

## **“Ten Gems on a Thread”**

By Catherine Filloux

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*For the past ten years I have been writing plays about Cambodia. In early 2001 I went to Phnom Penh, Cambodia on a Playwright's Residency grant from the Asian Cultural Council. During the two and a half months I was there, I did two plays with Khmer (Cambodian) actors from the National Theatre, and research for my new play “Silence of God,” to be produced at Contemporary American Theater Festival next summer.*

### 1) Hall of fame

These are the women I place inside my personal hall of fame. Chanthol Oung, the director of the Cambodian Women's Crisis Center, is wearing a well-pressed white blouse, which highlights her dark and youthful face, as she shows me upstairs to her cool office. As though in a mantra she does not stop to breathe until she is done:

“Confidential Crisis Shelter, Legal Representation, Reintegration, Vocational Training, Community Education, Monitoring Violence, Capacity Building.” She says there are men who will appear in her office, dressed in police or military uniforms, to demand their battered wives back. She tells me she says to them, calmly, “We will let your wives know you are looking for them.” There is a foreigner, she says, who raped young

women, paid off the police, bribed the court and then came to find Chanthol, yelling at her through his car window. She couldn't hear what he was saying, because at the time she was outside the Center, driving away in a closed Jeep. A general in the government owns a brothel where women or girls are locked up. Two women throw letters out of windows from inside, asking for help. She says, the mayor has closed down the brothel, but it is still open.

The second woman in my hall of fame, Kek Galabru, is dressed in a floor-length, purple, iridescent, silk dress and a white silk scarf, which she drapes around herself in various ways during my visit. She is the founder of LICADHO, the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights. When she speaks about the Cambodian Prime Minister she looks in a certain direction, into the city of Phnom Penh, as if he is there, hanging in thin air, right outside the curtained-window. I can see him in her gaze. Her face changes from radiance to shadow. Information suggests that he could be involved with kidnapping, theft, bribery and drugs. The French, who give money to human rights, don't want to know about this corruption.

I ask her about hope and she looks at me: "Yes, you must have it," she says.

I meet Vannath Chea, the president of the Center for Social Development, on my birthday. She is also gracefully dressed, serving tea at a round table in her office. She's curious why I want to meet her. She says she is humble before the problem of "reconciliation" in Cambodia: the question of how to move on from the genocide. She

bought land for a house. The house is near Tuol Sleng, the Khmer Rouge extermination center, now turned genocide museum. As they were digging the foundation they found bones of arms. The bones were tied together with electrical cord. She shows me how, underground, the bones were still tied, by putting together her own lower arms. She had the bones burned on her own property and the ashes were placed in a pagoda in Kandal province. Everyday she prays to the bones at an altar in her own house. She hopes that what she accomplishes each day can be done for the spirits of those who are under her house. She gets Kleenex for us, as we sit together at the round table. Maybe we can go to the pagoda, she says.

She cannot read my plays, she says, because she has no time to read. She glances at the piles of paper on her desk: she doesn't even get to the newspaper. When I tell her I have come to Cambodia to do theatre, she says that the arts are like women, the first to be degraded in poverty and war.

The fourth woman, Sochua Mu, Cambodia's Minister of Women's Affairs, comes to pick me up in her Jeep. Her driver takes us to an Italian restaurant where we sit outside. She tells me she must, at once, dress the part of the Khmer woman and try to teach the men she works with that women are also precious gems. In Khmer culture, women are *cotton* and if cotton falls in the mud it is permanently soiled. A *gem*, which the man is, never gets soiled. So Sochua says to the men, "*Women* are precious gems." Sochua has been serious in taking a few men, who have tarnished the precious gems, to court.

## 2) Pich Tum Kravel

I wait for Pich Tum Kravel and Mao Keng at the Ministry of Culture, in Kravel's office, which has a prefab quality. Kravel's suit coat and tie rest dignified on the back of his chair. The office is empty of any papers or books. I make a series of calls, on my cell phone, one to Kravel. I never once reach Kravel on his cell phone. It is always answered by a group of women whom I imagine to be sitting in a circle around the cell phone, picking it up, calling out Khmer words to me, to each other, to Kravel -- who is certainly not there. After a while a woman appears in the office where I am waiting. She's totally mystified to find me. She quickly turns on the air conditioner, returns with tea and quietly closes me into the room.

