

Words from the Torrid Zone

**MONSOON
SOLITAIRE**

**HOWL
PRESS**

Monsoon Solitaire

HOWL
PRESS

"Start telling the stories that only you can tell, because there'll always be better writers than you and there'll always be smarter writers than you. There will always be people who are much better at doing this or doing that — but you are the only you."

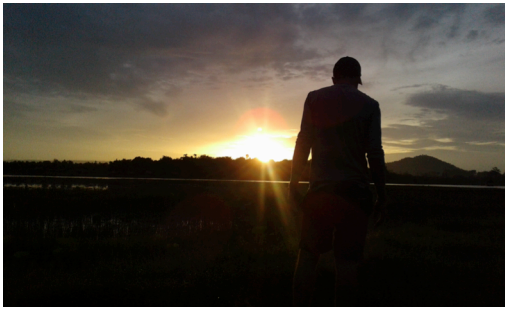
— Neil Gaiman

Note: The wolves of HOWL have edited none of the pieces re-printed here (save spacing), leaving them as they were submitted. Any errors are therefore those of the authors. That said, too err is human, so please read with grace. Do not worry though — on the whole I think the poets and writers did a fine job!

Table of Contents

The Haunt of Sanctuary	Les Cook	.....	9.
A Crash Landing in Paradise	Mark Symons	.....	12.
Being Here, Now	Martin Bradley	.....	17.
The Prodigal	Nick Marx	.....	20.
A Smiling Idiot in an Indonesian Village	J.R. Sinclair	.....	22.
Torrential	Sam Plummer	.....	28.
On Which Tomorrow? A Fiction	Scott Bywater	.....	29.
Spirit of the Storm	Steven W. Palmer	.....	34.
East of Heaven	Tom Vater	.....	39.
Thero 1997, Phnom Penh	T.W. Bell	.....	43.
The Monsoon Inside	Josh Clayton	.....	49.
The Two Suns	Joss McDonald	.....	51.
Write Drink Gamble. Acclimatizing to a Monsoon	Les Cook	.....	54.
Rainless	Becky Barnes	.....	56.
The Kingdom	Nick Marx	.....	58.
The Dragon's Back	Wayne McCallum	.....	59.
The Storm	Dough South	.....	62.
The Riverbank	Laurence Stevens	.....	64.
Monsoon Wave	Alasdair McLeod	.....	68.

Origins . . .



HOWL is seeking contributions to a new anthology, to be published in 2021. The theme for the anthology is ‘monsoon solitaire’, a title inspired by the people, place, events and spirit of the monsoon. As much a mood as a place, it is not bounded by geography, but defined by a notion of a world given meaning by what occurs and is fashioned by the winds of the ‘torrid zone’.

Contributions can take the form of poems, essays, photo-essays—even pod-casts—which will be posted on the HOWL website, with the most popular being submitted for publication in the 2021 anthology. For written submissions the limit is 1500 words.

More at: howlcambodia.com. Submissions to:
wayne@songsaa.com

Once more, a **‘HOWL’** greeting . . .

We made the call and they came. From the far fields of France, to the less distant paddocks of New Zealand, onward to trapeangs and boulevards of the Kingdom itself, the scribes put pen to paper—finger to keyboard— and shared their words.

And like our previous publication, *Face Masks and Hand Gels*, **Monsoon Solitaire** has proved an overwhelming success (helped by certain prizes undoubtedly). A sign, moreover, that despite everything, the word lives on, bright and powerful.

As one would anticipate, the quality of entries to the competition that birthed this volume varied, although we consider each effort outstanding in its own right. That said there were some that shone out, exploding in shards of light that left the good people of HOWL truly dazzled (and a little envious).

It is our pleasure to include some of these writings here — stories and poems that would be worthy of inclusion in any conventional anthology (‘conventional’ being an adjective not so familiar to the wordsmiths of HOWL).

From a ‘smiling idiot’ to a whisky drowning ex-pat, a journey to a tropical island to an escape from a wet season deluge, they are all here in well-crafted and evocative prose and verse.

We hope you enjoy reading these pieces — we certainly did.

Keep on HOWLING!

Dr. Howl.

The Haunt of Sanctuary

Author: Les Cook

Cambodia

Birds chirping, you know the routine.

A perfect sunny day. Finally, after the cloudy, muggy, near rain.

Wait! UV radiation warning to sun exposure for three days. Stay in the shade.

My mind is clicking.

I'm writing down quickly.

Let me see one hundred words of untidy verse.

Read it... erase it. Undelete half.

You want to read what I wrote? August 21st

Listen up: I ate four of those homemade coconut popsicles they sell on the street, while I plotted my theme.

Not part of the verse, just setting the scene

The Verse:

You can throw away evolution for humans.

Look at a picture from a hundred years ago.

Read a story from a thousand years ago.

We have changed rapidly.

A dog is the same in a film shot a hundred years ago.

A frog is the same in a story written a thousand years ago.

All is almost the same, except us, the human, we have changed most.

A time ago

An intelligent alien ingredient must have been captured from
another world and ingrained in us, the human, to advance first.

Or maybe not.

I stop writing the verse.

People ask me what's it like in Cambodia

One person asked me if there is a lot of mud.

Some ask the past.

Many ask if Cambodia is beautiful.

I don't know.

I know, but I don't know. I can't explain, do you have all day to
listen... and days, and days after that?

Why Hindu why Buddha why Natural Spirits and ghosts?

I don't know.

Esoteric.

In Cambodia you float on a plane. Some kind of humble
romantic. Some kind of risk everything. Some kind of ... you
can't describe.

You are exposed comfortable... Down-to-Earth.

Khmer Elder's say - No need to go somewhere, everything is
provided for you here.

The deeper you stay in Cambodia the worse you understand it.

Don't fight it.

Naïve wide eyed in love is best, easy on the mind. Smiling at the chaotic astonishing surprise.

It's not the boisterous orchestra of tropical forest. Not dogs chasing frogs.

It is the missing piece of a puzzle, you can't find, and can't leave behind.

So... you try to fix it.

A Prevalent Seasonal Wind.

Leave it alone.

Win win.

A Crash Landing Into Paradise

Author: Mark Symons

The year 2020 was a particularly bad one for me, the woman I'd assumed would be mine forever turned out to be fickle. After putting all of my emotional reserves (and most of the financial) into what I had stupidly assumed to be my partner for life, I was adrift. Without a home I lived in a camper surviving on a diet of alcohol and self-pity; with the occasional meal.

We all know that dark clouds have silver linings and mine was that now that I was alone I was spending surprisingly little. My ex-wife might have implied in the past that each week I was drinking the equivalent of the Haitian National Debt but this wasn't the case at all. I was actually saving money and my war chest was swelling! After getting through a bleak winter and suffering yet another bloody awful skin operation I decided that enough was enough and I made a phone call to DialAFlight. In seemingly no time I was on a Singapore Airlines flight to Phuket.

There was a transfer in Singapore where I ended up sitting next to a lovely lady from the US who was going to become a 'digital nomad' teaching maths. Dear reader I am so naive that she had to explain the term. Also, in the same vein, I explained that I had stupidly forgotten to pack my socks. She simply smiled and said 'you won't be needing socks darling'. How right she was. On approach to Phuket she became rather tearful; I suspect that the reality of her venture was hitting home. After all, she'd sold her home. Her new found English fool was simply drifting and blissfully ignorant (of almost everything).

The quality of the Sandbox program had to be experienced to be believed. As we new arrivals approached the desks we were

faced by a huge television, which was screening our approach. Around each of our faces was a wobbling square which captured our facial temperature; green square good. I was so fascinated that I stopped to stare for a moment. The equipment was made by FLIR, I used to be involved in combustion and I know for a fact that they are industry leaders in the field of temperature measurement; I was both fascinated by the complexity of the Thai operation and also saddened by the fact that I hadn't seen anything remotely like it in the UK.

We were all sat in pre-arranged lines of chairs and then passed through immigration with impressive efficiency. As for the ladies in uniform, wow! When it comes to a job involving general bossiness we in the UK tend to choose ladies of the larger boned variety; the type with rather short hair, tattoos and a tendency to show more interest in the wife than in the husband if you follow my drift. The lady customs officials in Thailand are recruited from a different line all together; the Chanel line. I wondered for a moment if it was worth all the effort of going to the bars in Patong, I could easily meet the love of my life without even leaving the airport.

Out of immigration I had my first nasal swab. This might be a good time for another first versus third world comparison. Before leaving UK I paid handsomely for a swab that guaranteed a result by email within 24 hours. At the chemist I was given an envelope, quite simply the rest was down to me 'bring it back before two luv'. The simple truth is this, if I had booked a flight and felt slightly feverish I could easily have asked a friend to take the swab for me. I'm sorry but I struggled with this rather slapdash attitude to a test which was allegedly a major tool to reduce the spread of a rather horrible virus. Switch to the third world and things are somewhat different. A nurse cocooned in a sterile cabin held out a vial upon which is a sticker with all my details. She took the swab and bagged the whole lot up ready for

the lab. No mistakes, no cheating; absolute security. Then to a pre-arranged taxi with a separate passenger area. The whole set up was unbelievably well organised.

