



May Execution

for Hean Mam and Loeung Kbi

So we've put the murderer to death.
The dog chews an itch.
Something is righter than before.
The people are vindicated.
The dog smells doggy.
Clouds move from the west.
When Pol Pot finally died, a man I know said
"the devil will take care of the rest"
and he meant it, his children long dead
in Cambodia.
Thunder in the clouds and airplanes too.
Leave it to the devil?
Better than the hand of man?
The dog licks.
The rain begins.

—Cullen Bailey Burns, English Instructor

Author's Note: This poem was inspired by two wonderful students who were in my classes in the mid-Nineties. They were both survivors of the Khmer Rouge: Loeung Kbi's small daughter died of starvation in the killing fields; Hean Mam's six children were murdered when he fled his home to escape the death squads who were looking for him. Both men exuded the powerful dignity that comes from suffering and survival. They were some of the kindest people I have ever met, and I have the utmost admiration for them. When Pol Pot died in the jungles of

Cambodia, without ever being brought to justice, Hean Mam said to me, "The devil will take care of the rest." His notion—that retribution doesn't necessarily need to come through the justice system—struck me powerfully because at that same time our country was putting to death Timothy McVey, the Oklahoma City bomber. I understood Hean's comment to mean that humans can't always make things just, but he had complete faith that justice would come, no matter what. I have been reminded over the years of the hard-earned wisdom of these men, wisdom that continues to inspire me in my daily life.