

Poems: Dr. Howl

**BAD POEMS
SOCIETY**

**Collection
2018 - 2022**

**HOWL
PRESS**

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“HE WAS A SELF-PUBLISHED POET —
THE SCARIEST CREATURE ON THE
PLANET.”

— CHARLES BUDOWSKI
WOMEN

The poems shared here were written
between 2018 and 2022. One was
drafted in Japan, others started in
Phnom Penh, but all have been honed
and shared in my temple home
– Siem Reap.

Works

I Heard the News	.....	2
Acceleration	.....	6
What is a Poet?	.....	10
Dead Soldiers. A Prince, a Journalist, a Flight Attendant & a Poem (Essay and Poem)	.....	18
Srey Bamboo	.....	52
Sakura Au Revoir	.....	56
Locked Down, Temple Town, Delta Blues	.....	58
Declaration	.....	60
Love Poem	.....	64
BOMB	.....	66
The Algorithm	.....	70
Everyday I Write a Story	.....	74

On January 11th 2016 I rose early, and after my morning run checked the internet. There, I found it alive with the news that David Bowie had died while I slept.

Bowie's death hit me; he had been part of my cultural wallpaper while growing up; an artist who had produced moments of magic, while being someone who was 'just there' . . . And now he wasn't.

Two years later, June 8th, Anthony Bourdain, another hero—a connoisseur of the human connection between food, joy and place—had, too, passed away in the night.

I call them 'heroes', although if they were heroic, they were also imperfect. Nevertheless they were figures that inspired me — who showed me what a creative light can produce and ways to live.

Their lives and spirit roused this poem, which is dedicated, not just to David and Anthony, but to other heroes too. Figures that, while gone, remain in my heart.

More than this, though, it is also a poem, however remote, of resurrection, and of that most human of things — HOPE.

I Heard the News

(2018)

I heard the news –
The fashion queens say that you are back.
Jean Jeanie, Star-man, the Thin White Duke,
Singing 'Fame' on Soul Train,
While trading licks with Mick Ronson,
And making love with your ego like a leper messiah,
With cheek bone chic and suited attire.
Innovator, curator, a Ziggy Stardust once-been,
David Bowie take a seat and tell me what you've seen.

Anthony, the kitchen hands whisper that you're back.
With *No Reservations* and nothing *Confidential*;
Those character lines, silver main,
That voice of New York wit.
Hanoi with Obama,
Blue chairs, plastic table,
A cool beer on your lips.
A gourmet traveller,
And lover of food and where it can take us;
Returned from *Parts Unknown*, Anthony
Sit at my table and tell me what you have tasted.

I stare at the stars and they say that they're back
Ros Sereysothea, Sin Sisamouth,
Pan Ron, Yol Aularang, and the Thra Kha Band.
Nightingale of the Mekong, Elvis of the rice fields,
The cheeky monkey, the longhaired rebel,
The Kampuchea 'Stones'.
Cambodia's golden rock n' roll shaking the earth,
Tipping over the turntables,
Reclaiming the airwaves,
I hear that they're all back,
And the future has never sounded so good.

Tiger, tiger, they say that you're back,
And the camera traps on Pub Street
Have recorded the fact.
Lapping a cold Angkor at Laundry.
Savoring the amok at Sugar Palm.
Devouring a bagel at Bang Bang.
And purring over a cool mojito at Ms. Wongs.

Tiger, tiger, sleek and strong,
With you gone the jungles have been so quiet,
With nothing but the sound of chainsaws and bulldozers to
Greet us as the sun drifts round.
Tiger tiger, sleek and strong,
11 years gone, welcome home,
Its been too long.

Oh I hear that they're ALL back!
Common sense and decency.
A critical press and free self-expression
Love and kindness.
Dignity and respect.
Real news and open debate.
The White Building and Boeung Kak Lake.
Cambodian Daily, Phnom Penh Post.
Kim Lay, Chunk Vuth and Chea Vichea,

I hear that they're all back!

And if this is a dream, do not wake me.
For in my dreams they have all returned.
And in my dreams there is love.
And in my dreams there is hope.

In early January 2020 HOWL held a special poetry evening in Siem Reap. (Covid was in the shadows; still that 'thing' happening in a strange sounding city in China.)

Convened at the *1:11 Gallery*, it featured an overseas guest, the 'grandmother' of Canadian poetry, Marsha Barber (if a grandmother, then a very spritely one). Scott Bywater was there too; too young to be a 'grandfather' — lets call him the 'Godfather' of Phnom Penh poetry instead. Present, also, were a host of other 'old souls and new voices'. All told it was a beautiful evening, one that lives warmly in recall.

One person, who could not be there, was my cousin and fellow poet, John. Now John could appear for

reasons that become obvious in the telling. For John is from Australia, and John is a voluntary fireman, and in the weeks leading up to the event (and after) he was busy fighting fires on the Gippsland Tablelands, of Southeast Victoria; my cousin playing his part to help save people's homes, livelihoods and their very lives.

To honour John and his colleagues I wrote the poem that follows, its verses summarising events and details from that time. (Enthused by wider issues around climate change.)

Still, today, the poem remains one of my favourites.

You can find my 1:11 Gallery reading at: <http://waynemccallum.com/howl/>

Acceleration
(or 'Is this what tipping point feels like?')
(2020)

One tone-deaf Prime Minister.
Two lightening strikes amongst the trees.
Three embers bright and drifting,
Harbingers on a warm breeze.