After an overnight quarantine in the hotel my result came through as negative and I was free to explore Patong, and explore I did.

My first impression was a rather sad one. The pox has hit this town like a sledgehammer, huge venues are wired up with cage fencing, gathering dust. I took the time to count the tables in just one. I reckon it could seat two-hundred and fifty, and that's just the seats! There are many such venues which must have been previously packed with revellers and busy staff. Walking street, Bangla Road, was deserted, almost eerie. Shades of Pripyat, the abandoned town close to Chernobyl. I supposed that the ones fortunate enough to have a home and family in the provinces (whom they had previously supported financially) had an escape route. For others who were utterly dependant on the Patong tourist industry this must have been a shocking two years.

I met a girl, a masseur, or am I allowed to say masseuse without the gender police battering my door down? May knew everyone including a fella that ran one of the deck chair businesses on Patong beach. When times were really hard and he slept on the beach she and her friends used to buy him food at least once a day. There's no safety net here, if you don't work, you don't eat. He was incredibly happy and upbeat; a joy to be with. He had a simple job, the best office window in the world and a zest for life. As I sat there, sipping cold beer and covertly observing him, I pondered how a windfall might affect his life and outlook. Probably in a negative way I thought, after all, everything for him was just about perfect. How many of us can say that? How many of us with our sodding manicured lawns, our gnomes, our

‘No Turning’ signs. The new car every three years, the holiday villa, not forgetting bridge club, green fees, parish meetings and the Daily Mail dropping onto the doormat every day (who needs low blood pressure?). No, this fella, stood on his beach with his hands on his hips had it all, he was master of these sands, the barefoot lord of all he surveyed.

Without wanting to sound like some kind of ghastly virtue monster, whilst I was in Patong I did try to ‘spread it about a bit’. I would make a point of buying something from the beach vendors and always tip well at bars and restaurants. Compared to these people we westerners are comfortable and in my view we ought to spread a little of that comfort. Despite the very real possibility that these people could be in debt up to their eyeballs they still gave excellent, smiling service; they deserved a good tip.

Eventually I tired of the place. There are those that thrive there, those that know the bars and staff. Those that find the allure of the silicon enhanced beauties irresistible. Those that drink into the wee small hours then surface just before midday to start all over again. These individuals are the perfect prey for what I termed the ‘Marys’. These are the super smart, rather young and often surgically enhanced darlings that prey upon elderly wobbly western men. The name comes from Mary Anning the renowned Dorset based fossil hunter.

You see, I had to go. I didn’t fit in, I don’t own a singlet and if I was given one I’d use it to wash the car. I detest football and as such most bar conversation left me in a catatonic state. Someone might have given me a lecture on the defensive strengths of Tottenham Arsenal and days later I would still be rooted to the seat staring unblinkingly out of the window, such was the boredom.

Sometimes you just have to move on, so I did. First to Phatthalung and then Songkhla where I bought a Honda Wave (almost everyone in Thailand rides a Honda, the others ride a Honda) and rode it non stop back to Phuket. My backside and I are still not on talking terms. I met a girl on-line and travelled to Surat Thani. We rented a bungalow and embarked on what is known as a relationship. That is to say, fighting and loving in equal measure. So far so good.

My son sent me a WhatsApp message saying that in Manchester he had just turned the heating on. My reply might have seemed a little smug, provocative even. I said 'what's heating?'

Being Here, Now

Author: Martin Bradley

Metta Metta Metta

Sadhu Sadhu Sadhu

Phenomenal city, Angkor, Cambodia, clutches grateful
stationary traveller to gracious bosom. Held tightly, succoured,
kept safe from all harm, pandemonium, in nowness past/future
constituting irrelevancies.

Majestic ancient city, Angkor, its Wats preside, city of peace,
saffron monks, carved stone, apsara angels, sunrises, tangled
roots man and nature.

Before day rush dawn whispers meditatively.

Bird murmuring orange blue morning, bamboo stem silhouettes
sway momentarily. Cloud wisps don pink cloaks against eggshell
blue. Wat Damnak dawn chants spreading Metta, Karma,
Dharma recollections.

Gentle gamelan vibrates through freshly diurnal blue skies.
Occasional white clouds wander tropics overseeing day's
arrangements. Sun incandescently smiles.

Now stationary traveller, behatted, promenades past sweet
jasmine, frangipani, grilled bananas, street coffee perfuming air,
smiles, slight bow greets alleyway family opposite Hospital for
Children, offspring in hammock, mother prepares boiled rice,
samlor soup, prahoc, moves aside, traveller passes. Solitary
save for whispering birds, secret, coy, Khmer children smile.
Stationary traveller ventures through once laughter-ridden

alleyways spread between bustling Samdech Tep Vong Street,
Wat Preah Prohm Rath, The Passage, Covid global sadness silent
closed or closing, torn A4 rent, sale, contact.....vacant for
canine dreams.

Alleys upon alleys once people bright, vendors, toe nibbling fish
tanks, lanes become ghost alleys, remembrances of Bayon,
Angkor Wat, Tonle Sap Lake visiting hipsters, students, new
agers, families, lovers playing at raiding of tombs, shapely in
shorts, leather walking boots apsara posing, painting red piano,
yellow submarine, purple mango, blue pumpkin. Smile not
reaching eyes. Selfie taking ego fanning charity acolytes
pumped with goodness not Covid returning.

Out, Street 9, chilli salted cockle vendors, hot grilled chive cakes
sellers, Psa Chas bound, tuk tuk, motor cyclist, cyclist avoiding,
secretive market bursting forth fragrant essences, kaffir lime,
lemon grass, fish wort, coriander. Bright fish eyes watch
dimmed candle lit narrow aisles, porcine snouts, bovine tails,
feet, livers, hearts of chickens, purple octopus. Khmer
purveyors, straw hat wearing sun wrinkled faces project
welcoming smiles, marble eyes bright. Kuy teav noodles, pork
broth, beef slices, deep-fried garlic, herbs, breakfast soup lost in
translation.

Slim Khmer vegetable selling angel ever smiles with eyes,
proffers king oyster mushroom, enoki, galangal, turmeric,
customer pulls garlic, ginger, carrots into metal pan, extracts
fresh flat rice noodle into dish, pays, leaves for plastic bag of one
kilo rice.

Steung Siem Reap, leaf strewn, azure sky reflecting bridges
watching anglers. Scoopy processions carrying brief reflections
of damsels, long black hair, faces soft blue paper masked,

travelling over bridges, beyond to families, college, work,
secrets and lovers.

Sun kissed bright mornings merge into golden orb drenched
drying days, bringing breeze, bamboo taps on kitchen mosquito
screen, inescapable warmth. In white painted rooms, browning
ceiling fans slice air caressing hirsute arms, scent of Jasmine
joss. Sun browned white fingers type on hard black plastic
keyboards, pause, reach for frosty glass ginger water. Fingers
drip welcome condensation cool.

Khmer pasts, Khmer futures begat times of cleansing,
thunderously saturating equatorial rain. Night streets glisten
iridescently proudly revealing momentary clarity, splendour.
Tu tuk drivers press through rain onslaught. Tourists too few to
deny.

Cooler Krousar (family) Café evening encountering
International School English teacher nest, stunning ebony type-
dancer, brown eyes, hair recalling Henrix. Siem Reap haven for
strong North American females, Irish Catholics, Metta bums
replacing Majid for Wat. Night walk return, intermediate neon
reveals pot holes, Street 27 sleeping dogs left to lay, grilled fish
scents, barbecue spiced meat, red ants. This night Khmer star
abundant skies grace stationary traveller with cosmic
splendour.

Metta Metta Metta
Sadhu Sadhu Sadhu

THE PRODIGAL.

Author: Nick Marx

"My Child you know I love you, you mean all the world to me.
I've given everything to you. I hope that this you see.
Always I've stood by you, doing all the things I could,
With all of it so freely, just as any Mother should.
You know that I've provided everything I could afford.
I've asked for nothing in return - your presence my reward.
Always I have sheltered you, ensured there's food to eat,
The water from my streams you've drunk I hope was always
sweet.
If I thought you were in trouble I would shield you from the
storm
And throughout the coldest winters it was I that kept you
warm."

"To respect another's judgement can often be a little hard
And I know you hold my values in such very low regard.
You challenge ancient wisdoms taught by sages long ago,
You travel many paths you know it isn't wise to go.
You hurt so many others that I love as much as you.
These battered toys you play with I'm unable to renew.
You've caused such fearful damage, broken many sacred vows -
Gone far beyond the boundary any common sense allows.
I've been so very worried that you never seemed to learn,
But always I had hoped to see my Prodigal return."

"I've tried so hard to care for you, your debts I've always paid,
Smiled down on you benignly when I've seen your wasteful
ways.
I've forgiven your ingratitude, and all the harm you've done
As any loving Mother would forgive her wayward son.
I'm so sorry that I've failed you, couldn't make you understand

That you could go beyond the limit I was able to withstand.
Please forgive me now my little one, to whom I've given life.
I can no longer help you and this stabs me like a knife."
Mother Earth/monsoon winds, softly sobbing now. She knew
what lay in store,
But she was barren and exhausted, and she could give no more.

