

Triptych

A WASH collaboration
Text by Scott Bywater

Written in Phnom Penh, Paris, London, Montpellier,
Kampot, Berlin, Hobart and in between, 2011 - 2013

Compiled in Phnom Penh, 2013.

**Part I : Phnom Penh
earth**

light/heat/weight

I am woken by the amber chants of bald men
and ecstatic squeals of children

& the mysterious banging and grinding that will miraculously
turn into a new storey on a house across the street
or a new building in the next street down the block,
once I have the energy
to walk past

the lubricated heat makes sleep slippery and elusive, like the
geckos that dart from behind anything that stands still too long
and becomes inert

it is hard to imagine ever moving again. my new ambition is to
become a hatstand.

restlessly the familiar ceiling fan turns, once so evocative of
black and white movies about men wearing hats and white suits
and women ordering gin and tonics from underneath parasols.
now it's just a necessity

a new scientific study asserts that we make better decisions
when we have an urgent need to pee. including, one presumes,
the decision to pee when we need to. the need to pee may be my
salvation.

I wouldn't mind a little rain today

I wouldn't mind a little rain today
to wash some dust
to tidy the air

I wouldn't mind a little rain today
to empty the streets
and rinse the paths

I wouldn't mind a little rain today
to cleanse the sky
and soften the greens
and draw out the hidden purples
and gently coax the aquamarines from the grey

I wouldn't mind a little rain today
to make alley-creeks and raise the river

I wouldn't mind a little rain today
to let the dreams dance between raindrops
like children scampering under downpipes
and swimming in intersections

I wouldn't mind a little rain today
to keep me right here
a little longer
as the day
passes

night soup

night still,
air heavy with heat

domestic muttering,
television sounds drift through gaps
floating on pockets of distant passing laughter and chirps from
children resisting sleep

the splutter of a moto fades into the night fabric
someone's telephone rings
and tap tap tapping comes the soup

The last night at Snow's

it was always worth crossing the bridge.
for the lights and the bells
and the mirrors and the masks
the pinks and the blues, the shimmering silver
on the balcony for the last time
what became a familiar view
of the riverside turning incandescent as the night falls
to the rhythm of the floating life, the ferries and barges and
dredges.
They will continue
but unobserved from this railing
it will be different
they dance swing to the blues
pushing tired feet against these wooden boards
because they won't get these boards dusty again
the ghost of gigs past
in a place where each and every gig was a good one
(which is hard to say of many places)
the white shirt resplendent
his body willing but fatigued, the smile still as wide
it's been a long few days
and then the announcement, for the last time: out of beer
for the last time,
the lights and the bells
and the mirrors and the masks
the pinks and the blues, the shimmering silver
it was always worth crossing the bridge

Kampot River, just before twilight

murmuring surface,
tickled and dotted,
in a broad, thin dance

the current, the present,
still, and still with effervescent teeming
under spilt light
fragments reflected

the shape changes the colour,
the colour changes the shape...

the spirit moves on the body of the water
and, once again, there is light

The heat streets

The real heat begins to show itself,
rising through the middle of the day.
I walk across the Monopoly board of Phnom Penh,
houses and hotels rising swiftly on every block
amid appropriate bumps and grinds
and the beseeching anthem of the icecream van

The tuk tuk drivers bare their bellies
and make unenthusiastic attempts to sell their services
as the airconditioned and well-labeled Chariots of Lexus
plough through the noon streets
in search of the next coffee house with wifi
and yet more airconditioning,
while white men with tattooed legs
stir lethargically in bars, under fans,
contemplating Angkor
(or Anchor)

To cross Norodom I walk beside a woman in bright trousers
pushing a barrow laden with salted shellfish,
causing even the big cars to slow down.
Once across she begins to sing

A small girl dances inside a hula hoop in the shade
and a motodop studies himself, and pops spots
in the otherwise unuseful rearview mirror
as a posse of \$80 a month cops
in helmets and visors and well-pressed skyblue uniforms
pull over trucks from the provinces
to ask for donations for their kids' schoolbooks

restaurants new and old
beckon me with specials,
and memories of attending or not attending,
dotted through these streets of rubble
and mini-marts
and canvas banners
and visitors clutching travel guides.
If a tree falls in the middle of the forest
and Lonely Planet doesn't mention it,
how do we know it happens?

