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Review: And So I Was Blessed by Bunkong Tuon

Alan Catlin · Wednesday, February 7th, 2018



Bunkong Tuon, *And So I was Blessed*

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“Waiting for Your Arrival”

Last night a green dragon
rose from the ocean’s blue water.
Wings spread wide to keep
us cool against the sun’s rays.

A quiet joy flutters in
our chests as we wait.

*

There is nothing accidental about the inclusion of this poem as the preface to Tuon’s second, excellent, book of poems. It evokes the arrival of the family’s first child, Stella, to whom the book is dedicated. If nothing else, Tuon is a poet who is all about family. His life story is not a simple journey from a foreign country (Cambodia) but an escape from a brutal, totalitarian regime marked by a genocidal wrath. Both of his parents perished and Tuon was carried to safety, literally, on the back of his grandmother. They spent years in a refugee camp, working with a sponsor and then gaining approval to enter our country. It is the kind of journey that our forty-fifth president would like to prevent from ever happening again. Why? Because Asian people don’t look like us. It seems as simple as that.

If survival is a blessing, and I believe Tuon’s life, poetry and family, prove that it is. Tuon has been blessed in a multitude of ways. The child is a blessing (she is as beautiful in person as she is in the author’s photo.) His extended family, those who managed to escape and emigrate and begin anew,

is blessed to be here, instead of left behind in the Killing Fields. The memory of his grandmother, who saved him, nurtured him, and loved him during difficult times when assimilation into an often unforgiving, bullying culture, was difficult, is as deep as it is essential to his new life. As a child, he suffered taunts for being “Chinese” (?!), for being shy and different. As he was neither physically imposing nor aggressive and assertive, his life was often difficult in a particularly American way. Finding a way forward, where he might fit in was challenging as well. Then he discovered poetry. In particular, Charles Bukowski.

It is hard to imagine two more different personalities than Bukowski’s and Tuon’s. Where Bukowski was rowdy, self-aggrandizing, blowhard boozier and womanizer, Tuon is mild mannered, soft spoken and self-contained. Choose any two poems at random by either poet and the differences are readily apparent. What Bukowski did have, that Tuon lacked, was a sense of direction and purpose he found through self-expression. This became a goal for Tuon leading him to develop, over the years, a strong, lean, precise narrative style that avoids bombast. His lines are clean, clear, well defined, often personal, but never written in a self-serving way. Both tell stories, albeit, radically different ones.

In *And I Was So Blessed*, Tuon details his journeys to Vietnam. The first was to visit with, and commune with, his father’s remaining family. Secondly, he travels in his professional capacity as Dr. Tuon, literature professor at Union College, as a mentor for a group of college students. Meeting with his father’s family is difficult, often perplexing and bewildering, if only for the language barriers, but mostly, as the surviving first born of his progenitor. The kind of attention he receives from his relatives, sometimes borders on reverence, is both strange and comforting. He is not used to the kind of attention he receives but finds some solace in being able to reclaim something of his father.

The later trip is undertaken with some trepidation given he will be away from his wife and newborn child for some weeks, as the poem below indicates.

“After a Dream”

I wake up.
Alone in an apartment
in Hà N?i.

The air is humid, heavy.
Constant honking
of motorbikes.
A man runs across
the street for

his cà phê ?á.
I wash my face
in the sink.
Outside the rain falls,
heavy and fast,
thudding against sidewalks,
umbrellas, walls, windows,

throbbing inside my head.

I am a small boat
bereft at sea,
a child orphaned
once again.

Throw in the responsibility of overseeing a group of college students, thousands of miles from home, and you have the perfect recipe for stress. What could go wrong with ferrying about twenty-something-year-old college students in a foreign country? Just about everything. Luckily the students are responsible, they bond well, and are genuinely engaged as students. The trip is mostly a success as the poems in section III show. Still, no matter where he is, or what he is doing, Tuon's thoughts return home to his daughter. We are, at the end as we were at beginning, blessed with a child to carry on after us. What could be more important and satisfying than that?

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