Kravel and Mao Keng arrive. Kravel is the foremost living playwright of Cambodia and he has taken a post in the government as "Undersecretary of State for the Performing Arts, Fine Arts and Libraries." An accomplished, erudite and sophisticated man, he gracefully takes the Khmer translation of my play and promises to study it.

When I ask if my project is in place, Mao Keng, the director of the National Theatre says very simply to Kravel, in Khmer, that the actors are "waiting." Kravel straightly translates in French, "*Les acteurs attendent.*" We laugh at the simplicity of what Mao Keng has just said and at his deadpan expression. Kravel is worried that the standard of acting has been lowered: there was a time when they had actors who could do Shakespeare, he says, and Moliere. Kravel himself was called the "Romeo of Cambodia"

before the Pol Pot time. He wrote a play based on a famous poem “Tum Teave” by Pikhoh Sour; this was the Khmer *Romeo and Juliet*, and Kravel played Romeo. When I ask him to write down in Khmer the words, “I am a writer,” because I need to know the phrase for my new play, his handwriting is like all French-educated Khmer: beautiful and careful. I remember, when I learned to write French from my grandparents, all the different lines in the notebook to make sure you got the heights of the letters right. I ask Kravel, as I ask everyone, about Pol Pot. How could it be? It is not a question, he says, that he knows the answer to. Throughout his life, he says, he has had to adapt to various political regimes: Sihanouk, Lon Nol, and then the Khmer Rouge. He simply looks at me and says, “I survived as a ‘cultivateur.’” He says the word “Cultivateur” in my own native tongue, matter-of-factly. A “laborer”: one more disguise in his life.

Later I hear from a Khmer friend that Kravel changed his name after the Pol Pot time. He put “Tum,” based on Romeo, in the middle of his name. “Pich” is a friend of Tum’s. His chosen last name, “Kravel,” means earring. The earring leaves a hole so you can never forget, Kravel tells me later.

We are having dinner with a group of Khmer male academics, by the Mekong River. Beer girls flock around us, pleading with the host to buy their brand. I am sitting next to Kravel, with whom I have come to talk, and confess my sadness at seeing beautiful Miss Heineken and lovely Miss San Miguel with long red prom-like dresses and sashes. He simply says, “It’s for money.” Then he picks up his glass and looks at me seriously. “I ordered a Coke,” he says. He believes my play will help younger generations to

remember and understand. It creates a memory, he says, for Khmer people who will see it, and remember their own experiences. Some young people don't even know about Pol Pot or believe their parents when they hear about the period from 1975 to 1979. It is a strange amnesia: a kind of anti-amnesia, I think to myself, because as much as some people want to erase the memory, it is there, perhaps even more strongly, because it is being resisted.

Even in his name Pich Tum Kravel resists. He has become a new person and, as such, survives.

### 3) Why did he correct my memory?

On the first day we meet in the red-curtained theatre of the French Cultural Center, the actors slip off their shoes at the bottom of the stairs and we sit in a circle on the gray-carpeted stage. We go around the circle to say our names. My interpreter, a visual artist who graduated from the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), translates for me, as I tell the actors that I've been writing about Cambodia for ten years. My plays and oral history are passed around the circle and the actors look at my writing.

Eleven of the actors and actresses are from Mao Keng's National Theatre, the only professional troupe of modern theatre actors in the country. A country in which there are virtually no contemporary plays produced. One actress is from the Royal University of Fine Arts, which before the war was a prestigious training center for Khmer performing

arts, but now lacks funds. One actor, Arn Chorn-Pond, is a Khmer survivor, artist and activist, who divides his time between the large Cambodian community in Lowell, Massachusetts and Cambodia. As we sit in the circle I say to the actors that I have found, through the years, I like to write what's close to my heart. "If you were going to die tomorrow what would you write?" I ask. I demonstrate that it would be better if they act out the story, rather than to narrate it in the third person.

We break from the circle and the actors take some time to think about what they will write. After lunch, around two, the actors come back holding their papers: some are folded into squares, some in notebooks, some with words all the way to the very edge of the paper, as if to save on precious space. There is a kind of nervous hush. I sit next to my interpreter, Dom Nang Pin, whose mouth is very close to my ear. He feeds me the words in English in a furtive whisper as the first actor, Bunron, runs onstage -- ducking, hiding behind a bush, calling, gesturing downward with his hands, urging his friend to hide. He unwraps some food from his *krama*, his scarf, fearfully checking the perimeters, stuffing his mouth, his being, his life. What is the food? I ask Dom.