A Smiling Idiot in an Indonesian Village

Author: J.R. Sinclair

I had never been completely on my own, relying entirely upon myself, until I travelled overseas in my early twenties. Being alone among people I did not know, while also realizing that no one knew exactly where I was, gave me a euphoric sense of freedom. I was keenly aware of the feeling because it was so intense that at times I wondered if I might not be going a little bit crazy: I would catch myself with a silly grin on my face, not a look of joie de vivre, but unadulterated joy like the smiles of Evangelical Christians who have clearly been provided with all the answers, and are so ecstatic about the lack of uncertainty in life, that they use facial expression to share this feeling with the entire world.

This monstrous happiness would usually coincide with me being not entirely certain where I was, but not lost, because I was exactly where I wanted to be. To onlookers I must have appeared like just another stoned backpacker, but I was as straight as a die, just thrilled by the process of breaking a mould that no longer quite fitted.

While in the throes of my newfound freedom, I would play this little game when I arrived in a new town. I would ask myself, 'What kind of person will I be today?'

To go along with my chosen personality—be that an introvert, an extrovert, or whatever took my fancy—sometimes I even adopted a new name, but that became complicated when I met people I wanted to stay in contact with. To avoid the embarrassment of explaining to those people why I was not who

I said I was, my name changing became confined to my first and middle names: some days I was John, some days I was Ross, and occasionally I was even John Ross.

Such feelings of freedom reached their zenith one morning when I was on a local bus travelling between two provincial towns in Central Sulawesi. I was looking out the window at what seemed like the middle of nowhere when all of a sudden I shouted, 'Stop!'

The people on the bus seemed surprised and somewhat bemused that I would want to stop in such a place; there were no houses or people anywhere in sight. The bus driver kept asking me if I was sure I wanted to get off.

Up until that point in my life, a rural road in Central Sulawesi was the most out-of-the-way place I had ever been.

After the bus roared off and the dust settled over a natural stillness, I noticed a small track on the uphill side of the road. The track was clearly not suitable for larger vehicles, but there were signs that motorbikes and oxcarts used it, so I figured it must lead somewhere. It was a dirt track with rough fields on either side, where jagged tree stumps and smouldering piles of wood were interspersed with recently planted cassava stems.

I started walking up the track and ended up following it for several days.

Later that afternoon, and in the afternoons that followed, when I came across a village at a time that seemed like a sensible hour to stop, I asked for the Village Head. After a short negotiation to agree on a price, the Village Head took me to one of the villages houses where I stayed the night.

The houses were simple 1-2 roomed dwellings with iron roofs, walls and floors made from rough-hewn planks, with the only modern amenity being light from a single Butterfly lantern hung in the centre of the main room. Food was cooked on wood-fired stoves in a separate building, where the women worked while the men talked.

The evening meal consisted of rice and vegetables with a little meat. On my first night, a single tin of curried chicken was opened and placed beside a bowl of rice in front of me. It was such a small tin, and there were so many people in the room, it was almost impossible to take only my fair share.

Evenings involved sitting on the porch with the family exchanging more smiles than words, except with the old people, who assumed I understood everything they said and proceeded with long one-sided conversations.

One Village Head seemed particularly pleased to meet me. If the whole experience had not seemed so otherworldly, his roguish grin and humour-filled eyes would have been sufficient warning that he was up to something.

We sat on a mat together in stilted conversation while his wife served us cups of tea and sickly-sweet cakes.

Not long after my new friend established I was Christian—if I could communicate it I would say ‘raised a Christian’ and let people assume what they would—another man joined us on the mat with a young woman I assumed to be his daughter.

I sat and nodded and smiled not understanding 99% of what was being said, and certainly not understanding anything about what was happening. It was not until the third father and daughter, in a procession of fathers and daughters, that I began

to suspect that these young women were being presented to me as prospective brides.

I could pick up the odd word in the sentences of the men; their daughters did not say a word. My suspicions were further raised when a sentence directed at me, with accompanying gestures directed at the young woman, had a word I recognised.

The word I recognised was, 'love'.

With patched-together phrases from my dog-eared phrasebook, I confirm my worst suspicions that I was indeed an eligible bachelor.

I must have seemed uncomfortable, yet the men could hardly contain their pleasure at the proceedings. The young women seemed less pleased by the goings-on as they flushed red with either embarrassment or anger.

The last of the young woman to sit on the mat—I shut the occasion down by lying about my marital status—was the only one to look at me and she studied me intently. When we made eye contact, she did not seem entirely repulsed. I wondered if she was sizing me up as an option to escape from a place where women were offered up to strangers. But then, that was possibly not what was happening at all, and I may have completely misinterpreted the entire situation.

It would not be the last time.

In every village I visited along that track I was asked my religion.

Muslim villages were no less friendly, but in them I did not seem to be considered an eligible bachelor.

(The Muslim villagers were part of a grand scheme called Transmigration designed to ease the population pressure in far-off Java. Transported to remote often marginal frontier places, families were given land and supplies and left to eke out a living as best they could. The Christian villagers were rural poor from Sulawesi pushing into the forest in search of a better life. I planned to return to the area to work with a local conservation group, but the project was scrapped due to an outbreak of communal violence: the Christian and Muslim villages had subjected each other to the most horrific attacks.

At the time I was first there, I would not have believed something so gruesome was possible. By the time I heard the stories, I had spent several years in Papua New Guinean. I had seen there the incredible potential for violence between neighbouring villages of different cultures that, to an ignorant outsider, appeared very similar, but in their reality share little in common other than deep-rooted mistrust and animosity)

While I sat and drank sweet tea in the mornings before heading back out on the track, I would watch the men of the village heading out into the forest with chainsaws and air rifles. Under the Suharto dictatorship at the time, it was illegal to own firearms, so Indonesians made ingenious homemade air rifles; not the slug guns and bb guns of my childhood, but weapons capable of bringing down large birds, monkeys, and even small game.

I saw birds and lots of butterflies, and occasionally I heard a group of monkeys in the distance, but my walk was not the wildlife experience you might expect when so close to tropical rainforest.

The track I followed mostly skirted the edge of the forest, and walking along it was the first time I encountered tropical rainforest rapidly retreating to the sound of chainsaws and the smell of burning wood. These were sensations I would experience repeatedly in the years that followed, and ones I have spent the last 30 years trying to stop, at least at the industrial scale.

The track eventually landed me back on another road—or it might have been the same one I had left several days earlier—where I hailed a passing bus, that took this smiling idiot, further along the road...

Torrential

Author: Sam Plummer

Torrential, sun-streaked
Drawing across the paddies like a veil
Buckling banana leaves and awnings.
Kaleidoscopic pagoda roofs cascade into lily ponds
Nourishing paddies, revitalizing rivers.
Life-giving and eternal.

Torrential, lightning-blitzed
Smothering the city like a shroud
Scattering motorbikes and lives.
Thundering off veranda roofs to shatter the neon reflections
Flushing sewage, plastic and dreams.
Dark and ominous.

Torrential.
The monsoon tests our lives.
Washing our bastions downstream
to be reclaimed by culture
reclaimed by nature.

It's torrential outside
sisyphean and miserable.
I shouldn't be alone.
I should be with family, friends
comfort and cheer
to deflect the hopelessness
of building monuments in foreign lands.
Instead, a pen and a bottle of whisky.
Who else can save their souls? Save mine?

**On which tomorrow?
a fiction**

Author: Scott Bywater

waiting
stickily waiting
rinse and repeat

all is forgiven at the roar of the tumbling
and we rejoice in the thrilling generosity
of the brand new boundless downpour

and then again
we wait

it will be back but
on which tomorrow?

here I am picking over my haunting
the haunting of a time when
a endless lonesome dry
was broken by a long slow cooling magic

I thought I had slid off the human cycle
of want and not want and then want again
that old rinse and repeat

she begged my differ
she filled my want
she climbed my tree
and shook my branches

through the dry as we wait for the rainshowers
bathroomshowers must suffice
three times a day sometimes
bless the skin

at first the new season arrives intermittently
teasing and testing and
we rehearse our monsoon lines and steps
and flirt with the operatic clouds that come a-billowing
and yet may not deliver

then the delight to be woken in the wee hours
by the sound of rain
and to rise up to start the day with
petrichor swirled into the balcony coffee

trapped in a small room
making talk small and long
making sweat and blending it
making love as it pours
we rejoice in the thrilling generosity
and are glad to be under cover

we are at the place where
there is nowhere else to be

the rain allows us our buildings and our cars
is amused by our raincoats
and challenges our umbrellas

sometimes it takes the form of a gaoler
locking us in where we are
fierce and unforgiving
like you're on the wrong side of the Old Testament

and then those beautiful
sprinkles of pinprick-tiny raindrops for hours and hours
one long pointillist mist
that draws out the song in us

the songs surely should tell us the parts that they don't
specifically mention
but then the songs have the same half life as our good (bad?)
selves

lyrics metaphorificate crying and loneliness
and frequently add walking
because the rain also symbolises
that which we cannot but must accept

so if it's inevitable
blue eyes
let's go out and get
drenched

and in steady falling rain
relive our greatest tragedies

dial up old radio songs
strap on the headphones and howl

the tease of whipping winds
and the suddenness of the dark

our optimism and pessimism run on rails
that the rain ignores and just rides over

with an insistence of moisture
subdivided into unsharp bullets

the deliberate
(intentional? painstaking? methodical?)
disintegration of
yet another misguided erotic dialogue

at least it presents as a dialogue
it tastes and smells like a dialogue
we can crowbar it into the shape of a dialogue
and we can squint at it to make it look like a dialogue
but it becomes increasingly clear that there are two
or more
or even more
misinterpreted and poorly grasped monologues
stagnating in puddles in the two spots
where we forget that we should
fix
those leaks

and the painfully slow end
as later

we wander through
air like soup
and the smell of damp to go with the dust

because day after day
the corridors are dirty with mud
the stairs are made dangerous by constant trickles
the resentments grow at each incident
and we are ready for the dry again

this narrator is unreliable
this narrator is unworthy
this narrator is undaunted
this narrator tries so hard each time

this narrator is part of the problem
this narrator is not dissolving into solution
this narrator is feeling damp and soggy

and here we are
in the middle of the day
talking to ourselves

this narrator is still waiting
and will still beg for the rain

rinse and repeat

and then again
we wait

it will be back but
on which tomorrow?