skies

walking north at dusk,
the river brown,
sky darkening,
clouds painted in every shade of grey

walking south,
the river black,
the sky so quickly full of night,
coaxing out bright lights
from amber gourds on lampposts,
from streetfronts and rooftops,
wat and palace gleefully budded for a birthday

and in response, the sky suddenly blazes
in multicolour
with fireworks
surging up above the river
like so many exotic and incandescent vegetables

I stop and stand by a golden lion to watch.
A teenage gecko, unimpressed by such displays,
scampers down the lion and into the dark

swoops and splashes,
with bangs rebounding from the palace walls behind.
the colours explode,
then fall slowly
turning to smoke
that hangs on the far bank
and fades gently
into darkness
and memory

walking south
a patient moon,
partially obscured by cloud,
reasserts itself
in its part of
the sky

**Part II : the art of travel
fire through air**

song of the highway/hymn of the road

the smoldering pathway,
lit by smoke,
drawn in charcoal.

the fiery pursuit:
burn up the bitumen
until the brief pyrrhic victory of arrival
so inflammable,
so destined to be sacrificed
to the gods of movement, of wheels, of steps

monday, first thing

the sparkling sensation
of covering ground,
slipping through others' daily-ness
and sprinkling it with passing fascination

a moon lingers into the morning, long after
the scree of cloud, that was italicised and pinked by the
deep orange rising sun,
has disappeared to the south

the sky clear, a space to fly into

La Palette, Odeon

in many ways, just another clear blue sky
but a different kind of blue.
a blue invented here,
a place where the invention of such thing is
firstly conceived,
then believed and argued,
then achieved, and
transcended.

there are few straight lines,
there is music that is never the same twice,
there are smudges and marks on the walls that could be from
yesterday
or centuries old.

all the shades of blue are here,
including the ones yet to come, just as
all ages live simultaneously
collapsing into each other
wave after warm sweet wave
like archaeological honey

London, November, okay

London
found me some sun

and it shines this morning
on the applecheeks and pinstripes
and bulbous cabs and pubs all called Crown and Horse and Great

and musicals are blooming on every corner
and bouquets of statues
(mobile and immobile)
are gathered in squares and circuses

tourists scamper across the crashing collage of lost empire
and New Britain steel-and-glass and
the post-modern colonialism of Starbucks (and its bastard
cousins) wallpapering the streets
and the Christmas lights starting to come into bud, mimicking in
reds the greening of spring,

songs about London
chase my ears
through the streets

Saturday afternoon

compelled to walk in the rain
compelled by its steadiness,
its directness,
its swift, wet, downward purpose

across the world people are sitting exams, painting bathrooms,
eating dinner, making love with people they love, changing
nappies, dreaming of cats, learning to ice skate, inventing
cocktails and otherwise constructing futures...

here in the land of small joys
the square is covered with a graceful, thin flow
the lights flicker on the carousel
long low rolling Mediterranean thunder makes the umbrellas
tremble (black black red black blue black rainbow rainbow
black)
the coffee is quick and strong, and the change is correct
there's no need to move faster

swirl-turn-stop

swirl, turn, stop and the spinning spins on

all these little pieces of paper accumulating in my pockets,
covered in numbers and letters and small coloured geometries,
issuing the gentle scent of the path

swirl, turn, stop and the spinning spins on

smear of accents
across clumps of cameras, rucksacks,
and good walking shoes;
cataloguing the evidence to justify
(poor Mona, having to stare at armpits all day)

swirl, turn, stop and the spinning spins on

the television has run out of names
still pondering the origin of dust
and the destiny of paint

swirl, turn, stop and the spinning spins on

a lively note
taking flight
above the beyond
where white and black
are the same,
where up and down
are equal,
where near and far
are both each other

swirl, turn, stop and the spinning spins on

a seashell full of birdcalls
a pocket full of rhymes

swirl, turn, stop and the spinning spins on

Wayside

carved into the side of
the current of movement,
harsh angles against the flow

the necessary food and watering
in bleak, windswept,
savage angles.

