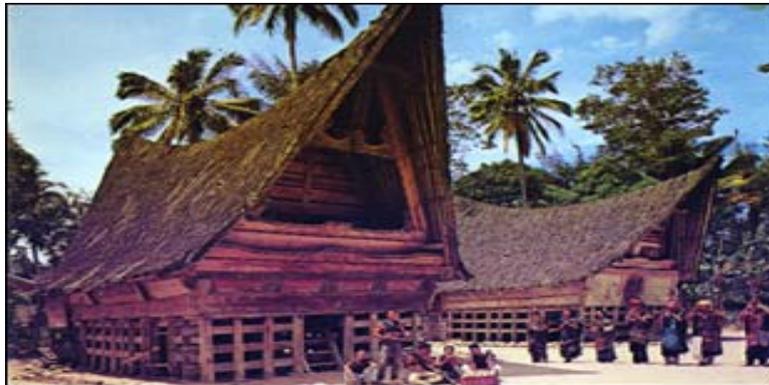


Eating the Wind: Red Mole's Asian Itineraries

Martin Edmond



*... every drawer and curtain's fold breathes forth a curious perfume, a perfume of
Sumatra, whispering come back, which is the soul of the abode.*

(Baudelaire, 'L'invitation au voyage')

makan angin

In *Fq* #74, 'Precious Stone,' Alan Brunton wrote: 'I promised with my hand stuck to a tree by a knife that I'd eat the wind all my life and ramble from commune to commune while my blood / w e p t .' The poem is for his daughter and is part prayer, part prophecy. As for the promise, it isn't clear if that has been fulfilled or not. And what, anyway, does it mean?

In the *Dhammapada*, 423 verses containing the essential teaching of the Buddha, it is written that after powerful deities visited Siddhartha Gautama in the night,

illuminating the whole forest, the ascetic Jambuka complained: 'For fifty-five years I have lived by eating the wind, and have stood on one leg, but no one came to pay respects to me.' (5:70) The Buddha rebukes the pretender, saying: 'You may have deceived the foolish majority, but you cannot deceive me. Is it not true that you have lived on excrement all these years, going naked, sleeping on the ground, and pulling out your hair?' Jambuka is forced to concede that it is. Subsequently, he retrieves his sense of shame and returns to the path.

Again, in the Old Testament, in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, where the King James version gives 'vexation of spirit,' the Contemporary English Version (CEV) has 'chasing the wind' with the variant 'eating the wind.' That is, instead of 'I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit' (1:14), the CEV gives 'I have seen it all, and everything is just as senseless as eating the wind.' This particular phrase, in its alternative version ('chasing the wind') reverberates through the great dark despairing canvases of Colin McCahon's four last paintings (1980-82).

Maori, too, eat the wind. From Edward Tregear's *The Maori Race* (1904): 'The last name has a rather round-about explanation. The moa (dinornis) was supposed to stand on a mountain with its beak wide open eating the wind (te moa kai-hau). The idea of eating the wind or feeding on air became a metaphor applied to lovers who lost their appetite through excess of sentiment, so that to say one was a moa feeding on air implied that the person spoken of was in love. Hence Hine-moa, Lady Moa, meant a girl lover.'

One more example, from a poem by Kuroda Saburo, a Japanese who lived in Java during the Second World War:

It's been more than ten days on the plateau.
I walk between corn and flowerbean fields,
thinking, *Makan angin*.
In Indonesian,
eating the wind means taking a walk,
brisk and elegant.

Eating the wind
means running away
in Japanese.
But I am not running away from the city,
just eating the wind
on a path on the plateau.

Makan angin, in Malay as well as Bahasa Indonesian, is a polite response to the conventional question: ‘Where are you going?’ ‘For a breath of fresh air’ might be another translation; but the Indonesian use is not quite, or not always, as Kuroda Sabura suggests, since it also has the connotation of doing nothing, going nowhere, wandering. This kind of wandering, somehow both purposeful and purposeless, has an ambiguity nicely expressed in the words of our childhood: ‘Where you going?’ ‘Nowhere.’ ‘Can I come too?’ And then there is the Japanese meaning, running away, which (given that in ‘Precious Stone’ the poet’s hometown, Hamilton, has just been evoked) is also echoed in *Fq*.

What all these usages have in common is that they express a state of dissatisfaction with how things are, allied with a determination to make change happen. It seems that when Alan Brunton recalled his vow to ‘eat the wind all my life,’ what he meant by that was to dedicate himself to that kind of purposeful / purposeless wandering that seeks to find a better way. And equally, or concomitantly, to asceticism, to the wisdom which may or may not reveal the vanity of the world, to unceasing love, to brisk and elegant walking and to running away. If this is the case, where did he go and what did he see?

setting rolling the wheel of truth

In 2001, in an interview in *brief* #19, Alan told John Geraets: ‘I travelled around the sub-continent for a year, totally ascetic. Just a copy of the *Dhamma-Cakka-Pavattana Sutta* . . . the foundation of the Kingdom of Righteousness; the last sentence: “Thus he won his name, The One Who Understood”—getting ready for the thousands of life-times it would

take to attain that state.’ The *Dhamma-Cakka-Pavattana Sutta*, or *Setting Rolling the Wheel of Truth*, is the Buddha’s first sermon, preached at Varanasi, in the Game Refuge at Isipatana. It is brief, only a thousand words, in which are expounded the Four Noble Truths, the Eight Fold Path and the Middle Way—neither asceticism nor indulgence—to enlightenment.

