

**MOMENT**

**BENZONED**

**VASTER LANDSCAPES: RATANAKIRI POEMS**

**WRITING BY GREG BEM**

**CAMBODIA, 2014**



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Words written and book designed by Greg Bem.

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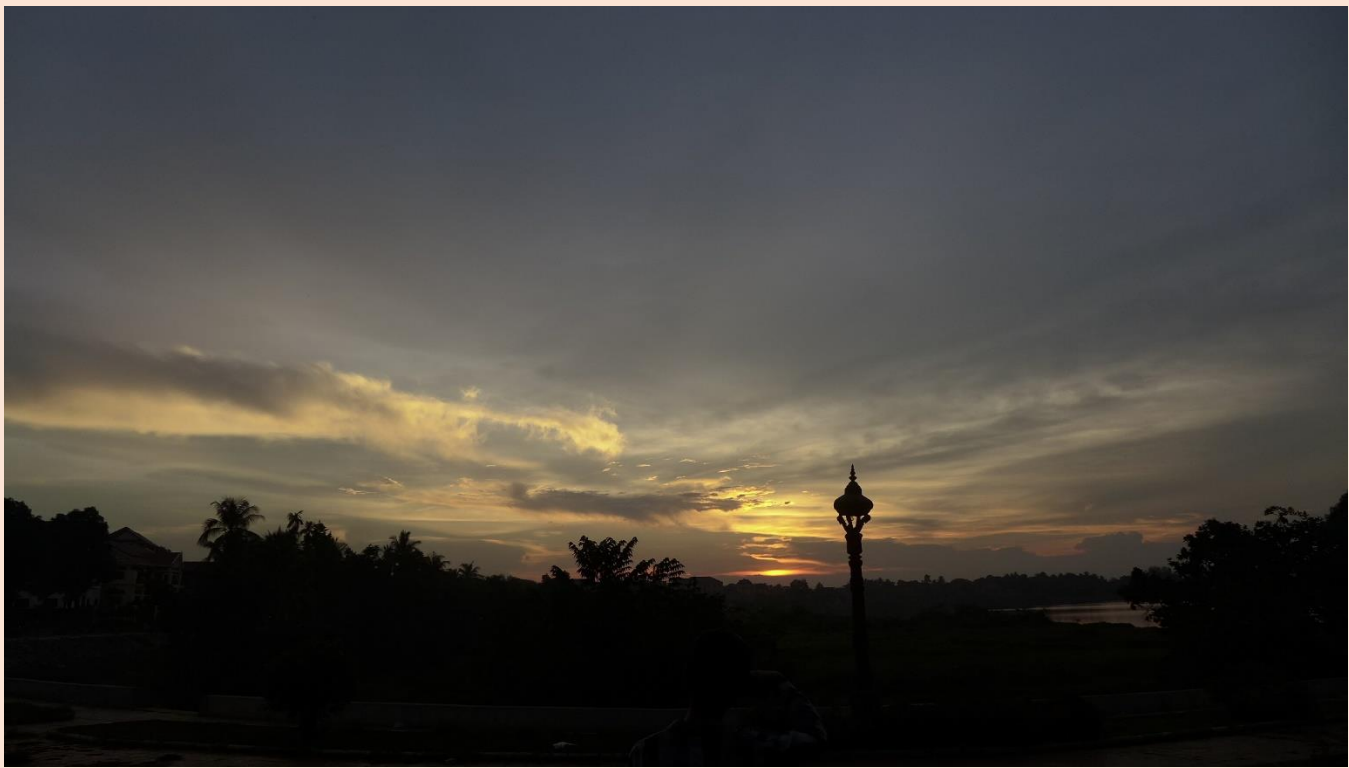
For more by Greg Bem, visit [cambodianbem.wordpress.com](http://cambodianbem.wordpress.com) and [gregbem.com](http://gregbem.com).

Also, you may want to read [“Nine Nights in Cambodia”](#) if you like this book.

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\*

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**MOMENT**



**"anger in his heart"<sup>1</sup>**

*For Andrea & Daen*

**a**

he'll always be a yearner  
lightning shattering lightning

**b**

lightning on the strips of horizon flutter  
and the idea of memory etched into clouds

---

<sup>1</sup> Partly inspired by the Tune-Yards song "Gangsta."

c

you should be staring at the road,  
not at the clouds, where they stare  
back, backwards in time, through you

d

there is the aircon we speak of and it is true  
and a memory of work I cannot take my eyes off

e

and if only those fingers were accessible  
those that I've seen but never touch

f

stretched as lightning on the horizon  
they flash and then vanish, haunting, clicking

g

horizons and horizons of abstract imagery  
patterns, remember? “singing from the heart, but”

## Turner of Stones

*Ratanakiri<sup>2</sup>, Cambodia*

he will exist on the back of the tortoise as it rocks  
he will sway and lie down as he lied so many nights  
with his mouth emitting sounds

his eyes willed to be shut, though perhaps the light wants them open  
he will watch the boy roll down into the ditch of dirt forever  
a GIF in his mind, a reality, a shaken stone, those bones of a boy's body<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Alternative spelling: Ratanak Kiri.