essence of lost time,
overtaking rendered pointless,
under the abstraction of fluorescence
and McDonald's

the passing flow
reduced to sets of spectacle headlights
plunging on into the future/night

Berlin in February

Andie McDowell in a public bubble,
David Beckham in his undies,
Whitney Houston in the news,
Cambodia in the cinemas,
Tobacco smoke and Sweet Home Alabama in the bars...

snow/snow and grit/wet grit/more snow and grit/more snow,
with
tough, flash, sensible automobiles,
and rampant bears and subzero joggers,
and sledding and skating on Sundays like Bruegel biscuit tins.

a metro with no gates;
a town with no hills;
a vertically flattened world that pushes for the sky.

Between keys

a trundle down waking streets
making small adieus

anewly astonished at
the combined accumulations;

but also that
which has evaporated.

gliding safely from
one cluster of life to the next

adding and subtracting as needed
while striving for daily wakefulness

the graceful triad of past present and future
embraced in movement

Theo

awash in a city of myth and promise,
the currents are to blame

if I could paint and play the saxophone and dance like an
angel and my name was Theo I could scarcely be happier

2nd to 13th

and so life can be drawn
through a thin cigarette

and so quizzical-eyed plans and elusive questions can be
strewn across the streets,
rinsed with Sunday and
left to dry

and so time can be absorbed in
in measures of shoe leather, sunburn,
and arrondissements

streets of coded answers,
sleep of coded dreams

Rue des Cinq Diamants

Four pigeons, three pigeons,
four pigeons
are scavenging in patterns,
absently mongrel shades of lilac

focused, though:
digging for gold,
drilling for oil,
between damp cobblestones
and passing cars,
under sky of chalk which they also ignore

last night the rain drifted in fine, fine drops,
hardly more than a mist,
through thick amber light
that kept unwinding through the hours

here below, ever, the work to channel the stream,
to funnel the energy,
in order to withstand the strength of malices,
those interior and exterior forces that are no stranger
and yet still surprise by merely appearing, quivering, in the
doorway,
where you never left them.

Bring the cloak of invisibility! The magic wand! Mutter the
secret incantation!

Striving to pull answers out of the fire, bright glowing diamonds
now,
instead of letting them burn
and waiting to sift through the ashes for one's treasures,
to find, later, only cool glass beads

ha! laughable/unphotographable
three point five pigeons.

Pink

in this garden
where it is always 27 degrees,
the sun fries eggs and shrimp
while we speak of hier soir,
and faraway places,
and impending futures
that will be presents all too soon
and where shall we three meet again?
(in thunder, lightning or in rain)
or under another sun
where the sun has baked a third language
and I once wore a pink suit

partout

where do I lay my head
where do I find my feet
where do I lend my ear
where do I fill my chest

where do I turn my gaze
where do I set my sights
where do I lift my chin
where do I stir my soul

where do I count out the rhythm of my blessings
where do I store the swaying pile of lessons

where do I discover my heart
today, again,
where do I discover my heart

Beauty sleep

to surf on the breezing dust
to dance on the flame
to dream with open heart

a place; a place; a place
figures in the time(less)scape

a jungle edge; a cross-dust-roads;
a stage, air with lurking water

forever past; forever future
forever wonder; forever wander

**Part III : the art of living
water**

Seeking be my compass

Finding more solace
in the unknown
than the known

Leaving the flatlands for mountains and jungles,
crossing oceans wideopen like mind
Anticipating the mysterious
esoteric embrace
of unbelievable things that are truer than yesterday