The year was 1970; but documentary evidence from the Brunton Rodwell archive demands a qualification. It was a somewhat truncated year: Alan’s eastern travels began in mid-1970 when, after time spent in Sydney and Melbourne, he flew from Darwin to Calcutta. To Chris Bourke in 2000 he observed: ‘First day I walked out and there’s a body on the footpath right outside the Salvation Army . . . A dead person lying on the street, just starting to ooze the bodily waste, and people there standing looking, and that was the first thing I saw in the East. It was like the Buddha enlightens you, on the Buddha’s turf the Buddha sends a sign: “Beware of Maya, it’s all illusion.”’

The summary of his next movements, made in the same interview, is accurate: ‘Went to Kathmandu, spent several months there, then finally time to come down from the mountains to the river, to the Ganges, to Varanasi or Benares where we stayed on a houseboat moored right beside the burning ghats where the bodies were being burned and thrown in the river.’ Sarnath, where the *Dhamma-Cakka-Pavattana Sutta* was preached, is just north of Benares and there the poet went in pilgrimage to sit under a Bodhi tree—or sacred fig—though not perhaps for the forty-nine days it took Gautama to attain enlightenment.

From Benares, he went to Delhi and from Delhi north via Peshawar to Kabul, thence to Bamiyan, 150 miles north west of Kabul on the Old Silk Road, where he saw the great carved Buddhas blown up by the Taleban in 2001. He became ill in Afghanistan, probably from hepatitis, and flew directly to Europe, going, perhaps via Amsterdam, to London. In a 2002 obituary Ian Wedde recalled: ‘Alan turned up at our place in London. He was yellow and skinny after months in India, but at once entered the city with an irrepressible homing instinct for its resources.’ This was the northern winter of 1970-71; he spent that Christmas with the Weddes in Brixton.

In the interview with Chris Bourke, Alan remarks: ‘So the East was a series of enlightenments and revelations.’ Some of this series is to be found in the poems that

survive from the journey. Mostly published in periodicals in New Zealand in the early 1970s, their locales were later identified by the author or can be established from internal evidence: 'in my wake & silent time' (India); 'The preacher enters the third world' (India); 'hanging out in a feudal place' (Kathmandu); 'this town of hours' (Benares); 'novel' (Kabul); 'At Electricity & Water Installations' (Kabul). Despite these geographical identifications, the poems do not advertise their place of composition in any obvious way; rather, they are all set in a community of travellers (or of a single traveller) in an unspecific orient and are about the possibility or impossibility of metamorphosis, its actuality or absence, as much through the auguries and *dérèglements* common to the time as through the contemplation of sacred texts:

as was told by the one-two-pick-up sticks
the dream's hexagram
patterns of the pebbles
fall of lead in the water-jar
cut of the tarot cards
etching the blood of oxen
dithyramb of the trance
voice from the mask
the dancer's trapezoid
persianpoets' acrostics
salt crystalgazers & madame martine
chairshakers
clapham spiritmakers
& moneytakers
('At Electricity & Water Installations')

stone people come

Alan had been intermittently in touch, by mail, with Sally Rodwell during his journey through the subcontinent and the subsequent two and a half year period spent living in

London and travelling abroad—to Ireland, Scotland, France, Spain, Morocco, the Greek Islands, the Balkans, Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium and perhaps other destinations. The possibility that she might join him in any of the places he went had been mooted; but the rendezvous was not finally made until September 1973 and it was in Bali that it happened.

Alan had flown to Singapore in June of that year and set out on an initial reconnaissance that took him north to Malacca and then further along the western coast of the Malay peninsula to Penang. From Penang, he crossed the Straits of Malacca by ferry to Medan in Sumatra, where he fell foul of the police and had his passport confiscated—why, isn't clear. It was returned and he continued from Medan by bus to Prapat on the shores of Danau Toba.

Danau Toba is a crater lake formed about seventy thousand years ago by the largest volcanic eruption of the Pleistocene. A relic of the eruption is a big island on the lake, called Samosir, and there, in a town called Tomok, Alan encountered the first of those whom he came to call the Stone People. From the poem 'At Prapat':

On the high trails
horses fall,
the rivers of paradise
have an atomic weight
of twenty-two.
We visit the zoo
to see the last wanderer.
To Tomok
the Stone People come!
The Stone People come!
(Notebook 1973)

There are megalithic cultures all over South East Asia, many of them marginal, like the Toraja of Sulawesi, in the inland hills or else, like the Nias and the Tanimbar, on islands offshore of the main lands. Some say they are descended from the sky, often via a

stone bridge, others that they sailed over the sea in stone boats, replicas of which might form the skeleton of a village. Still others claim descent from Alexander the Great or perhaps from one of his sons or generals. Anthropologists generally trace these peoples back to the Dongson culture on mainland Asia, where Vietnam now is. The Stone People at Tomok are called the Batak.

batak

Batak houses, some of them hundreds of years old, have saddle-backed, twin-peaked roofs, made from palm fibre, anchored by long poles and ornamented with mosaics and carvings of snakes, lizards, serpents, magic birds and monsters known as *singa*. These carvings are painted red, white and black, the holy colours. The houses have no doors, they are entered by ladder through a trapdoor in the raised floor beneath which animals are kept. No windows either: it is dark inside. Old men talk of spending a whole year carving a single house.

The best place to see these great carved houses is in fact Tomok, where the ferry from Prapat lands on Samosir; here too is the tomb of King Sidabutar, who adopted the Lutheran Christianity the people, once cannibals, still practise. They were converted en masse by one Pastor Nommensen, a German missionary who arrived in the 1880s with just a Bible and a violin and built the first mission station in 1893, astutely adapting his Lutheranism to the local animism.

Samosir has few roads. It is mostly grassland, with some forest, and a network of winding footpaths connects the villages. There are shrines in the forests, and hot springs; a small traveling circus called the Samosir Opera; and Batak orchestras, small ensembles of gongs, drums, lutes, flutes, zithers and a wailing wind instrument like an oboe.

