

# From Misery to Flight: A Cambodian Soars Through His Poetry

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On April 13, 1975, U Sam Oeur, a captain in the army of the American-backed Government of Gen. Lon Nol in Cambodia who wrote poetry on the side, was celebrating the Buddhist New Year at his home near Phnom Penh.

Suddenly, "there were soldiers with heavy guns around my house, coming like flies from every direction," Mr. U Sam Oeur said in an interview in Washington last week. As shells fell from the sky, Khmer Rouge soldiers under the command of Pol Pot ordered people to evacuate the city. Mr. U Sam Oeur, his 4-year-old son, his wife, pregnant with twins, and mother-in-law wrapped themselves in mats and prepared to die. "We decided to stay and be burned alive," he said.

Instead, they were sent to the countryside, where they endured four years in the labor camps of the Khmer Rouge, part of a drastic reorganization of society in which as many as two million Cambodians died through execution, disease and starvation. Mr. U Sam Oeur's wife, son and mother-in-law survived; the twins did not.

Mr. U Sam Oeur, 62, who now lives in Edina, Minn., has written of his time under the Khmer Rouge in a new book, "Sacred Vows," translated by the poet Ken McCullough and published by Coffee House Press last month. Composed of 53 poems, the collection is a retelling of the story of the Cambodian killing fields in poetic form. It is one of the first English translations of a contemporary Cambodian poet's work. Today at 2 P.M., Mr. U Sam Oeur is to read a selection at the bookstore of the Asia Society at 725 Park Avenue, at 70th Street. The poems, written in Cambodian with the English translations on the facing pages, evoke the lush, rural culture of Cambodia:

Where water glitters, palm trees dance.  
Where egrets and herons flap after fish,  
water buffalo charge each other, grunting like giants.

But Cambodia in the 1960's was caught in the middle of the Vietnam War, which fueled the civil war pitting Lon Nol's Army against the Khmer Rouge. Mr. U Sam Oeur records the transformation of Cambodia into a Dantesque hell:

No places to hide,  
no skies under which to rest;  
and the moaning of children  
and the cries of mothers  
out of blazing fire across the land.

Cambodian poetry traditionally relies on several of 46 rhyme and metric schemes, and is chanted. Mr. U Sam Oeur uses some of these forms and incorporates in them the myths and prophecies of the Angkor era of the 10th to the 14th century common to classical works. But he also employs narrative passages, and sections of free verse.

From that moment on, he did not care "whether I lived or died," he has said. In December 1976, he was taken to the Sre Pring camp, known as the most brutal of all. His job was mixing human feces with dirt to make fertilizer.

In 1978, when the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia to wrest power from the Khmer Rouge, he was ordered by the Khmer Rouge to move to Phnom Chi, which was known in Khmer as "the Fertilizing Mountain." There, he was told, human bodies were rendered into fertilizer.

But just before he reached the camp, he said, he was able to flee in the wake of the Vietnamese Army. Mr. U Sam Oeur returned to Phnom Penh with his wife, son and mother-in-law, working as the manager of a bicycle factory and then in the Ministry of Industry. In 1991 he was hired by the United States Embassy when it reopened after the Cambodian peace accords.

All through those years, Mr. McCullough assumed his friend was dead. But in 1984, Mr. U Sam Oeur wrote to the Iowa Writer's Program, requesting a copy of the thesis he had burned in Phnom Penh. The friends re-established contact, and with a series of grants, including one from the Lillian Hellman-Dashiell Hammett Fund for Free Expression at Pen, Mr. U Sam Oeur attended the International Writing Program at Iowa in 1992. He and Mr. McCullough began writing down and translating the poems that Mr. U had carried in his head. They have also been translating Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" into Khmer, in the hope, Mr. U said, of introducing free verse to Cambodian poets.

He hopes to remain in the United States, he said, and eventually be rejoined by his wife, Sim Syma, who stayed in Phnom Penh to care for her mother. His son, Bonya Roeuddhi, 28, lives in Texas.

Mr. U Sam Oeur's book has been turned into an opera, renamed "Krasang Tree," arranged by Mark Bruckner. It will be performed with Cambodian actors and musicians at the Jeune Lune theater in Minneapolis in September.

The opera is sung in Khmer. But at the end, the actors and musicians freeze. A spotlight shines on Mr. U Sam Oeur as he recites in English his poem "Lunar Enchantment." It is a work quite different from most of the others in "Sacred Vows," a poem about peace.

Last week, he recited the poem during an interview:

I look through the window;  
I see a white disk through the foliage.  
I switch off the light,  
wondering if I'm dreaming  
Oh . . . I'm in my safe refuge  
on Brown Street, Iowa City.

As Mr. U Sam Oeur recited, his face reddened, he squeezed his eyes shut and his voice rose to an operatic pitch:

I take off the glasses,  
gaze at the white disk floating towards me,  
higher and higher above the trees.