

# Gruel

Bunkong Tuon

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First Edition

Set in New Baskerville

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Cover Photo: The author's parents' wedding (circa 1972). In the center are Chhoeun Thach (his father), Noerm Tuon (his mother), and to her left, Yoeum Preng (his grandmother).

Author Photo by Nicole M. Calandra

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## First Snow

We huddled  
behind the back door  
of our sponsor's house.

My uncle, the bravest  
because he spoke a little English,  
went out.

My grandmother, aunts,  
and I watched him  
through the kitchen window.

He bent down, reached for  
the whiteness of this new world,  
and put some in his mouth.

He looked back at us and smiled,  
"We can make snow cones with this!"

America, the miraculous, our savior,  
you were the land of dreams then.

## 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.

## **In Pol Pot's Shadow**

A man outside in his orange sarong talking with the police then arguing over his right to beat and rape his wife, ran into his home and promised the police to butcher them with a kitchen knife.

The officers ran to their patrol cars and radioed for backup. Minutes later, an ambulance, and at least five patrol cars and a helicopter surrounded the brown house. The officers went in with their shotguns and came out carrying the man whose arms and legs were tied. We, his neighbors, fellow refugees ourselves, stood under the elm tree, in Pol Pot's shadow.



## Gruel

We were talking about survival  
when my uncle told me this.  
“When you were young,  
we had nothing to eat.  
Your grandmother saved for you  
the thickest part of her rice gruel.  
Tasting that cloudy mixture of salt,  
water, and grain, you cried out,  
‘This is better than beef curry.’”

All my life I told myself I never knew  
suffering under the regime, only love.  
This is still true.