

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

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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

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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.”