Uncle Bob's garage, car, house and farm
Aflame beneath a shrouded December sun.
While five households huddle
On a crowded and gusty shore,
Praying for mercy from the heat, the smoke,
Victims of this new ash war.

Twenty-five family trees blackened,
Branches and buds lost
To this unnatural affray.

Forty-two months and only 20 millimetres of rain

A thousand koala joeys cremated on Kangaroo Island.
How much carbon did they ever emit?
How many lies did they ever tell?

Three thousand reservists called up on the 4th,
More men and women for a battle already half lost.
10,000 brave 'firies' struggling on in the climate change
Twilight,
Beneath 10 million hectares of flame-burned Silhouettes
Glowing in the hazy moonlight.
In memory of dawn choruses and dusk cries,
Half-a-billion creatures consigned to the enflamed wind,

A billion words of denial.
One trillion tears of anguish.

Post-script

Politicians and philosophers, Aunt Claire
And cousin John,
As Tim Flannery once wrote:
“The reward for being right
Will be embers in our mouths.”

For the homes of the denier and the believer
Burn just as bright;
Principles and truths rendered
To cinders on a burnt forest floor.

In Cobargo a bookshop has a new sign:

**‘Post-apocalyptic fiction
has been moved to
current affairs.’**

In 2018 I was in Japan, staying in Yaksushiro. It's a quite place, most renown for a smoke stack, which constantly bulges steam, giving the city's air a moist-sweet tang.

Having visited Yaksushiro several times, one of my favourite 'things-to-do' was a visit to 'Micks', a traditional—in a 1960s sense—Japanese breakfast restaurant.

In a declining part of town, numerous shuttered shops along the narrow streets, Micks had caught my attention because of the by-line on its name board — “coffee and jazz”. I mean how could you not be interested, right?

So I started to become a Micks regular whenever I was in

Yaksushiro, befriending the proprietor himself—yes, his name was Mick—while enjoying the ambiance of his establishment.

It was there, sitting at the restaurant bar where I came to write the poem that follows; refining it, later, back in Cambodia.

As for the subject, it is inspired by everyone, including myself, who has pondered the questions: “*what is a poem and what is a poet?*”

And I hope that, if you wrestle with these questions, that my verses will offer you some solace and answers.

I do not know if Mick and his restaurant survived Covid. I hope so. It was a special place.

What is a Poet?

(2018)

After the word jam, she whispered in my ear,
“You think you are a poet,
But you don’t even rhyme.”
In reply, I ask you, “what is a poet?”

Should I create metaphors from
Mismatched words?
Pitch together adjectives that
Shudder and moan?
Should I fashion symbols so obscure
That even I forget the meaning?
Should I write a sonnet, a haiku, a lyric
Or rhyme? Or keep the words simple,
With lines naked and bare?

Performance:
Should I reach out to the masses and crave
Empathy and connection,
While stretching out my arms
Like a poetic messiah
Or should I bow before you —
Your humble servant,
And kneel before your cold beer and white wine

Or perhaps I should ignore you completely,
And beat my own path to
The sweet poetic light.

Role models:

Should I drink like Budowski
The smell of stale beer on my lips.
Eyes leering at black stockings
Captured beneath a tight pencil-skirt

Or should I weep like Plath?
The sweet smell of gas in my hair.
Tears falling on torn
Pages written for Ted.

Or should I 'HOWL' like Ginsberg
And write a poem that
Sells a million berets?
With words of beat love
For Jack, Burroughs and Cassidy.

Or maybe I should wax lyrical
About past times and places?
Like Prague in '92
Before the beer-packers.
The *thump, thump, thump*
Of tyres on cobblestones,
The smell of damp walls, rebirth in the air.

Or Trujillo in the humid Honduran night.
Lighting colliding with the ocean,
Phil Collins on the jukebox,
The lonely *clink* of pool-balls,
On a torn tabletop.

Or Kagoshima in the chilled blossom twilight.
Sakura picnics, and warm sake and barbecue
Beneath a pink-pedalled rain,

While a long ash cloud rises from the
Peak across the bay.

Or perhaps I should dedicate lines
To the women I have loved?
Who like a fine red,
crested my lips,
enflamed my soul,
Who taught me to be kind
And to think of somebody else.

Or perhaps, instead, I should craft verses
for those ships that bumped me in the night:
Brief moments of drama and magic
Beneath a soft bedroom light.
Of how I was 'Big' in Japan,
'Pequeno' in Nicaragua', or
'Just right' in Hong Kong.
Or maybe I should write a poem
About the one who broke my heart?

Returning to the question,
Do you remember the question?
'Am I a poet?'

If the *sine qua non* is a love of words,
The possibility of the 'truth' captured in a line.
Of touching and feeling,
Writing with fire.
Of howling on the edge of town,
jamming in public,
scribbling in the dark,

Then let me say to you —
“remember these four letters.”

Yes I want you to read them!
Yes I want you to be inspired by them!
The initials are WDMC aka Dr. Howl
And I am a poet!

Just don't expect me to rhyme.

The poem 'Dead Soldiers' is not well known, marking it as a lost piece of writing from a traumatic period in Cambodia's recent history. Of the poem itself, I cannot recall how I discovered it. I do remember that I was researching its lead character, Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey. And while I already knew some facts about the prince, the poem added

vivid texture and context to his tale. The result of this curiosity birthed the essay that follows; for which, until now, I have been unable to find a home.

Both the essay and the poem stand out from the rest of this volume, like the figures they immortalise — I think they would appreciate that.

