

Leaving Luang Prabang: A Tale of Two Travellers

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Leaving Luang Prabang

Luang Prabang sits under strange skies
at the edge of the universe.
They walk down the moonlit road
to the river.
They smoke cigarettes then someone says; Go!
White Flower
White Angel
Go!
Holy
Holy
dancing the dance
of the powerful beast

Go!
invoke the genius
of every living thing
slide into the river
the green green river
make your motor turn over.
There's always some left, crying tears
that stain their face like rain, saying: Come back
Come back
but
o
Sister, what's the time?
Time to move on
Go!
I want to go where there's no Beyond
Go, shadow of man and haunt this house no more
The boat turns into the flood
The freedom fighters run along the shore, calling:
Come with us you daring boy!
It is a pleasure to enter into the nothingness of the better life
The day has a purpose
Go!
Here is your comb
Here's your mirror
here's the hot wire for your soul
The world's on strike
The way is open
It's Time to go somewhere new

What is this? a single page in a manilla folder from 2001 marked Current Scripts; and so many echoes of other poems: 'For the Asking,' 'To Sally: Eight Years Gone,' 'Before a Journey by Water.' Also 'Riverrun' ('The Weeper shouts, / How can you live without me?'), 'Last Dance' ('I leave you / *bayadere* / the memory of nomadic nights / I searched for "the herb Lunatica"'), perhaps even 'Sleepwalker' ('It's only when you leave for the last time that you / understand that you were ever there'). All are places where someone gets into a boat or takes to the road, leaving something and (sometimes) someone behind.

What is this? a poem but also a script, percussive, scored for delivery and spliced with lyrical densities that seem to arrive out of nowhere. Who is leaving Luang Prabang under strange skies, holding onto comb, mirror and hot wire? Why such urgency to go down the river?

Two travellers have come across the Thai border into northern Laos. It is late 1973 and war rages beyond the Lao border to the east. The travellers take a cheap flight from Houei Sai 120 miles south to the provincial capital of Luang Prabang where the Mekong is ‘passing through to Saigon,’ as one of them notes on a hand-drawn map. They disembark from the antique Dakota after a seat-clinging ride over ravines and mountainside plantations and go looking for accommodation. ‘109 doss house,’ over the road from a boat landing on the river, is another note on the map; it corresponds to an itinerary detail in a notebook: ‘Luang Prabang (Hotel: 109 Mekong).’ Nearby are post office, bank, money changer, the Eros Cinema, a hospital (‘sister kate’s’), soup kitchens (‘cheap & nasty – very weimar’), ‘melodys,’ ‘dude ranch for americans,’ ‘bar ♪,’ ‘coffee and politicos (hot licks),’ ‘cinema (skin),’ ‘restaurant & brothel,’ ‘auberge (hindu)’ and ‘dope (haw).’ The map has a north pointer and a carefully lettered title: ‘Long John.’ There is a hill with steps to a temple (Si Phouthabath) and a tributary called Nam Khane winds through town to join the Mekong. Also marked are more temples (wats), Lu and Meo villages, silver and wood carving outlets, the Lao royal palace, the prison, the police station and the crematorium. There are markets to buy bread and eggs, arrows to lycée, pool and tennis, and the airport (‘strictly for the birds’). How long did it take to know and note these things? and what happened in Luang Prabang that returns now, beautiful and ambiguous?

Moonlight, river walk, cigarettes and then someone says Go! Perhaps she is the White Flower, the White Angel; a ghostly narcotic as powerful as the Dragon they are smoking. Dancing the dance as instructed, they invite the genius of every living thing, drawn by and into the green river on its endless journey. So they are moving, or will be moving; but who is left (will be left) behind, tears staining their face like rain, as the boat pulls out into the flood? The freedom fighters running along the shore call the daring boy to their cause but not the companion who has come with him this far. *Time to move on.* Is a hotwired soul single- or double-chambered? *I want to go where there’s no Beyond. Go, shadow of man and haunt this house no more. It is a pleasure to enter into the nothingness of the better life. It’s Time to go somewhere new.*

The poem has several avatars. One of them is ‘Before a Journey by Water’ published 1977 in *Hasard 1*, an instalment of the chronicle that covers the same stretch of travel but with names and noir detail as Monk Alias Turnblazer and his companion Sister Mercy negotiate their fragilities and the febrile drug scene of the region. Déjà vu: ‘Turnblazer came to / hanging onto the edge / of

the universe / under strange skies / where Long John / sits by the river / he has been swinging / on
the staircase / at the skin flicks / all day long / & he can't get it up / to skin the cat / again.'
Moonlight, cigarettes and companion are configured in a rented room where Turnblazer goes to
fetch a knife from the kitchen. Sister Mercy's 'greased and wanton / corporeal reality' ('love is
just a mammy away') is provoking: 'Turnblazer goes over to shut her up / with the knife in his
hands / the yellow morning hangs low in the clouds / for a daring boy to haul by spit and gob.'
Somewhere outside 'the freedom fighters who creep across the night / hear the prophet's voice
wind down / to a plea of insanity / or loss of memory.' Everything goes wrong. Turnblazer is
'testy & burning in his wellsprings / without a notion / of native wit in his fried skull.' He walks
out, crosses a bridge to the highway and hitches south with a truck driver as the monsoon rains
blow in from China. And his companion? 'tears stain her face / she sits for a while / and then the
rain came in on her in Long John too':