Seeking
be my compass

the way is paved with experiences,
the only things we truly own

dangling threads of alternate lives

from the plans that came to nothing,
to the little decisions that changed directions

the advice not taken
and the applications rejected,
the active choices and
the inspired leaps

shopping lists torn up
and wishings abandoned

sometimes the futures untaken
sit muttering on the sidelines
denouncing the present
as fraudulent and phony
and sometimes
they are right

some trains wait
in the station
until you find your way back
to the platform

some ships have sailed,
and already gained the horizon,
swift with the wind of regret

some dreams recur
and recur
until the twisting thread we follow
leads us down the winding path
to walk,
for a while,
in long anticipated grace

life: enjoy the wind in your hair

pocketful of diamonds,
pocketful of gravel.
they both weigh us down

the broken fingernails of the soul
may just come from grabbing at the wrong ledges
as we slip and fall towards the inevitable

don't like the way it is?/turn it around/turn it around

it's not fear of falling,
it's fear of landing.
life: enjoy the wind in your hair

Blessings

Blessed are those who see
the branches waving,
and also choose to see the wind
and to hear the music riding on it

Blessed are those who map
the fragile geometry of crystals,
and also choose to see the angels
in the angles
and to read the stories that trace through the mazes

Blessed are those who follow the path,
and also chose to ignore it
when they can seize the chance to chase the music through
the maze of angels

or blink

change comes nibbling at the edges,
blushing noiselessly across the sky

hold still and see the splendour
or blink

items once daily
are being quietly catalogued and archived;
the playlists are shuffling new cream,
new populations of memories;
opinions shifting through shades.

a building is being dismantled,
piece by piece, and soon we will forget what it looked like
because fresh eyes will come and observe
no absence

open the windows
and let the ghosts slip
into the blushing sky

It will not be titled

it will not be insisted,
for insistence crushes it

it will not be tied, bound, chained,
for it flows free, effortlessly escaping
from all bonds

it will not be discovered from aggressive, impatient search,
as if looking for misplaced keys or wallet,
and it will not be uncovered
through complex description, detailed direction,
or ruthless discipline

if it ever comes, it comes softly, unannounced,
and sits quietly waiting to be noticed

it will not appear in its coat of many colours
in the midst of argument or debate,
but it may unfurl, unexpected,
before ignorance and knowledge alike

it is not arrived at by greater efficiencies, or
improved concurrence,
by this season's new colours, or
a redoubling of efforts to improve

it will not be locked in a cage,
bedecked with jewels,
delivered through multiple channels to market,
or sophisticated and differentiated cleaning products

its song is almost silence,
a breath in an empty room,
a single warm note on a mountaintop

it has neither deadlines nor milestones,
it has no key performance indicators,
it has no feedback, no awards;
it is without ownership,
it mobilises no resources,
and knows no targets
it is without glory

it is in between the lines,
and where the dust settles,
it is in the gaps, like stray grass
it taps on the cold glass
it is hiding in plain sight
it belongs

I used to know so many things

Happiness is not comfort;
happiness is not having.

Happiness is loving the struggle,
whether the struggle's nature is chosen or inflicted.

Tiring of your apricot struggle?
Trade it in for an articulated lorry struggle,
A pixel struggle,
A baptism struggle.

Which came first, the song or the dance?
I used to know; I used to know so many things

**Funambulist: tightrope walker,
from the Latin *funambul*: ropedancer**

moving through
the ever-present present

greeting each snap/slap/whap change in the weather
like an old friend,
each day like a new friend

phrases across the stave,
leaping the bar lines,
on a ropedancing melody
perchance to rest, pause,
breathe and dance on

and let us

and let us
allow each moment
to build on
each moment,
creating the next instant,
for an instant
(and repeat)

and let us
hold in our hearts
the places we could also be,
without wishing away where we are
in favour of where we were
(there are so many places to be,
and yet only one)

and let us
move, or drift,
with poetry in our soul,
the better to understand;
(and logic in our pockets,
for emergencies)

faith in the wind and the water

patches of blue
and inspiration.

replenishing at deep warm pools, where
accumulations of reflection
ripple into clarity,
and distortions and fractures
can be melted
and re-set

I have constructed a quiet room to carry with me,
sparsely furnished, with a view of the world,
where the air moves gently but firmly.

lives echo behind,
evaporating under a new sun

getting sea legs, getting shipshape, and steering for the
horizon,
with faith in the wind and the water,
traveling lighter every day