Spirit of the Storm

Author: Steven W. Palmer

Samnang gazed to the southwest, dark and roiling clouds rushing towards him, heavy and intimidating yet bringing a welcome release from the oppressive heat of the last month. There was no way he would make it back to his family's hut in the small village near Angkor before the monsoon unleashed its watery load and its winds blew hard across the land.

He had lingered too long by the river, lulled into sleep by the fragrant rumduol flowers that surrounded his favourite fishing spot. His dreams had been impossible dreams that had seen him elevated to the royal court. He had been a kumara under Mahaparamasaugata and had spent his days hunting or learning combat skills and bokator and his nights sipping rice wine and surrounded by nubile dancing girls. Ah, the soft embraces of those girls, though not as soft as the embrace of impossible dreams.

Samnang was wise for his thirteen summers, or at least so he believed. He knew his dreams were nothing more than wishes that would never be granted. He had accepted that the reality was to spend his days working the land or fishing and that nights were for nothing more than sleeping to prepare for more of the same days ahead.

At least the rice wine was real and that although he would never experience those dancing girls, he was promised to the fair Arunny, a true morning sun in his life. It was, of course, an arranged marriage. Arunny's family owned several cattle while Samnang's family owned a larger piece of land but had fewer cattle. The marriage would bring the two families, and the two farms, together. Samnang would then inherit all, though of

course Arunny would be the real power in the family. She was an only child while Samnang's only brother was a monk in Mahendraparvata.

But now was not the time for dreams or for thinking of his future bride. Those dark clouds were closer now, encroaching on his position like the horde of savage Tais under Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao his father had fought 10 years before.

Samnang knew this area well. It was his playground, his battleground, his hunting ground, his very own little empire. The nearest rest house on the highway was too far to run before the storm struck. But there was a possible haven closer to him, a pile of ancient rocks that he had used as a fort many times. While not covered, it would offer shelter to this young warrior prince.

He gathered his fishing gear and that morning's catch and nimbly sprinted for the safety of his fort. As he ran, he could feel the monsoon's vanguard wind begin to rise in strength, though he thought of it as Buddha's breath urging him forward to escape the advancing storm.

He reached his special place, noting that the small copse of Troyak trees next to one of the larger boulders had grown since his last visit and would provide more shelter from the rain. He found a corner between two large rocks with a tree growing in front of them and hunkered down to await what the storm would unleash.

When it came, it was as ferocious as any warrior, drops the size of pebbles given added anger by the driving wind. He had chosen his spot well, with only a little of the storm's onslaught reaching his refuge among the rocks.

The storm was unrelenting, though the dry and parched earth welcomed the life-bringing rain, the first true monsoon of the season. There had only been a little rain in this last month, two days of teasing of the deluge to come.

Samnang knew his father would be angry, not so much at him being out in a storm, more for not being home to get the livestock into shelter. They had lost two of their cattle in a thunderstorm the previous year, the charred feast the family enjoyed still leaving a slight bitter aftertaste because of the loss. Although it was still early afternoon, the menacing clouds made it as dark as early evening, and the wind brought a chill to Samnang's bones. Why had he lingered so long by the river? Why had he fallen asleep?

A noise startled him, was that a laugh he heard? And how could he hear anything above the volume of the wind and the rain? He peered out into the driving rain and was shocked to see a figure strolling nonchalantly between the boulders. He was huge, well over six feet tall, but what shocked Samnang was more that the man, if it was a man, had four arms. One hand held what looked like crackling lightning, another an axe, a third held a discus, and the last carried what looked like an elephant goad. The reason for that last item became clear as a white elephant appeared and walked up to the man who fondly stroked the animal's trunk.

This was no man, this had to be a God.

The God laughed again and turned to the elephant saying, "Ah, Airāvata, is this not glorious? Is it not fitting that we who came from the Churning of the Ocean of Milk oversee the churning of the sky?"

Samnang gasped, it really was a God.

To his horror, the God heard his gasp over the storm and turned to peer into the boy's hiding place.

"You! Boy! Come here now." The gods voice contained all the sound and power of the thunder in the skies above and Samnang felt compelled to obey.

He walked up to the God, keeping his head bowed to show respect.

"Why are you hiding here, boy, and what is your name?"

"I got caught in the storm, sir." Stammered Samnang. "My name is Samnang."

"Do you know who I am, boy?"

"Yes sir, you are Pah En, mighty God of the sky."

"It is good that you know one of my names, boy. It shows that men still respect the Gods and have not forgotten us. I am also called Indra or Sakra, but my Khmer children know me by that name of Pah En."

"Of course, sir, we honour you in the family shrine and leave offerings for you every day."

"I am impressed, boy. I sometimes forget that the children of earth still do such things. But tell me, why are you not cowering in fear before me? Look at the wildness of this monsoon, the chaos my actions bring to the country. People and animals shall die, homes will be destroyed, does this not make you angry with me?"

"No sir. Of course I am afraid of you, you are a God after all. But why should I be angry? Life is an ever-revolving circle. My father once brought home an old coin from the ancient kingdom of Funan. The coin had a picture on each side though they were faded with time. Your actions in bringing storms and monsoons to the country are like those coins. On one side is the chaos and destruction. But the other side is the more important. Your

monsoons bring life back to the fields that have been long starved of rain. Your monsoons fill the rivers and lakes and the fish begin to breed again. So while there may be some death and loss, it is the life that we focus on and thank you for.”

“How old are you, boy?”

“This is my thirteenth year, sir.”

“So young? Yet you show a wisdom beyond that of many adults. Yes, I bring life as well as death. My Khmer children must continue to grow, to become wiser, and to flourish. Tell me, what are your plans in life?”

“Sir, next year I shall marry the girl promised to me, Arunny. Our families will join together as will our farms. I will continue to work hard and to learn from both my father and Arunny’s father so that I can make our farm profitable. And then...”

Samnang giggled, “we shall make many babies together.”

“I have not spoken to a mortal in many centuries but I like you, Samnang. Promise me that you will remember the old ways and the old gods and that you will continue to honour me.”

“Yes sir, of course.”

“Then I give you my blessing, Samnang. Your farm will flourish and all your babies will be born healthy and grow up to be great men and women. Now I must leave you. I have more storms to sow to bring this land back to life.”

With those parting words, Pah En mounted Airāvata and with a final wave, rode off into the storm.

When Samnang got home, he told his family about his encounter with the spirit of the storm. At first, nobody believed him, but when each successive harvest was better than the last, they finally believed the boy had been blessed.

East of Heaven

Author: Tom Vater

The town was covered in reddish dust. A nickel mine operated near-by and everyone worked there. Thanks to the rain, the dust clung to everything. Sam and I had been travelling south from the Palawan capital Puerto Princesa for several days, on a series of Jeepneys, the Philippines' all-purpose public transport vehicles. Sometimes we got seats and ate driving rain through the open slats of the passenger section. When the sun was out, we clung to the roof, along with bound chicken and pigs and ate dust. At a stop half-way down the island, a piglet in a rough rice sack made a valiant break for freedom and hurled itself along the hot tarmac down the road we'd just traveled, panicking, leaving a trail of shit and laughter from its owners behind. They caught the poor creature soon enough. There was no escape. There was no freedom. Not for pigs anyway.

We'd been sitting in front of the town's all-purpose kiosk for three days. Every now and then I bought a smoke, stood under the kiosk's awning to make sure it wouldn't soak and inhaled furiously. The cigarettes were called Hope. A piece of rope smoldered by the kiosk's counter all day. That's where I got a light. And a dirty look from the old crone who ran the place. Behind the kiosk, the town stretched away into red mud. A couple of disintegrating wooden warehouses populated by armies of rats sold the basics – rice, noodles, alcohol, and bullets leant into the daily deluge. Beyond these exhausted malls, a couple of hundred shacks and a handful of ugly concrete buildings made up the rest of the town. We slept in one of the concrete buildings which rented four rooms, mostly by the hour, above a karaoke bar. The nickel mine lay beyond a barbed wire gate just outside of town, guarded by men wearing Carrera sunglasses and carrying pump action shotguns.

