

# And So I Was Blessed

Bunkong Tuon

NY  
Q Books™

---

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.  
New York, New York

NYQ Books™ is an imprint of The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.

The New York Quarterly Foundation, Inc.  
P. O. Box 2015  
Old Chelsea Station  
New York, NY 10113

[www.nyq.org](http://www.nyq.org)

Copyright © 2017 by Bunkong Tuon

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Edition

Set in Times New Roman

Layout by Raymond P. Hammond

Cover Design by Raymond P. Hammond

Cover Art: Taken by the author on a trip to see family in the Mekong Delta

Author Photo by Nicole M. Calandra

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017948480

ISBN: 978-1-63045-052-6

# CONTENTS

## Preface

Waiting for Your Arrival .....	13
--------------------------------	----

## Part I

Friend .....	17
Enemy .....	18
Late Arrival in Hà Nội .....	20
Lesson in the Back of a Cab .....	21
Crossing the Street in Hà Nội .....	22
Hà Nội Nights .....	23
Lady of Justice .....	24
Helicopter Mother on a Train to Huế.....	26
Beautiful Hội An .....	27
To the Blue-Eyed and Blonde-Haired Girl in a Hmong Village in Northern Việt Nam .....	28
Squid Fishing in Halong Bay .....	30
My Daughter Sleeps Tonight .....	31

## Part II

Lies I Told about Father .....	35
Logan Airport.....	36
Searching for Father in Kampuchea Krom .....	38
1618.....	52
Dream of a Khmer Krom .....	53
And So I Was Blessed.....	55

## Part III

How to Prepare Yourself for a Semester Abroad in Việt Nam .....	59
The Tall Blue-Eyed Kid from Long Island .....	60
A Day in Saigon .....	62
It Hit Me .....	64
A Reasonable Explanation .....	65
Daughter .....	66
People Watching .....	67
On a Motorbike in Saigon .....	68
On Our Way to a Famous Cave in Central Việt Nam .....	70
After a Letter from Cambodia Delivering News of Father's Death .....	72
Hotel in the Clouds .....	73
After a Dream .....	77
At the Edge of Khau Phạ Pass .....	78
Không Biết Tiếng Việt .....	79
Visiting a Hmong Village in Northern Việt Nam .....	80
The Other Is Me .....	84
No Longer the Tourist .....	86
Thanksgiving in Hà Nội .....	87
Flying from Hong Kong to Los Angeles .....	90
Waiting in LAX for a Flight to Boston .....	92
Trời ơi, Trời ơi .....	93
Song for Stella .....	94

## Postscript

Stranger .....	97
----------------	----

# Lady of Justice

1.

I asked Mark about the woman  
in the conical hat, straight black  
hair covering her shoulder and back.  
“That’s Our Lady of Justice,” he said.  
“She appears in different forms.  
Sometimes, she rides her bicycle  
with fruits and vegetables in her basket.  
Other times, she carries a bamboo pole,  
a scale of justice on her shoulders,  
a ghost from the past, of wars,  
duty, the old way of life.  
She is eternal:  
her hat bobbing  
in the busy Hà Nội street.”

2.

A French tourist was having breakfast  
with her husband on the second floor  
of the May De Ville hotel when she put  
down her knife and fork, pointed,  
her painted red lips opened wide,  
“Regarde, une ancienne femme!”  
The husband grabbed his camera  
from the table, walked up to the glass  
wall and snapped photos of a woman  
in gray pajamas and long sleeve shirt  
carrying vegetables and fruits  
from the countryside, her bamboo pole  
bent by duty and sacrifice.  
A swarm of motorbikes and cars  
honked, slowed, and swirled,  
an invisible sphere to protect her.

3.

She gets up at two in the morning,  
washes her feet, hands, and face  
with cool water from the well.  
She bends down, legs folded,  
blows into the crackling fire.  
Dust and ash in the air  
paint her face and fingers.  
She stir-fries morning glories  
with garlic and ginger.  
The clay pot of rice simmers.  
In her one-bedroom hut  
her daughters wrap  
their tiny arms around  
their father. Near  
the head of the bed is the altar  
with candles and incense,  
a picture of Hồ Chí Minh  
next to a picture of her parents.  
She's going to take a two-hour  
bus ride into Hà Nội  
to sell her fruits,  
vegetables, and flowers,  
hoping to sell enough  
for the bus ride back  
and a little extra  
for books and pens  
for her daughters.

## Dream of a Khmer Krom

He was a slim man,  
hollow eyes and sharp  
Adam's apple, smiled  
when he spoke, as if  
he found pleasure  
in the stories he told.  
But his stories were sad  
like the shack he stayed  
in at night to guard  
the coconut tree farm.  
The toilet, a wooden  
platform perched  
on the murky river  
outside the shack.  
The catfish swam out  
of the mud, flopped about,  
and splashed the water  
when he used the toilet.

His companions were  
the dim light bulb hanging  
from a wooden beam  
and a small color TV  
tuned to a Khmer station  
in Phnom Penh.  
When he got bored  
he put in a DVD  
and watched  
Khmer karaoke.  
The moon lit up  
the sky illuminating  
the coconut field  
and the rice farm.  
His rusty pistol  
hung on the wall.

Once, before having kids,  
he visited Phnom Penh,  
but as soon as he spoke  
the Khmer people called  
him “Vietnamese.”  
In southern Việt Nam,  
where he was born,  
he was a Khmer minority  
receiving a bag of rice  
each month for sending  
his children to school.

He lit a cigarette,  
took a deep breath,  
as the Khmer women  
danced on the TV,  
shaking their small hips  
to a song celebrating  
the Cambodian New Year.  
Young men and women  
threw powder at each other.  
The one time in the year  
they came close to almost  
touching one another.  
Outside the frogs croaked,  
and the crickets sang,  
a constellation of night songs.  
The rice field stood  
quietly in the distance.



## Daughter

I must ask for your forgiveness  
for any mistakes I might make.  
I only want what is best for you.  
Remember, joy is not wealth,  
which enslaves the psyche  
and destroys the spirit.  
Joy is the love you share  
with family and friends and the respect  
you show towards all that is life.  
Choose whatever path speaks to you.  
Make it moral and righteous.  
When lost, return to books,  
music, and arts.  
They will help you find your way.  
Strength is not found in might.  
It is your mother waking up at 4 a.m.  
to check if you are breathing.  
It is your father leaving home  
searching for his own father  
in the cries and laughter  
of his aunts and in the furtive  
glances of his uncles.  
And hope resides  
in lonely rice fields  
when your father, lost,  
thinks of your mother  
and you, and smiles.

## At the Edge of Khau Phạ Pass

“Hey Professor,” they giggled.  
I glanced up: a student was standing  
on the edge of a cliff,  
green abyss below,  
clouds on his shoulders,  
one leg lifting, hands stretched out,  
like Christ the trickster,  
his roommate snapping photos  
to be shared later on Facebook.  
All it took was an unruly pebble,  
a gush of cruel wind,  
or the hand of an indifferent God.  
My mind flashed  
a letter to the parents:  
Dear Mr. and Mrs. So & So,  
I regret to inform you  
that your son . . . .  
My knees wobbled.  
I squinted my eyes,  
gritted my teeth,  
the cold mountain wind  
brushed my hot cheeks.  
I walked slowly  
towards the student,  
said as calmly as I could,  
“You’re too close to the edge.  
Stand nearer the railing, please.”