Sister Mercy stares down the road

& sings:

 'come back

 come back

 Turnblazer

 o come you back Turnblazer

 come you back

 to me

 —

 where Long John

 sits by the river'

These are the final lines of 'Before a Journey by Water'; he is gone, she waits in a café by the
river in Luang Prabang.

upriver

The Mekong, which is the Mother of All Rivers, has been in the picture since the travellers'
arrival some days previously in northern Thailand near the border with Burma and Laos that is
the centre of the Golden Triangle. [gallery 1] Here the river is the border, crossed and recrossed
by controlling interests in the drug trade and their private armies ('self-defence forces') who bring
opium caravans out of the mountains to refineries in the border settlements. Three infamous
sawmills in the area process the opium that is sold on as No. 4 heroin (Dragon, Double Lion,
Double U-O-Globe) or 999 morphine. [gallery 2] The drug bosses cut deals with government

agencies paralysed by the threat of communist overthrow; remnants of the Kuomintang fight guerrilla actions for whichever side pays best, and the livelihood of 50,000 hill tribespeople depends on poppy cultivation.

From Chiang Mai, the travellers went further north to Fang and then on to Chiang Rai. At Chiang Saen they looked upriver into Burma before going to Chiang Khong to cross by boat to Laos. [gallery 3] *'Beside the Mekong would you / that day have died for love?'* The question is hers, a long time afterwards. He recalls the scene in Houei Sai: *'(beside the Mekong / we are on an ox-cart / a sawmill on the other side).'* She continues: *'I mean when we drove to Burma / in that wooden cart / pulled by a buffalo.'* He: *'(when you are in love / does time keep / a hand on your heart?)'* She: *'When we attacked Fort Carnot at dawn.'* He, remembering the ox-cart and the refinery on the other side of the river: *'Yes / beside the Mekong I would / that day have died for love.'* This is the background, 'For the Asking' and 'To Sally: Eight Years Gone,' against which their story plays out. Also:

the history of the Others,

the yellow moon
the moon and all its hospitals
those nights when
saliva and sweat are dangerous
that sulphur moon
takes you from Desire to Need;
you abandon the Old Man of Heaven
and dance
in a dress
with the Yellow Empress

Downriver at Luang Prabang a dangerous cocktail of regional and personal turmoil explodes. Later it could be assimilated ('we can explain why the sky is blue / but not why marriage / makes us do the things we do'). Different, though, on the riverside in Luang Prabang with the storm breaking from foreboding skies and the partnership suspended.

turnblazer

We can go further. There is a manuscript called 'Turnblazer: A Pastoral Idyll. Script for an Audience' written into a carbon copy ledger that has lost its cover. The fly leaf tells us the ledger

was acquired by the poet July 1973 in Yogyakarta, Java; an epigraph from the itinerant French surrealist Blaise Cendrars appears on the same page. It is a statement about fellowship: ‘Ma véritable famille se compose / des pauvres qui j’ai appris à / aimer non par charité mais par / simplicité.’ The six parts of the work that follows are dated August through December 1973 and assigned places of composition. Parts 1, 2 and 3 are written in Bali, North Sumatra and Thailand; parts 4, 5 and 6 in Northern Thailand and Laos, Luang Prabang and Vientiane. 15 of the 30 pages are effectively Laos-based and concerned with events in Luang Prabang. The detail of the hand-drawn map snaps into focus: it is p. 21 of the Turnblazer manuscript, traced from a more conventional (but also annotated) map of the town that is extant among the poet’s folders. [gallery 4] [gallery 5] Three pins held the printed map to the ledger for tracing: the holes are visible on both bits of paper and the inked-over lines of the top map show up as a network of deep impressions on its underside.

The Turnblazer manuscript supplied material for accounts of travel in Asia published in the 1970s, notably such poems as ‘Letter to Harry Leeds,’ ‘Before a Journey by Water’ and parts of ‘Rimbaud’s Passport.’ Typescripts for further Turnblazer poems also draw on the manuscript; they include ‘Swan Song (Daddy at the letter-box)’ and a fragment beginning ‘she left Turnblazer behind.’ Most importantly, the manuscript is the source for a comprehensive edit of the Turnblazer saga in 1993, twenty years after the events it describes. The 1993 typescript, ‘Turnblazer Chronicle,’ is 36 pages including photocopies of the Long John map, drawings from the manuscript and photographs from the *Hasard* publication of ‘Before a Journey by Water.’ Not surprisingly the typescript operates with the long lens of hindsight while the manuscript appears to bring us at least temporally close to the action. Each has something to say about leaving Luang Prabang.

The manuscript is for the most part composed in long, closely written lines that move the page towards prose, ostensibly reports (chronicles) that Turnblazer is making to fellow operative Harry Leeds (poet Russell Haley). We pick up the trail near the triple border in the north, Turnblazer’s third-person patois in full swing:

Sister Mercy stride across the runway going up the Buffalo Horn Hill to look at the light / but that poor boy farther along again, he wants to travel route 1016 to Chiang Fango Saen Gate / he say, Mister I have to see that Mekhong River, that’s where I want my next soda & juice / put yr crocodile-skin valise on the truck Sister Mercy we moving on one more time. / But the real that Turnblazer anxious to cast his sightseers on is the Golden Triangle / I don’t mean Nebuchadnezzar & all kinds of music & the townpeoples laying down / I’m talking about where the white flower grow, where the hotel boy bring in the

dope on a tray / & you walk down the laterite, struggle through that dust storm by the Sop Ruak / that's ~~Burma~~ Pegu across that river & the kingdom of a million elephants over the Mekhong. (TB 73 17)