Dead Soldiers

‘A Prince, a Journalist, a Flight Attendant & a Poem’

In 1973 James Fenton, an English correspondent with the *New Statesman*, was given an assignment. His brief was to travel to Kampong Speu, south of Cambodia’s capital, Phnom Penh, and report on a battalion’s efforts to repel the steady advance of the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese communist forces. A day or so later, having left the safety of the capital, Fenton found himself in the most surreal of situations, likely wondering what rabbit hole he had fallen into.

To set the picture: laid out across a fine dining table, at which he had been invited to sit, was a banquet of frog-legs and turtle eggs, complemented by the finest French brandy and champagne, the entire affair astride the centre-line of a tarmac highway. To the side, just in case the newsman forgot that he was in a war zone, an armoured vehicle was pumping sporadically fire into a nearby grove of sugar palms. This bizarre experience would later be recounted in a poem by Fenton, *Dead Soldiers*, a work that spotlights one of the most enigmatic, yet lesser known figures of twentieth century Cambodia – Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey.

The son of Prince Norodom Chanthalekha and cousin to the later head of state, Norodom Sihanouk, Chantarainsey was born in 1924 and grew up in the shadows of Cambodian royalty. It would not be until the start of World War II that Chantarainsey would raise to prominence, the Prince joining a sponsored nationalist movement seeking to overthrow the Japanese controlled colonial government. Their efforts were largely in vain however and in 1945, following the defeat of the Japanese, Chantarainsey, along with other nationalists, fled to Thailand. It was here, shortly after, that he joined the *Khmer Issarak* ('Free Khmer'), an emerging coalition in the fight for Cambodian independence.

Rising rapidly through its ranks, Chantarainsey returned to Cambodia and participated in anti-colonial campaigns in Kampong Speu and Kampong Thom. Later, in 1949, the prince switched allegiances, joining the Khmer National Liberation Committee, an overhauled Khmer Issarak organisation, shorn bare of its leftist elements. Events moved quickly and by the time of Cambodia's independence in 1953, Chantarainsey had attained the rank of Supreme Army Chief in the committee.

Despite his distain for colonial rule through the years of the 'liberation struggle' Chantarainsey's politics remained unclear. Outwardly a republican, it was a stance that put him at odds with his cousin, Norodom Sihanouk, who used his position as king—he was crowned in 1941—to lobby for the Kingdom's

independence. On the left, pro-communist nationalists considered the Prince a potential ally, looking to draw on his regal connections to earn popular support for their brand of liberation. Quickly, however, the idea had been dismissed, the prince judged too 'feudal' by its leftist leaders.

Following independence the prince travelled to France, where he spent the next four years at a military academy where-after, following his return to Cambodia in 1957, he quickly fell out of favour with his cousin, Sihanouk. Events deteriorated rapidly and soon, accused of plotting against the ruling party, Chantarainsey was stripped of his title and rank, and imprisoned. There, over the next three years, somewhat at odds with his military mien, Chantarainsey devoted his time to writing romantic novels, the books garnering large sales upon publication.

By 1960, judged rehabilitated and in Sihanouk's good graces, Chantarainsey was released and appointed to run Phnom Penh's state casino. It was a lucrative position, which saw the one-time rebel prince—his title now restored—accumulate a large reserve of wealth, which he would later put to good use.

The situation at the start of 1970, a coup and the overthrow of Sihanouk, did little to halt Chantarainsey's rise. And on the prompting of Lol Nol, the coup's leader, the prince was promoted to the command of the 13th Army division and given the rank of

general (later in 1973, on Lol Nol's urging, Chantarainsey would renounce his royal title, the general suspicious of the prince's growing power and popularity). The next five years proved the most momentous of Chantarainsey's life as he led his troops—know as the Tiger Battalion on account of his birth date and the tiger insignia on their uniforms—in the fight against the pro-communist forces (comprising the home-based Khmer Rouge, North Vietnamese army regulars and Viet Cong guerrillas). It was a role he seemed destined to fulfill, revealing himself to be an inspirational leader to his troops and a benevolent ruler amongst the villagers in the shadow of his command base (in Kampong Speu province).

This veneration was due, in large part, to the care that the prince took of his men. Moreover, using his own money, Chantarainsey ensured that his troops were supplied with the best weapons, often purchasing equipment from generals controlling other areas. The prince's largess was not restricted to his men either, and in the villages of Kampong Speu he set about applying the efforts of his soldiers to the construction of irrigation canals and roads.

Undoubtedly Chantaraingsey 'heart and minds' approach, which compared favourably to the widespread corruption and graft of other commanders, contributed to his popularity and success against the communists. But these achievements would have remain unknown if he had not also proved apt at public

relations, regularly inviting journalists to Kampong Speu to observe his fighting efforts and community projects. A 1973 article in *Der Spiegel* is typical of those instigated by the prince's media team, the West German newspaper printing photographs of smiling villagers and soldiers; images that belied the bloody civil war being played out beyond the camera's gaze.

It was the prince's adeptness at PR that brings us back to James Fenton and that road-top banquet. Fenton himself is a intriguing figure, acclaimed as a '21st Century renaissance man' this left-leaning journalist was on hand to record the fall of Saigon (1975), student massacres in South Korea (1980) and the 1986 triumph of 'people's power' in the Philippines. The journalist, Jacques Leslie, provides a candid description of the Cambodia-era Fenton in his memoir, *The Mark*: "James Fenton . . . was an eccentric Englishman who wrote essays for the *New Statesman* while wandering through Asia. Once he reached Cambodia, however, he ceased wandering: he took up residence in Phnom Penh (for a while living in a hotel room with a monkey), acquiring an extra job as a stringer so he'd have enough money to live, and sent whimsical, brilliant dispatches back to London."