Bataks work gold, silver, bone, shell and bark; they weave ornate gold-embroidered cloth, carve and paint wood panels, make long copper pipes decorated with phallic human figures. They also have several kinds of sacred book: one, made from thin slices of wood bound with the bark of the tree left on the outer edges as a spine, records the ritual responses of priest and mourners during funerals; then there are calendars engraved on cylinders of bamboo, used to work out days auspicious for plantings, weddings and

other ceremonies; and a third kind, made of letters inscribed on bone or bamboo, ornately decorated, which document Batak myths.

Like the Toraja, like their distant cousins in Madagascar, the Batak perform elaborate funerary ceremonies that involve digging up and reburying bones. The skulls of their leaders are interred in boat-like, stone sarcophagi, with a *singa* carved on the prow. At a traditional funeral you might see a *sigalegale* dance: life-sized puppets carved from the wood of the tree of life, the banyan. The puppet wears a red turban, a loose shirt, a blue sarong and stands on a long wooden box to dance to the gamelan, the flute and the drums.

The first *sigalegale* was made in his image by a widow mourning her husband; she would hire a *dukun* (a shaman) to bring his soul and a *dalang* (a puppeteer/story-teller) to work the *sigalegale*. The custom spread: at funerals, the puppet would be decorated with the dead person's things and the soul of the deceased invited to enter it. Nowadays, however, *sigalegale* dance more at a wedding than at funerals.

Batak cannibalism, which continued for a little while after the coming of Christianity, was largely symbolic. Only enemies, consenting old people and certain kinds of criminal were consumed. At the court of kings at Ambarita, near Tomok, stone chairs and benches stand in a courtyard. On one of the stone blocks the guilty were bound, blindfolded, sliced, the wounds rubbed with chili and garlic, then beheaded. The leader of the village from which a criminal came sometimes assented to the sentence by sending over a cloth to cover the face of the condemned and a plate of salt and lemons as a garnish for the flesh.

These customs have not survived. But chess-playing has, along with the beating of drums by village pastors to ward off devils, communal bartering over bride-price and the ceremony of slaughtering water buffalo to unite clans after a wedding. Family and kin group remain basic Batak social institutions and many aspects of their complex, pre-Christian forms of ancestor worship are still practised. Some people can still recite twenty generations of their lineage. Yet the Batak are also passionate singers of Lutheran hymns.

Tomok must have been where Alan, himself the child of a radical Protestant sect, disembarked on Samosir, to be greeted, no doubt, by shouts of *Horas!* ('Lord protect you!') The next question would have been *Mau kemana?* ('Where are you going?') to

which the reply is *Jalan-jalan, saja* ('Just walking'). Red Mole would later call a show *Just Them Walking*. They would also import into their practice elements of the ceremonies and entertainments described above, in particular puppets and marionettes, and the use of gongs, flutes and drums. At a deeper level, the whole Red Mole project took place, not uncritically, within a shamanistic matrix.

the sack

After a week or so, Alan moved on from Prapat (by means of a local company called the Liberty Bus) into western Sumatra, to Bukittingi, where the Stone People are called the Minangkabau and trace their descent from Maharjo Dirajo, the youngest son of the Macedonian tyrant Alexander. They are Muslim rather in the way that the Batak are Christian; the new religion has not extinguished their traditional culture, but accommodated it.

South west of Bukittingi is the coastal city of Padang, from which you can take a ferry through the Straits of Sunda to Jakarta. The one Alan sailed on carried pilgrims returning from the Haj to Mecca: 'Beside me a man weeps / having gone mad in Mecca. / The stars carouse in Babylon.' (Notebook 1973). From Jakarta he moved south and east towards Yogyakarta. On the train between Bandung and Yogyakarta, a disaster occurred:

. . . while I wasn't looking
some-one stole my sack away,
. . . stole my daily stop and scritch,
four years of my scrying
and mad what's-this
torn up now for shopping lists.
(Notebook 1973)

It is difficult to overstate the effect on a writer—any writer—of the loss of the accumulated work of years. Initially it will appear as an unmitigated catastrophe. You cannot replace what has been lost, though you might perhaps be able to restore some of it

from memory traces; but even then you will have the disconcerting feeling that what you have restored is different from, maybe inferior to, what has gone. Also lost are those odd phrases that might later prove to be the seed of works you were not yet capable of producing. These seeds, which seem to need to be buried beneath the black earth of experience and so forgotten in order to germinate, can never, unless inadvertently, be recalled.

It is also a curious truth, not confined to loss of papers apparently useless to anyone else, that those who are stolen from frequently feel culpable:

So that once again I'm anxious
and bloodied by the cosmos,
my page has nothing behind it
and where there was an outer edge
I can no longer find it,
neither notebooks nor secret pledge,
my logos and my logarithms,
the hints of X-rays without
and the fate of Colin Clout
(Notebook 1973)

On the other hand, there are few gifts a writer can receive greater than a clean slate. Especially one that is granted through an accident of fate, which in the end may be easier to bear than one wiped by your own actions or by the actions of those who think they know better—the weary trope of the burned manuscript.

We can't know what was in the lost sack; but some guesses might be made. Probably there were notebooks of travels in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Perhaps similar notebooks from European travels. And from the sojourn in London. From those that do survive, we can surmise what they would have been like: elliptical, discontinuous, mostly undated, mostly in verse, containing stray facts and strange observations, recipes and word lists. Many seeds that might later have become works. If there were accounts of actual events on the road, they would have been written in brief,

dense, highly allusive prose that tends to conceal the documentary event behind, or within, its fiercely metaphorical language. There would also have been bits and pieces of other publications, notably newspaper and magazine articles. And there might have been more substantial works therein as well: maybe the epic about the Waitemata mentioned in the Geraets interview.