Fango Saen is Chiang Saen and Pegu is Turnblazer's name for Burma (now Myanmar), part of the narrative coding that intensifies as the trip gets closer to its narcotic heart. Mozart (Thailand), solar energy (heroin), the City of Angels (Bangkok), Fort Carnot (Houei Sai), Long John (Luang Prabang), Nueva City (Vientiane) and the Ali Baba Shredded Pork Factory (a drug syndicate) all figure in the web of intrigue that surrounds the travellers. Sometimes they are fugitives, sometimes traders or counter-insurgents. Sometimes they are working undercover for the Factory, professionally co-dependent, excited by and suspicious of each other. And one of them is chronicling events along the way, tearing out (perhaps despatching?) top copy pages from the ledger and keeping the carbon record.

In Long John/Luang Prabang, the story unfolds much as we have seen though without the kitchen knife and with a yellow moon (not morning) hanging low behind the clouds on the night when things fall apart and Turnblazer deserts. Footpads, not freedom fighters, creep across the night but Sister Mercy still assumes he has gone to enlist for a foreign war down the river. This is a cue for Turnblazer's next appearance (solo, in fatigues) at a Pynchonesque chamber music recital (Mozart, Liszt, solar energy) in Long John as reported in the local paper. Sister Mercy comes to the concert 'to jaw a wag with her fellow travellers' (TB 73 23), but she doesn't appear to be on talking terms with Turnblazer.

A couple of pages later, marking time in Long John, the Turnblazer manuscript delivers the draft of a poem published 1976 in *Spleen 2* under the alias Charming Cole Tundra:

How to smoke 'Lucky Strikes'

I had decided to have nothing more to do
with John Locke's world;
I wanted to find out where heroin
could be obtained.
I didn't realise it was going to be so easy
so easy.

A number of pale young men rushed to me

& begged for money.
I gave twenty five cents each to three men.
They ran off –
I followed them.
They went behind a coffee shop –
they exchanged the money
for four packets
of No 4 heroin:

they went to the riverbank beside the bridge,
they lit matches & smoked.

After they had finished
they came back
to the landing
to beg for money from other visitors.
There is no law against such things
in Pegu.

Many taxi drivers make a habit
of crossing the border
for a 'smoke.'

the place is known to addicts as
'Paradise.'

They would ask one another:
'Have you been to Paradise today?'

Clippings from regional papers accompany the Turnbuller material and information transcribed near the draft poem details current prices for heroin, its passage between borders and some local consumption habits. 'Twenty-five per cent of the Haw Yunnanese (mainly from the former 93rd Kuomintang Army) living in Mae Sai as jade merchants are heroin addicts. They would put No. 4 heroin (pure) into their 'Lucky Strike' cigarettes for smokes. Each smokes two packets a day. Each packet costs \$20.' (TB 73 25) The transcriptions are filtered through Turnbuller's codes and include page references from the confessions of a Mozartian opium king published in Dublin in 1984. Pace Orwell.

leaving luang prabang

When Turnblazer exits Long John on a Sunday afternoon after spending seven days in an opium den, he is called to the river with a heady mix of traditional rites and jazz funeral music. His walk through Long John to the opium den is redolent with locating detail:

Turnblazer strutting down the high street through Long John like a snake on fire /
ancestral voices wailing in Araby this way Turnblazer this way goes down the river / but
that poor boy turning by the pancake stand smother his cake in condensed milk / he ain't
been in town long but he sure knows his way about the burg tonight / all these acres of
money steaming in his purse make him feel a saint in the lions den / he got the power he
got the power & a little more faith a little more faith in the human race / slap it on the
drums let the cowbell ring in the morning mist slap your tambourine / save all yr riot &
circumstance for the wedding because that boy marching on / got money in the purse
breathing up a hillside of wants smacking in the ears / Turnblazer take a promenade
across Long John goes from the river with his long hair down / brass noise of the town
break in the high seas over Turnblazer's head, hey Doctor Strange / just where does that
boy rustle up the muscle to work the pavement so flash cadillac . . . Turnblazer go to the
opium den / turns in the gasoline station where the convicts are digging a ditch to bury a
truck . . . struttin' & swingin' his gourd rattle singin' a litany to wake the saints . . . ducks
his head & flags into the opium den next to the hospital in Long John. (TB 73 26)

Purified and eventually void of all traces of the white flower, Turnblazer steps towards freedom down the river in Nueva City. A poet staying in Long John who has been with him in the den comes on board the boat. He will pay good money to write down Turnblazer's memories but 'the last aboriginal' is already eating fish with his ancestors and chopping at freedom's sandalwood walls with a blue axe. His advice for the scribbler is succinct: "'it is not the words of poetry that need to be freed, it is the poet himself" say Turnblazer.' (TB 73 30). Boat, motor turning over, the pleasure of entering into the nothingness and being born to a better life are all present. The shadow of a man haunts the houses of the living ('let your soul go to the wind in another world'); comb, mirror and a way that has been opened are also apparent; and in Nueva City itself 'tax-collectors have chained their wheelbarrows to the treasury building & gone out on strike / angels stand ten feet tall & radiant & shine a light on the burying ground every morning.' (30) The wrap, three lines on the final page of the manuscript: 'Turnblazer went down the river / Turnblazer passed away / He was a dark & fictive ~~man~~ life & then he passed away.' (30, verso)