Today it is Fenton's poetry that remains most well known, his crisp style and imagery, alongside clear and engaging verse, earning comparisons with W.H. Auden, a poet who Fenton acknowledges as an inspiration. Meanwhile, Fenton's tendency to draw on his experiences as a foreign correspondent has seen

him recognised as that most unique of things: a ‘journalist poet’. All of these qualities were at work in *Dead Soldiers*, Fenton’s retelling of Chantarainsey’s ‘war banquet’.

The poem itself is rich in symbolism, some of which will not be obvious to the modern-day reader. The “frogs legs” “pregnant turtles” and “boiled eggs” referred to in the poem’s verse, as examples, carry both culinary and wider symbolic meaning. ‘Frog legs’, for instance, symbolise the plight of innocent villagers, embroiled in the country’s cycle of war and strife. The reference to “pregnant turtles” captures the fate of refugee girls raped and impregnated by Chantarainsey’s men—contrary to their media image, the prince’s men were not all saints—while ‘boiled eggs’ refers to the damage that ground and aerial bombardments had brought to the Cambodian countryside.

Of course, the most significant symbol are the ‘dead soldiers’ themselves. Nominally the term refers to the empty brandy bottles discarded on the ground as the banquet draws towards its end. However, it also captures the uncertain fate of the men who Fenton dined with on that day, the poem having been completed and published after the communist victory in April 1975.

These representations and others in *Dead Soldiers* suggest that Fenton appears sceptical about Norodom Chantarainsey and his efforts. A man of socialist persuasion, Fenton himself held a

certain admiration for the 'liberating' efforts of the Vietnamese and Cambodia communists, even jetting from London to Saigon in April 1975 to witness the arrival of North Vietnamese in that city.

If one wishes to be kind to the characters in *Dead Soldiers* one could suggest that Fenton's approach is satire, and rather than taking sides he wishes to highlight the irony of the Cambodia civil war, a conflict that pitched royal cousins and ideologies against each other.

A budding poet was not the only Westerner to fall into the Prince's orbit. In 1971, Spencer Dale, a 26-year old flight attendant, arrived in Cambodia on leave from Bangkok, intent on some sightseeing. Travelling south of Phnom Penh, his presence at a local pagoda, where he planned to stay the night, caught the attention of the Khmer Rouge. Spooked by his presence they set about to investigate. In imminent danger of being captured, Dale was lucky, with soldiers arriving from the Tiger Battalion to spirit him away to safer environs. The next morning, after spending a night at the local headquarters, he was introduced to their commander – Norodom Chantarainsey.

From this unlikely beginning a friendship developed between the two men. And over the next four years Spencer Dale would return regularly to Cambodia, spending anything from a few days to many weeks in the company of the prince. During these

visits Dale was essentially embedded with the men of the Tiger Battalion, journeying with them on patrols, witnessing fire-fights and hunching over maps with the prince and his subordinates, late into the night.

Photographs from the period show that Dale fully embraced the ‘weekend warrior’ opportunity afforded to him, even adopting a pair of US army fatigues and carrying a pistol when with the battalion. Dale has admitted, in his later years, that the trips to Cambodia were inspired, initially at least, by his admiration of Sean Flynn, the son of actor Errol Flynn, who had pitched up in Vietnam and Cambodia seeking adventure, seeking to build a name as a photojournalist. Unsurprising therefore, like his muse, Dale carried a set of cameras around with him, using them to shoot film and images from his forays in the field with Chantarainsey’s battalion.

Quite what the prince saw in the camera-touting flight attendant is difficult to decipher. In recent interviews Dale has attributed their friendship to “an incredible chemistry . . . we bounded instantly, and that bond lasted until I last saw him, about five years later.” For his part the prince might have considered Dale’s chosen profession a useful cover for more covert activities, perhaps suspecting that he was an agent for Australian or American intelligence. Alternatively, Chantarainsey could have considered his time with Dale as an extension of his PR activities — another opportunity to garner

positive reviews for his endeavours. Or perhaps the prince simply enjoyed the camaraderie of the straightforward Australian, a man with no hidden agendas or promises to broker and break. Maybe all he wanted was a friend?

As for the footage collected by Spencer Dale, his archive is reported to include several thousand stills and at least three hours of 8 mm colour film, the reels offering a unique and rare insight into the short-lived life of the Khmer Republic. Today an on-line search will take you to a Facebook page dedicated to Dale's photographic and film work in Cambodia. And if you visit you can click on a short video, which provides a tantalising glimpse into the chaos of the Cambodian civil war.

But by their own recollections neither Fenton or Dale were on-hand to witness what was reputedly the prince's greatest military success: his part in the defeat of communist forces holding the strategic pass of Pic Nil. This battle, which sought to re-open the highway between Phnom Penh and Cambodia's main port, Sihanoukville, better known as Route 4, played out against a changing background of American involvement in Cambodia. (What US president Richard Nixon would come to describe as the 'Nixon doctrine in its purest form'.)

In April 1970 a questionable incursion by US forces into the southeast portion of Cambodia, intended to root out and destroy communist sanctuaries, sparked public protest in the United

States, with many of its citizens—already tired of the war in Vietnam—seeing the invasion as a broadening of the conflict. (Protests included demonstrations at Kent State University, which culminated in the fatal shooting of four students and the wounding of nine others.)