No one was happy here, and no one was ever going to leave. Except for us. That's why we were so popular.

Once in a while I ambled down to what passed for the jetty, a long line of loose planks stretching across the placid water of the small bay that the town lay in. Vultures perched on the rotting posts that held the jetty together, plumage dripping. A couple of catamarans, their wings skeletal and fragile on the dark green water, lay tied to the posts. There was no one on board. Beyond, black clouds rumbled silently across the angry gun metal sky. The coconut trees on a couple of small isles a mile or so out to sea bent in the rain, threatening to fly off into the churning sea beyond.

The boat to Balabac, the one we wanted to be on, should have left a couple of days earlier, but the rain had been too strong. There was a storm out there lashing the ocean like a devil. This is what Mr. Gabunilas was telling me. Mr. Gabunilas lived on Balabac, the the Philippines' most remote, most southern island, a nest of outlaws allegedly, that young, entitled adventurers with too much time on their hands needed to visit. He was about sixty, a skinny man with fading Christian tattoos on his arms, a legacy of his years fighting with the Americans against the Japanese in WWII. Mr. Gabunilas was partial to a bit of hope himself, and so we periodically stood next to each other under the kiosk's awning, smoking, while he would give me an update on the lack of updates.

It was that time of day and I strolled from our room to the kiosk through light drizzle and purchased the day's first increment of Hope. The old woman scowled when I pulled the rope to my smoke. Mr. Gabunilas was next to me before I could take a drag. I nodded to the woman for another Hope, but he waved me off, his eyes on fire.

“You’re happy to leave, no, Boss?”

I nodded carefully. Everyone called foreigners Boss around here, apparently in reference to Bruce Springsteen. Male foreigners.

“Sure, happy to leave, we’ve enjoyed all the sights in town.” Mr. Gabunilas grabbed the cigarette off the old crone, lit up and left, waving at me emphatically. I hadn’t seen anyone here with this much energy.

“Today, we go. The boat will go. We will leave,” he shouted and disappeared behind the malls.

An hour later, the boat captain and his crew showed up. They wore grim expressions as they passed us and began to load one of the catamarans with petrol, ice boxes and plastic sacks of instant noodles. A small crowd gathered by the jetty, half hidden under garish umbrellas. The vultures were nervous, their pink necks quivering like something that was about to die. The sky looked the same as it had for days, wet and angry.

Mr. Gabunilas arrived, a tattered rucksack slung across a shoulder, eyes alight as if he’d experienced a religious epiphany. He guided us down the rickety jetty with a great show deference and even helped load our bags onto the boat. The small crowd, who turned out to be, like Mr. Gabunilas, from Balabac, followed us with visible trepidation. Fifteen minutes later, we set off towards a darkening sky, southwards, the catamaran almost loaded to capacity.

We skirted the bay and headed off the Palawan coast into the South China Sea. The town and with it, its torpor, quickly faded into the moist afternoon gloom. Soon the waves rose and there was nothing but water around us. A couple of sea gulls that

accompanied us turned and headed back the way we'd come. The boat's engine roared. We harked on across ever larger troughs, ravines and summits of water. The night came quickly and we sat in almost complete darkness, under a single bulb fastened to a leaky stretch of tarpaulin above our heads. It rained hard enough to knock out flying fish. Black water rushed at us from all directions. The catamaran heaved. It creaked. The passengers began to pray.

I turned to Mr. Gabunilas.

"Do you often travel like this?"

His face was drawn and pale. He shook his head emphatically. "So why did the boat head out tonight, if the weather was still bad?" Sam shouted at the old man to make herself heard. The roar of a full-blown storm lashed the catamaran and everyone onboard with fury. A couple of children behind us started crying. The captain switched off the engine. We were adrift.

Mr. Gabunilas shook his head sadly.

"You said you wanted to go, right, Boss? I told the captain the foreigners want to go. He looked at the sky, but he also needs to make money. You know the storm will pass, don't you? It will pass, if a foreigner decides to travel on this boat, right? We all trust you, that you make the right decision, right?"

His concern gave way to hope then and he smiled at us beatifically, wiping rivulets of water and spray from his face, "With foreigners on board, we will reach our destination, God willing."

Thero 1997, Phnom Penh

Author: T.W. Bell

The ramshackle bar, one of a few along the Phnom Penh riverfront, is open to the sky and to the tall weeping trees that surround it. Parts of it are sheltered by low, dull-brown thatch and overhangs of corrugated iron. The rough, grey wooden floorboards and tables, and low partitions dividing it from the street are all held up, ten metres above the river, by thick tree trunks sunk into the riverbank. The slow sweet smell of stale tobacco and malt from the counter and the beer-soaked floor hangs over everything. It is strongest in the sun the morning after the barang clientele have let their hair down, some few left slumped dozing in their chairs.

Mosquitoes poach in this humid, stale air above the Khmer barman. Their drone mixes with the Khmer pop music in the background. The barman sleeps, half standing, half draped over the waist-height counter. His breath is softly rhythmic except when, in his dream, he is laughing with cousins he has joined for a day of kindnesses, singing under the soft light of a waterfall hanging from a blue sky.

This bar is the sort where in monsoon season the afternoon downpour pounds big flat drops that thock rapid-fire on the tin roofing above the bar counter, drowning the quickened murmur of the barang as they huddle close to the bar and grow excited by the cool, sweet breath of this passionate beast on their cheeks. They watch it lash the rough tables half a metre from their barstools, and hold their hands out to it. Puddles form from the thick streams runnelling down the corrugations in the tin roof.

For some of them it suggests the obscure fury that has been raging elsewhere in the country, the conflicts that have again encroached on the city, spilling over the line of coloured sand laid around Phnom Penh by the government to give it magical protection. It has again boiled into the city streets of shop houses outside of which the owners once hung portraits of Sihanouk that carried a picture of Pol Pot on the back, to turn over, depending.

The monsoon obliquely justifies the expensive security threaded so exactly around the foreigners by the aid outfit or company or government that sent them. For some it is just another deprivation in the third world, another triumph of their sacrifice.

This bar is where the crisis of a drink wrongly poured or dropped on the slippery floorboards by the Khmer staff develops into shouts and sometimes blows rained upon them by the owner or his patrons. And where Thero, the blind throuer player, was asked about his eyes.

As he lies on his mat nested behind the cardboard and plastic of his shanty, Thero is remembering the barang's question outside that barang bar. No. I cannot speak of it. I cannot think of it.

Above Thero the river's evening breeze feathers the lined trees' fronds that are sheathed in their boles like an upturned shuttlecocks. It snuffles at Thero's skin, harbinger of early monsoon rain.

Thanks to the barang, he has eaten good food for the first time in three days. His stomach aches with the bulk of the rice and prahoc, fermented fish-paste from the market. They could eat like this for a long time with the barang's money.

In the dark Thero smooths the mat with his fingers, then raises his hand to his brow to massage his temple. An absolute weariness. His hand falls back to his side. Till dawn, "When the sun returns to the world, born again and breaking free from between the black panther's groin." He can hear his father ending the recital that Thero knew by heart, and can see him smiling behind the small ovals of his bifocals. "And we begin again." Thero is back, back then. Two decades before Pol Pot time. A light in his mind swings lazily across the memory.

He is six years old. They are in the Sneng village classroom by the pagoda. This is where his father teaches. It is dusk, the hour of the black panther, when the big cats come scavenging; when they suddenly leap out of the close swollen shapes of jungle, seizing screeching fowl, a goat, or a child.

Because of this, his father has been cautioning him for being out late. In fact Thero has been down on the red banks of the river, alone, playing the throu. He had watched the water cede its shattered colour, moment by moment, to a low, brilliantly burning red moon, as he tried to think the diffusion of the light into the sound through his arms and hands to the instrument, the way his father had told him.

Thero remembers the dusty schoolyard that was also the pagoda courtyard and the village square. It formed a causeway from the ancient, moss-covered stone tower in the east, to the entrance of the pagoda.

The lotus bud tower had four faces of the Healing Buddha, You climbed a narrow cut staircase to a landing set in the centre behind the faces. Hanging there was a bronze gong with a wooden beam that swung against it to sound all over the village and out over the fields.

The Buddhas had eyes that were closed, heavy-lidded with slender slanted brows. They had broad noses, full jaws, mouths closed with thick benevolent lips like swollen fruit. They were smilingly slightly, ironically, at some inner dreamt amusement, smoothly voluptuous, crumbling, shrouded by the thick vines of lilac bougainvillea creepers and rambling orchids bright against the dull grey-brown stone. The monkeys and the jungle prowled and grasped at the Buddhas, who had been asleep forever.

In the evening, most of Sneng, met in the courtyard, to tow leiying; to drink, to sing and play, and listen to the stories of Buddha told by the monks, and have fortunes told by traveling guess-men. They watched mask and shadow plays, danced circle dances around flowers.

The river was a black jewel, lispings vowels and sibilants to its banks thirty metres away. In the light of the glowing candles and the wood-fire braziers that spat sparks into the night, they gathered to eat boiled eggs and fried beetles and snake, and sometimes grilled tortoises from the river, and the mothers cooked rice snacks wrapped in banana leaves. The flames threw violet shadows into the cavities of the school buildings and the temple.

