

# An Interview with Speculative Fiction Poet Bryan Thao Worra

by Catherine Lundoff

**B**ryan Thao Worra is a Laotian American poet, prose writer, and journalist currently living in Minnesota. Born in Vientiane, Laos on January 1, 1973 during the Laotian Secret War (1954-1975), he came to the United States in July, 1973 as the adopted child of an American pilot working in Laos for Royal Air Lao.

Today he is one of the most widely published Laotian writers in the world. His work has appeared in the anthology *Bamboo Among the Oaks*, as well as *Astropoetica*, *Urban Pioneer*, *Unarmed*, the *Asian Pacific Journal* and the *Journal of the Asian American Renaissance*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *Dark Wisdom*, *Mad Poets of Terra*, *G-Fan* and *Tripmastermonkey.com* among many others. Thao Worra's work frequently explores a wide range of social and cultural themes, as well as the transient nature of identity and home. His first full-length book of poems, *On The Other Side Of The Eye*, was released in August 2007 from Sam's Dot Publishing.

**CL: Can you tell me a bit about your search for your birth mother?**

**BTW:** I grew up with a particular fable:

During the secret war for Laos, my adoptive father was an American pilot for Royal Air Lao and I was told an Australian furniture-maker friend brokered my adoption after a friend of his housekeeper had a son born out of wedlock. My mother was an unmarried widow, and Vientiane was a small town where the gossip was just too much, I was told.

I came to the US in 1973 as the first major American pullouts out of Southeast Asia began.

From that point on, all I had was my mother's name and a photo, clues that would become a key part of

my search for her. For a number of different reasons it wasn't until college that I was able to begin an earnest, active search for my family, which took just over 13 years. But the results were ultimately successful.

I finally had the opportunity to travel back to Laos after 30 years in 2003. Years ago, the American embassy in Laos provided me the name of the ancient temple in my mother's village at which our family might have worshipped. It wasn't much to go on, but it turned out the timing of my return was impeccable: At the temple I met an old monk who had just returned from exile in Thailand to his old neighborhood temple in Vientiane.

I held out a paper with my quest translated into Lao: "Do you know Mitthalinh Silosoth? She is my mother."

"Oh, yes," the monk said, "Her sister lived just three blocks away."

I soon found myself in front of this restaurant in one of the most awkward conversations of my life. Through an interpreter, I learned that my biological mother now lived in Modesto, Calif. I had traveled halfway around the world to find out that my mother was living halfway across the United States.

The next day I and my mother talked by telephone. Her first words to me were "Hi, honey. How do you like our country?"

When I finally met her face to face, my mother told me that she also was adopted by an Indian merchant family and accidentally learned in her teens that she was Laotian, not Indian. Accidentally in the sense that my mother grew up in her home believing she was Indian, until one day as she was sweeping in the family courtyard, a strange woman came by and watched her for a few minutes, and when the stranger left, a friend came up and asked, "Did you know who that was?"

"No," my mother replied.

"That was your mother! Don't you know you're

adopted?”

And the details from here became a little convoluted but boiled down to my mother running off to the countryside for a few years before eventually returning back to Vientiane, an unmarried expecting mother. She said my birth father was a farmer who rejected her because she lacked the cooking and farming skills he expected in a wife.

Now, I don't know how much of this story is true. For transcultural adoptees, our lives are written in pencil. Everything you think you know about yourself can change in an instant.

I get occasional questions regarding my father's identity, but this has proven far more fluid and unreliable. As stated before, there was a belief for a time that he might have been a soldier, he might have been a Hmong tribesman, he might have been a hundred different things, really.

At one point during my trip, in a strange cross between *Star Wars* and *Will and Grace*, the old monk tried to tell me he was my father, but my mother firmly informed me that was ridiculous because he was just her best gay friend in Vientiane in the 1960s who used to go to the movies with her.

You just learn to get used to those sorts of things and laugh.

My trip to Southeast Asia involved trips across Bangkok, Phuket, Chaingmai, Phnom Penh, and the old Royal Lao capitol of Luang Prabang and the battle-scarred city of Phonsavan and the ancient Plain of Jars, where massive, enigmatic stone urns litter the landscape. And of course, my birth city of Vientiane.

Perhaps a big part of my love for the fantastic and for



**CL:** Tell me about some of the elements of your personal heritage and cultural history that inspire your work today.

**BTW:** Without romanticizing it, the secret war for Laos fought between the CIA, the US State Department, the Royal Lao Government and the communist Pathet Lao was immensely influential on my experience. It caused not only a physical and political displacement, but a spiritual one that led me to a constant state of question, of interrogation into the secret nature of

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and a mythic place within my consciousness.*

speculative literature can be traced to seeing so many more stories reflecting experiences closer to my experience as an adoptee among these characters than among, say, other stories and narratives in the mainstream culture.

There was something particular that I enjoyed reading the stories of Oedipus and Moses, Romulus and Remus and the Peach Boy of Japan, Worf, Batman and Hellboy, or the comic book character, The Question. And even today I more often enjoy seeing the way adopted characters are treated within speculative literature than mainstream dramas and stories that I've often found missed the mark.

things.

Southeast Asia was for many years both a real place and a mythic place within my consciousness, often viewed through filters of other cultures and communities. A line from my poem 'Aftermaths' summed it up as: "I don't have a trace anymore, except the tales of strangers / Who saw my heritage slowly burned away / Timber by timber."

Without getting too complicated, there are several systems of beliefs operant in my old homeland of Laos—animist, shamanic folk religions, iterations of Buddhism influenced by Hinduism, Western and Marxist ideologies, Judeo-Christianity, etc.—each