

Gruel

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

Copyright © 2015 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 New Baskerville

Layout by Macaulay Glynn and Mickey Kellam

Cover Design by Mickey Kellam

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

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015942607

ISBN: 978-1-63045-006-9

Contents

I: FAMILY PORTRAIT

The House of Many Voices	/ 15
Grandmother-Mother	/ 16
Reciting Alphabets	/ 17
Photograph of My Mother on Her Wedding Day	/ 19
Lies I Told about Father	/ 21
First Snow	/ 22
Fishing for <i>Trey Platoo</i>	/ 23
Where Uncle Dreams	/ 25
Literary Success	/ 27
Fishing with My Cousin	/ 28
Under the Tamarind Tree	/ 29

II: EAST COAST

Snow Day	/ 33
Our Neighborhood in Revere, MA	/ 34
Our Secret	/ 36
Halloween, 1985	/ 37
An Elegy for a Fellow Cambodian	/ 38
Dancing Fu Manchu Master	/ 39
Why I Chose Literature	/ 40
Losing One's Name	/ 41
Ollieing over Obstacles	/ 42
Saturday Morning in Malden, MA (1986)	/ 43
Those Were the Days	/ 44
Rhonda Said	/ 46
Lessons	/ 48
Bad Day	/ 50
Remembering	/ 51
What the Buddha Taught	/ 52

III: I NEVER KNEW HOW TO THANK YOU

Dead Tongue / 55
Calling Home / 56
Breakfast with Grandmother / 57
Dining in Chinatown / 58
Exile / 59
My Four-Year-Old Niece's Birthday / 60
A Lesson / 62
Thanksgiving Farewell / 63
Breathing In / 64

IV: WEST COAST

American Dream
Cambodian Style / 67
Loneliness / 69
Renting a Room on Myrtle Avenue in Long Beach / 70
The Customer / 71
How Everything Changed / 72
literary support / 73
Driving from the Recycling Center / 74
Night Vision / 75
Love / 76

V. WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT WRITING

The Atheist's Prayer / 79
Writing / 80
Breathing Out / 81
What We Talk about When We Talk about Writing / 82

VI: DAY WORK

- Fishing on Canandaigua Lake / 87
For Nicole / 88
Healing / 89
Living in the Hyphen / 90
Work-Related Trauma / 91
At the Nursery / 92
3:45 AM / 93
What Was That? / 94
Coming to Terms / 95
The Storm / 96
Mooring / 97
The Day My Worst Fear Came True / 98
The Photographer and the Poet / 100
How They Stay with You / 101
The Pavilion Dream / 102
An Invitation / 104

VII: CAMBODIA

- The Case is Closed / 107
Inheritance / 109
Lucky / 111
Fragments / 112
Khao-I-Dang Refugee Camp (1980) / 114
Goodbye, Cambodia / 115
In Pol Pot's Shadow / 116
On the Porch with Grandma / 117
The Importance of Names / 118
My Uncle / 120
Beginnings / 121
Gruel / 123

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.