

YEAR ZERO
MONICA SOK

Selected and Introduced by
MARILYN CHIN

The Poetry Society of America

NEW AMERICAN POETS • CHAPBOOK SERIES

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C O N T E N T S

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Acknowledgements

Biographical Note

Between 1975 and 1979, over two million people died in Cambodia. In a reign of terror, the Khmer Rouge regime led by Pol Pot "cleansed the population." People were purged, worked and starved to death, tortured, and executed. The regime especially targeted the professional class: doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists, and engineers; their families, too, were rounded up and murdered. Universities were closed, monasteries and temples destroyed. Ethnic and religious minorities were decimated. The perpetrators documented their terror, systematically photographing their victims, then leaving mountains of skulls and bones in their wake. This horrific era was revealed to the rest of the world in an unforgettable 1984 film called "The Killing Fields."

How does a young Cambodian-American poet respond to this horrific era? Theodor Adorno questioned how one could continue to write poetry after Auschwitz. In "Year Zero," Monica Sok strikes a brilliant balance between rich remembrance and compassionate forgiveness. In clear song and soft assonance, ghostly remembrances of these times are spoken in the voices of ordinary people: mothers, aunties, fathers, uncles, girls selling tamarind, villagers going about their day in a lush tropical landscape of octopus trees and betel leaves. Haunting images abound: "Angkor Wat floating in the lake," whose fragile beauty is juxtaposed against darker images, of "Strong smells of smoke prayers," ghostly flutes, and skull-shaped fruit. The terror is hidden and menacing, ready to ignite.

"You don't have mouths. So silent," is a damning truth. The poet is able to offer quiet wisdom without sentimentality. Ultimately, this poet refuses to surrender to victimhood. The chap-

book ends optimistically in the borough of Brooklyn, where the young speaker lives happily, sometimes seen in the neighborhood eating bagels with friends and writing new poems. She has found her way to "the healing fields."

— MARILYN CHIN

YEAR ZERO

LEFT-BEHIND LOOKS FOR THE APSARAS

Left-Behind saw apsara crowns floating in milk,
churning underneath a poached sun.

She watched the red-and-white-checked Krama Man
smash skulls sometimes. He couldn't see her
—small inside a tree trunk above the courtyard.

Soon, it would turn red over the kingdom.

Nobody liked that color, not since the evacuation,
especially the jungle. Strong smells of smoke prayers
rising above Ta Prohm temple's roof. Left-Behind
scuttled back to her nest, climbed the neck
of the Octopus Tree to find the source of fire.

Where are the apsaras? she asked the trees.

But the trees pretended not to know anything.

Below, stone heads nodded to her, watching over
Angkor Thom. Smoke clouds sealed their mouths, shut
their eyes. Left-Behind squinted through the haze
to make clear the shrieks she heard. To tell you what she saw,
she would have to whisper through this flute she found
in a branch. She couldn't go near the circle of dancing women
or where the soldiers took them—near the palm trees
whose leaves blushed again and again, again and again.

THE RADIO BRINGS NEWS

When I told lies, he says, the grass grew
so fast, it hid the whole field. The river
drowned the men with guns
and flowers wilted over their bodies
as their apology. But nothing happened
if the lie wasn't good enough, like
when I said I love my country, I love
my people, I want to be a communist too.
And I'd raise my axe and hack the dirt
for my spoon of rice, for my cup of soup.
The river was clear, the river was fresh.
If only I was a log, if only I was a bird.
I would have freed myself before more.
Once a soldier asked me why I worked
so hard. His uniform nice, I lied to him
and pounded my fist to my chest and then
he left me alone. At night the radio
crackled and someone dimmed the volume
so fast, you might have thought
the sound of static was grass growing.
In the dark, I listened closely. I thought
I heard escape. I thought I heard Thailand.
I thought I heard the soldier asking me
if I wanted to run away with him
and five others tonight. If I wanted to eat.