What was not lost was the current notebook, the one detailing the travels summarized here. This is where the poem telling of the theft, ‘Significatio,’ appears. It was written at Kuta Beach, Bali, in August 1973, just weeks before Sally, whom Alan had been importuning, off and on, for nearly four years, finally arrived at his side. They were not really ever to be apart again until Alan’s death in June 2002.

turnblazer

The persona of the ‘epic construction of the Waitemata and the port’ was called Uriah Shellback. A shellback is a sailor who has crossed the equator, with ceremony; or, otherwise, a veteran. Someone whose labours have made him a carapace that not even the cat o’ nine tails can wound. It is pure supposition that poems other than those surviving in the Shellback corpus were lost with the rest of the contents of the sack on that Java train. What is not at issue is that subsequently a new persona appeared and that this persona became one of the lead actors in the drama enacted in the next set of travels. His name is Turnblazer, sometimes Monk Alias Turnblazer and, eventually, Alias Monk.

A.M., for Alan Mervyn, were the Brunton initials. But whither Turnblazer? A blazer can also be, like a shell, a covering for the back; yet you can’t avoid a further implication, that of a coat that is turned, a turncoat. This new persona is not the quasi heroic old salt Shellback but a younger man, callow, compromised, addicted, like so many of his contemporaries, to a kind of hedonism that exists uncomplainingly, indeed easily, beside or within a conception of radical politics that it in fact contradicts.

However the source of the name would appear to lie elsewhere. On 17 September 1973, just days after Sally joined Alan in Bali, *Time* magazine reported the arrest of one Tony Boyle, sometime President of the United Mine Workers, for embezzling union funds and using the money to pay for the contract killing of his political rival, Jock

Yablonski and Yablonski's wife and daughter, in Clarksville, Pennsylvania. Boyle was arrested after the testimony of William Jenkins Turnblazer Jr., another official of the UMW, based in Kentucky and Tennessee. Turnblazer had attended several meetings and witnessed other events in the lead-up to the Yablonski killings. His confession was made to FBI Special Agent Henry Quinn and in it he acknowledged his own guilt as an accomplice before the fact of the murders.

Alan was an avid reader of the press and articles excerpted from *Time* magazine are preserved, along with other press material, in his papers. The implication that his new alias came from reading *Time* or some other news source in American-saturated South East Asia is irresistible, given the coincidence of the dates. Whatever loss of identity was associated with the theft of the sack, it was swiftly ameliorated, perhaps even assuaged, by the arrival of Turnblazer.

It is in the Turnblazer papers that a version of these lines first appears:

I had decided to have nothing more to do
with John Locke's world;
I wanted to find out where heroin
could be obtained.
(‘How to Smoke *Lucky Strikes*’)

This is Locke on identity, from his *Essay on Human Understanding*:

Since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that, that makes every one to be, what he calls self; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal Identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational Being: And as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that Person; it is the same self now it was then; and 'tis by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that the Action was done. (Book II, Ch. 27)

We might then understand having ‘nothing more to do with John Locke’s world’ as an abandonment of the continuity of consciousness, ‘the sameness of a rational Being’ that makes a self stable. Abandoning it for what? A counterfeit, perhaps, recalling De Quincey’s conviction that opium is a perfect counterfeit of the self; this is certainly what Turnblazer was. Or perhaps something even more radical is envisaged: why stop at one, why not a cornucopia of selves, a succession of personae that could be assumed and discarded at will? This does describe Alan’s later career in the theatre, especially during the 1970s; while his immediate counterfeit, Turnblazer, the traitor self, went on to explore the contradictions of love, war and drugs.

events of 14 october

Newly betrothed, Alan and Sally went back on the road, travelling through Java. The route appears to have been from Denpasar via Surabaya to the region of central Java known as Yoglosemar, an acronym of Yogyakarta, Solo and Semarang, and thence to Jakarta. It was perhaps on this trip, as they watched street performers behind a bus station in Jakarta, that a seminal moment in the ontology of Red Mole occurred: a desire to emulate this insouciant, committed and radically populist form of entertainment.

A ferry took them across the Sunda Strait to Sumatra, where they went, via Palembang and Djambi in the marshy south east of the great island, to Padang and thence through Sibolga to Tomok on Danau Toba; there, perhaps, to eat the famous omelettes made with magic mushrooms and to ramble through the high grass to the hot springs; while the Stone People called *Horas!* and *Mau kemana?* and they replied *Jalan-jalan, saja*.

It was just an interlude in paradise, however; they were heading north, into Indochina, where the war that would be lost and won in two years time was still raging. They travelled via Butterworth/Penang in Malaysia to Bangkok, arriving in Thailand just a few weeks after the Events of 14 October, also Alan’s 27th birthday.

On that day in 1973, the latest in the succession of military junta that had ruled the country since 1932 fell after a day of bloody protest in which 1500 people died, most of them gunned down in the street by the army. The rioting and the massacres ended only

when the king, ignoring the advice of his security staff, ordered the gates of the palace opened to the students. It was the first time in modern Thai history that a constitutional monarch had involved himself in a transition of power. Later it would be alleged that the trouble started when Yao mercenaries in the pay of the CIA opened fire on student protestors, who then assumed they were being attacked by the army.