Following the largely unsuccessful foray into the Kingdom, the US Congress introduced new restrictions on American military operations in the region (the so-called Church-Dodge amendment). Ground support was removed as a military option and replaced with the provision of air cover and logistical and technical support. In this context, planning to retake the highway, the changing military situation ramped up the pressure on the Tiger Battalion and its plans to retake the pass.

The campaign to clear the highway and regain the thoroughfare—codenamed Operation Cuu Lorry—commenced on January 13th 1971, with soldiers from Chantarainsey's and other southern battalions, joined by reinforces from the South Vietnamese army, moving in a pincer movement to flush out the enemy. Overhead, restricted by the US Congress to air support, the American's took to their new role with enthusiasm, anchoring a helicopter carrier—the Iwo Jiwa—off the shores of Sihanoukville, and using it to launch multiple gunships raids on the contested portions of the highway and pass. Further above, dive-bombers and B52s ensured that the aerial pressure on the entrenched communists remained intense (over the duration of

the operation the American's recorded the lone loss of a F-100 Super Sabra).

Nine days after it began, the allied forces, lead by the Tiger Battalion, broke the communist hold on the pass, the New York Times running a photograph of "jubilant" Cambodian soldiers raising a Khmer Republic flag at Pic Nil's top. Another photograph—this one shot by Dana Stone, who would later disappear while on a photo-assignment with Sean Flynn—shows a journalist, James Pringle, standing beside the prince near the rocky top of the pass. In the photo Chantarainsey is staring out across the montane rainforest, Pringle describing the battle as "ferocious" and Chantarainsey as "an inspiring leader".

It is possible, as Chantarainsey stared out across the jungle, that he saw the success at Pic Nil as a turning point in the Cambodia Civil War. History shows, however, that it was more of a high water mark, with the communists, over the course of the next four years, steadily pushing the republican army back into a few well-armed enclaves, and the country's larger urban centres. Route 4 itself would remain hotly contested throughout the rest of 1971 and into 1972 until, tiring of the efforts to keep it open, the government resorted to the use of its port on the Mekong, near Phnom Penh, as its harbour connection to the outside world. Meanwhile Chantarainsey and his men fought on through to the first months of 1975, the communist advance pushing them to outskirts of the capital and the rice fields around their

military base in Kampong Speu.

Before the final Khmer Rouge offensive the prince could have considered boarding an aircraft and fleeing the country, joining a host of other Khmer émigrés who pitched up in France in the final days of the Khmer Republic. It is an opportunity that James Fenton reflects on in a verse of *Dead Soldiers*:

*"In those days, I thought that when the game was up
the prince would be far, far away—
In a limestone faubourg, on the promenade at Nice,
Reduced in circumstances but well enough provided for."*

But a committed nationalist and driven, perhaps, by notions of a heroic last stand or anchoring a guerilla campaign, the prince refused to budge. Or perhaps he was simply loyal to the people and the country that had nurtured him?

The end when it came, like the man himself, maintains an element of mystery. Early accounts suggest that the prince was killed on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, fighting to stem the final push by the Khmer Rouge on the capital. In some of these stories it is reported that he was killed in an explosion caused by a booby trap, while others record that he died from leg wounds. Some of these descriptions suggest that he was trying to break through the communist lines, seeking a return to his battalion headquarters, where he planned a final stand with his men and their families. (Soon after the base would be captured and its 4000 inhabitants, including women and children,

massacred by the communists.)

Other reports, those sympathetic to the prince's romantic side, suggest that he was killed in an attempt to rescue his wife from a Khmer Rouge prison in Battambang, a city four hours north of Phnom Penh. Others suggest that the end had not come at all. In June 1975, two months after the fall of Phnom Penh, the *Bangkok Post* reported that the prince was still alive and fighting, leading 2000 men from bases in the Elephant Hills and Cardamom Mountains, the upland regions south and west of the capital. Meanwhile, two years later the Belgium journalist, Jacques Bekaert, published a story claiming that 'White Khmer' forces, the title given to Chantarainsey's supporters, were still active in this area, harassing Khmer Rouge bases and transport routes.

In 2009, for the first time since his wartime exploits, Dale Spencer returned to Cambodia on the mission of uncovering the truth about his friend's fate. From his investigations the former flight attendant believes that the prince met his end following an attempt to flee through the hills of the Kirirom Plateau, a montane area to the south of Kampong Speu. It was in the pine forests that fill this area that the vehicle transporting Chantarainsey is said to have run out of fuel, resulting in his capture by the Khmer Rouge soldiers who were pursuing him. In the pine shaded glade, stripped of his uniform and marched off to a nearby hall, he was handed over to the ruthless Khmer

Rouge general Ta Mok—sometimes called ‘the Butcher’—who executed him shortly after.

Despite his exhausted efforts to discover the fate of the prince and his conviction that he ‘probably’ discovered the truth, in interviews Dale has admitted that he cannot be 100 % sure of Chantarainsey’s fate. It is this uncertainty that, in the days following the fall of the Khmer Republic, fuelled hopes that the Prince might be alive and part of a fifth column battling against the new Khmer Rouge regime. As a result many acts of resistance that occurred in the time between 1975 and the Vietnamese invasion in 1979, were credited to the prince and ‘his men’. The most unusual of these, which gives some indication of the power of Chantarainsey’s aura, was the unexplained appearance of an aircraft over the Siem Reap province in 1977, which was said to have been flown by the Prince himself.