DURING MONSOONS

the Octopus Tree swings its swords against water arrows,
its trunk a shield, roots tumbling. None of the apsaras have seen this,
but I've heard the whirring spell like a huge battle
from the house of apsaras,

where sometimes I can't sleep even to the flute player's song
stretching out to me like a blanket. If I look out the portal
over the lakes, blue demons climb down from temple walls to dance
with trees.

The Octopus jumps off the roof, branches hammered against
the swarm, maybe some of its arms severed. The next morning,
with my bare feet, I'll find the stone floor rooted up
in corners where the demons did their work

before getting squashed. Their guts fresh. It wasn't the Octopus
who stomped them, not its one bad foot, healing underneath stone,
lifted up and smack! No. But how can I know who the Octopus really is

and what it thinks these days? It doesn't talk to me anymore,
not since I asked it who the mosquitoes were and said I wanted to be big
like them and fly, not since over the wall I offered my arm
to mosquitoes.

When they landed in around me, four, five of them, suddenly
the strongest shade. Suddenly the dark. Every candle
in the temple out. Then gone. Except for wetness on the stone,
the ground piled around me: a wide circle

of fallen doors the Octopus couldn't have fit into.
But I know it rests on the roof, watching me. Always opening its back eye
to know where I am.

SONG OF AN ORPHANED SOLDIER, CLEARING LAND MINES

When I saw my father walking
I thought he might look like a man
afraid to die. Ahead
I kicked the road,
land mines ready to burst at his feet,
convinced their metal brains
the humming they heard
was a knife cutting,
not a living man's voice.
They believed me.
They had heard this song before.
Like snakes in grass,
they clicked their tongues.
The gods I met promised me
they could make a life happen
after what had happened
if I knew who my father was.
I clapped my hands to signal a stream
and my father followed my sound.
He drank and bathed
as I cleared the land mines,
and I hoped it was him. He slept
in the jungle, dreamed jaguars circling
though it was nothing but fire
burning. Close to the Bassac,
I climbed mango trees,

dropped down sway to feed him.
Along the way, I waved my arms *no*.
To himself my father said, *Yes*.
No, I did not bury the bodies
nobody had prayed for.
There are things in this world
we must make one another see.
My father took me gently,
each one of us
gently, he took us to the flames
humming *my children*,
my children. Three provinces,
I traveled with him like this
only to take him back to Prek Eng
where he found his sisters.
If my father were to tell this,
he would tell you he carried me
over his shoulders to a nearby village,
that no danger touched him
and that the gods were watching,
they wanted to see me live.

THE RADIO HOST GOES INTO HIDING

Disguising myself as old people

to survive in these fields of black uniformed Khmer
their red white krama
their outlined rib cages and tight skin
if I could air
the voices of the people to the Five Powers of the world
what would they say
about the Khmer Rouge would we throw our fists
Angkar is everything we shout everything
we the old people
allowed saucepans
new people only possess spoons to dig more than eat
what a society

*

I was warned by the French
before they left Kampuchea in a hurry
Come with us they said but like my only friend Rithisal
I chose not to abandon
in such cowardly fashion
Rithisal young historian says
why the Five Powers do nothing to end this experiment
first began with U S A escalated menu campaign on Ho Chi Minh Trail
breakfast lunch dinner snack
anything that flies on anything that moves

stare straight into gun barrel
plastic bags over heads bodies floating in river
not so loud Rithisal not here
think of Rachana I say
but leaders suspect
Rithisal and me then sent to a place
called Tuol Sleng whispers *my kids used to go to school there*
and where is Rachana looks away

*

we enter I forget which day it is but it is year zero
the place Tuol Sleng a prison
people locked in stalls old people new people Khmer Rouge
maybe Pol Pot himself instruments of torture
in the schoolyard here everyone dies
Rithisal writes on walls won't listen to me
he writes
I ask Rithisal if he thinks his children are Angkar's children now
he raises a fist says *Whoever opposes*
Angkar is a corpse
Angkar never
makes mistakes Angkar
is everything Angkar
cares for us all