Alan and Sally went from Bangkok further north into that part of the Golden Triangle that is in Thailand. After a side trip, perhaps just for a morning or an afternoon—or perhaps just in the imagination—to Burma, they crossed the Mekong and flew south to Luang Prabang for a stay of an indeterminate period, a couple of weeks maybe, before going further south to Vientiane. It was in Luang Prabang that the formation of Red Mole was first mooted, but it is not my intention here to inquire into that event, the circumstances of which have been evoked elsewhere. However, the desire to obtain heroin was certainly satisfied in this part of the journey and opium, too, that counterfeit self, was also tried; after which, the Turnblazer opus concludes with the freeing of the poet and the passing away of that ‘dark and fictive life.’

the meo, the yao

Stone People are met in the Golden Triangle too. In ‘Turnblazer Chronicle’ (1993) they appear on the east, the Lao, bank of the Mekong at Houei Sai or Fort Carnot, after the travellers have crossed into Laos: ‘And the rain pitters down as they walk the path from the waterway, among Stone People and soldiers with Armalites.’ Who is meant here? They must be members of one of the so-called Hill Tribes, about twenty distinct ethnic groups who live in that part of the world, having migrated, mostly from the mountains of southern China, mostly to escape persecution, a hundred or so years ago. They number more than half a million; traditionally they practise swidden cultivation (slash and burn); and among the crops they grow is opium.

The two groups mentioned by name in ‘Turnblazer Chronicle’ are among the six major divisions of the Hill Tribes: the Meo, also known as the Hmong; and the Yao or Mien people. Meo and Yao are linguistically related, but the Yao write in Chinese characters and worship Taoist deities, whereas the Meo use Roman letters in a script

devised for them by Christian missionaries. Both these peoples were implicated in the opium trade, and in the secret war the CIA waged in the area during the 1960s and early 1970s.

In the first half of the 20th century, the French government's opium monopoly, *Opium Régie*, suppressed cultivation of the poppy among the Meo and Yao in order to control the supply of opium, most of it brought in by sea from India and China, to licensed dens; by 1939 fifteen percent of the colonial government's revenue came from taxes on the sale of opium. When the Second World War disrupted these lines of maritime supply, *Opium Régie* changed tack and began to encourage local growers; the result was an 800 percent increase in indigenous opium production in just four years.

The Meo split during the war with the French in the 1940s, one party siding with the colonialists, the other with the communists, who promised them their own independent homeland once the protracted Lao civil war (1953-75) was over. Those who fought with the French transferred that allegiance to the Americans in the 1960s. CIA operatives trained Meo and Yao guerrilla forces, funding their operations with the proceeds of opium sales. An alliance was formed between the Royal Lao government, opium warlords who commanded remnants of the Kuomintang armies that had fought the Chinese communists, and the CIA. The CIA co-ordinated the collection of opium, which was turned into heroin at refineries in the Golden Triangle, mostly on the northern Thai-Burma border, from which it went to markets all over the world.

Over eighty percent of Meo men in Laos were recruited by the CIA to join the Secret War. Meanwhile the Yao, loyal, unsplit, made up what was described as an efficient friendly force. The CIA used the so-called Special Guerrilla Unit under General Vang Pao to try to block the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the military supply route running as a series of tributaries through Laos and Cambodia, from the north to the south of Vietnam. More than 40,000 Meo were killed, countless men went missing in action, thousands more were injured and disabled. Without the Hill Tribes, who specialized in the rescue of downed pilots, many hundreds of American servicemen would never have returned home.

After the United States withdrew from Vietnam in 1975, the Lao kingdom was overthrown by the communist Pathet Lao and the Meo and Yao people, no matter which

side they fought on, became targets of retaliation and persecution; the promise of a homeland was never honoured. While some returned to their villages and attempted to resume life under the new regime, many more made the harrowing trek to and across the Mekong into Thailand. 1975 thus marked the beginning of a mass exodus of the Meo and the Yao from Laos.

There are other glimpses of Hill Tribe life in 'Turnblazer Chronicle': 'Exit they effect from White Elephant Gate early in the wet season; Meo peasants arriving in town with maize in baskets on their backs; a long drum band knocking up a 5/4 tune toasting the fall of the "Tyrannical Trio," a quintet of steel-stringed viols, found only in this town, adding dinks.' It was (probably) Chiang Mai the travellers were leaving, on their way north to Fang; the tyrannical trio were Prime Minister and Supreme Commander Thanom Kittikachorn, his son Colonel Narong Kittikachorn, and Army Commander Field Marshal Praphas, all of whom were forced to leave the country after the fall of the military government which they ran.

Later, after a delay in boarding the boat at Tha Ton for the journey down the Mae Kok river to Chiang Rai, 'they embarked, still tetches, with a party of Yao weavers, women ornamented with lapis and silver, old men blowing pipes, romping through the rapids out of their trees on painkillers, not caring a jot.' But 'Turnblazer Chronicle' is not about the Stone People, not really, although the contradictions Turnblazer and his companion, Sister Mercy, must negotiate are a kind of diminuendo of the complexities and perversities fate has visited on the Meo and Yao; and like those Hill Tribespeople, the travellers also use 'painkillers' in an attempt to reach that desired state of 'not caring a jot.'

up the rajang

The 'progressive sojourners,' as they are called in a later version of this portion of their travels ('Events in the South China Seas'), exited Laos at the border with Thailand near Vientiane. They travelled the Friendship Highway to Bangkok then went south down the peninsula to Malaysia and crossed the South China Sea to Sarawak, coming ashore at Kuching. After exploring the local area, they went north to Sibiu, a thriving mercantile

city sometimes known as the New Foochow, after the Hokkein and Teochew Chinese immigrants from Fujian province who, at the invitation of white rajah Charles Brooke, settled there in the 19th century. At Sibul, as they did at other stations along the way, they bought local craftworks and textiles for resale at home before taking a boat up the Rajang River.

