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Lying and Desires

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, June 21st, 2017

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Let me come clean. There are inaccuracies in my work. I'm not talking about grammatical mistakes, though those happen in spite of my combing through draft after draft of my poems and essays; I'm talking about those inaccuracies regarding facts and history.

Maybe it's more accurate to describe the act as "lying." I don't mean the lying and deception in Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, where throughout the memoir young Jack puts on a costume and acts out a persona, trying to see whether his identity performances might reveal his "true" self. What I am talking about is closer to the idea of "story truth" versus "happening truth" in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. But I'm not writing about being in a battlefield, bullets whizzing by my head, watching a friend get blown up in a flashing moment, pieces of him scattered on tree branches, where what the survivor/writer has at his disposal is "what seems to happen." For O'Brien, everything emerges in the traffic of memory, where desire, language, and the imagination do their magic.

Rather, I'm writing about a different kind of loss—i.e. loss of homeland due to war, separation of family members, and the dissolution of language and culture through migrating and taking refuge in someone else's country.

Take my poem "Under the Tamarind Tree," collected in *Gruel* (NYQ Books, 2015), as an example. It is based on the most primal memory I have of my mother; the kind of memory that overshadows every other memory connected to her. It's about her death and what I remember seeing and feeling that day: people going in and out of our house and me crying because I was too young to understand what was happening and because of the burning pain on my thighs, inflicted by my aunt, while we were sitting under a tree outside our home.

Under the Tamarind Tree

The child sits on the lap
of his aunt, under the old tamarind tree
outside the family home.

The tree stands still, quiet,
indifferent. The house sways

on stilts.

Monks in saffron robes,
and nuns with shaved heads,
lips darkened with betel-nut stain,

sit chanting prayers
for the child's mother.

Incense perfumes the hot dry air.

There emerges a strange familiar song
between the child and his aunt that day—
a distant one, melodic but harsh,
as if the strings are drawn too tight—

Each time the child hears prayers
coming from the house, he cries;
each time he cries, the aunt, a girl herself,
pinches the boy's thigh.

My aunt and I were thrown out of Eden that day, though I suspect she might have lost her innocence way before that. My mother passed away from sickness and starvation a year or two before the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. When the Khmer Rouge took over our village in Battambang, in 1975, my aunt was forced to leave home, helped build irrigation ditches, ate what was provided by Angkar (a term used for the Khmer Rouge organization), scavenged the rest, saw things she wished she could un-see, then danced and sang propaganda songs for the Khmer Rouge before she heard about her older sister's passing and returned to our village.

The inaccuracies in the poem have to do with the circumstances surrounding life and death under the Khmer Rouge, the communist party that controlled Cambodia with a bloody fist. During the regime's four-year rule, Cambodia lost approximately one-fourth of its population to, first, execution, then labor, hunger, starvation, and sickness. Under its control, there were no doctors, teachers, bankers, no one associated with the previous government. Family relations were abolished; even one's own mother was to be called "comrade." Religion was banned; monks were either disrobed or murdered.

The fact is this: my mother didn't have a proper Buddhist funeral. No monks, no family and community coming together, no burning incense, and no Pali (the language used in early Buddhist literature) to help usher my mother into the spiritual world.

But, as you can see, I could not allow this injustice to happen to my mother again. So I mixed facts with emotions in telling my story, revising history according to the logic of my desire: I wanted my mother to have a proper funeral. I kept the facts of her death and my aunt pinching me under a tree, but I also gave her monks, nuns, saffron robes, incense, and Pali on the altar of literature.

The tree might or might not have been a tamarind tree. But I like the life of a tamarind fruit. When young, the fruit is sour and, sometimes, bitter; when old, it is sweet. I hope that this trajectory will also follow my life's narrative arc. The tree under which my aunt and I sat naturally became a tamarind tree in the world of the poem.

You see, to honor my mother, I had to lie. And, perhaps, I had to lie to protect myself.

Featured photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher.

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