<sup>3</sup> Originally this sequence, and MOMENT as a whole, featured many quotes, embedded and otherwise, from Tune-Yards. After realizing the temporal influence of the band (which I was listening to during the writing process), I decided to (mostly) cut the quotes out.

**he will trespass into his memory**

*Ratanakiri, Cambodia*

there were so many dogs that night, appearing out of nowhere  
phantasms these dogs, never puppies, just dogs  
and Stephanie was there and I kept thinking of her face in the darkness  
thinking, what is she thinking and how is she expressing what she is thinking?  
what is she and where the hell are we in this moonlight?

there is the pollution of sound: honking horns and distant chainsaws  
in the future there will be imperfect rainstorms

**"worst behavior"<sup>4</sup>**

*For Tana*

"motherfucker never loved us"

and yet we've loved each other  
cradling our bodies

purple texture tinged with pressure  
you hold the tatters in your hand

my hands are sticky, my glasses filthy, stickier  
I look through my glasses to find you

there is the nothing I'd rather wait to see a bit more of

---

<sup>4</sup> Inspired by Drake's song of the same name.



*Phnom Penh, Cambodia*

## **Arrival**

I watched the boys holding the bags of glue up to their mouths, eyes bleak as pinpoints poked into flesh, hollowed bodies, skeletal beings. Humans? The ride back home an impossibly pleasant journey, a void of excess and near-collisions. People move here, people move to this place. I looked at buildings without caring, looked at the construction and noticed the differences in the sizes of the buildings. I saw a boy sleeping on a sidewalk, his head leaning against a makeshift construction zone closet, while Cambodian men stood nearby talking.

## **Passage**

A woman drinks a red bull with a straw. There are two Cambodian women, and I wonder if they've been called beautiful in many years, by anyone, and they sit watching the traffic on their little elevated platform in their tiny wooden house on the edge of the national highway somewhere near Kampong Cham. The platform is little and huge at the same time.



**BENZONED**



In<sup>5</sup> his heart he aches, the same way the streets ache. To be cracked.

I rode my bike on a cracked road. The grooves were monstrous, waves of tarmac.

Happened near Diamond Island.

Ungodly I swerved from one to the other. There is no correct way to swerve.

There is no ideal maneuver.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> This poem originally began with the following: “Tangent: Ben's dad died and he wasn't even 60. I remember thinking: this is a huge gap in my life not caused by a family member.” The poems written in this section have little to do with Ben or his father, but the memory popped into my head while writing it. I chose not to ignore the pun with the drug.

<sup>6</sup> This opening was originally the end to *MOMENT*.

1

It is all sweat and then tears streaming down my face and then sweat.  
The streaming is memorized into the back of my head but no one has a face.

2

This is the end of an empire, they claim, when everyone is obsessed with sex.  
I'm obsessed with sex but not with sex at the same time. I think about it but it is blank.

3

The pills keep getting flushed through the esophagus. How long before they're dissolved?  
Perhaps I will live to be alive like Elvis did and then die to be dead like Elvis did. Died.



Did you know about valium and how advertisers invented a disease to go along with it?  
Well, it's true. But it happened before Valium. Librium. Liberation.

The mind, when in the crux of a benzodiazepine<sup>7</sup>, is vibration, but nothing is beautiful. You are beautiful, you say in the mirror, in the selfie, in the whatever.

---

<sup>7</sup> Valium is legally available (and widely distributed via pharmacies) throughout Cambodia.

6

The sedation of the failing body and the failing mind or that which just needs rest.

This is what capacity is all about: kinetic understanding leading to a damp cloth wiping the forehead.

Metaphors. Dreams of no children, aching hearts, and some kind of final personal solution to self. I love the world. And I love everyone in it. I love many friends. They all deserve to be loved more.

# VASTER LANDSCAPES: RATANAKIRI POEMS<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Originally titled “The Ratanakiri Poems.” Ratanakiri is a province in Northeastern Cambodia. It is home to many indigenous groups at risk of being evicted. The center of the province, Banlung, is a small town offering numerous tourist experiences.



*For Penhleak, Yenda, Stephanie, and Eric*





Outside Kratie<sup>9</sup> we picked up a man, who carried what looked like a rifle, but it was a machete. He hopped into the window making an already packed minibus even more packed. “This is how we get things done,” said another Cambodian man, hanging off the back bumper of another minibus headed in the other direction.

---

<sup>9</sup> The closest town to Banlung, to the south on the route to/from Phnom Penh, is Kratie, which is the center of the province of the same name.

dive into the volcanic lake<sup>10</sup>  
they say it is deep  
you go down, continue down  
and it is so hard to come back up  
and it is so hard to find the top  
where the air is, and your lungs hurt  
and the word "burst" seems appropriate

---

<sup>10</sup> Yeak Loam, just outside of Banlung.