The Rajang ('river of redemption') rises in the remote Iran Mountains in Central Borneo and flows from there over five hundred kilometers west into the South China Sea. It is navigable by quite large boats as far as the Pelagus rapids, which also mark the border between the peoples who live on the river: below the rapids, they are the Iban; above, a diverse group known collectively as Orang Ulu or upper river people. We don't know who our sojourners came among, only:

red lights in the long house no one
home they've gone to pay their taxes
. . . a basket of five English
skulls swinging dead over my head
since some remote Insurgency
('Events in the South China Seas')

The Iban, or Sea Dyaks, were known for their ferocity and aggressive culture of war against sea dwelling groups and emerging Western trade interests in the 19th and 20th centuries. Their own traditions, which are partly written, partly oral, suggest they colonized the Rajang in the 17th century, probably from Sumatra. In the Second World War they fought on the side of the British and there was a late, brief revival of head-hunting, with Japanese as the victims. Iban head-hunters, in contrast with Maori practice, kept the skull, not the shrunken head. Captured heads were brought triumphantly back to the settlement, received by the women, tied with rattan and hung in bundles from the ceilings of the longhouses. The skulls might also be placed over hearths.

Each Iban longhouse is in effect a village. They are supported on ironwood stilts and roofed with shingles of the same hard wood. Entry is by means of ladders that could easily be drawn up in the event of attack. Boats are stored underneath. Longhouses have a

separate door for every family living there, so that a house of 200 doors is equivalent to a settlement of 200 families. A family usually consists of the parents, daughters, young sons and (formerly) female slaves. There is a small fireplace for cooking, and a sleeping area. Each family door opens onto a long interior gallery which is the common living area. This gallery will have a fire every ten metres or so as well as a main central fireplace hung with heads, charms and talismans. The hearths are kept smouldering at all times. Visitors sleep here.

Above the rapids live the Orang Ulu, who worship dogs. Men wear necklaces made of antique beads and perforate the rind of the ear; the object worn here denotes standing as a warrior: those who have brought home a head may wear the beak of the helmeted hornbill. The ear lobe may also be perforated and brass rings, sometimes weighing as much as a kilogram, hung there, causing the lobe to elongate. Women also wear these brass rings. Weapons of war—wooden shields, swords and spears—are decorated with human hair and carry the same designs that are used in beadwork, as murals to adorn house walls, on tombs, boats and barns, and on musical instruments. They also reappear in tattoo.

a port in borneo

Photographs of tribal peoples illustrate some of the writings Alan published subsequent to these travels, and their values sometimes enter the poems:

Bless the grass before clearing it
“ the shell before cutting it
“ the seed before planting it
(‘Events in the South China Seas’)

But his work does not focus primarily upon the ethnic or the natural. Whatever the experiences might have been of two weeks on the Rajang, they have not survived in any written form; even the diary Sally kept for this part of the journey has nothing to say

about the trip upriver. The one substantial piece to have come out of their trip to Borneo is a document of a completely different kind.

Some unexpected complication in travel arrangements, some mess up of flights and times, saw the travellers arrive on the island of Labuan, technically part of the Malaysian province of Sabah but in fact just off the coast of the Sultanate of Brunei. My 2002 *Rough Guide* gives this description of Labuan: ‘a duty free port, used mostly by Bruneians and Sabahans in search of prostitutes and cheap beer [. . .] offshore wrecks are popular dive spots.’ Here, at the Bay View Hotel, is the theatre for the book-length 1976 poem *Black & White Anthology*.

The *Anthology* is told in a mutation of the voice of Turnblazer, misogynistic, despairing, cracking wise, but without quite the degree of bravado we find in the Turnblazer corpus. There’s a snarl in this voice that is aimed at the corrupt milieu within and about the Bay View as much as at the beleaguered companion, a woman known only as 69. Any attempt to explain why the voice is like this has to look two ways, outwards at the world of the times and inwards to the circumstances of the travellers. For example:

(these people will never
understand
over there

death lies there
in wait, the
pleats of your

overcoat

Over where? In Indochina? Or somewhere else? The 1970s in that part of the world saw a frenzy of oil exploration as big American or multinational companies scoured the world for reserves to replace those denied the West by the OPEC bans. Oil towns were founded all over the archipelago, on both the east and west coasts of Borneo as well as in other parts, including the south coasts of Java and Sumatra. The milieu glimpsed in *Black*

& *White Anthology* is one of displaced expatriates working for the company and obsessed with the trivia of their lives, the goings on of servants, the peculiarities of their companions ('my wife is keeping a jellyfish . . . as a pet . . . I think it must be this jungle juice') and the contortions and paranoias of bought sex, while sinister police enforce a corrupt law and, over all, presides the arcane, bloated figure of the Czar of Petroleum.

This brilliantly evoked dystopia is external however to the real dilemma of the poet and his 'last duchess': they are stranded, under threat from the law, hungry, running out of cash. But the circumstance that gives the sequence its overall feeling and, incidentally, or perhaps not, unites the travellers with the sick milieu they are in, is this:

ho the ides of March has found us here
& the dope
has all
given out
 ain't
 no
 horse
 ain't
 no
 grass

69

we are going stone for broke
belly & tits!
let that silk hat mob
 carry us away

In other words, it is the exigencies of heroin withdrawal that gives the *Anthology* its peculiar, schizoid ambiance; schizoid because in amongst the self-loathing, the imprecations and the bile there are glimpses of another way altogether, one that might be called the way of the devotion, both in the intermittent, almost fugitive tenderness shown

the beloved and in the invocation of the gods or god at the beginning of the book and subsequently; this way is accepted, implicitly, in the penultimate poem in the sequence:

he that
goes gently

goes
to
far reaches

An early version of the *Anthology* is among the poems Alan recorded for the Waiata LP project, *New Zealand Poets Read Their Work* (1974), soon after returning to New Zealand. Sans title and recently recovered from the Waiata archive, the track is a window on the world of the travellers almost contemporaneous with their journey.

tana toraja

The progressive sojourners escaped Labuan and continued on their way, to Kota Kinabalu in Sabah and then across the northern part of Borneo to Tawau on the east coast. From there, they took a boat south to Nunukan in the Indonesian province of Kalimantan Timur. Sally's diary speaks of their relief at leaving behind the strictures of the former British colony and once again embracing, or being embraced by, the friendliness of the Indonesians.

