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Call me Ant

Sunisa Manning

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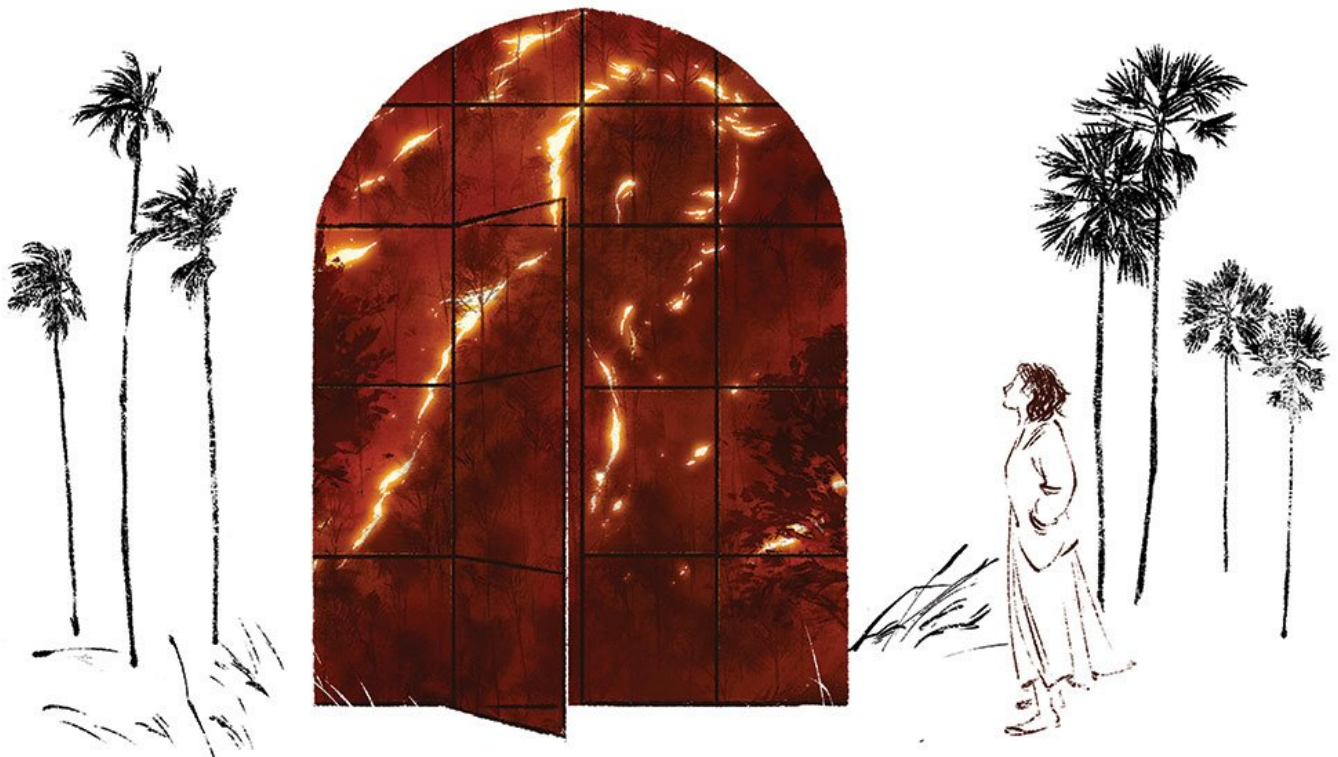


Illustration: Charis Loke

Anthony Veasna So was a new friend who felt almost immediately like an old one. We called ourselves diasporic neighbours—him from a Khmer American family, me from a Thai American one. We talked about visiting

Southeast Asia together. I'd show him Bangkok, glitzy and delicious, where his exuberance would fit right in. Then we'd go to Cambodia and 'visit some family' before finding another spot in the region where neither of us had been. I have a husband and son, but, somehow, I was sure the trip would happen.

We met in January 2020 at the Tin House Writers Workshop, in a blustery coastal town in Oregon. I had a bad cold that we later learned was pneumonia. Anthony sat next to me, even though I was a snotty mess. He handed me tissues as we talked with other friends about Asian writers entering the US market, and Sianne Ngai's work. I didn't know he was going to be one of the last people outside my family to hug me; soon after we returned to the Bay Area, California declared a lockdown.

At Tin House, Anthony spoke all the time of Alex Torres, his partner, who was home in San Francisco eating potato chips, he said, because Alex couldn't cook. Anthony made him breakfast every day of their relationship, which began when they were undergraduates at Stanford. There was a moment when Anthony turned to me and said with this solemn face: 'You can call me Ant. Ant and Al. That's us.' I knew I had been invited into the circle. I have a small circle too.

During this year's fire season in California, which was long and brutal, Ant would text: 'My sister says the smoke's really bad. Is it bad near you?' We are—were—both asthmatic. It was hot enough that I took to wearing nightgowns all day. He and Alex were 'wearing swim trunks like they do in Cartagena in the heat ha ha ha'.

I drove into San Francisco to hang out with him. Standing at the door to his apartment as he put his shoes on, I told Ant to roll wet towels and stuff them in the cracks where the windows had settled, where I could see the sky. 'The smoke can get in here,' I said. 'It's fine,' he said. 'I vacuum three times a week.' That moment haunts me. I should have insisted.