*

these fields rice paddies land mines mass graves bodies upon bodies
will not be voted an ancient wonder of the world
Rithisal takes notes on

medicinal experiments executions force-feed excrement forced confessions
babies thrown
then in the air
Rithisal tells me all the missing pictures
quiet not so loud here not here not so loud
not here not here not here not here

*

on air on air year zero radio
what time is it what day is it
year zero here everyone gone
Rithisal never see him again
world can you hear me can you hear me
find the sweet potato in a hole dug up
look for the girl who planted it there

WHEN THE WAR WAS OVER

He was cornered by the men in blue
at the bottom of the stairs outside.

One pointed a gun at him
made his hands flail

upward in alarm. He cowered behind
Pol Pot—ten times his stature, hands

on his hips as if he were the hero
protecting the victim.

Around the building he ran for it,
found me and told me the war was over,

kissed me, thrust me against the table—
I take his hand, climb the stairs

of my school, twist
the doorknob of a locked classroom

and round our way to the EXIT
where we climb the steps

of an ancient world wonder
from a pre-Angkorian time.

In the open air, we admire the valleys below.
We are small against the carvings

exploring something we missed
only to find the natives

excavating our temple.

REMAINS

Today I can't look at the ocean.
A skull's in the wet sand,
bleach white and freshly chiseled.
It's looking at my face.

This morning after rain I walk alone
on this beach, nameless now.
I hear not even the calm
blue sky. I lift the shape

gently as a conch, mouthing to myself,
What did our father say
to us about holding skulls?
Respectfully, Goan Srei.

If I press my palms against its temples,
return it to the rubble,
I'm thinking of you, Bong.
Its missing gaze rotates

toward the water, a maze in sand,
some labyrinth I know
from our childhood days,
when I hear Father's voice—

*Go on, Goan Srei, go on. Don't be afraid.
The high cheekbones will smile
to you your own smile.
Don't look away.*

BONG SOTA'S INHERITANCE

Strapped on the back
of my cousin's motorcycle
I'm a sack of persimmons

The road made
of red buttons
my cousin drives
slow

She takes me everywhere she goes, even if I warn her
of dead people selling tamarinds

on the side of the road

We're going to Kandal anyway
She wants to show me her house

My insides
jiggling

I am ripe enough to eat

I'm not scared of dead people
but I don't know

what to say to someone
I'm supposed to know

*

She carries me into the field

the field which is made of dirt, bones, grass, mosquitoes,
wildflowers, and teeth

I open my mouth and persimmons fall out
One by one
they roll away

My cousin takes off her straw hat

Teeth in the field
clatter

The dead people are coming
I say to my cousin
I told you they'd be here

She kneels among wildflowers
waiting for her father

She lights incense

sticks them
in the dirt

*

Her father stands with us
slicing off a rusted peel
hands us each a piece

by the tip of his knife
He tells the dead people
to go away

we are his visitors
these persimmons are his
go find your own family
praying in a field

My cousin bows and smiles
She brings more offerings to him

before asking him for a house
a great big house

Her father points his knife
behind us

I stay in the field trying to eat everything
but they walk away together

A house is calling them home

TALKING TO A ROOM

You don't have mouths. So silent,
drifting as I sleep.
Some mornings I don't open my eyes.
Come from the killing fields, come.

Drifting as I sleep,
skull towers and bones in mud.
Come from the killing fields, come.
(Your daughters and sons are still asleep.)

Skull towers and bones in mud,
show me Angkor Wat floating in the lake.
(Your daughters and sons are still asleep.
Lok tha, forgive me for where I was born.)

Show me Angkor Wat floating in the lake.
Tell me of wars carved on temple walls.
(*Lok yeay*, forgive me for where I was born.
I only know *Srok Khmer* for the fields.)

Tell me of wars carved on temple walls.
Some mornings I don't open my eyes.
I only know *Srok Khmer* for the fields.
You don't have mouths.