They went further south, to Tarakan (Sally: 'god-forsaken Kalimantan oil town'), and from there took a ferry across the Straits of Macassar to Sulawesi, which the Portuguese called Celebes, or 'celebrated.' They disembarked at Parepare and journeyed into the mountains to visit the last of the Stone People to appear in this account, in Tana Toraja.

Tana means 'land' and the name *Toraja* ('those up in the hills') was given to the people by their lowland enemies, the Bugis and later institutionalised by the Dutch, who began determined efforts to evangelize the highlanders only in the 20th century. These

efforts were largely unsuccessful until the wars of the 1950s, when Torajans fought for their identity against attempts to form an Islamic State in South Sulawesi. In these years thousands converted to Christianity without, however, entirely abandoning their animist beliefs.

Each Torajan village is one extended family, centred upon a house which gives its name to that village. Houses are decorated in the sacred colours, red, yellow and black. Coloured wood with detailed carvings graces the outside walls. Wood carving (called 'the writing') is in fact the primary mode of cultural expression. Each carving is named; common motifs are animals and plants, used symbolically. For example, water plants and animals, such as crabs and tadpoles, symbolize fertility.

The traditional class system, like traditional Maori society, has three divisions: nobles, commoners and slaves, although slavery was officially abolished by the Dutch East Indies government in 1909. Descent is bilateral for most purposes, but class is inherited through the mother, leading to a strong taboo against marrying down and an equally powerful incentive to marry up.

Torajans are traditionally polytheistic animists, they follow the *aluk*, which means 'the law' or 'the way.' Ancestors came down from heaven on a stairway and this stairway can still be used to communicate with Puang Matua, the creator. There are three worlds, heaven, earth and the underworld; heaven and earth were married, there was darkness, then a separation, and finally the light. Animals live in the underworld; the earth is for mankind with heaven above, covered by a saddle shaped roof. There is a god of earth, an earthquake goddess, a god of death, a goddess of medicine and many more.

Most of the life ceremonies of the Toraja were suppressed by Dutch missionaries who, strangely, did not interfere to the same extent with funerary rituals, which as a result remain. In the *aluk* religion, only nobles have the right to an extensive death feast, usually lasting several days and attended by thousands. The more powerful the person who has died, the more buffalo are slaughtered at their death feast. Alan and Sally travelled from Rantepao to Lemo, a burial site where effigies (*tau-tau*) of the rich and powerful stand at the entrance to their cliff-face tombs. Sally's diary gives a vivid account of the ceremony she and Alan witnessed there:

Sombre, grey, medieval, one entrance to the Kampong through high rock cliffs, cliffs rising high all around, slow processions, ritual of gifts, black shirts, black sarongs, red blood, black crows, red cloth round the coffin, flash of parang, slashed throat, buffalo crazy, roaring, stamping, charging at the people, blood pouring on stones, pouring on mud, move back, back, watch in awe and fear the wild eyes, the Death Dance, hot breath snorting, hot blood streaming, till the great beast can leap no more, pauses, trembles and crashes down into the hard mud, and the little misshapen butchers leap out of the shadows.

Ceremonies may in fact be prolonged for weeks, months or even years after the actual death, while the deceased's family labours to raise the necessary funds. Torajans anyway believe that death is not a sudden event but a gradual journey toward the land of souls. During this waiting period—'the sleeping stage'—the body is wrapped in several layers of cloth and kept under the house; the soul is thought to linger around the village until the burial is accomplished.

Torajans dance many dances, including one so rare that it is performed, by men dressed as buffalo circling a sacred tree, only every twelve years. There is a thanksgiving dance where the six-holed flute accompanies a group of shirtless men with long fingernails. Sally's diary records that at Siguntu the travellers attended a dance event, apparently the dedication of a house:

They just poured into the compound—men shouting, chanting, singing, pigs squealing, neighing, screaming, great gobs of saliva on their snouts. More and more and more. The circle grows, chanting, chanting . . . Alan lets out a wild shout of joy. The missionaries cower back, photographers are trampled underfoot. Brilliant flashes of real house raising festival. Three, four times the Kampong fills with men and pigs. Men from the mountains, pigs in their elaborate litters—houses made of bamboo frame, decorated with coloured leaves, yellow fringed palm leaves, giant red leaves, spiky magenta flowers, tied on . . . or sprouting wildly out of ends of bamboo.

All Torajan dances are determined, both in aspect and timing, by the *aluk* religion. *Aluk* is in fact a combination of law, religion, and habit and governs every ceremony of social life as well as much of the detail of the day-to-day. The ultimate authority of *aluk* is the priest. The words and actions prescribed by these priests, called *minaa*, must be followed to the letter, to the fingertip, in life and in death.

centipedes are his eyes

Among Alan's writings from Sulawesi is this seed:

Who is the man who knocks downstairs
it is the village medicine man
his face is like the centipede's back
there is danger to the common people in his tale

bulls ears nailed to the cornerpost
the house can hear
eye of the sun nailed to the eaves
the house can see

The passage implies a confrontation of some kind with one of the *minaa*, the omnipotent priests. It occurs at the beginning of 'Dispatch Songs,' a long, associative, unrevised and unpublished raga Alan wrote at, or about, the time he and Sally spent in Tana Toraja.