We walked to Mission Dolores Park. Anthony was reading Nietzsche for a class he was taking to keep his brain in motion. I was reading Simone de Beauvoir. We

kept trying to convince each other to read our respective books, but neither of us would budge. He had precise, sharp taste. We could really get into it. You didn't offer your work to Anthony to critique unless you wanted him to dismantle it, but that was the gift—that he read your work like it was deserving, that he gave comments presuming publication. Ant taught me to use LOL. He said, 'You aren't too old!' Being around him made me laugh, and shake out of some of the tight anxiety of being a minority in America.

Anthony was from Stockton, and loved being from the same place as Maxine Hong Kingston. I envied him such lineage. 'I know,' he said. 'I'm lucky.' While Anthony acknowledged the hardship of being from an immigrant family, in my experience he dwelled more often on its gifts. He was going to make it big. He was going to play his cards right, which is how he said it, and probably go to LA, where you can actually make a living as a writer. Or teach high-school English—all the fun and none of the academic toxicity. Anthony was more than representation, but he knew how hard it is to get attention as a Southeast Asian writer. He was going to change the story of Cambo Americans, as he called his community. Skirt the trauma narrative of arriving in America as a refugee from the Khmer Rouge and celebrate, instead, the verve and hustle of a resilient community.

I grew to love the way he loved his family. I wanted to meet Alex, but Ant declined for him, protecting his partner's introversion. I watched them flirt on Twitter instead. Ant sent me pictures of his nephew. I sent him pictures of my son. He told me about his big sister defending him on the playground, how she shielded him from taunts about what Anthony would come to understand was his queer identity. I heard about his mother. 'I was raised by strong women.' He talked of and worried about his cousins and siblings all the time. I recognised the overprotective immigrant tone, the one that wants to gather your people in your arms and carry them.

When my novel debuted, he collaged a photo of me from 1970s-era Thai stamps, the same timeframe as my book. We joked that book launches are more meaningful than weddings. He said: 'Honestly tho. It takes more work. And

devotion. To write a book.’ He was a slow reader, and made sure to write me this text in the avalanche of our banter: ‘Also I got your book and the writing is so good. You are not frivolous.’ The lines made me cry. We are never going to get to talk about what he thought of my novel, and that kills me. He is never going to see his beautiful books debut and that kills me.

I knew, when I decided to write this piece, that I should read through his published stories so I could talk about his work as much as our friendship. But I couldn’t do it. Not yet. To do so would be to admire the way his talent for irreverence was undergirded by a love of our human foibles. We are bereft of that now.

When his story collection *Afterparties* debuts, or on the 100-day anniversary of his passing, or on his birthday, I will sit with Anthony’s work and let his voice come alive again. But right now I couldn’t stand it: such vibrancy might deceive me into thinking that this has been a grotesque misunderstanding. Whenever it is that we are able to emerge from isolation, I will find it hard not to go to his building, not to haunt Mission Dolores, not to scroll through his social feeds, unbelieving once again.

Anthony’s most famous short story was published by the *New Yorker*. It’s called ‘Three Women of Chuck’s Donuts’. I learned that donut shops are to the Khmer community what nail salons are to the Vietnamese one, namely, the engine of their foothold in America. To steel myself to write this piece, I went to my favorite donut shop run, yes, by Khmer women. A stack of donuts—plain glaze, old-fashioned, chocolate glaze—accompanied me as I wrote these words. Such a sentimental gesture would probably have made Anthony laugh, but he would understand it too. *Do what you have to do*, he’d say.

With his loss, the title of his short story collection, *Afterparties*, has taken on a grim double entendre. It would be like Ant to throw his own afterparty, wherever we go when we leave this realm. He feels near. I have almost texted him. I have the feeling he’s watching our grief. I can imagine him giving his droll sideways

grin, saying: *LOL, I thought you'd send bigger flowers.* It would be very like Anthony to post selfies from the other side. *It's not so bad, he'd say. Your skin's amazing here.*

Throughout her sixteen years of life, her parents' ability to intuit all aspects of being Khmer, or emphatically not being Khmer, has always amazed and frustrated Tevy. She'd do something as simple as drink a glass of ice water, and her father, from across the room, would bellow, 'There were no ice cubes in the genocide! 'Then he'd lament, 'How did my kids become so not Khmer?,' before bursting into rueful laughter. Other times, she'd eat a piece of dried fish or scratch her scalp or walk with a certain gait, and her father would smile and say, 'Now I know you are Khmer.'

What does it mean to be Khmer, anyway? How does one know what is and is not Khmer? Have most Khmer people always known, deep down, that they're Khmer? Are there feelings Khmer people experience that others don't?

Variations of these questions used to flash through Tevy's mind whenever her father visited them at Chuck's Donuts, back before the divorce. Carrying a container of papaya salad, he'd step into the middle of the room, and, ignoring any customers, he'd sniff his papaya salad and shout, 'Nothing makes me feel more Khmer than the smell of fish sauce and fried dough!

Anthony Veasna So, 'Three Women of Chuck's Donuts'

Sunisa Manning is the author of *A Good True Thai*.

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