

In Tongues

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We share words at first. Point, English. Point, Khmer. Try and say each other's version. I repeat in English. Slowly. 'Good night.' She smiles, her teeth bright against skin and night, and tries to make her mouth conform. I find mine following, mimicking her attempt, encouraging its shape. But her words come out strangely. Vague and formless somehow. We grin then giggle.

Over the campfire she shows me how to tie my skirt so it doesn't come undone. She demonstrates with hers, pulling it loose and then: fold, fold, twist, tuck. The fabric forms a pad across her stomach and, over the smoking embers, I see she's much slimmer than I'd thought. The skin on her belly fairer than her face but downy like her cheeks.

In the kitchen she squats, flat-footed, and pulls the stomachs of fish out through their mouths. A small pile of red glistening entrails. One smooth, coaxing motion. She sings softly as she works.

I scratch at a smattering of welts across the tops of my feet.

She watches. 'Yong.'

'Yes, mosquito.'

She tips talcum powder into the palm of her hand. It smells sweet. She kneels and rubs the talc across my feet and up my calves.

She reaches under my skirt and her broad fingers pad over the insides of my thighs.

'Mosquito,' she says.

I want to tell her that she's beautiful. I want to tell her that around her I feel alive.

But we only have hot, cold, good night, fish, eat, rice, and now mosquito.

I find my breath. 'Yong.'

She fries the fish in oil and kaffir lime. Drains them. Passes me a bowl of rice and sits opposite me to eat.

I watch her ball the rice and press it against the body of the fish. She puts it deep into her mouth then raises her eyebrows.

My spoon feels heavy in my hand. She watches me lift it to my mouth and then looks at her own hand, holding another ball of rice. I want to tell her that her way is better than mine. That my spoon is awkward and out of place. But instead I raise my eyebrows and tip my chin and hope I have guessed the right meaning.

‘Gin khao,’ she says, the words coming from the middle of her mouth. Eat rice.

That is the difference. My words are all at the front, spilling out. I taste with the tip, just skimming the surface.

Her eyes go back to her bowl and I watch her chew

I imagine how deeply she would have to take me in. Place me on the wide spoon of her tongue. Press me against the roof of her mouth and squeeze me tight to taste me.

She carries a plate of the fried fish. I hold a bowl of rice. The funeral has started. It was the woman who sold flowers from baskets that hung on either side of her body. Someone found her swinging by an extension cord in her sala. Bad husband.

People sit on grass mats. Empty bottles of whiskey are lined up like caught fish.

After, we stand in the road and watch the stars. The night is chaotic: howling dogs, roosters, the bass of far-away speakers, motorbikes, wails and laughter from the funeral.

She takes my arm, turns me to face her. ‘Suay,’ she says and cups my jaw in her hand.

I stroke her cheek. ‘Yes, beautiful.’

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