But ('o Sister') the manuscript has dismissed Turnblazer's companion; she is an interlude, a memory upriver, 'a hurricane in the north they call it Sister Mercy.' (TB 73 28) She seems incidental to Turnblazer's myth, has indeed left *him*: 'the lady came alone with the spirits of the yellow leaves moving on at the year's end,' 'her voice was like a northern whiskey that pales inside yr sense.' (27) Their histories, merged briefly, are now separate:

the customs man say he took her to the outside of town she became Nothing in the middle
of the highway / she left Turnblazer behind she left that poor boy to be his Daddy's Word
forfeit to the past / black like a crow digging in Calcutta white as a mountain flower
burning in the sun / she laid me down in the trees of February for three half-moons & a
sixpenny spoon / Turnblazer run like the hare that thinks it could kiss the moon . . . he
dances when he is drunk try to cut water with his sword . . . Turnblazer plays his flute in
a buffalo's ear he leaves for the village where the cock does not crow. (TB 73 27)

In the opium den he invokes a power that is not her though he uses one of her talismans to do so:
'Om / oh white flower! / I use the talisman of the White Angel! / Om! / Sathatheti! / Om! / I
invoke the power of Pha In / I invoke the power of Pha-Pram / I invoke the power of the heavens'
dancing beast! / Om! / Maha Saming! / I invoke the Great Genius of living beings!' (TB 73 27)

To see her again we must step into the poet's shoes (he who was there in Long John offering to
chronicle Turnblazer), then go back to the opium den and forward twenty years to the 1993 edit
of the same scene. In this recension Turnblazer starts out 'pouring condensed milk on his pancake
/ at the Eros, / feeling all the riot and circumstance / of a wedding in his ears / he's got the power /
of a renovated purse, / expansive in the coffee-shop / as some-one writes a poem, / it's a poem
about Turnblazer.' (TB 93 29) He turns in by the gas station where the convicts are digging and
enters the den, 'his favourite one / by the hospital in Long John.' Smoke, induction into the world
of spirits, and then (TB 93 33):

Three days later
Sister Mercy enters by herself
like a baked sweetmeat
synthesised from silence
Om
white flower
White Angel
Om
invoking the power of Pha In

invoking the power of Pha Pram
the power
of the dancing beast
Om
invoking the Genius of living beings,
Come with me to the river
Turnblazer, come down
you've got to roll
down the river
your motor turning over
from Long John
to Nueva City
the water is green
on Sunday
don't let me take you by surprise

o
Sister

trumpets from the hill again
five long notes
spirits of the yellow leaves
moving on

o
Sister

1993 is quite clear: Sister Mercy delivers the summons and they travel together on the river: 'Turnblazer / (o shadow of a man haunt our house no more!) / and Sister Mercy / (o / Sister) out Long John / on a Sunday, / here comes the riverboat.' (34) The typescript also supplies a detail that foreshadows the terrifying paradox of the hot-wired soul (35):

Flying higher than the isotherm
American pilots
flying for the Firm
let their bomb-loads drop
hundreds of miles away,

the dirt roads palpitate
hot wires wrap themselves
around the kindergarten kids doing
callisthenics in a playground,
and a swell goes down the river
Turnblazer and Sister Mercy
drift down Sunday
on *Nueva City #209*,
the sun throws out its net,
white light that signifies:

A Journey

So the travellers are together but (just as surely) one day they will be apart, and the poem (1973, 1993, 2001) knows this.

The story that follows ('A Journey') is a fable about two travellers who rest after a long day's march. One falls asleep; the other watches as an insect crawls out of his friend's ear and hops through grasses to a nearby water-hole before returning to the ear. The sleeper wakes and exclaims: 'o! what a sleep! what a dream! / I walked in forests / and bathed in rivers.' (TB 93 36) And the typescript ends with four triple-spaced lines: 'the river's asking for you /// the world's on strike /// the way is open to Nueva City /// fade to black.' (36) The story about the two travellers also occurs on the final page of the Turnblazer manuscript, where it is neatly framed with the same black pen that adds the Cendrars epigraph, codenames for places and the title of the opus itself. Here the travellers' story is told 'as a grace for his faith' by the poet who is in Long John with Turnblazer, and the insect is a cricket. The soul, 'stepping humble,' hops in and out of its housing, the dreamer remembers bliss and someone retells the memory for others to hear. (TB 73 30)

alias monk

Even in manuscript Turnblazer is 'Script for an Audience.' We turn now to 'Alias Monk: A Chronicle,' written for a season at The Space in Newtown, Wellington, as part of the March 2001 Fringe Festival. [gallery 6] The show was performed by the neo-jazz ensemble Lulu White's Mahogany Hall and featured music, words, movement, light and a video installation. One version of the script begins:

A man gets on an escalator. It's going backwards. He's dropped into 1974, somewhere in Asia. There is war, drugs, cheap sex, and Mozart. His only way out is to find Sister Mercy. Everywhere he goes, so do the neo-avant hepcats, Lulu jazz. It's a brief history of the universe . . . (AM Feb 01)

'Alias Monk' recuts and condenses Turnblazer's story, making lyrics and choreographing space for five performers between the monologues that move the story along. A narrator/chronicler steps in and out of view; and the script distributes lines among the members of the ensemble who become interlocutors in Monk's world. Against a date ('28 August') and a background of mystical music, the narrator begins to collapse history:

There's this man called Alias Monk. He is not me, he's somebody else, sitting on the staircase, smoking a cigar as the sun comes up, 24 frames per second, so it's like he's standing backwards on the escalator as it goes down to the Underground. Down there, in the darkness, it's 1974. Monk puts his hat on, he puts his hat on his head. It could be eight o'clock but there's no time here. It's all space, the space where things happen. (AM Feb 01)

This is another edit, a same but different Turnblazer, and the dates at the end of the script confirm its origins: '1974 + 1993' (the shift to 1974 is not explained). When we come to the leave-taking scene it is fuller again than 1993. The section title is 'Long John' and it begins 'Monk knows his way around this town, he reads it like a map':

He walks as far as the Eros Cinema and looks at the display pictures . . . buys a pancake from a street vendor and pours condensed cream over it. The opalescent goo runs down his shirt and everybody laughs. He sells his transistor radio to the street vendor and, looking up and down the street, he is suddenly overcome with a loopy tenderness for all the world and faith in the human race.

The feeling doesn't last long. He climbs up the hill to the temple, through grass as high as himself, kicking up the red dirt in little showers of dust that hang in the air. He smokes a King Edward VII cigar and the smoke brings tears to his eyes. When the vultures start to get up, he decides to head back to the town. He doesn't want to be caught out there alone. He walks past the hospital and down to Melody's Coffee Bar. He unwraps the tablet and swallows it with a glass of water. He orders a helping of popcorn. Within a few minutes, there's hymn in his ears, the wedding of opposites . . .

At 11, he goes to the bank. The supervisor is waiting with his money. Somehow, it's come halfway around the world to this place. This is 1974, remember. The transfer

has happened by wireless transmission despite all sorts of difficulties with the weather.

The cover of Time magazine asks, not for the first time: *Is This Armageddon?*

He walks south for a few minutes, and turns off the road at the gasoline station. A group of prisoners in shackles are digging a deep trench, deep enough to bury the truck that brought them here, a devious psychological trick to erase from their minds any thought of possible escape. (AM Feb 01)

Time folds over itself but space persists. A man smoking a cigar on a staircase as the sun comes up is at the beginning of his story as well as its end: he is a point on a map, pinned, traced, visible there at the edge of the universe. The Eros Cinema is the Queen Theatre on the printed map of Luang Prabang, three blocks away from the base of 328 steps rising in a zigzag to the golden stupa of Wat Phousi. We can see the panorama depicted schematically on a souvenir ticket from the Queen Theatre pasted into the poet's scrapbook next to a news photograph of an opium smoker from northern Laos. [gallery 7] Heaven and earth swing on the staircase with Monk (Alias Turnblazer) as he climbs the temple hill and then heads for nirvana in the opium den.

From smoky visions, the 'Alias Monk' script goes straight to 'Out of Here,' its penultimate lyric, which is almost but not quite the poem 'Leaving Luang Prabang.' What is missing apart from the locative title are the opening lines that set the scene and its players on the moonlit riverbank. 'Out of Here' is laid out in four stanzas each beginning 'Go!' after which the ensemble segues to its outro: 'We've got to go, go, go / Come back next week / we'll do another show.' (AM Feb 01)

But where is the poem as found in the manilla folder? There is another 'Alias Monk' script, updated to February 2002, almost a year from the show at The Space. The poem is there in toto and titled 'Leaving Luang Prabang.' It seems to have been dropped into the script: the pointsize is smaller and there is surplus blank space between poem and outro. February 2002? The neo-avants of Lulujazz anticipated such complications of linear time by running a soundless and heavily posterised video projection of the previous night's show, complete with escalator footage, alongside each performance. Past is present, present will come again; Monk (with his hat on) knows he is an envoy (AM Feb 01, AM Feb 02):

What time is it?

1974. Got a problem with that?

I'm an aimless beast. I have no past. I have no present.

No future?

I come from the future. How do I look? Do I look like a diplomat? [gallery 8]

the yellow moon

The travellers who came to Luang Prabang in a rusty Dakota leave by boat for Vientiane, where Turnbuller's chronicle is completed in its first incarnation 31 December 1973. From Vientiane they return over the border to Thailand and make their way through Malaysia (Penang, Sarawak, Sabah) and Brunei to Indonesia (Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Bali), West Timor and Darwin. By September 1974 they are in Wellington founding a theatre troupe called Red Mole that will determine their mutual history for the next three decades.