The courtyard was canopied by tall green coconut palms, big fronds like the enormous drowned pale eyes of the river dolphins that were sometimes brought up in the nets.

In the daytime the shadows of the palms' spiky fronds would hypnotise Thero as they slid across each other in the breeze. Their cross-weave strobed the sunlight from where he sat, cutting tiny fractal wedges whose shapes altered as their shadows moved over the red ground and the benches beside the giant dark-green pads of elephant-ear plants, where the children gathered, talking. When he closed his eyes the fronds

left moving cut out rows of negatives, moving checkerboards of bright and dark.

Thero remembers his father's history lessons in the courtyard, lessons that would always relate back to his visit to Sarnath when a youth. "The first turns of the wheel of Buddha's law were in Sarnath. We show like this," his father said, and put his thumb and forefinger together, touching to make a circle, with the other fingers straight out. The tip of this circle touched the middle of his other palm; the palm was open and twisted back towards himself so his fingertips touched his heart. He held his hands up for the class to see, and the children copied. "You see the Buddha statue with his hands like this."

And in the courtyard the tight pink bundles of oleander blooms bright against the dusty khaki leaves, like the shape his mother's mouth became when she put French lipstick on; and she would wriggle away, laughing when his father tried to kiss it off, telling her she was too pretty, that she was his mas prah ling, jewel spirit.

The colours and the confluent essences of all kinds of flowers were there, in the courtyard. He remembered. A garland from a girl. Sovanara, and a sniff-kiss on the cheek.

Lying on the mat he remembers his house upriver at Kum Jai: bamboo frame and woven bamboo mat walls, and dried palm leaf thatch roof, perched on stilts, with hammocks underneath in which they lay at the height of the sun, surrounded by the panting yard dogs and the chickens and other beasts, which crowded in beside them.

Next to the house there was a waterwheel with revolving bamboo buckets that turned into the water of the irrigation ditch from the trawpeang, house-pond. The pond was covered

with dark green moss and brilliant pink lotus and lilac-blue hyacinth flowers. There were giant red hovering dragonflies. Rows of ducks glided through the moss and fat pigs wallowed. Here and there one of the wide round lily and lotus pads were raised like, his father joked, sun parasols for the carp. The family washed here when the water-jars were empty, his mother pushing through the lotus pads and pond slick as she waded in, edging up her krama as she kneeled, till the water covered her breasts.

The matted bamboo walls felt laughter, silence, songs, tears, children's voices. No-one knew of time, of hours, or age then. Not until they fell out of the wheel of years.

The Monsoon Inside

Author: Josh Clayton

Awake,
Blue sky,
Clear headed, step away
From the a/c room that shows no trace,
Of the oppressively humid day,
And the reality of everything still to face,

Deep breath,
Rev bike,
Could be a nice day,
Cool breeze against skin,
“Maybe it stays that way” you say,
Ignoring the monsoon that waits within,

Hard work,
Keep going,
Clothes get heavy with sweat,
Are those clouds you see in the distance?
Did I prepare for a day that is wet?
Is that doubt seeping into my conscience?

Fake smile,
Push back,
Hope that somehow the dam won't break,
And it stays sunny throughout the day,
Maybe it won't be more than you can take,
Though you don't believe the words you say,

Failure,
A waste,

Everything you planned unfinished,
Black clouds now cover the sun,
All confidence diminished,
No choice now but to run,

Leaves fly,
Dust swirls,
Vortexes formed in the gale,
Batter the eyes from every direction,
No rain jacket or poncho, again, a fail,
The first drops fall as tears form in your vision,

Lightning,
Thunder,
With fury the skies rend in two,
The monsoon inside now unchained,
Within seconds soaked right through,
Unable to feel anything but pain,

Plod upstairs,
Nothing matters,
Drenched clothes slosh to the floor,
Where no one can see you cry,
Hidden away behind a locked door,
Alone as the monsoon rages inside,

The Two Suns

Author: Joss McDonald

Winds are blowing from the north-east today. The small seventy-seater plane sways from side to side as it descends towards the tiny runway. A tarmac so small, I contemplate whether the plane could be whisked right past the end and into the sea that borders it.

The plane lands safely.

I unclench my hands from around the armrests, unbuckle my seat belt, and gather my belongings. Outside, an auto-rickshaw awaits to take me to the jetty. Thirty minutes later we arrive, albeit minus an actual jetty —

I follow my driver as we weave past some dogs, through what appears to be somebody's yard. The dogs bark. They seem worried I'll be a threat to their loot of garbage strewn around the dirt.

We arrive at the water's edge where a longboat is waiting to carry me to my destination. A boy takes my carry-on suitcase. It turns out he will also be the captain. I gingerly climb into the boat. I am his sole passenger. Packed around me is the clean linen we stopped to collect at a laundromat on the way here.

Thankfully, the tempered wind has lessened. We head across the peninsula. The boat rocks back and forth- the top of the sides almost kissing the water more than once. As we enter the bay, the ocean becomes tranquil. Before me a white beach, dotted with palm trees, glitters in the sun. Secluded behind that is where I'll be sojourning.

The journey has taken an hour. When the longboat pulls close to shore, I gather up my skirt, ready to be christened by the shimmering blue sea. Then, stepping onto the beach, the sand molds itself around my feet. These will be my shoes for the next few days.

Paradise.

I arrive at lunchtime. A table is spread with local cuisine. Instead, I'm drawn to the scenery that captivates and encompasses me. I look outwards, peaking through the trees, at my view of sparkling turquoise. Gazing to my left, a longboat sits perfectly framed between two palms. The waves, softly lapping a few meters in front, are hypnotic.

Having only recently recovered from Dengue, travel and the bumpy flight have taken its toll on my body. The serene beauty of this location soothes me though. It is the balm I didn't know I needed. I could sit here forever in this reverie.

Day turns to evening. On the beach I watch the sunset. The sun burns crimson, its reflection seared across the water. A strip of water looks like it could be on fire. -A yellow flame that fans out to orange, fringed with red edges. Slowly, the sun lowers itself behind a mountain.

Winter monsoon will last another month. The heat of next season hasn't begun to build yet, so the night air is cool. I put on a jumper to sit in the open-air restaurant. After dinner and wine, I head to bed. The pillows are like cumulus clouds that lull me to sleep.

My alarm chimes to wake for sunrise. I climb out of bed, step out of my room and onto the balcony. Over the bay, the sun is competing with itself, trying to eclipse last evening. A hint of

magenta is everywhere I look- the sky, the beach, the ocean. Fishing boats' motors are humming at shore. The rise of the sun illuminates the oxcart that is arriving to carry away a night's taking.

Soon the sun is fully up.

I float a few feet back to bed. This 18-degree morning is frigid now that I've become climatized to living here in South-East Asia. I swaddle myself in my duvet and reflect on what I have beheld. I smile and I declare sunrise the winner of the two suns. What I have witnessed was not a dream. For I have been blessed to hold court here with both.

Write Drink Gamble
Acclimatizing to a Monsoon

Author: Les Cook

Under – a Cambodian National Park.

Over – looking Kep Bay.

At the first drizzle of rain... I kinda stopped drinking and I'd started to gamble, specifically on sports betting because I didn't drink when I gambled.

This was it, the missing puzzle . . . sports betting could be my alternative to drinking – super.

This is going to be great. Not only will I not be drinking as much. I can also make the money that I would have drunk.

So it began

And it was working. I was drinking very little.

Betting was expensive – though worth it compared to the cost of my wellbeing, or lack of it from drinking.

Soon though . . .

I'd drink when I lost – and then I'd drink when I won – and finally I drank while I gambled – experiment over.

It's funny, Charles Bukowski the poet, a notorious alcoholic had to stop drinking, Doctors orders and he's like, "What will I do now?" – and his I think girlfriend said, "Go to the horse track. You can bet on them."

Dumbstruck, he was like, "They bet on horses to see who will win?"

And she gives him details.

So he went to the track, gambled, and that was it – he was hooked – loved it – and experienced a surge in his Poetry when he returned from the track.

If he didn't go to the track he couldn't write.

He never did stop drinking.

So I sit, no drinking, no gambling.

Now what?

Pouring rain.

Write

Rainless

Author: Becky Barnes

I don't remember the rain when I think back. Though it must have rained. I remember everything else. The hot air wrapping me in its sticky film while I stroke my finger along the wet cold condensation of my glass of beer Laos, relentlessly chasing the salty taste of chilli peanuts. I remember it all so clearly. Lonely sunsets on the majestic Mekong River, waiting for you.

When you arrived I was already alone. Do you ever think back to the big wooden house? That stately building surrounded by coconut trees. It stood on the street that had no name. The home that had no number. One late evening when a ripe coconut bounced on the roof, laying alone in the darkness, I realised no one knew my address. If I called no one would come. When I think of it now all I can taste is Marlborough smoke passing my lips and filling my lungs. Smoking after work on the huge open veranda, staring into the darkness, making out shapes, wondering how soon I could go to sleep. It must have rained. One entire wet season in Laos. I don't remember the rain.