Yet today, despite the venerations of the past, the man that Spencer Dale described as “humble” and “a gentleman” is largely unknown in the West and to the Cambodians born since 1979. Instead his name and story, like a fading flame, lives on in a largely forgotten poem and the memories of a long retired flight attendant.

Dead Soldiers

When His Excellency Prince Norodom Chantaraingsey
Invited me to lunch on the battlefield
I was glad of my white suit for the first time that day.
They lived well, the mad Norodoms, they had style.
The brandy and the soda arrived in crates.
Bricks of ice, tied around with raffia,
Dripped from the orderlies' handlebars.

And I remember the dazzling tablecloth
As the APCs fanned out along the road,
The dishes piled high with frogs' legs,
Pregnant turtles, their eggs boiled in the carapace,
Marsh irises in fish sauce
And inflorescence of a banana salad.

On every bottle, Napoleon Bonaparte
Pleaded for the authenticity of the spirit.
They called the empties Dead Soldiers
And rejoiced to see them pile up at our feet.

Each diner was attended by one of the other ranks
Whirling a table-napkin to keep off the flies.
It was like eating between rows of Morris dancers—
Only they didn't kick.

On my left sat the prince;
On my right, his drunken aide.
The frogs' thighs leapt into the sad purple face
Like fish to the sound of a Chinese flute.
I wanted to talk to the prince. I wish now
I had collared his aide, who was Saloth Sar's brother.
We treated him as the club bore. He was always
Boasting of his connections, boasting with a head-shake
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase.
And well might he boast. Saloth Sar, for instance,
Was Pol Pot's real name. The APCs
Fired into the sugar palms but met no resistance.

In a diary, I refer to Pol Pot's brother as the Jockey Cap.
A few weeks later, I find him 'in good form
And very skeptical about Chantaraingsey.'
'But one eats well there,' I remark.
'So one should,' says the Jockey Cap:
'The tiger always eats well,
It eats the raw flesh of the deer,
And Chantaraingsey was born in the year of the tiger.
So, did they show you the things they do
With the young refugee girls?'

And he tells me how he will one day give me the gen.
He will tell me how the prince financed the casino
And how the casino brought Lon Nol to power.

He will tell me this.
He will tell me all these things.
All I must do is drink and listen.

In those days, I thought that when the game was up
The prince would be far, far away-
In a limestone faubourg, on the promenade at Nice,
Reduced in circumstances but well enough provided for.
In Paris, he would hardly require his private army.
The Jockey Cap might suffice for café warfare,
And matchboxes for APCs.

But we were always wrong in these predictions.
It was a family war. Whatever happened,
The principals were obliged to attend its issue.
A few were cajoled into leaving, a few were expelled,
And there were villains enough, but none of them
Slipped away with the swag.

For the prince was fighting Sihanouk, his nephew,
And the Jockey Cap was ranged against his brother
Of whom I remember nothing more
Than an obscure reputation for virtue.
I have been told that the prince is still fighting
Somewhere in the Cardamoms or the Elephant Mountains.
But I doubt that the Jockey Cap would have survived his good
connections.

I think the lunches would have done for him-
Either the lunches or the dead soldiers.

James Fenton

In 2018 a Khmer friend, a child of the 1970s Thai refugee camps, returned to Cambodia to live and forge a new career. A passionate advocate of

bamboo and its innumerable uses, I wrote this poem as a dedication to her, and my respect for her strength and character.

Srey Bamboo

(2019)

I am Srey Bamboo and this is my poem.

My grandmother used to say that
Our family was like bamboo,
Tall and strong, tough and wise.
And like the plants in our chamkar,
We would continue and thrive,
A Siem Reap bloodline destined to survive.

And with stems pointing skywards our family bamboo grew,
Feed by love—healthy and sound;
With wisdom passed on through shoots and leaves,
Our family bamboo swaying gently in the Mekong breeze.

And then darkness came, people wearing black,
Sprouting rants of revolution and acts of blood.
They cut at our bamboo family,
Slashing and dicing,
And some branches toppled and wept in the rain,
Severed and broken, gone with cries and sad pain.

But others remained - our family bamboo,
And with long roots we found new homes.
First, dusty borderlands, thin dirt and dangerous streets,
And then the deep soils of a European place,
Our family bamboo growing fresh shoots with a distant embrace.

But in our hearts Cambodia remained our bamboo home,
Our spirit and soul living on in this Mekong land.
And now I have returned,
A green stem transplanted,
And on the river plain where our family bamboo stood,
I will seek to grow tall and strong once more.
New bamboo in the land where my
Grandmother once grew.

I am Srey Bamboo and this is my story.

Over the course of the pandemic we
all endured separation from the
things and ones that we love.
Inspired by the experiences of a
Japanese friend, this is my poem

tribute to what she lost and what, in
the time to come, will be revived
once the last facemask is placed in a
draw.

Sakura Au Revoir

(2020)

Every year we went
Kagoshima, Kumamoto
Or some other place
Mum, dad, sister and brother together;
A family in one space.

But in these Covid times the tradition was broken
And there were no blossoms in March
No dappled pink in the chilled twilight
Or sakura picnics, warm saki and bbq
Beneath a pink pedal rain

Instead, in the year of the virus,
Delight and wonder gave way to fear and Nippon staidness
Every one trying to go with the flow
By not going anywhere
(Except to work – we are, after all, still Japanese!)
Stuck in our rooms
Prisoners inside our own beige walls.

