

Poems

of

Cambodia and Vietnam

2011

Carl Lahser

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Bay of the Descending Dragons

The 2,000 emerald karst islets

Were spit out by protective dragons

And jewels and jade

Sprang up in front of enemy ships

Hą Long – the place where mother dragon lived

Bάi Tú Long – where lived her children

Islets swathed in a hundred kinds of trees

Protecting Haiphong

Protecting Vietnam

A quiet night on the Bay

Watching Scorpio overhead

Hearing halyards slapping the mast

Listening to the creaking wooden hull

Quiet and a pot of tea.

Carl 28Oct11



Water Puppets

In Hanoi live the water puppets

In a pool telling farmer’s stories

Mounted on rods beneath the surface

Operated by puppeteers waist deep

Hidden artists and three foot actors

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Typhoons

Typhoons, teeth of the Southeast Asian gods

A storm one hundred thirty years ago

Hit the Gulf of Tonkin

Decimated Haiphong

Killing 300,000 in the Red River Valley

In April 2011 a storm hit Saigon

On24 September Typhoon Haitang hit Hanoi

On 30 September Typhoon Nesat hit Haiphong

On 9 Oct Typhoon Banyan hit Hong Kong

The Mekong rose 30 feet

And 3000 people were killed

Most of Thailand was flooded

Water will still be standing for months

Tong le Sap Lake was 70 miles wide

Quiet and humid

And a falling barometer

Need to listen to the weather man

It’s coming.

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Scooter Heaven

Southeast Asian streets

Hanoi, Saigon, Phnom Pehn

A writhing sea of

Motor scooters,

Motorbikes,

Rickshaws,

Pushcarts

Cars,

Busses

Ox carts

Old women with a loaded yokes

Crossing a street

Walking into traffic with your hand raised

Walking at a steady pace

While demons fly past

Emerging on the other side unscathed.

Wheee!

Carl 26Oct11

 

Snack Time

Sidewalk cafes

With red or blue plastic chairs

And knee-high plastic tables

Serving tea and pho

Talking news

Telling jokes

Oblivious as the world flows past

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Sidewalk Market

Bok Choy

Dichon

Water morning glory

Taro roots

Peeled pineapples

Leeches

Rice

Sitting on the sidewalk

Resting on low tables

While the old women sit

Talking or dreaming of better days

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Fish Market

Crabs and eels

Catfish

Snails and turtles and frogs

It’s all edible, Joe

I clean it for you, Joe

Right here on the sidewalk

30Oct11



Farm House

In a clearing off the road

Beyond the family shrine

Past the tethered water buffalo

And jackfruit trees

A house on stilts

With hammocks strung between the posts

A loom on one side

Lightning rods for the monsoon

A lotus and Nagas on the roof ridge

Thatch roof

Blue shutters

Waiting for the monsoon to slaken

Waiting for the Mekong to recede

Carl 31 Oct 11



Mekong River

A mile wide and fifty feet deep

The Mekong flows from China

Then between Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia

Essential highway

Suddenly the halyards beat against the mast

Evening monsoon clouds slide in

Cool and loaded with rain

Sheet lightning highlights tall clouds

Humidity and rain fill the night

Overcast daylight drips humidity

It is light but the sun forgot to rise

Don’t breathe too deeply

Or you will drown

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The River is Dropping

Typhoon rain and wind

Rushed up the Mekong valley

Raising the water level thirty feet

Backing up into Tong le Sap

Tripling its size

Six weeks later the river was falling

The farmers were following the river down

Fishing in the water

Planting the silt covered banks

With pole beans, bananas,and taro

Time flows onwards.

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The Killing Field

An overcast morning

At the end of the monsoon season.

I visited the reborn Phnom Penh,

The City of Ghosts.

I stopped at the Russian market

For a wide-brimmed hat

Anticipating a short trip to Choeung Ek

To see the Killing Field.

15km south

Through thinning businesses and homes

Behind the houses ran the river

Where rice and morningglory were raised

Passing through Choeung Ek

We found the glass-faced memorial stupa

Filled with unidentified skulls

0f 8000 victims executed

And buried in the Killing Fields



Under a gloomy sky we walked among the burial pits

Grown over with green turf and trees

Looking like a tough golf course

Pits containing remains of

Men bludgeoned to death to save bullets

Women unclothed

Children smashed against the killing tree

Pits containing rags and bones and teeth of the victims

Remains of 8985 people have been exhumed

Many were brought alive from Tuol Sleng,

The secret service headquarters,

Up to 300 a day for killing



Under grey sky and a weak sun

This is a monument to cruelty and insanity

And the indifference of the outside world

A memorial to gentle poor people who did not resist

A lesson to future generations

Who think selfishly only of themselves

Who ignore corruption, tyranny and repression

Who do not participate in government

Carl2Nov11

Tuol Sleng (S-21)

In the outskirts of the City of Ghosts

Sat the Tuol Svay Prey High School

When Phnom Pehn’s people

Were ordered to leave town

And sent to the countryside

To meet Pol Pot’s dream f

“Return to the old agrarian ways”

The school was desecreated,

Degraded, and modified

To serve as a Khmer Rouge interrogation and torture center.

Tuol Sleng, secret department S-21

1975 to 1979

Run by Comrade Duch

14,000 men, women and children were “processed”-

Tortured and the majority killed

Grisley place.

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Ox Carts

Out in rural Cambodia and Vietnam

The Ford F-150 and Toyota Tundra

Are replaced by the ox cart



Off to the market

Out in the fields

Decked out for holidays

Jouncing along trails

And unimproved roads

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Rubber Trees

A rubber tree produces latex sap

The water is removed leaving

Raw rubber.

Ford and Edison had rubber plantations

In Brazil, Malaysia, and Vietnam.

Japan’s coveting Malaysian rubber

Started WWII.

The US wanting Vietnamese rubber

Caused another war.



Most rubber is plantation raised

Young plants produced from cuttings or seeds

Are planted in rows and tended

At seven year trees are slashed for 30 years

A spout leads the latex to a collection bowl

A plastic ribbon is tied above the slash

To divert water from the bowl

The latex is boiled or roasted

To remove the water

Then shipped out for further processing

Wild rubber came from Mexico to Brazil

Where natives were enslaved

To collect and smoke raw rubber

They were mutilated or killed

For missing their quota



Carl8Nov11