Your visit brought light to the dark recesses of my shadowy loneliness. Beers after work, new adventures, moto rides to the Buddha park, late hot nights sat laughing on the riverside, the lights of Thailand so close we felt we could touch them. We watched TV and curled up in the heat. Sweat bonding us together in long close embraces and accidental sunrises while we discussed theories we barely knew. Maybe the rain couldn't touch my skin when your heat covered every pore that breathed you in.

When you left, I tried to find another life in Laos. Long cycles to long chats with people I didn't care for. Drinking too much to try and laugh along. The call of monk's early morning prayers beckoning me to wake up to start each new day. I desperately tried to love the sunlight as it danced along the road of my nameless street in the early morning. Carefree bike rides on the smooth open roads lined by huge green palms. I let the Mekong calm me as I drank cold beer Laos and watched the explosive orange glow of the sun setting before, once again, I returned to the darkness. A beautiful place made for beautiful memories. My loneliness and I sat quietly together while we waited for you.

You never came. Every day you never called my loneliness was there to speak to me. It's voice mumbling quietly at first, a whisper in the balmy hot nights, growing louder. The words echoing the pain I already felt. My loneliness grew as it coaxed me in and wrapped me in you. The cocoon of comfort and cruelty.

But there was always someone else with me - though I remember them even less than the rain. When I tried to listen, I heard them. When they told me to leave, they were right. Somewhere beneath the crystalised exterior of my cocoon was another voice to be heard.

I followed the calm strong guidance of the Mekong and with its calling current I came to Cambodia. The rain came. It rains still. I feel the wet, cold, heaviness crash against my skin. I hold my palms and face towards the black heavy sky and let every bursting drop explode on me. I feel it all and let it wash you away. The rain strips me and my pores breathe again. Loneliness waits for me in another rainless place but neither of us wait for you. The layers of you are ripped and torn, by the monsoon that finally pours, and beneath them - is me.

The Kingdom

Author: Nick Marx

"Go lightly on your journey. Leave no footprints in the sand.
The path that you are treading is on someone else's land.
There's no problem with your presence. Glad to have you
passing through.

Please take comfort on your journey, and I'm sure you'll love the
view.

Take nourishment and shelter, but use only what you need,
Do be gentle with the creatures and don't fell too many trees.
There is all that you could want here, on the land, in woods and
streams,

But be careful on your travels, it's more fragile than it seems.
There are many gone before you who have caused no small
distress,

Though it's someone else's property they've left a fearful mess.
The damage that they do could maybe soon obscure the
sun -

And I've heard the birds and beasts are now all leaving one by
one.

It isn't theirs to vandalise - nor yours - so please take care
On your journey through a property so plentiful and fair.
You ask me where you travel, and the name we give this land?
We know it as "The Earth". It's all we have, please understand.
Now you want to know the Landlords, those you feel you ought
to warn?

We all journey through The Kingdom of the Young Ones Not Yet
Born."

The 'Dragon's Back': Laos 2004

Author: Wayne McCallum

When it arrived the change was sudden, catching us unaware, and rounding a bend we were seized by the current, the water snatching our craft and pitching us forward. Gone was the calm flow of a few seconds before, the view ahead dire, water morphing into whirlpools and frothing whitecaps – the Nam Ha boiling and pulsing. There was no way out, we had entered the Dragon's Back.

Over lunch Toey and I had discussed the options for descending the rapid, both of us agreeing that it would be prudent to pull to the side and study the stretch before proceeding. Now though, for some reason, my colleague had been caught unaware. Perhaps he had been daydreaming? Or the rapid's character had changed since his last journey? Either way the Nam Ha had decided for us. We were trapped. Fated to descend the Dragon's Back ready or not!

Shooting forward our kayak jetted into a trench, a spray of water and an enormous boulder looming on the other side. Furiously we plunged our blades into the current, working hard to steer us left, staving off disaster by centimetres, the rock flashing past my arm. Ahead, the limbs and leaves of a fallen tree reared up, cloaking our route. Raising my paddle I flicked them aside, the leaves brushing my face as we rocketed by.

On we hurtled, my muscles flexing as we skimmed past more rocks and fallen obstacles, our expedition balanced on the edge of calamity.

Dropping down a shoot the kayak was captured by a whirlpool, the torrent spinning us around, the swirling water almost wrapping us around a wide boulder. Jetted to the right we were released by the eddy, and ricocheting off a sandstone wall we broached a wave, a fountain of water drenching us as we continued on.

In the kayak, gripping my paddle, I could feel the energy of the Nam Ha pulsing through its blade—immense and untamed—its violence questioning our right to be here. Further ahead I spied something. Clear water! We were almost through.

‘Almost!’ For the river had a sting in its tail, a final section of riverine chaos: a stretch of boulders and frothing water, with several toppled trees strewn across its channel. Unable to fight the current we hurled into the caldron, the trunk of a fallen bough almost taking my head off as I ducked underneath. In front of us a large rock now appeared, its pitted surface ordained to impale us. But Toey was quicker, his ability and experience merging in a move of agility and grace, and with a twist of his paddle he shot us through the narrowest of gaps, our kayak exiting the whitewater. We were saved!

Toey and I were exhausted—soaked, but alive—a calm patch of water rippling around our kayak, the feeling meditative after the bedlam of a few moments before. Through the air a light breeze, a valley zephyr, whispered past my face – my body still, pulse settling. Behind me Toey remained quiet, wondering, I

suspect, how he had managed to save his Nam Ha reputation. Lost in thought I shifted my paddle through the water, watching the wake as the adrenaline ebbed from my body.

“That was hard.” Toey broke the silence. “I guess we should’ve pulled in first.”

I did not need to think of my reply: “Yeah. I think you’re right.”

We continued to drift, our kayak at peace, the current gliding us in an ever-wider circle, the sun’s rays drying our clothes. Drifting on we both remained still, the pair of us alone with our thoughts and visions of what might have been.

THE STORM

Author: Doug South

There is something about being on the inside. A protection, a security, a calmness, & cosy if you will, watching the drops splash against the window pane, the rivulets meandering downwards forming a delta of rivers on their journey. The raindrops making their metallic symphony on the tin-sheathed roof above, the crescendo shifting & changing as if in time with the baton directions of the Maestro...yes, a warmth comes with the rain when on the inside.

But, in the early hours of this morn I awoke to the tempest of war, the sky was almost as if day; the lightening putting on its spectacular show, & just as night follows day, a constant heavy rolling of a thunderous noise across the heavens. The usually comforting metallic sound now like hammers of a force demanding entry, demanding to have its way. The howling wind, tossing the leaves of the banana trees in a frenzied mayhem, forcing its will on the stalks of the bamboo thicket ... they bending to their extremes, refusing to yield to the ultimate...the breaking point. The noise to the point of deafening.

A heart a beat or two quicker with the excitement that comes with the concert performance that is nature demonstrating one's helplessness when it wishes to put on its display of power. Yes, there is something about being on the inside at such times, and in the early hours of this morn, a wonderment, an excitement at what this home of ours presents at times. A thankfulness that Mother Nature's show was limited to a small demonstration of her power this day. And, a fleeting thought of apprehension at her message, one which makes me recoil at the thought of her ever wishing to demonstrate to me, first hand, the fury & violence of her ultimate power. Many have . . . (Suong, Cambodia).

The Riverbank

Author: Laurence Stevens

The mountains surrounding the river were thick with trees and mottled dark and bright green from where clouds blocked the sun. The river ran smooth, shining like a rink of rippled brown glass. Close to the bank the fishing boat bobbed in the water and was tied to the bamboo jetty by a length of frayed blue rope. The boat's chipped white paint had been baked pale yellow by the sun and a brown water mark stained halfway up the hull. On the deck, the father lay snoozing underneath a stringed tarpaulin as he awaited his son.

The roar of a dry motorbike engine filled the yard. The father turned his head and saw his son lugging a trailer of rattling wooden planks and tools with the rusted 87' Honda Dream. Chickens clucked and flapped through the cloud of brown dust the bike left in its trail. The boy pulled up next to the riverbank and turned the key in the ignition, killing the engine in a splutter.

"Did you find everything?" said the father.

"Everything," said the boy.

"Did they understand you?"

"Of course," said the boy.

The father got up and stretched out his arms. A weak breath of wind stoked the breeze as he stood, and the dry wood of the boat creaked as he descended the ladder to the jetty.

"Throw me a beer," said the father.

The boy opened the orange plastic cooler, plunged his hand into the iced water and grabbed a semi-frozen can of Angkor Gold, throwing it to his father. The father cracked open the can

and drank. It was slushed with ice but went down his gullet refreshing and delicious.

“What do you know about boats?” said the father.

“They float and take you places,” said the boy.

“That’s the short of it,” said the father.

“I don’t think this boat will, though,” said the boy.

“Why not?”

The boy looked at the boat.

“There’s too many holes, and the wood looks rotten. When it rains, it’ll sink.”

For 20 years, the former owner had sailed the boat into the Gulf of Thailand to net mackerel and longtail tuna. The fisherman’s sinewed body had been tanned a dark brown by the sun, and he’d been glad to be rid of the boat so he could settle on land to grow mango and short fruit.

“Holes can be patched,” said the father, taking another swig of beer.

The boy’s face hardened.

“I think it’s sailed as far as it can go.”