Accounts of Red Mole's origin vary in the troupe's publicity but certain events in Indochina play a recurrent role. A 1979 prospectus from New York claims a puppet group was formed after a chance meeting of New Zealanders in Laos in 1973. The Lao connection is reiterated in publicity for the troupe's return to New Zealand in 1980 with two shows, 'Numbered Days in Paradise' and 'Lord Galaxy's Travelling Players.' Revamped as an 8-page tabloid brochure, the prospectus explains: 'Red Mole members, who at that stage could best be described as merchants and travellers, got together at Luang Prabang and decided to tour the world as a performance and political enterprise.' (*Red Mole Enterprises* 1980) The brochure includes an elaborate myth of origin that slides in and out of historical possibility: 'A Conceptual History of Red Mole' begins with an expedition commissioned by 'the king of the Dutch' to find the source of rumours about a land to the south where black angels with guns and boats are raising up flags on a crimson sea. The expedition finds the place and some good news for the sailors: 'On the shores of that bloodred sea there came at night a man speaking of liberation and dialectics. When morning came he invited the captain to join the forces of anti-imperialism. He said: "*Raise a cry all over the world! Where bondage is, let freedom be!*"' The stranger divulges an ancient mystery called Red Mole to the captain of the expedition: '*The birds of paradise dance on my wrist when a big yellow moon shines. I listen to voices on the paths of freedom. It is necessary to tear open prisons. At night there is a whisper from the telegraph station five steps from the dark side of hell. This is broadcast on all frequencies through the night. Keep the good faith and chant of paradise and you shall understand that Red Mole will always return.*' The captain records this revelation and heads north; he is blown off-course in the South China Seas and sails up the Mekong under a yellow moon without realising where he is, eventually arriving in Luang Prabang. The king of the city confiscates the prophetic record, the expedition returns home empty-handed and everyone who might have passed on news of the revolution in the south catches grippe and dies. The story continues:

Some centuries later a group of New Zealanders were sitting in an opium den behind the Shell service station just along from the USAID post in downtown Luang Prabang. The

den's operator was called Baron Samedi. He said that Shell was a Dutch company. One thing led to another. He led everyone to a small pyramid beside the river. Inside were the records left behind by the captain of the expedition of the king of the Dutch. Eagerly they pored over the writings.

Without warning Baron Samedi rose to his feet. He said: *You are now aware that there are mysteries. It will be your doom to travel the world as a group of barefoot players. You will take a vow of poverty. You will be called thin surrealists. You will be called amateur because you talk to the people and ignore elites. You will yearn for paradise but always remain one mile from those gates. You will call yourselves Red Mole Enterprises. Forever you will kick walls.*

Sadly the group departed from that place and started to travel the world. That is what they do: travel the world and play. Once they went to the former Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, now called New York. Always, they search for paradise. (*Red Mole Enterprises* 1980) [gallery 9]

On the cover of the tabloid brochure a photograph of the travelling players is superimposed on a tropical jungle with looming cliffs over which presides a huge full moon – the same moon that features on the revolutionary Lao flag, the Queen Theatre ticket and in Barry Linton's poster for 'Lord Galaxy's Travelling Players.' [gallery 10] [gallery 11] It is coincidental that the last full moon of 1973 rose 10 December while the original travellers were in Luang Prabang; and no coincidence that its influence has a long afterlife in their conceptual history. The full moon of the 12th month marks a point in the Lao lunar year when the saffron-robed monks can leave their monasteries and resume a wandering life. The same moment saw two visitors traverse a difficult passage from Desire to Need, 'dancing / in a dress / with the Yellow Empress' hung low in the clouds over Luang Prabang.

conversation on the boat

The single page 'Leaving Luang Prabang' in the manilla folder marked Current Scripts is closely related to the 'Alias Monk' script of February 2002. It is indeed a 'current script.' That it has not simply come loose from 'Alias Monk' but is part of something new can be determined from its place among the typescripts and photocopied poems in the folder. 'Leaving Luang Prabang' is the third of four consecutive pages that have been folded in half – texts for a reading? thoughts about a project? Whatever their purpose, the four pages belong together because of these folds. The first is a hastily typed transcription of passages from *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness* (1991) by Austrian novelist Christoph Ransmayr: a ship caught in pack ice drifts north to certain destruction, a wooden coffin in the polar night beyond the Bering Strait, a dead voice from a journal that is

not quite from the 19th century and not quite contemporary either. A copy of Ransmayr's novel is on the poet's bookshelves. The second page is a quotation from the Rasarnava, a 12th century alchemical treatise from India, describing the delights of an afterlife with a Siddha maiden. The page concludes: 'Once one is there / one need never return.' The same quotation is the epigraph of 'Life in the Shade,' poem 127 in the sequence *Fq*, published in 2002 by Bumper Books. The paragraph from the Rasarnava has been copied, enlarged and pasted from a draft of *Fq*: there is a typo ('hundred and thousands of years') common to both.

Two of the four pages are translations, locators or coordinates that juxtapose the icy dread of dissolution with a Tantric wedding in the world of the Siddhas. Next comes the boat on its run down the green river from Luang Prabang to somewhere so new it is beyond Beyond. The fourth page is a typescript headed 'Conversation on the Boat.' It is an excerpt from a script called 'The Excursion,' has at times been printed as a poem and its place in the sequence of folded pages anchors everything that has gone before. 'The Excursion' was performed by Red Mole in New York in 1982, a poetic evocation of the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead blended with Gustave Flaubert's visit to Egypt in 1849 and the recent (1981) declaration of martial law in Poland. In the sixth section of the show, the Boat of Millions of Years journeys across worlds of light and darkness and a voice begins the conversation on board: 'Baboon, we have travelled far. We have established colonies where the sun never stands upright.' The second voice answers strange questions that drift through the first mind; one is instructing the other and together they compose an eerie cosmogony. A performance of the conversation recorded live in a New York club in 1984 realises the ghost in the machine with microphone delays and non-verbal voice effects. [gallery 12] The performers in the club give no title but the words they speak have evolved into 'Dialogue: A Man and His Soul,' first published in the poetry collection *And She Said* (Red Mole, 1984).