The volcanic lake is blown open again.  
Khmer Electronic Dance Movement<sup>11</sup>  
blasting across the face of a deep crater.  
The water is neither clear nor dirty.  
The bottom is untouchable and mysterious  
except for the occasional slimy tree limb  
which is mysterious and absolutely disgusting  
as our feet rub up against it, in accident,  
and we look at each other, grimacing slightly.

---

<sup>11</sup> A growing interest in fast electronic music is currently pervasive in Cambodia.

The rows of rubber trees lusty in their order,  
in their constriction they are fondly perceived,  
hypnotic and fixed into a growth spurt.  
The spiral agonizingly known as we sit together watching.  
We are learning how the plantations<sup>12</sup> flutter as feathers.

---

<sup>12</sup> Economic land concessions, focusing on rubber trees, are slowly taking over the entire landscape of what I consider Cambodia's most beautiful region.



You have not seen  
rubber like this.  
You have not seen  
the lines of shacks  
like lines of rubber tees  
young and indentured.  
Fixed into position.  
Row upon row and waiting.  
Waiting upon waiting.  
I think about burning.  
Suicide and burning alive.  
Or the spinning of tires  
on the ground, piled up,  
frowning with oppression.

David Weinberger says it's the twitch of the ocean connected to the rest of the ocean.  
We are part of a vast landscape that is attached to vaster landscapes.  
As you look into your phone and dial the number I look into mine and dial your number.  
Who will arise when the ring tone emerges and begins its dance through the air?



Beneath the hammock of the treetop  
sprouts a nail and though I stepped on it  
it did not press through my flesh.  
A lucky step filled with lightness.  
The lightness of a cooler climate in May,  
where the sun destroys the day  
and the night lures us with a chill.  
I place the waste basket top-down  
covering the frowning trickery of this nail.  
I climb on the hammock and swing.

“Scarlet Scarf Lake” is what I call it.<sup>13</sup>

The explosions of red flowers in the trees,  
cascade like fire bombs around the perimeter.

Outside some unnamed general's fancy, walled property,  
we watch the general's child and his nanny  
hang out with other children near a trash pile.

We wait for the tuk tuk<sup>14</sup> and watch the sky.

I am thinking of Cambodians armed with rocket launchers.

I am thinking of what the inside of the general's house looks like.

---

<sup>13</sup> The actual name of this lake, located just north of Banlung’s center, is Kan Seng.

<sup>14</sup> A common form of transportation in Cambodia and Southeast Asia. The Cambodian version features a moto and a single-axle “carriage” capable of holding around four passengers.



We are at the pool.<sup>15</sup>  
There is a single joint.  
We are the only ones here.  
I am thinking about mosquitoes.  
I jump into the pool.  
The water bugs are everywhere.  
It has been a long time,  
since I was stoned in a pool.  
She is completely silent.  
He is completely silent.  
The water bugs are everywhere.  
The water bugs are completely silent.  
I dodge them like sea mines.  
Swim underneath to avoid them.  
Then I get out, disgusted.  
I dream about mosquitoes

---

<sup>15</sup> At the Terres Rouges Lodge.

There is a current of fear.

There is no moon because of clouds.

We go and get Indian food.

Everything becomes spicy and okay.

She is silent and it stings like a stab wound,  
silence a knife jabbed into my throat.  
Tonight it's her silence we bear witness to.  
"My god, I want you to be happy," I think.  
"Please be relieved of all the stressed of your life."  
It is true that I am horrible at making remedies in real life  
and hide behind words and screens and empty avatars.  
It is also true that despite my fears, I do care,  
and do hope she reaches that point she has been seeking.

Buying honey<sup>16</sup> in Ratanakiri.  
A sport for us in our dirty skin.  
Our dirty clothes. Dirty hair.  
Every family we see on the road looks pissed.  
The tuk tuk driver and the endless hunt.  
I wonder what the families do  
when customers aren't looking.

---

<sup>16</sup> Roadside honey is sometimes available and often requires visiting different sellers along the road to Vietnam.







She places the glass above my eyes  
says to me: be still and look through.  
"What is it I'm aiming at finding?"  
My voice unrolls like an aluminum coil.  
She puts a finger to her lips.  
She narrows her eyes and pulls back her hair.  
The moon is beginning to be forgiveness.  
I can feel my calf begin to twitch.  
The bad leg, the one that suffered.  
Then there is the glass above my eyes.  
It illuminates. She says nothing.  
I watch and suddenly it is her eyes.  
She is leaning over the glass.  
She is looking so far into me.



Ratanakiri's greens and rusty browns.  
Days later I would step into the shower  
the small trickle of water toward the drain  
a mix of soap and the dust that coated me.  
I love when a place leaves its mark on you,  
like when she wore lipstick and kissed my neck.

There is the window.

I love that there is a window.

I love that the Cambodian man  
can fit through that window.

We may all smile a bit more  
while looking at the window,  
marveling it still can opens.