AFTER DINNER IN PREK ENG

My aunt doesn't want help burning garbage
near the persimmon forest behind the yard
grows a garden, the banana tree
proudly glows when the light goes out the house
my aunt, as she sees the monk by her gate
for his morning round and plump her calves
in my hands when she asks me to massage her legs
are swollen but she walks everywhere or calls
a tuk tuk to travel long distance to the city
from here is kind of unbearable but I try
to hang out here anyway I'm afraid my aunt
won't like me much unless I keep my mouth
shut the kitchen door Srey Mol or else
it's your fault the hen and her chicks get inside
the mosquito net I'm always reading until
my aunt says breakfast on the table is sometimes
a place to sit, lie down, or nap, or in the hammock
tied above the trees of this village, the night
is not as dark as I thought, especially in the forest
by the house, my aunt likes to crouch knees
bent, heels touching the dirt isn't too much dirt
and I'm not too much of a priss that I cannot sit
beside her she keeps betel leaves to chew on
and I crouch down without her noticing I'm there
she turns toward me slowly, wondering how
I got there, there, there again I got no smile
from her blackened betel-leaf-crusted teeth

are the scariest features in old Khmer people
I know, crisscrossed eyes gazing on me for a moment,
my aunt stares hard, back at smoke prancing over
bananas peels, over the sweets I had
and the Cokes, I'd rather be garbage, just garbage
that she said in her low voice go back, go back

YEARNING

I want to know the names of things,
only the names in Khmer.

I want to know the names of trees
whose roots grow on temple roofs.

I don't want to know my uncle was never found.
When my aunts looked for his face, his was not there.
I don't want to learn my aunt's twin sister died
or why Bong Sota's father got killed.

I want to know the names of things,
tasty as cold shrimp zucchini soup.
I want to taste the last sweet thing
my grandfather gave my mom—
a sweet potato on his death bed.
I am the name of all these things.

Hold my hand at the prison gate,
help me dig a blessing from this rice,
let me cross my legs to pray,
let the monks fan me with river chants.

TUOL SLENG

Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is the site of the former Chao Ponhea Yat High School, which the Khmer Rouge used as the notorious S-21 execution center from 1975 to 1979.

I

They're here to stroke black-and-white photographs
of tortured prisoners on display.
They press closer to look at a picture:
a handcuffed boy,
leaning toward them. Walking slow
around Tuol Sleng prison,
they crouch in cramped stalls and lock themselves in
to imagine what horrors.

They walk around the metal bed frame,
cover their mouths at rusted chains,
the hammer and toolbox in the corner,
the floor stained
and the walls the color.

They cry. They write on the walls NEVER FORGET
signing their names.
They have been here.
They buy books from the souvenir shop
and silk scarves and krama
and handmade purses.

Once I went to Tuol Sleng with my six-year-old nephew, two neighborhood girls and their nanny. My nephew ran in the halls, stopping to duck his head into every classroom, then off again as if he heard a school bell ring. "You see that boy running in the halls?" a tourist asked another tourist. "Does he have any respect for his history?"

Look at those two tourists shaking their heads. Now the girls run, and now their nanny chases after them into the schoolyard.

PREY VENG

Ba's friend from Prey Veng is dying inside his wooden stilt house.
Rain hammers the man's roof, it shakes the floor.

His chest an anvil, he can't get up to show respect so he sampeah.
Take off your shoes, Goan Srei, Ba whispers. *Don't want to wake the floor.*

Ba tells his friend, *Your ribs are bruised from sleeping on these slats.*
His friend says, *But heaven spreads out straw mats to make floors.*

My first time meeting the man, I offer chek from our banana tree
and leave forty dollars next to a plate of sponge cakes on the floor.

Now behind us, it seems the whole village has come to his door.
Even his chickens gather on the dirt underneath this fake floor.

One woman opens her purse, gives a few riel to help him buy herbs.
Ba puts down more money for the man as if he wants to break the floor.