The fourth page in the manilla folder comes from a rewrite of 'The Excursion' made in February 2001 (another typo confirms the link) and the dialogue in section six of the script has changed. As before the conversation is saturated with melancholy: 'There is a voice which only the oldest parts of my body can understand. Intuition on the left is made small and indecisive by the crocodile on the right. It is impossible to look at someone and talk at the same time.' *'These are the disturbances of the sleepwalker in the sadness of the ocean, the sadness of iodine, the sadness of nitrogen.'* And then the final exchange:

I no longer sense changes in atmospheric pressure. I cannot distinguish between either glass or ice entering my skin. I see cities thrown into the skies falling back as black dust over a number of days.

You are the sleepwalker. You are the master of inherent characteristics. The master of the last secret that keeps lovers together. You are revelation of cockroaches on ground zero, watching a kind of animal disappear. Go on. Go further, you alone. The night is long. Go.

The soul reminds her companion that existence is a waking dream. The sleepwalker, he who journeys towards paradise as a bug to a water-hole, is master of inherent characteristics and the last secrets of lovers, revelation's observer on ground zero: a cockroach. [gallery 13] And then come commands that appear in no other version of 'The Excursion' or 'Dialogue: A Man and His Soul' but are familiar to us in their urgency and iteration: '*Go on. Go further, you alone. The night is long. Go.*' In 'Leaving Luang Prabang' they are incitement, holy revelation, hot wire for the soul to begin the journey. In 'Conversation on the Boat' the soul's counsel is resolute and abyssal; it is not certain that going on alone contains anything but terrors of ice and darkness and the sadness of molecular dispersal. Paradise and apocalypse share a single threshold.

Given that February 2001 is when 'Alias Monk' was in rehearsal for its Fringe Festival performance the following month, we can see how the two boats on their respective rivers might converge for a moment as the soul's voice appears to uncouple the binary pair. This is life in the shade; a farewell. Everything runs backwards into the future (*Fq* #127):

When there is no sleep, there is
no night; when
no words, no gap
between mouth and ear; when
no sin,
no break between
saintgod and us
like now there are no
secrets from the past: where
there's love, is no breath;
you were not made for night
I am not dreaming
you are (forever) à venir

in memoriam Peter Fantl

And (forever) what is to come is beside itself, *a snake on fire*. A programme note for ‘Alias Monk’ at The Space acknowledges source materials for the show:

Alan Brunton’s text was created for performance from diary notes he kept during a journey with Sally Rodwell through north Thailand and Laos in 1974. It catches the traveller’s yearning for the exotic but also the small details, the fears and the constant adjustments to unreliable timetables. The violence and solitude happen, from this distance, within the mental landscape of memory, the Underground.

One of the people encountered by coincidence on that trip, in a small riverside hotel in Luang Prabang, was Peter Fantl from Wellington. Peter died 22 February 2001 while this performance was being rehearsed. Alan’s text is dedicated to his memory.

The poem called ‘Leaving Luang Prabang’ comes into being as the poet and his companion prepare to read and speak at the funeral of an old comrade who was an integral member of Red Mole in its early years. Peter Fantl is one of the chance-met group of New Zealanders in the opium den behind the Shell service station in Luang Prabang, another traveller on the river. The poet composes an elegy from current scripts with long histories that will do the stretch: two pages (polar night and adept’s paradise) for concentrating thought; two more (folded together print outwards) to name the place on the river where the journey starts and to intimate the course of the unknowable beyond. In the event, it was Sally who came to Auckland for Peter Fantl’s wake at Alleluya Café on K Road where she delivered a eulogy and the poem written to make visible not one, not two, but a convocation of travellers: *They walk down the moonlit road / to the river. / They smoke cigarettes then someone says, Go! / White Angel / White Flower / Go! / Holy / Holy . . .*

Did the poem play its ‘Alias Monk’ season with title and travellers smoking in moonlight? The video record is soundless, the performers scattered and the options, as always, are multiple. Perhaps it was ‘Out of Here’ as in the rehearsal script of February 2001. Perhaps it had no title as in the performance script of March 2001. Or perhaps the audience at The Space heard Alan Brunton deliver ‘Leaving Luang Prabang’ as it appears in the archived script of February 2002, not long after Peter Fantl’s funeral and the filing of four pages in the folder marked Current

Scripts. One certainty remains: a full moon rose 9 March 2001 over Wellington as the show began its season. [gallery 14]



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gallery

1. Map of Thailand, Burma and Laos from *Bangkok Post* clipping 'A Second Vietnam?' by Theh Chongkhadduikij, 24 Jan 1974. With 'Notebook 1973.' BR 103.
2. '999.' Matchbox lid pasted into 'Notebook 1970-1980.' BR 502.
3. Postcards from Laos, 1973: 'View across Mekong River into Thailand at Ban Houei Sai, Northern Laos'; 'Their Royal Majesties, the King and Queen of Laos in the Royal Procession at That Luang Festival, Vientiane.' BR 708.
4. Houei Sai to Long John: three pages from 'Turnblazer: A Pastoral Idyll': 'Turnblazer walk down to ask the ancestors' (19); 'Two Mozart soldiers from the Solar Energy Battalion' (20); 'Long John' (21). BR 500.
5. Luang Prabang Map, 1973. BR 702.
6. 'Alias Monk' poster, 2001. BR 337.
7. Queen Theatre ticket pasted into 'Notebook 1970-1980.' BR 502.

