrooms when I felt the need to convince science and economics students of the importance of literature and the arts, in my office demonstrating to students the redemptive power of reading and writing, in an essay about finding a literary father in Charles Bukowski, and now here, as a public response to President Trump's budget proposal to eliminate the NEH, the NEA, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the other educational and cultural programs.

Literature has given this once-refugee kid the skills necessary for self-transformation. In writing, I make sense of the chaos that is my life and find structure, order, and meaning in telling my stories. In giving voice to pain, I release some of it. In reading, I see how others think and what they feel and I am less alone. From there, I begin to imagine other ways of being and acting in the world. It's then a matter of commitment and choice, self-fashioning and self-invention, as the self is slowly rebuilt from the fractured, wounded one of the past. The power of literature begins, for me, in redemption and healing, but its greater gift is in the possibilities it opens in one's imagination, creativity, and sense of self.

I share this story to remind those in power of the importance of literature, arts, and the humanities. Congress has the final say on the federal budget, and I beg its members to take into consideration testimonials such as mine and to include the NEH, the NEA, and other educational and arts programs in their budgetary planning. These programs make a tiny dent in the \$1.151 trillion discretionary budget for the FY 2018; more importantly, they save lives.

Photo courtesy of the author, taken of his family in Khao-I-Dang refugee camp in Thailand circa 1980; he was the kid in the red shirt.

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