

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

To Wish Impossible Things

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, August 23rd, 2017

My cousins who grew up in the States read the stories I told, in both poetry and prose, of our lives as Cambodian refugees in America. My uncles and aunts, on the other hand, don't know what to make of my writing. When my first full-length poetry collection, *Gruel*, came out, I handed each of them a signed copy. My aunts smiled. My uncles, not smiling, looked on quietly. When I visit them at their homes in Massachusetts, I see copies of *Gruel* sitting on shelves collecting dust. I don't say anything. I ask about the grandkids. My aunt says, "You need a haircut. Take that chair and bring it to the back. I'll get the scissors."

When I first told my uncle, the one I looked up to because I didn't have a father, about my book being published, he asked, "Where's the publisher at?"

"New York City," I told him.

"New York City, oh that's good." I thought I saw a smile about to break in the corner of his mouth when he asked, "How long is the book?"

"It's about one hundred pages long." He didn't say anything. His silence felt like a judgment, as if I disappointed him with my inability to produce a magnum opus of thousands of pages of brilliant poetry.

Then he asked the question that I dreaded, the one that stops the heart from pumping blood into my brain and makes me pale, dizzy, nauseous. "How much money are you going to make?"

We are not talking about linguistic or aesthetic differences here, where my uncles and aunts don't feel comfortable reading English or question the lack of a discernable rhyme scheme in my poetry. There is truth to all of that. But what I'm talking about is the generational difference in our refugee experience.

My uncles, aunts, and grandmother are refugees from a Cambodia drenched in blood, where a quarter of its population died from execution, starvation, sickness, and forced labor under the Khmer Rouge regime. As adults, they left our ancestral home in 1979, scattered like debris across refugee camps in Thailand for a few years, then landed in Massachusetts in the early 1980s. For them, it's all about survival, and having money is key to securing physical safety, comfort, and happiness.

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For me, survival is about dealing with the emotional and psychic scars of being a refugee and an orphan, growing up lost and confused in America. Thus, I wrote to confront loss and alienation and to invent a poetic space for forgiveness, redemption, and healing. Writing is my path to survival. In *Gruel*, I needed to tell my story, and in order to tell it, I also had to tell stories of my uncles, aunts, and grandmother. They are the mythic players, heroes and heroines, in my story. My grandmother carried me on her back when we crossed the Cambodian jungles to reach the UN refugee camps in Thailand. My uncle was beaten by the Thai military police for leaving the camp at night to fish in order to feed us. Once in America, my uncles and aunts, like other refugees and immigrants, worked crazy hours at factories and assembly lines in order to give their kids an opportunity to achieve the American Dream.

Gruel is as much about them as it is about me. *Gruel* is for all of them, not just for my grandmother. When I gave my uncles and aunts each a copy, I said, “This is for you. This is for us.” Knowing that the book would probably sit collecting dust, all I can do is hope and pray that they understand what I meant by that, why writing matters to me, why financial gain is the furthest thing from my mind when I put down words for our shared memories. That the book would break through our generational differences and be recognized for what it is: my way of paying respect to my elders.



Tuon and his extended family in a refugee camp in Thailand circa 1980.

I dedicated *Gruel* to my grandmother, Yoeum Preng. In “Dead Tongue,” a poem in the collection, I wrote to her:

*I never knew how to thank you.
The words don't sound right.*

*My tongue has been cut
to fit the meter of another world.*

*The words bounce off walls,
deflated, a dead poem.*

My grandmother passed away three months before *Gruel* came out. I never got that chance to give her this book, hug her, and tell her in Khmer, “Thank you. I love you.”

(Featured photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher.)

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