Potatoes.

Bunron pounds his chest, gasping for air. His friend, who is invisible -- Bunron is doing this all alone -- tells him he will steal some more potatoes tonight. In the field in the distance they look out at us in the audience. We are now armed guards with scythes, swords, knives, sickles. We sit further down in our seats. Bunron tells his

friend, “No, don’t go, tonight. You stole today, they’ll kill you this time.” The friend, the invisible one beside him, says, “What does it matter? To die of starvation or from their blade?” Bunron makes a strong case for him not to go. Bunron asks, who will take care of his friend’s old mother?

The friend does go to the field, to steal more potatoes. Bunron watches him. We watch Bunron. After he is finished, Bunron bows to us and makes his way down the stairs. At the bottom he puts his shoes back on. I get up from my seat and hug him. It is not customary for a woman like me to hug him, in Khmer culture, but he is gracious and accepts it. And I tell Bunron that I love him for what he is done with such beauty and courage. Dom translates. Bunron nods. He makes the same movement and expression he will always make: one of accepting the inevitable, as if to say, “It had to be done. We had to do this play.” But I can see that it has cost him to recreate the story. Later that week I ask him about it and he says that, yes, it can give him a headache, and can give him bad dreams, but he wants to do it. He assures me and the others that he wants to do it.

Bunron chooses another National Theatre actor, his friend Kry Onn, to play his friend in the piece he has written. Twenty-seven days later, they perform the piece, which is called “Because of Hunger,” at a press conference for Khmer journalists as an introduction to our work. The press immediately asks, with a camera pointed at me: “Why the Khmer Rouge? Is this about the tribunal?” “It’s a play,” I say. “Theatre.” The actors say the same.



After Bunron and Kry Onn perform, we ask for questions. One of the journalists in the audience says, “The Khmer Rouge did not have swords, they had bayonets.” In our circle later Bunron asks, puzzled, “Why did he correct my memory?” Bunron knows what he remembers. “He probably wants to share his own story,” I say apologetically. Bunron is an artist, a survivor of a regime that tried to kill all artists, and now can tell his story, as an actor. The journalist does not seem to have had that same opportunity.

#### 4) Lamentation of a Widow

When she does her piece, it is almost as if I am watching a silent film, except that Prak Vanny whispers to herself. Later when we stage what she has written, she moves the actors around to fit her memory; she directs them. She takes Chhouep Tang, the young man she has chosen to play her husband, by the shoulders and physically moves him to the place on stage where she wants him to be. What she does is recreate her piece -- in rehearsals, in run-throughs -- each and every time with the same amount of dignity. It is a short piece, maybe two minutes, but it is as if by repeating it, she gives it the impact it so clearly deserves for her: the minutes leading up to the last time she saw her husband. She was wrapping rice in banana leaves, there was a knock on the door, it was a Khmer Rouge officer. She is the oldest in the group, and it is eerie to see handsome Chhouep Tang play her husband, young as he would have been at the time. Fitting that she chose him. I learn that she was once a playwright herself, as well as an actress.

One actor is skeptical when she has finished showing us her piece. He asks, “Shouldn’t you tell us on stage what happened to your husband?” I am surprised by his question because every movement she makes from the moment she starts to wrap the rice in the banana leaves to the moment she leaves for work, miming putting the hoe over her shoulder, makes it clear what happened to her husband. And there was never any doubt, for anyone who ever watched Prak Vanny’s piece.

#### 5) Coming Home

After the first day of watching the actors’ pieces I go home exhausted and get in bed. On TV is the film *Coming Home* in Khmer, with English subtitles. I cry for what I saw on this first day and for the actors’ bravery. I wait for the scene in which Jon Voight’s character makes love to Jane Fonda but it has been cut. The movie rolls along and I can hardly tell where it fit in.

#### 6) Photographs

Rithy Panh, the French-Khmer filmmaker, has chosen Than Nandoeun (Doeun), one of the National Theatre actors, to direct my short play, *Photographs From S-21*, and has cast the actress Sok Ly as the Young Woman and Roeun Narith as the Young Man. Narith was the lead in one of Rithy’s recent films.

Doeun, Narith and Sok Ly make up their own subgroup and decide to rehearse in the mornings in the French Cultural Center Cinema theatre, where we will have our performances. There are tensions surrounding how much they are getting paid, and they ask that I come up with more money for the four performances. The director at the French Cultural Center agrees to find the balance of the money and we are able to pay all the actors a better fee in the end.