But it's over now or so the fireworks say
But so are the blossoms
Consigned to memory after the sad days of spring
So I must pray that my parents will be here next year
To enjoy the opened buds minus masks and Covid cares

And once more we will mark our spot,
And celebrate life, family and re-birth,
A clan united under the branches.
And then I will know
That this time has truly past.

Another 'Covid' poem, this one unfolded over the course of a bus trip from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh.

The poem does raise an curious perspective on the pandemic, namely the 'not so bad' changes that

it brought to Siem Reap. That these 'changes' spelt financial disaster for many cannot be overlooked; yet even in the worse of pandemic times, there was something of value to be found in the events of that time.

Locked Down, Temple Town, Delta Blues

(2021)

It came from the north via a city far away,
Borne on a Wuhan cough or a snuffle,
Least that's what the experts say.
And like a plague it descend on the wind,
Spreading chaos, confusion,
Making politicians act on a whim (some better than others).

In truth it did not take long
For things to get out of hand,
Friends, careers, businesses blown away
By this viral Covid band.
Teaching us all a new language along the way:
'Herd immunity, Sinovac, variant, Delta'
Making us all epidemiologists in less than a day.

Now, staring into their Omicron crystal ball
The optimists say:
"Soon things will improve and we will again make hay!"
The masses returning,
Our temple Town renewed,
Cash registers singing like a
line in 'Hey Jude'.

TRUTH! When I hear this I start to reminisce,
To recall things from *now* that in the future I will miss.
Like Angkor at 5 with nobody around.
Still streets, quiet roads,
lone cycles between tall temple trees,
Finding a table without a struggle through a tight
Flash-packer squeeze.

But what about those things that will return!
Like beautiful Khmer smiles held captive behind white masks,
Beaming once more, set free at long last.

And I will cherish the day when I can truly HOWL.
A writer and poet sharing lines and verse,
And not a virus set free upon my loose words:
A lupine creator, baying once more, at a Covid free moon.

Declaration was written for the opening night of the Writers and Readers Festival 2021, with the poem calling for a celebration of the energy and brilliancy of Khmer authors and poets.

The theme was a fitting one for the event and the broader objectives of the festival. While, along the way, I had the opportunity to include some of my friends in a poem of my own.

— Declaration —

(2021)

I don't want to speak in clichés.
Of monsoon breezes and conical hats.
To sound like Greene, Swain, Strangio
Or some other barang chap.

To reminisce of moist lovers held to my side,
Of rice dishes or long rides through
The dusty Khmer countryside

And lets avoid lines about corrupt politicians
And others on the make.
Forests falling, trapeangs filling,
Everyone desperate for the last piece of cake.

And yes! We could talk of new realities
Under 'Belt and Road'.
Of a mother river in a state of flux
A great lake that is not so grand any more.
Of jungles shorn bare of tiger, leopard, elephant
And, well bears.

No! I want to be more original than that,
To use new symbols and metaphors
To describe this, our Khmer habitat
To rejoice in *de nova* words and
Those who write them
The wonder of fresh verses and stanzas
And those who recite them.

Cries like Kosal roaring free from his cell door.
Chheangly, So Pina, Slap Paka and so many more.
Nou Hach, the Magic Bus, and old scribes too,
Like Khun Shen, Chin Meas, Kim Lay
And others who wrote of the truth

And lets not forget new souls too,
Like Nisha stepping up that first time,
Ensnaring an audience with her beautiful and fresh rhyme.
Together word slingers sharing hopes and dreams.
A band of lettered sisters and brothers
howling from the steps of Angkor.

But ladies and gentleman, srey, bong, ming, pou and ouen
Let me conclude by calling you to task,
For here tonight, please, do not let it be the last.
For I call on you to share and spread the word.
To celebrate new lines written in fresh ink.
Each of them wonderful, beautiful,
Bountiful, original and unique.

So here! A clarion call to the pen,
A shot into the wind.
In this place, on this stage, a declaration to you all:
Let us howl long into the night!

My shortest poem.
Sometimes a few words
have power enough.

Love Poem

(2022)

I do not write 'love poems' . . .

Except for the poem
that I will write for you.

I was driven to write *Bomb* at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There was a lot of noise at this time: the overturning of Roe vs. Wade in the United States, climate change, the continued rise of nativism and racism (nearly everywhere), a cost of living crisis, and a general feeling of insecurity

about where this is all headed.

In writing the poem I also wanted to pay homage to Gregory Corso, one of the original 'Beat Daddies', whose poetry and tales I deeply enjoy. In 1958 Corso published a poem called *Bomb* he, like me, exploring the meaning of life in the shadows of uncertainty.

BOMB

(2022)

I want to be your bomb!
To sit in the corner, ready to ignite.
Our passion and *l'amour*
Illuminating the dank monsoon night.
The earth shaking: Our biology blowing all
Doubts away.
With nothing, no words left on the pillow to say
And at the end our bodies lying in the
Crater of a warm post-coital glow.

I want to be the BOMB that blows them all away.
The hackers, traffickers and facebook trolls too.
And THAT ktv, loud and bright across the streets way.
We can stick them all on Jeffery E's island with
Its bevy of fake tans and the 'Prince of No Sweat'.

Wait, there's still room!
So lets add some racists, nativists & misanthropes
And a Supreme Court judge or three.
And others who deny inconvenient truths.
On that note, that last president, he'll definitely do.
Okay, everyone help me, countdown.
5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1
Now raise your faces to the cleansing
Thermal breeze.