“Maybe, but the winds will turn soon, and she will sail upriver, renewed. Mark my words,” said the father.

The boy’s eyes rested on his father.

“What?” said the father.

“Nothing,” said the boy. “But why do we have to leave and go up the river?”

“There’s nothing here for us son, not anymore.”

“But what about...” said the boy, looking back towards the yard.

“It’s ok,” said the father, placing his hand on the boy’s shoulder. “We can’t stay on the riverbank forever. I am old, but you will soon be a man, and the world is that way,” he said, pointing upstream.

The boy looked from his father's shimmering green eyes to the fishing boat that had been whittled by storms and high seas.

"Maybe she'll sail, if we fix her properly," said the boy.

"She will. Now, help me with the tools," said the father, smiling.

The father and the boy walked to the trailer. The father grabbed three lengths of timber and a metal toolbox from the trailer, throwing the stack of timber up onto his shoulder with ease.

"Bring the hand plane, we will need it," said the father.

The boy picked up a tool shaped like a shoe with a circular brass handle at either end, one slightly larger than the other. As they reached the boat, the father stopped and waited by the ladder.

"Welcome aboard," said the father, holding out his hand and motioning the boy forward.

The boat sank and swayed under the boy's weight as he climbed the ladder and boarded. It was a strange sensation that seemed to treble in power as his father clambered aboard after him. They set the tools and planks down on the deck, its pale-brown panels run smooth from decades of trampling footsteps. On the bow a gaping hole looked like an escape hatch and deep grooves from the pull of ropes pitted the stern. There was much work to be done, the father reflected.

"When will we leave?" said the boy.

"Soon. The fish spawn in upland lakes when the river's low, but when the rains return, and the rivers rise, they'll spread. We'll catch them for food."

“But what about the storms?”

“Storms make the trees drip fruit, and the frogs come out their holes, and snakes follow to feast upon them. Our larder will be full by the time we reach the city.”

“Will it be the same when we go upriver?” said the boy.

The father paused and grabbed the hand plane.

“No, it will not. And it will not be easy.”

“Then why leave?”

“Do you wish to stay here on the riverbank for the rest of your life?”

The boy looked away to the mountains. The shade of green grew darker as the afternoon approached.

“No, but why can’t we go downstream to the sea? We can go the beach, and fish for tuna and stingray, like usual. We can swim in the ocean and sleep each night under the stars.”

“We head for the city. One day, you will come back the owner of this plot of land, and then you can holiday by the seaside. You will need to take care of...”

The father’s voice trailed off as he looked back toward the yard. “We all have a journey we must take,” said the father, returning his gaze to the boy. “Come, pass me the tape measure. We will need to patch the hole on the bow.”

“You won’t leave me once we’re there, will you?” said the boy.

The father stopped and stared at his son a moment.

“I can only promise that by the time I leave, you will be ready,” said the father.

“Ready for what?”

“For life, my son, and for wherever it leads you.”

The boy looked to the mountains. They were dark green.

Monsoon Wave

Author: Alasdair McLeod

A dark squall rolled in across the valley, and the jungle canopy rippled above the swollen river. Among the wind-battered trees a winding road led to a crooked wedge of houses that overlooked the river.

The sound of Reva's laughter on a video-call was muffled by the hammering rain.

"Honestly it was the funniest thing I've ever seen in a staff meeting. Des had logged in to the call way too early, and while he was waiting he nodded off!"

"What? How is that even possible?!" asked Talia.

"He was slumped on his chair while more and more people signed in and saw him. He was still asleep when the meeting started. His volume must've been turned low as we couldn't get his attention."

"Some people can sleep through anything, I guess. I wish I could do it. Perhaps not in a meeting, though. It's been a pandemic – apparently nothing is off limits now!"

"When we were on the third agenda point, he finally woke up. He quickly realized what had happened and apologized but then he muted himself and called a mate. He was laughing a lot, and I'm no lip-reader but I could see he was telling his friend the story of how he'd fallen asleep before a work conference call. The Head of Department kept going with the meeting, but everyone was

watching the screen tile of Des grinning and talking. I can't begin to imagine why he didn't switch to his avatar and kill the camera."

"He ought to be careful. With all the shutdowns, so many businesses have closed and workers are returning to their villages. We're lucky to have jobs, so Des should tread carefully."

Reva brought the camera close and ate a strip of fresh mango. She then took a sip from a large glass of red wine. Looking up and to the left she said, "Look at our terrible lives."

"Poor us," replied Talia. They both laughed.

"But Des probably doesn't care. The shutdowns are changing us all in myriad ways. It seems to me that everyone is acting a bit unpredictably as they've started forgetting how to be with other people socially."

"Everyone is waiting for things to go back to the way they were before, but those days are gone. With no-one to talk to, it's making narcissists of us all!"

"There's a scary thought, talk to you later."

Branches were scraping back and forth along the gutters and Reva was unsettled by the noises as the wind blew some loose fabric around in the roof-space. She turned on the news to drown out the sounds.

The newscaster had just asked a question and the guest said, "In our homes, all around the world, we're at a tipping point of loneliness in our locked down lives. The absence of meaningful community is the real story here."

Reva's attention drifted to a gecko that was creeping intermittently along the skirting board towards the kitchen trash can, ignoring the line of ants that had been plundering it all afternoon. She looked across at the window and the mantis eggs crusted on the outside of the glass in the upper right corner. A coppery millipede was disentangling itself from the fluffy edge of the doormat, and she shivered. There had been a small brown scorpion on her back patio the other day, and a snake on the gate.

"Loneliness is the least of my problems!" she muttered to herself in reply to the last thing she had listened to on the television. Maybe it was because of all the time she was spending at home, she thought, that these days she noticed the invasive creepy crawlies more than ever before. She checked all the windows and doors to make sure the mosquito net frames were closed tightly and that the rain wasn't being blown in. She sneered at the unwashed dishes that filled the sink and curled up on the sofa with her smartphone. She scrolled through the names and dialled one.

"Hey Altan, are you busy tonight?"

"Nah, not really, why?"

"Wanna hook up? I'm bored."

"Woah, not likely. Have you seen the weather? It's crazy out there. I think the road to your place is closed anyway, there are fallen trees blocking the way."

Her face pinched with anger and she raked her fingernails along the arm of the sofa. "I was just thinking about that party three months ago where we first met, in between shutdowns when things opened up for a bit."

“That was a weird party, people going off with strangers for a bit of action in the dark corners...”

“And up on the roof garden too! Everyone’s standards were lower than they used to be before all this so they got it on with anyone they could find. I don’t mean you and me, I mean everyone else that was there.”

“It was like, after so much time alone nobody knew how to talk to each other anymore, so they just went at it in the darkness!”

“So, I was thinking about us up there in the bushes that time... I wanna take care of you again, what do you say?”

She flung a cushion angrily across the room and it knocked over a lamp which promptly went out. If Altan wasn’t willing to bend the rules a bit or even make the effort to see her, he could go and screw himself. She wouldn’t be giving him any more chances. She was miserable from the lack of direct human contact, and she was tired of the grinding personal erosion that came from sublimating her social life through video-calls and social media. Day by day the monsoon wave kept intruding into her house and her world, nature’s tendrils worming their way relentlessly into her food supplies and her bedroom. Bloody geckos!

Reva sensed her moods were becoming more aggressive. Remote work had not been kind to her – it had been a hero’s journey battling self-loathing and depression. But she had endured and unexpectedly discovered a stranger within her. Something stirring in her was fighting to shed the rudderless narcissism that had become her routine. She was tuning in to the ruthless predatory focus of the natural world that had been pushing in on her with the monsoon driving it. Soon enough she would be part of the inevitable wave of hedonism that would sweep through cities and towns when they opened up again.

With the traditions of normal interaction forgotten, Reva and everyone she knew would abandon themselves to impulsive acts and reimagine human contact. The debris of their former communities would be renegotiated and bargained for. There would be chaos. Reva saw all this in her mind's eye as she wept in quiet resentment from her rejection at one end of the sofa. "I will find my tribe," she said to herself in the darkness. "They are out there, and I will find them."

‘Monsoon Solitaire’
Is
Brought to you by HOWL


A call out to the writers, readers, venues, and all
those who have cheered and supported our
endeavours.

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A BIG THANK YOU
FROM DR. HOWL



HOWL is the proud coordinator of the
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What is HOWL

HOWL brings writers, audiences and spaces together to create one-off 'pop-up' word events. A HOWL happening might entail a book launch, a presentation by an author or publisher, a poetry or short-story jam, a workshop, a panel discussion etc., with the overriding theme being the primacy of the 'word'.

Our Inspiration . . .

Our name is inspired by one of the great poems of the twentieth century, 'Howl' by Allen Ginsberg; a work whose words, verses and imagery threw open the possibilities for how we write, speak and publish. Our title is also inspired by the notion that it is the writer's role to 'howl wildly', to use words to fashion sentences, lines and verses that embolden minds, broaden imaginations and shine lights into the corners of human existence – and to spread these words widely.

This Anthology

This volume comprises prose and poetry selected from the enormous number of entries to the 'Monsoon Solitaire' literary competition. Each work represents a moment where a writer's pen shone brightly, creating something that we are privileged to share with you here.
Thank you all!

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