*Photographs From S-21* will be done in tandem with the group of actor-written pieces, *Night Please Go Faster*, titled after Monika Yin's piece, about the flooding of her squatter hut, and a prayer she makes to her missing parents.

At Tuol Sleng, or "S-21," the extermination center, in humid sunshine, the Khmer photographer Remissa Mak takes photos of both actors Sok Ly and Roeun Narith. He recreates the poses of the two victims in my play. Doeun, the director, wants to use Remissa's blown-up photos as the set design, so that the souls of the photos will walk out of their frames embodied by Ly and Narith. I offer my hand as the child's hand reaching up to the Young Woman in the photograph, and I lay on the ground as Remissa tells me how exactly to clutch my fist like a child on the bottom of Sok Ly's black shirt.

There is almost no barrier for me when I listen to the play in Khmer and, during rehearsals, I give my notes to the director, Doeun, through my interpreter Dom. To me the rhythm seems slow and the tone sometimes one note. My comments don't seem to have much effect.

Doeun has created impressionistic light and sound for my play which surprise and intrigue me. In retrospect they create a kind of theatre which is more poetic and non-linear than what I'm used to in the U.S. Doeun, an actor himself, does the sound for the play by breathing into a microphone from the booth in the back of the theatre. During the performances, by the end of the play, the theatre is totally silent but for sniffing. And when the lights come up no one moves from his seat.

On the Saturday that *Photographs From S-21* and *Night Please Go Faster* are to open in Phnom Penh, Vannath Chea, the woman whose house was built above the bones in Tuol Sleng, takes me to the pagoda where the ashes of the bones are. She and the other women in the Jeep tease me that I won't make it back in time for the performance, and that, when the Jeep breaks down, a lady walking on the side of the road, carrying four packages, a baby on her back and a bundle balanced on her head will have to take me in tow too. Along the way we see schools all named after the prime minister; the one road that is paved leads to his private home. I see a helicopter in the distance landing at his compound.

Along the road, pork is drying in the sun. A man pulls a cart piled high with cucumbers, there is a lushness to the green along the river. The older women walk barefoot in skirts, so fit, so graceful, their hair so naturally swept. People brush the dirt outside their homes with a thatch broom.

In Kandal province about an hour from Phnom Penh the Jeep turns into the pagoda and after a few minutes we find the monk who takes us to the altar where the ashes are in a marble urn. We pray to the urn. The monk says that when they did the cremation, the flames sparked many colors, and that they are special bones. He had a dream the night of the cremation that a doctor was giving him a shot. I ask if he thinks the bones had been those of a doctor and he says, yes he thinks so. He tells us that he takes very special care of the urn, bringing offerings every holy day, Saturday, and that he will not leave this pagoda because he would not want to leave the bones. I make an offering to him for the ashes in the urn, and for the souls of those portrayed in the plays to be performed that night. Every night before their performance, the actors Narith and Ly burn incense and pray to the two nameless victims in the photos they are playing.

When Rithy, the filmmaker, first read *Photographs From S-21*, he asked me if I'd be interested in writing a play about Bophana, a female Tuol Sleng victim about whom he made a documentary. Bophana was first written about by Elizabeth Becker in her definitive book about Cambodia, *When The War Was Over*. I go to the archives in Tuol Sleng and find the dusty, old box in which Bophana's confessions are kept. I look at the box of absurd confessions which Bophana was forced to write in careful lettering, and at the attentive archivist.

Yes, I say to Rithy, I want to write about Bophana. I discover she is almost a national heroine. So many know her strong and resistant face. She fought to her death, defying the Khmer Rouge leaders by writing love letters to her husband, who was also killed at

Tuol Sleng. Later when I ask Elizabeth Becker, she generously offers to let me see her translations of the Bophana files.

A Khmer friend used the word “unnecessary” to describe the Pol Pot time. When he speaks of the period, of its perpetrators, he starts to laugh: it’s a kind of helpless snicker, which I interpret to depict the insanity he feels about Pol Pot and perhaps the shame. He says he has never been to Tuol Sleng. Tourist busses unload at the gate, right in the middle of the city, and tourists flock in. Photos of “Pol Pot’s clique” hang at the entrance, though most of the clique is living free. The white tombs of those who were found when Vietnam invaded in 1979 are covered with white flowers that drop from trees above. A man selling tickets near the souvenir shop eats white turnips which he dips in salt. Beggars wait for the tourists at the gate. When I go there, I ask my moto driver, Saly, to come in with me. He points out to me the photo of Sin Si Samouth, the famous singer who was killed during Pol Pot. He tells me what a great singer he was and takes me to buy one of his CDs.

