

“Above us, the smell of death was everywhere. The terrifying, insane, disgusting smell wrapped around us and seemed also to be guiding us onward. It seemed to me that many souls of the dead were still swirling around us, giving off their pestilent vapours, and that here was an accursed land where evil spirits were permitted to infest the heavens.”

“We climbed on up the steps that led to the temple. A *naga* or giant snake reared up at the entrance. These *nagas* are always to be found in Khmer temples but in the darkness of night I looked up in dread at the sickle-like curve of neck. Its eyes glowed red in the light of the torches, its forked tongue seeming to be spitting out some vivid blood-red colour.”

“Above the main temple building at the top of the hill the constellations spread out into the sky like the temple of heaven. I felt I had suddenly been brought much closer to those heavens: and I was at once being drawn up into the skies and simultaneously cast into pestilence and death.”

“The interior of the main building was filled with an unbearable stench of death. The smell of rotting human flesh was nauseating. It was only the pain in my hand that prevented me from vomiting. The corpses lay in rows, and here and there were scattered scraps of clothing. Skeletons were rolling around and there were skulls with their faces still covered with cloth. Those skeletons still wearing clothes made us think of our fellow-villagers. In fact there were some items of clothing which I thought I remembered. How many skeletons were there? I couldn't count them. A wire had been passed through each skeletal hand. The floor of the temples was spattered with the hue of rusty wire. There were so many hands here that had struggled in death!”

“Still, what caught the light of the torches was not so much the corpses but the great statue of the Buddha. Its head had been removed and that gentle sandstone smile had now rolled into a corner where it was buried under a heap of corpses. The ceiling, decorated with a pattern of clouds and lotus flowers representing heaven, and the murals showing scenes from the life of Shakyamuni appeared vividly in the pale red light. It was a weird atmosphere. On the one hand there was the depiction of paradise on high, a promise of the blessed land for the righteous and virtuous in the next world, and in the real world before it —hell.”

“Below these sacred pictures of the Buddha preaching ‘do not kill’, ‘do not steal’, ‘do not lie’ to all sentient beings rolled the slain, the blood-stained, yelling curses. The floor of the temple building was smirched with great volumes of their blood. I wanted to laugh aloud. There was so little room to tread that it was as if the skeletal hands lying everywhere were clutching at our feet. This place, where human blessedness was preached had become a place where humans were murdered. A place where the happiness of being human was celebrated had become a slaughterhouse. Obscene words were written on the walls in blood, graffiti reviling the Buddha in vulgar and sordid words, as well as crude representations of sexual organs.”

“We could hear our breath echoing inside the building of. Forgetting the pain in my hand, forgetting what linked me with these victims of execution, I laughed to think that the world was like this: a headless Buddha, graffiti-covered walls and, on the floor, skeletons and rotting corpses. This hilltop that should have been close to heaven—a place where we could hear the voice of heaven had now become this: an execution ground. I couldn’t help but laugh. It was as if the skeletons had risen up one by one and let the echo of their bones cry out to heaven.”

“The main temple was in such a state that it was no longer possible to carry out executions there. We went out a rocky outcrop that lay beside the building. This was the very top of the hill. From this highest point we felt as if we could almost reach out and touch the stars. It was as if the showers of shooting stars were falling directly down at us. As the stench of death drifted up towards us from the dark night below, the stars shone above, beautiful and everywhere. We were gripped by the delusion that we would be drawn up into them, that we would ascend to heaven. I seemed also to hear from the main temple a voice reciting the sutras in Pali—the resonant voice intoning the sutras seeming to wind up among the stars. A breeze blew across the plain and caressed our sweat-soaked backs.”

“We were made to kneel down in a row on the edge of a rock. One of the crows pulled out a piece of his torch and hurled it before him into the darkness. It remained floating in the air for a long time. Right in front of us there was a deep hole. It was a cave, the bottom part of which was fairly wide and there was a row of Buddhist statues against one wall. When the piece of burning brand hit the floor it was still alight, so we could see bodies piled on top of one another. They had been pushed into the hole and fallen higgledy-piggledy on top of each other. Wires protruded from them. The cavern was a dozen or so metres deep. It yawned deep and wide before our faces and from it came an even stronger smell of death.”

“How many people had been brought, like us, to the edge of this cave and cast down into it? They were all in heaps below, rotting, stinking turning to earth. We were about to become like them. We would fall, just as we were, all joined together with wire. I shook uncontrollably. My teeth chattered—teeth that would soon be like those of the skeletons we had seen in the temple building.

“We would soon drop among those corpses. The instant of our fall was peering up at us from below our feet. We were assailed by the sense that we were about to plunge into hell. So many human beings steeped in the stench of death must have been thrust down here to their own deaths. Their bodies, and those in the temple and the many who would come to be slain and piled in heaps after them, seemed to be holding back a great cry. Within this abomination, this accursedness, this grisly stench all kinds of evil all kinds of hate, all kinds of corruption seemed to be contained. I felt that every evil impulse sprang from here into the world. An evil to match this deed would mean that anything whatsoever could be permitted—such was the power that was roiling here.”

“Just before I fell I looked up at the sky. One star was twinkling beautifully as if about to

descend. For a brief moment of time I looked up at those stars, distant and therefore beautiful. I cursed that feast of beauty. I could only curse all the stars and their radiance, wishing that they would fall from the heavens and that their glorious radiance should be destroyed. Yet, at that moment, in the opposite direction to our downward-looking selves, exactly counter to our sense of physical destruction, the corpses seemed to be floating upwards, gathering together from their different resting places and rising up into the sky. From the main building too, the corpses were gathering together in the bottom of the hole and then, merging into one stream, bursting upwards. It was a river like the waters that gather and flow into Lake Tonle Sap¹: cruelly murdered corpses were coming from countless other regions, mingling together here, and rising up skywards. They were drawn up into the night sky like a waterfall falling upwards, throwing out spumes of radiance. The fierce current became like a thick pillar of light, mounting like a starry whirlwind into the sky. It seemed to me that there was something in the blood-drenched earth which meant it could be drawn upwards in the form of light. The glittering of the stars flashed through my breast.”

“One of the crows thrust his foot against my back and my body fell with the others . . .”

“. . . my falling body caught on a dead branch that projected sideways from the side of the cavern, momentarily rebounded, and then sunk into the pile of corpses. I spent the night in that sea of putrid skeletons . . .”

“Only I had miraculously returned to life, I felt I was on an eternal journey to hell and back. Submitted to the pitiless deeds of human hands, thrown to the bottom of the earth, made to stare into darkness . . . I felt that this would go on into infinity . . .”

¹ The largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. The water level can change dramatically according to the seasonal rainfall.