Two days later, we hear Sam Ol from Prey Veng died from a stroke.
Burning dead leaves in the yard, Ba falls down—but how
his knees rake the floor.

MY SON KASAUL

Late at night, before the factory
a sprig of jasmine
on the dresser looking at itself in the mirror.
Kasaul, is it your birthday tomorrow? The window
in the mirror! My son in the window,
your toothless laugh was round.

Why did I ever carry you in my krama?
In the camp a woman offered her breasts,
she wanted to keep you her own.
You lay in a hammock between palm trees.
When I blame my dry breasts,
I see you rock by yourself.

In the mirror, I comb my hair,
rub perfumed lotion on my hands.
Kasaul, I make myself drink a glass of milk
to make myself strong again.
You are the jasmine. I am the window.
The jasmine in the window. Sweet. Full.

STRATEGY AGAINST DYING

We fashioned party cups
to catch bees, wasps,
sprayed the green hose
to drown them, then freeze them,
little blue flowers, milkweed
from the field, pulled grass
dead as hair.
We trapped the queen butterfly,
so free we suffocated her—
at the touch of water, her wings
went limp, they hinged shut
inside a yellow cave.
We froze her.
The ice pulled her apart,
opened her wings.
In the garage, we rested her
inside her own cup of sun
beside cut meats.
Dad found her in the freezer,
and asked us *Why?*
as he held her grave
like a drink in his hand.

FLIGHT

Look. We're flying.

He pointed to the sky. I pressed my face
to the window: a whistling teakettle,
leaving a pig's nose on glass.
I knew we were lifted off the ground
because I saw no trees, no grass,
but heaven like bathwater
or shaving cream
on mirrors, star ceilings
when we drove home
at night. His seat belt slouched to the side,
unbuckled, but our dad was a good pilot.
Hands on the wheel, he looked back at us
in the rearview mirror. I pretended to sleep
so he would carry me from the garage
to my bed where I slept with Mom.
He held me like a star.
Wrapped me in a winter blanket,
the one with peacocks fanning oil swirls.
When we napped together,
he'd spread the blanket above us
as a roof, the map of the world:
underpinnings of a quail's feathers.

CAMBODIAN // AMERICAN

you can make a window of time to sob if you want
if you go to the back of the house, there are empty rooms to do that
(to sob in)
nobody has turned on the lights yet nobody has been here today
yet the light illuminates you through the glass depending on the idea
you're having
in that moment it fades it comes back but it is not romantic
you can read about the killing fields there
you can read about the healing fields there
you can say to yourself it's okay
okay, something Dad says all the time *it's okay it's okay it's okay*
shouldn't you believe him after all he lived through
but Dad these cornstalks call me
cambodian // american it is not okay
lok ba it is not
it's a river I keep trying to cross over and over again
except the river's not there
not lonely
not alone
isolated
cambodian // american
in my mind he nods and keeps driving away in his old green van
on some pennsylvanian road

all the sobbing inside of me all of it Javier knows now he knows
but he doesn't know how cambodian // american feels in lancaster
or brooklyn or about earlier this morning

on the subway, a white girl with a streak of blue hair fell
flat on her back
her head a bowling ball close to my foot
her head a bowling ball that rolled on the floor
I looked up from reading *museum of accidents* and there
a girl confused on the ground breathing breathing breathing
someone call 911!
someone press the emergency button!
someone pull the girl up!
now she is sitting, telling someone
she is on her way to 23rd street as the train pulls up to
my stop on 8th
the doors open
and now I want to cancel class I think I think I should because why?
so I can sob about the killing fields
and how isolated cambodian // american is
I'd rather do that today
my head could be a bowling ball too
I could fall over from this too
but enough it is not the same, say the cornfields and the subway
and I listen
the student my age missed three classes, emailed me while in urgent care
said she would bring in a doctor's note
enough I teach the class
it is not okay to not be there
okay is when you break a wine glass in the sink without getting cut
okay is when you find 17 dollars on the sidewalk
walking to pancho's restaurant on 3rd ave
okay is when you find out that pancho's restaurant is closed
and you don't spend 17 dollars there

okay is standing in the regulars line at steve's bagels
the people are mean, the bagel okay
and I am not a regular
and I am not regular

cambodian // americans,
where are you regularly?
lately I have looked for you, lately not found you
lately not trying, almost give up
it's okay it's okay it's okay
with Javier by the hudson last night
>>> let's go for a walk
>>> let's keep walking
we walk the whole length