## 7) Directing and Producing

Before each performance of *Photographs* and *Night Please Go Faster* I pull the red velvet curtains on the stage so they’re even on both sides. I hang a black sheet over the backstage door that is ajar and I turn on the air conditioner. I commiserate with the young Khmer man who often tells me the French subtitle machine is broken and there is no one that can be reached to fix it because it is the weekend. I am delighted when the

subtitle machine is fixed by someone who happens to be nearby. I listen to sound-tapes of frogs that sound like ducks; I dissuade the actor who made a new sound tape from using melodramatic music during another actor's story. I remember the filmmaker Rithy Panh being sensitive to the actors' melodramatic style when he came to watch a rehearsal. I get someone to take down a banner welcoming lawyers to a convention simultaneously being held in the theatre and I get someone to re-hang the photographs for the set of *Photographs From S-21*. I make sure the door is open in the back of the theatre so Kry Onn won't be locked out when he runs offstage during Bunron's piece. I try to air out the theatre a little from the smell of burning incense after the actors have prayed. I repeat that we want Khmer pre-show music, not Charles Aznavour. I send the stage manager Pok Dirama out to buy new batteries for Doeun's microphone. I pay Sok Ly for her wig. I smile at Ros Navy's daughter who plays herself in Ros Navy's piece about when her daughter became very ill and a traditional Krou Khmer wanted to burn incense and pray rather than go to the hospital. I pick up the trash in the theatre and bathroom. I get the tickets from the French Cultural Center office, I take the money from the audience, I give programs out in Khmer, French and English, and if the program is in English I also give the spectators a flashlight, so they can follow along with the translated text in the dark. I try to encourage mothers with babies to take them outside if they start crying.

My favorite thing to do is to watch the actors carry in plates of fruit when they arrive for performances, two or three hours early, and to see them laugh at me because I am working so hard, and seem so busy.

## (8) Saly

We arrive at night at my moto driver Saly's house, driving through a maze of squatter huts over planked passageways, above a large sewer system. Most of the huts are open in the front and lit with candles, though occasionally one has electricity and, in some cases, a television which looms larger than life in the dark. As Saly parks and honks his horn, I have no way to know where we are or how we got there. At the open doorway, we step over a board that blocks the entrance for the baby. Saly's one-room house is made of cardboard and planks. As I glance at some cut out magazine pictures of women singers on the wall, he says, "We are very poor." My heart is beating fast, and I am trying to smile, as I nod. His wife, laughing, shows me their baby. I touch the baby's cheek and he also giggles; he looks like Saly, who is in his thirties but looks younger. The baby has a bandage on his navel and I remember Saly telling me he was at the hospital recently. Saly's wife has a dazzling smile, as we sit down together on the floor in the glow of a kerosene lamp. There is a mosquito coil nearby and some noodles Saly's wife has prepared. Saly quickly shows me an English tape he has been using to learn English. The baby enjoys playing with the cassette tape until Saly takes it away. I thank his wife for letting me have Saly everyday as my driver. Saly translates and she laughs and thanks me. I keep my eyes fixed on her beautiful, glowing face.

When we drive, Saly and I speak English and he asks me questions. He wonders if he can say "gentle woman" like he says, "gentleman?" I think about it, saying people



usually don't use the word "gentlewoman" but I don't see why not. He says I am a gentle woman and that the woman who introduced us, Laura, is also a gentle woman. Saly tells me in English that, "Sometimes he is not clever" and that he dreams with his eyes open. At night, he says, shaking his head, he is dreaming and his eyes are open. He wants to talk to me about the Pol Pot time but his English is not good enough. I reassure him that it's normal he dreams with his eyes open because he survived a bad war, and for the same reason, he may not always be able to think cleverly. And anyway, "No one is clever all the time." He thinks about this, as we drive.