I want to write a poem that explodes across the page,
Sending metaphors and
symbols cartwheeling across the poet's stage.
Projectiles and torpedoes flying off my typewriter ribbon,
With lines of collateral damage and friendly fire,
Spreading words of 'Mutually Assured Reflection'.
With stanzas of truth and verses of flowers
Howling long into the poetic night.

Let us all be the last bomb!
The one that echoes and cleaves and
Sends the war mongers away,
Leaving the generals and mercenaries with no one to play.
Redundant, they can form a book club,
Or learn to meditate or how to grow trees.
No longer man-gods seeking to bring us
To our bare knees.
And they can bring the olive branches,
We'll supply the doves.
Everybody watching, growing old
As the grass grows over the last missile silo.
And at last a world at peace,
And not in pieces.
A species of being,
Finally, truly human.

In early 2022 I read a review for a book (I have forgotten the title), which inspired me to write The Algorithm. The poem flowed quickly,

and despite the ease of the rhymes, its imagery and the questions it asks manage to yield a resonating message.

**The Algorithm (or
'If a tree falls in the forest and no one posts about it,
did it really fall?')**

(2022)

The Algorithm told me to come here,
What to write and what to share
Where to go and what to wear,
The Algorithm told me what to love,
And who to hate,
With a video, image or some other click bait

It told me how to vote and what to protest.
What to think and what to contest,
The conspiracies to cheer
And those I should fear.

The Algorithm sent me to the top of a
mountain for an Instagram view
And then down to a beach, a sunset for two.
A drink in hand, you by my side,
All the time wondering, 'Will I crop you or filter my face?
God I must post, keep up the Instagram pace!'

So what has life become in this digital age?
Encrypted, enciphered, Generation Screen Haze
The 'means' becoming the 'ends' as we swap left or right.
With reality curated by Samsung, Apple, Huawei,
And emotions reduced to emojis and gifs of cute cats.

Here's the thing:
Do you remember when we used to send letters?
When broadband was a tool for cutting wood?
And Twitter was something that happened in a tree.
While a post stood firm in the ground,
Part of a fence, not something causing outrage and human offense.
And 5G was a rapper from the East Side,
While people send telegrams that certainly weren't instant.

Okay Enough! I'm taking a stand!
I'm throwing away the digital box glued to my hand.
Switching off, swapping out, going 'black hole'
Leaving Mark Z. and Mr. Google to their silicon world,
Senora to them and their screen maze.

For I want a life that is broader than my data plan,
The nearest wifi,
Or the memory in my hand.
Reclaiming it for something that is more real:
Tactile, human and true.

I mean think of it —
The tranquility of a day off-line;
Body and soul surrendering to the beauty of 'now'.
Ears filled with bird song.
The slipstream of a butterfly as it flutters past your face.
Moments lived today - no filters, NFTs or influencers,
Just me alone in my sweet grace.

So I'll see you in the park, the library, the bookshop or the forest
Navigating without Google Maps.
Lost? Not at all!
Just a man on a path that HE has chosen,
And not someone from a Cynical Valley keyboard,
Far, far, away.

This poem is was inspired by a 1983 song by Elvis Costello and the Attractions ('Everyday I Write the Book) and

the empowering realisation, that each day, we have the opportunity to re-invite ourselves, in short to 'write a new story'.

Everyday I Write a Story

(2022)

Each day when we wake,
We get to write a new story
Words bare, we start a new page,
Making fresh impressions
As we take flight.

So what will it be today?
Something short, a haiku perhaps?
Or longer, an odyssey or saga:
A hero's tale of wrong gone right?

Or will I be the villain?
The one who does bad?
The one who gets his just desserts
As the sun strikes down.

Will I confront my great white whale
And rage against my metaphor.
Or will I be that creature — a rabbit, bird or canine perhaps —
Lost or separated,
Searching for a way home.

Will I be strong and upright?
A Jack with a long Reach
Or James Bond (he seems to have more fun)
Riding my Vespa Lynn long
Through the Casino Royale night.
Or a Gollum in the corner, enslaved to
my precious; succumbing to murderous intent.

Maybe I will get plastered: Budowski - like
The day scattered with empty cans,
Bottles and half-filled glasses.

Perhaps I will make love like a Greek God.
A man of 'seven shades' binding you to the bed,
metaphorically or literally,
I'm not sure yet, what do you think?

Will I cry like Plath into the Ariel wind?
Or be Fitzgerald's green light of striving intent?
Will I go Gonzo — filled with fear and loathing,
Chuckling down uppers and downers,
As my day goes sideways.
Or shall I be Homer and find my way home.

Will today's story be a 'best seller'?
Or go straight to the bin?
Will it make the literary lists
Or be overlooked in the din?

Scratching my eyes I really can't say.
But I know I must hurry.
Breakfast, coffee — author's fuel:
I have a story to write.

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A call out to the poets and listeners of
Yini Teahouse, Siem Reap, where these
poems were 'road tested.'
Thank you for giving them a home and
sharing your time and words.

Dr. Howl

Howlcambodia.com

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

Heralding from the coffee dens and poetry speakeasies of Siem Reap, Cambodia, *Bad Poem's Society* stems from the mind and keyboard of our own Dr. Howl. From 'bush fire' soliloquies to the eternal question – "what is a poet?" – it is a collection that offers solace and light.

Visit us at: howlcambodia.com



HOWL