

BUNKONG TUON

Fragments
(near the Thailand-Cambodia border)

I.
Nothing is like the smell of singed skin
meshed with burning metal in the evening wind.
The boy and his grandmother are crouching
in a ditch as the rocket whistles,
randomly selecting its victims.
The night sky is lit like fireworks,
the earth smells of burnt skin.
Mothers cry for their children.
The boy clutches his grandmother's body.
Bodies fall, parts scatter, dispersing
pieces of someone—a neighbor, a friend, and aunt, maybe.
Another round illuminates the darkening sky,
and then there is the silence and the trembling,
and the urine and the crying.
The boy asks, "Where is mother?"
The jungle is silent.
The world stands still.
But the whistling continues.

II

The boy awakens
from a nightmare.
The bomb, a firebird,
spreads its wings.
The boy is panting,
sweat dampens the earth.
Somewhere in this mist and fog,
outside the UN refugee camp,
a woman howls.
And the boy
thinks about his mother

III

In our apartment, in upstate New York,
we watch fireworks from our living room window.
The college where we teach is celebrating—
an evening of togetherness, where aging alumni
and retired professors meet under that boom-boom sound.
I sit back on the futon
trying to rest, eyes closed, sweating.
My fiancée looks out the window,
“There is something about fireworks.”
She says to me, “Something
about it that appeals to everyone.”



Born in Cambodia several years before the 1975 communist takeover of this Southeast Asian country, **BUNKONG TUON** lived under the Khmer Rouge regime without understanding what was happening around him. His mother passed away from sickness and starvation. In 1979, his uncles, aunts, and grandmother took him with them as they fled to refugee camps along the Cambodia-Thailand border, while his father stayed behind with his new wife. “Fragments” tells this story of escape, and it is part of a larger piece, a

collection of poems, called *Under The Tamarind Tree*. His creative work has appeared in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Numéro Cinq*, *The Truth About the Fact: International Journal of Literary Nonfiction, genre*, and *Khmer Voice in Poetry*. He teaches ethnic literature at Union College, in Schenectady, New York.