My friend Laura and I help Saly buy a new house. This one is not above the sewer water of the squatter's village. It's made of wood and thatch, and has some running water, electricity and primitive toilet facilities. It is better, Saly agrees. I see that he has pinned up a poster I gave him of an Angkor art exhibit. Saly comes to all the rehearsals and works putting up posters, buying water and bread for the actors, and giving any comments he has about the show. When it rains he hangs some of the wet posters on the seats of the theatre to dry. Near the end of the rehearsal period, he comes in with three circles on his forehead from cupping: he says his wife has given him a treatment because he hasn't been feeling well. On opening night we rush to the change shop to get change for the bills I have to pay the actors. He is happy when the lady accepts no fee for giving us change. In the glass case below the lady, are bills from all different countries, stacked in small piles with rubber bands.

On the moto going to the theatre Saly says he won't be coming to opening night. I ask him why, since I had invited him long ago, and he says no, he must go home, the air conditioning makes him sick. I take a deep breath. I touch his shoulder and say, "Saly, I want you to come tonight. You should come." He nods, and says he will come. After the performance when he sees that it went well and that the audience was pleased, he admits he is relieved. He wasn't sure whether the performance would be good, he tells me, as we drive home. He was afraid some people weren't good, he admits, and he didn't know if the audience would like it. Now, he says, he knows it is good and he is very happy.

#### (9) The Dump

As the path narrows Saly and I start to smell smoke, see more trash, a naked person walking dazed, and some scrawny dogs. He lets me off to walk into the dump on foot. To the horizon in every direction is trash, with smoke from burning waste rising in the haze of dawn. Children are lined up to get breakfast from a French non-governmental organization that provides meals, before the kids go scavenging through the trash--to make money for their families. A nurse treats a man who lifts up his pants' leg to show her the bloody side of his leg and ankle, cut up from metal in the dump. A little girl holds a baby and scrutinizes me. Also scrutinizing me are Saly, and two other moto drivers, Heng and Kim. They have accompanied me and Laura, my friend who runs her own NGO "Global Children." Some kids joke with each other in line as they wait for their food. In the dump itself are older women, with *kramas* wrapped around their heads,

searching through trash with a pick, steps behind a bulldozer rotating trash. The scavengers look for anything they can melt, recycle, collect, to get a few pennies. In the dump itself, people live in makeshift huts on top of the trash. It's morning time and a mother is cooking soup for her family; I can see the steam from the rice rising. I am confused to see children with backpacks making their way through the dump, as if on their way to school. The children I see have an air of simple necessity, as if they are the kids I usually notice playing badminton on the side of the road.

Kim, another moto driver, drives me away from the dump. He says he thought his life was bad but seeing this makes it seem better. As we wend our way back through circles of huts, my cell phone rings and I stop to answer it. When I finish talking, I see two young boys running towards me, with a plastic pink toy phone, calling into the receiver in English, "Hello? Hello?" laughing with glee.

#### (10) Never Again

Shortly after I return from Cambodia, I am introduced to a Khmer man who has received a human rights fellowship at Columbia University and works for LICADHO. He and I sit on a couch in the beautiful, plush lobby of the Columbia International House and the man keeps returning to the Pol Pot time, saying, "But, you want to know what happened to me..." The first few times he says it, I try to kindly say, "No, that's all right I don't need to hear..." but when he continues to repeat, "*You* want to know what happened," I finally nod and listen to the story of how he survived Pol Pot. We talk about how the prime

minister has the ultimate and only power in the country. And I remember what a Vietnamese artist told me: “Cambodians want peace at any price.” I say goodbye to the man and he gives me his email address. He says he will be beginning a project against torture. That day in May, as I walk home in New York, I renew my commitment. I remember, after my trip to the dump, talking to a woman from Human Rights Watch who said that part of a human rights violation is government collusion. I asked Saly, as we stood in the trash, if he thought Hun Sen had ever seen this place and he looked at me and said, “Fucker.” “Where did you learn that English word?” I asked him. He said, looking down at the ground, that someone he knew taught it to him. I, and the other moto drivers, got a good laugh. “It’s a good word,” I mutter.

Youk Chhang, the young director of the Documentation Center of Cambodia, says a human soul cannot be destroyed. He is neither scholar nor lawyer, just collects pieces of paper, he says. He writes, “Searching for the truth!” at the end of all his emails, below his name.

Before my trip my father sends me a poem by José-Maria de Heredia about travelers who “Watch in unknown skies, rising from the deep: Stars they’d never seen before.”

There *are* stars. Precious gems, to chart the way. Searching for the truth.

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