8. Lulu White's Mahogany Hall plays 'Alias Monk' at The Space. Performers: Alan Brunton, Aaron Inc, Kieran Monaghan, Michelle Scullion, Grant Sutherland. Excerpts from performance video, 2001. BR 1700.
9. 'Red Mole Kicks Walls.' Bumper sticker, 1980. BR 800.
10. *Red Mole Enterprises*. Brochure cover, 1980. BR 800.
11. 'Lord Galaxy's Travelling Players.' Poster by Barry Linton, 1980. BR 1400.
12. 'Baboon, we have travelled far.' Audio. 8 B.C., New York, 1984. Track 2, 7:01-10:41. Performers: Alan Brunton, Deborah Hunt, Jean McAllister. BR 1600.
13. *Dialogue: A Man and His Soul*. Chapbook, 1987. BR 1900.
14. '*the history of the Others*.' Audio. Taos, New Mexico, 1985. Track 1, 16:15-34. Performer: Alan Brunton. BR 1600.

people and works

Alan Brunton (1946-2002) and Sally Rodwell (1950-2006) rendezvoused in Bali in September 1973 and travelled through South East Asia before returning to New Zealand to form Red Mole in late 1974. The following works by Alan Brunton are cited in 'Leaving Luang Prabang: A Tale of Two Travellers'; materials from the Brunton Rodwell Papers (BR) are used by permission of Ruby Rodwell Brunton.

'Luang Prabang Map.' Tourist map with annotations, 1973. BR 702.

'Turnblazer: A Pastoral Idyll. Script for an Audience.' Manuscript carbon notebook, 1973. 30 pp. BR 500. (TB 73)

'Notebook 1973.' Typescript, ca. 1993. Transcript of notebook dated Jun 1973-Jan 1974. 46 pp. BR 103.

'Ouane: opium carrier for KMT.' By Kamthorn Sermkasen. *Bangkok Post* (Nov 1973); 'BPP on frontline in "opium war."' *Bangkok Post* (28 Nov 1973); 'Why Burma must make an example of opium traffickers.' Unattributed (Nov 1973). Newspaper clippings with 'Turnblazer Chronicle.' BR 269.

'Letter to Harry Leeds.' *New Argot* (May 1975): 5.

[Charming Cole Tundra.] 'How to Smoke *Lucky Strikes*.' *Spleen 2* (Mar 1976): n.pag.

'Before a Journey by Water.' *Hasard* 1 (1977): n.pag.

'Swan Song (Daddy at the letter-box),' 'she left Turnblazer behind.' Typescripts, 1974-77. 4 pp. BR 102.

'Rimbaud's Passport.' *Oh Ravachol*. Greenhithe: Red Mole, 1978. n.pag.

Red Mole Enterprises. New York: Red Mole, 1979. Publicity brochure for American tours.

'A Conceptual History of Red Mole.' *Red Mole Enterprises*. Wellington: Red Mole / NZ Students' Arts Council, 1980. Publicity brochure for New Zealand tour.

'Notebook 1970-1980.' Scrapbook, 1980. BR 502.

'The Excursion.' Typescript, 1982. 21 pp. BR 107.

'To Sally: Eight Years Gone' (includes 'the history of the Others'). *Span* 18 (Apr 1984): 43-46.

'Dialogue: A Man and His Soul.' *And She Said*. New York: Red Mole, 1984. 19-20. Rpt. in *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* (1985) and *Slow Passes* (1991).

Dialogue: A Man and His Soul. Amsterdam: Sally Rodwell on behalf of the species, 1987.

'For the Asking.' *Slow Passes: Selected Poems 1978-88*. Auckland UP, 1991. 37.

'Turnblazer Chronicle.' Typescript, 1993. 36 pp. BR 269. (TB 93)

'Sleepwalker.' *Moonshine*. Wellington: Bumper Books, 1998. 65-73.

'Alias Monk: A Chronicle.' Typescripts, Feb 2001. 11 pp. (AM Feb 01); Mar 2001. 9 pp. (AM Mar 01); Feb 2002. 10 pp. (AM Feb 02). BR 337.

'The Excursion.' Typescript, Feb 2001. 13 pp. Published with photographs of 1982 production in *brief* 28 (Spring 2003): 7-25. Online rpt. accessed 9 Sep 2007.

<http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/brunton/brief/excursion.asp>

'Alias Monk' poster and programme. Mar 2001. BR 337.

'For several days now we had entered a world totally alien to those on board,' 'from The Rasarnava,' 'Leaving Luang Prabang,' 'Conversation on the Boat.' Typescripts, 2001. 4 pp. BR 339.

'Life in the Shade,' 'Riverrun,' 'Last Dance.' *Fq*. Wellington: Bumper Books, 2002. #127, #128, #132.

The following works and websites have also been consulted.

Murray Edmond. 'Have you been to paradise today?' Part III (Red Mole). 'Old Comrades of the Future: A History of Experimental Theatre in New Zealand 1962-1982.' PhD thesis. University of Auckland, 1996. 294-390.

Ross Howard. 'Path up to Wat Phousi.' South East Asia: Luang Prabang gallery. Abitcloser.com, 30 Oct 2005. Accessed 9 Sep 2007.

http://www.abitcloser.com/photos/sea_luangprabang/img_4208.jpg?template=modern

Christoph Ransmayr. *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness. A Novel*. Trans. John E Woods. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991.

Grant Sutherland. Annotated rehearsal script for Alan Brunton's 'Alias Monk: A Chronicle.' Feb 2001.