The medicine man returns in part 6 of *The Excursion*—'my mask-and-gallant show / based on the proceedings of Ra, the archaic deity / through the Underworld'—a theatre piece performed by Red Mole in New York in 1982. ('Their Diet Consists of Carrion') The travellers are on the Boat of Millions of Years, on its nightly journey through the underworld. 'Conversation on the Boat,' about the fate of humans, involves the Admiral, the protagonist of *The Excursion*, and Hapi, the baboon god who is among his companions. The Admiral is washing the Baboon's feet when he asks: 'What is that hand knocking on the stairs?' The Baboon replies:

It belongs to the man who cannot be surprised. His face is wrinkled like a centipede's back. There is danger to the people should they ever hear him cry with wonder. He nails the ears of dogs to the rich man's house, so the house can hear.

The Admiral again:

There is a voice that only the oldest part of my body can understand. Intuition on the left is made indecisive by the crocodile on the right. It is impossible to look at someone and talk at the same time. When I walk I concentrate so much on breathing I no longer know where I am going.

This exchange also appears, in variant forms, in the poem 'Dialogue: A Man and His Soul,' in both *And She Said* (1984) and *Slow Passes* (1991). What is it about? What does it mean? Who is the man who cannot be surprised?

On a prosaic level, the man knocking on the stairs might be the one recalled in this account from *A Red Mole Sketchbook* (1989):

a memory of a Lieutenant Sally and I stayed with in the Celebes once. We joined his entourage each day as he went out to supervise the road-making [. . .] The Chief of Police was the Lieutenant's rival in the town (Mamasa) and he found an excuse to run us out. We sent the Lieutenant and his wife postcards from Jakarta. (81)

Mamasa is a small town in the isolated mountainous area in the west of Tana Toraja. Alan and Sally walked there from Rantepao, a four-day journey. Their trip back to the coast also ended on foot after two ancient vehicles gave up on the rough road.

However, even if the Chief of Police at Mamasa was the original of the man knocking on the stairs—and as such he forms one in a long line of law enforcement officers Alan seems to have fallen foul of in his travels—he is something more than that

by the time he appears in *The Excursion*. A man who cannot be surprised is one who has seen everything. To add that there is danger to the people in his cry is to suggest some new, unprecedented calamity. With a face like a centipede's back, made from overlapping shields of armour, and nailing dog's ears to a wall, he is not simply ominous or sinister, but probably evil as well. You could say he is death personified.

I associate him with the crocodile in the next stanza and, further, with that part of our ancestry that is almost inconceivably ancient: the reptilian and, before that, the arthropod brain we carry with us into the future. Centipedes are fast-moving, venomous, predatory, terrestrial, nocturnal; there is a giant variety that occurs on Sulawesi but we are not looking for zoological clues here. Rather, I think we are hearing, in the voice of the Soul, from the archaic past of the race and what it is telling us is of an implacable will to survive that does not rate the death of an individual, or indeed a species, highly. Intuition on the left, by contrast, is a human accomplishment, made small by 'the crocodile on the right.' We are certainly required here to think about left/right brain duality, though not perhaps in the received version: the left is usually typed as verbal and analytical, the right as spatial, intuitive and holistic.

Crocodiles have a history in Alan's poetry. His 'America: A Vision (for sweet little sixteen)':

begins with a construction
of inelegance in the eyes of
LORCA'S crocodiles to settle
matters of seeming reality . . .

In Federico García Lorca's *Poet in New York* the King of Harlem, to a jungle jazz rhythm, gouges out crocodile eyes with a spoon. Later in the book, in 'Sleepless City,' there is this enigmatic passage:

Live iguanas arrive to gnaw the insomniacs
and the broken hearted fugitive will meet on streetcorners
an incredible crocodile resting beneath the tender protest of

the stars

Much later, in *Fq*, 'eh crocodile' will appear as a salutation from libidinous women as a reminder to the poet who has (at least in imagination) pleased them.

Despite these appearances, early and late, 'the crocodile on the right' is most of all a representative of the archaic within us. As such, and particularly given the setting of *The Excursion*, it can be assimilated to the Egyptian crocodile god Sebek. Sebek, originally a demon, was first worshipped as an act of propitiation towards the actual reptiles that lived in the Nile. Later, he became allied with the army as its patron god, and later still was thought to have the power to go into the Duat, the Land of the Dead, and repair the damage dying had done to the bodies of the dead. By the 18th dynasty he was seen as an avatar of the primal god, Amen-Ra, with whom *The Excursion* is concerned.

The moment when the knock comes on the stairs is one in which the hackles on the back of the neck rise, the heart races, the palms sweat: animal responses to danger. The summons is one we cannot refuse yet in it is a denial of all that we are in our drive to become human. The conundrum is unresolvable: at the end of the poem, the Man is instructed by his Soul:

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

It is an instruction to venture into a genetic future that is unknown and quite possibly un- or in-human. In this sense, it relates to Alan's chiasm, his belief that 'we've got to stop and start again.' (*A Red Mole Sketchbook* 82) Meanwhile the Soul that issued this instruction to the body that dies, where will it be? Seeking some enlightenment or revelation, some unthought way of being, some surprise or rebirth, it will continue to wander through worlds, both purposeful and purposeless, eating the wind.

manifesto

The expulsion from paradise at Mamasa occurred in the southern autumn of 1974. In the summer of that year, November in Wellington, Red Mole produced its first piece of theatre, *Whimsy and the Seven Spectacles*. It was soon followed by a second show, a version of the Siddhartha story. White Rabbit Puppet Theatre debuted not long after. Contemporary with these early performances is a manifesto, here given in full with its single variant reading bracketed:

1. to keep [the] romance alive;
2. to escape programmed behaviour by remaining erratic;
3. to preserve the unclear and inexplicit idioms of everyday speech;
4. to abhor the domination of any person over any other;
5. to expend energy.

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