HERE IS YOUR NAME

Here's where you first wrote your name
next to your brother writing his name
next to your mother and your father
who both have their own names.

Here's your family watching you
trying to write your name, you erasing,
the new eraser whittled down.

Here's the composition paper shifting
underneath your left hand, your right hand
striking out and your brother yawning.

Here are your hands awake
in the middle of the night, your fingers
turn on the lamp, your whole hand
wrapped around a pencil,
nobody hovering over you,
the pencil crossing out the page, the zigzag
of an M upright, not sideways for Mama,
Mak, Srei Mol, Ming Dute, Bong Molyden,
Mokkie and Mikey, M like how your mother
says *Don't call me Mak, call me Mai*,

like how your brother and you play
Mother May I—

Here's the side of the white leather sofa
where you wrote your name in pen
when guests were in the living room.
Here's you writing your brother's name

next to yours, as he played outside with friends,
here are the guests telling your father on you,
your father at the dinner table, saying

Repeat after me: slabaprea, sam, kabet.

Here's the spoon, fork, and knife
to eat your mother's salaw ka go.

Here's you saying spoon, fork, and knife
instead of what your father said.

Here are your brother's insides shaking
and you cracking up with him.

Here's your father clearing his plate
and leaving the room. Here's you
at the table, after listening to the radio,
singing *Bad bad bad bad*

boy! You make me feel so good—

your father asking *Ha? Ta mek?* You saying
It's a song, Dad. Here are his lips
tightening and the *Go to your room*
and you going or else the orange fly swatter.

Here's your brother whining *Mom, I'm thirsty.*

Your mother sitting in the driver's seat in July,
you and your brother in the backseat.

Here's your mother without any water
in the stranded car. Here's your mouth
half full with saliva and the tap-tap
on your brother's shoulder to help.

Here's your brother saying *That's not water.*
That's spit. Here's your brother climbing
the backyard maple, on the highest branch,
reaching for the highest twig
because the neighborhood kids dared him
and here's you on the patio,
telling him come down, come down *now.*
Here's your brother backing down
branch by branch. Here you are
afraid you will fall, your brother pushing himself
up the temple, you are following your brother
up the temple, until both of you sit at the top,
out of breath, above the land, the window
breezing through you everything dirt and green.
Here's your brother pointing at the salamander
that scurried across the ceiling,
your brother sweating on the trail
to the zoo, where the monkeys chased him
for his bag of peanuts, the photo of you
and your brother resting on the steps of a temple
at Angkor Wat, both of you looking down
at your mother's sun hat, your father's shades.
Here your brother asks to drink your water
and though you said yes, you
slap the bottle out of his hand.

Your brother will not go back
and here you are back again.
Your relatives ask, *Where is your brother?*
You say, *He's coming next time.*

But he's still up there in that tree
and here you are still writing your name
and your brother's name, now your mother's
and father's names, as though writing them
might make your names true.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Monica Sok is a Cambodian poet from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Her poems appear in *Narrative*, *The New Republic*, *The Offing*, and *TriQuarterly Review*, among others. A Kundiman Fellow, her honors include fellowships and grants from the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, Inc., Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, Community of Writers at Squaw Valley, the Elizabeth George Foundation, Hedgebrook, MacDowell Colony, Napa Valley Writers' Conference, and the Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts. She earned an MFA from New York University, and is the 2016-2018 Stadler Fellow at Bucknell University.