

ISSN 1757-8329

**Lights out
&
other poems**

Wake up! series.

Vol. 1

26.07.2008

Phuoc-Tan Diep

A first short collection of
poems,
prose poems,
short poems
&
experimental forms.

Comments, questions, reviews:
<http://ptdiep.wordpress.com/>

All my
love and thanks
to my wife Maggie –
a most excellent writer,
my greatest supporter,
my most trusted
& true editor.

PTD

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the editors that published most of these poems:

‘A portrait of death as an artist’ was first published in the winter 2008 issue of **Poetry News**. It also came a close second in the Hamish Canham Poetry Prize for that year.

Many of these poems were first published in **Ink Sweat and Tears** webzine.

‘To catch a man’ was first published in **Eastern Verses** by ForwardPress.

‘Rendezvous under a Saigon sunset’ was first published in **flashquake** webzine.

Contents

- 1 am on the wrong side of town
- Hair cut.
- Truth lies in the gaps.
- Rendezvous under a Saigon sunset.
- To catch a man.
- Butterfly Women.

- Night nemesis.
- Lights out.
- A portrait of death as an artist.
- Some foreign field.

- Waiting.
- Swan song for Peterborough.
- 'Old Houses near St Benedict's Church, Norwich' by Henry Ninham (1796-1874).

- Tanka: Pine cones.
- Falling.
- Haiku: Bluebells.
- Cleave: Charm.

Poems © 2008 Phuoc-Tan Diep

1 am on the wrong side of town

quick steps
lose their echoes
down hard streets

red lights
hide
black ice

fish nets
catch
me slipping

thank you
from
me
to
her.

Hair cut.

How long has it been
since you cut me off,
long enough to reach
your back, your legs, your feet?

Why did you cut me
short, was I too wild,
too free for you?

Remember that day
remember that shop?
You could have held me
or tied me up
so I didn't fly
in made-up faces,
but you left me
to be swept off feet
dirty with crap from the streets.

It's been awhile
I've grown, I'm back,
lets try something new,
but, what
do I know,
of styles this year
I'm only here,
to make you
look good.

Truth lies in the gaps.

Side on he stands, always side on.

His smiles.

A tick that says, 'Yes'.

His eye's a wink drawing me in
to ask him why his nose twitches.

His eyebrow curves with feigned concern.

His hair is cut short and damp
with foreign perfume.

I say, 'Face me.'

His eye winks,
his mouth ticks,
his nose twitches again.

I want to see his other side
but the mirror is broken.

Our reflections
draw separate conclusions
along criss-crossed paths.

Fragments are missing,
fallen down crevices
between floorboards
lost in the gaps no vacuum can reach.

I ask, 'Why's the mirror broken?'

'I was working late.'

Rendezvous under a Saigon sunset.

I meet my husband under a nameless bridge in this brainwashed city. All identity is buried under the red of the sun.

Our memories return, hesitant and pregnant with guilt twitching under our skin like the tap tap of phantom sticks playing marching tunes. My skin is embossed with napalm scars, indelible maps, like our wounded land - healed but still wet underneath. Do you remember, the orange of the fires that burnt the ground, the naked trees that joined our hands waving at planes we called our friends?

You look, hot, my husband. Your shirt seems to sweat for you, was England that cold? Let me undo those cuffs that hold your wrists tightly crossed behind your back.

Do you remember how Mum used to simmer clear soup for hours then laid the carcasses beside the pho? Just bones drained of life, all the meat boiled off. Don't bring back the dead. Don't take me back to bed, where the names are still engraved. Leave them buried.

Heavy whispers sneak over pillows from lips to ears, refertilising the memories of our children slaughtered by the shrapnel of our broken promises.

He may be white inside, but he will always be yellow to me, no words can whitewash his skin.

To catch a man.

She spins a web to catch a man
a silken form flowing with curves and hints of curves.

She makes a star
a skeleton to hang her web to catch a man.

She spends every thought, employs all her skill
in spinning a web to catch a man.

She works by night
to make a web a man would touch.

She takes many nights and exhausted dies
her life has created a web to catch a man.

He approaches and sheds a tear for the spider
who has spun a web in the form of a woman.

Butterfly Women.

Falling rain freezes and shatters on hardened skin, spreading shards of cold. The sky morphs from seraph blue to the dark red of prostitution.

Black leather encases her as she huddles in shadow with hail shouting out her presence. The Collectors are out with their nets as the first night of autumn falls. The moon is already out, taking its place to watch The Unfolding.

Leather creaks as muscles stretch, preparing for the flight. Her slow ugliness is gone, the fatness of youth replaced by maturity.

She is hidden. They will not find her until she appears. The taint of her former life - gluttony and the sins of the flesh are metamorphosed. In her past she tantalised men, offering more flesh than they could cope with.

Now she is clean, a new being within her hardened skin. Memories of that life will lie discarded soon enough.

It is time – adrenaline surges in waves, each one engulfing the previous. Her fear splits like the cocoon shedding around her. She stands, multicoloured, beautiful and naked. Her wings unfold filling the night with honeyed sweat - the breeze strokes her body to dryness.

Shouts erupt from below. Bright beams highlight her

nakedness. She feels no shame, no guilt - they drip off her as water onto the ground. She is free of their taint.

She jumps beneath the screech of nets. She crumples into a ball and falls. The nets entangle the cocoon above her. Suddenly, she stretches out filling the night with kaleidoscopic colours, as lights pierce translucent wings. She flies, fast, angling close to buildings, dodging nets and wires.

The stars are bright and clear in a patch of sky. There is no dust veiling them. It is a break in the glass. She aims for it. Beams criss-cross the sky, lighting up many others trying for freedom.

She wonders how many of these women will find freedom from the nets of men.

Night nemesis.

The sound of birds herald the silk of night as it comes to rest on my skin, sticking like memories of lies laid down with good intentions. Sounds of day crawl back into nests and recede into caves. The sun's second-hand light provides no heat - just the cold of a silver sickle, shining, futile in the shadowed sky, trying to hold back the flood.

We are ready to do our part, clasping to branches, close enough to feel the warmth of a thousand bodies. The moon is so thin now; the arc of a drooping leaf hides it.

Then the moon disappears and my body hums, a reflex action in unison with my entire race. I burst into light, a silent explosion of lilac pushing back blackness.

The night screams out in rustles and wails.

We sing songs of hope, songs of how we will make it through - to see the sun.

Then the sound of wings come, shadows stealing lights, smothering bodies all around me. I blaze brighter; I do not flinch, even as a shadow engulfs me.

Lights out.

'Lights out, lights off,'
we flee our beds,
downstairs, down there
helter-skelter, into the shelter
hidden from bombs
dropped by fathers in uniform
with similar smiles to Santa Claus.

Spotlights touch those planes above,
fingers too thin to catch the bullets
and bombs that fall like sand
and stones that clatter on children's heads,
bent over, pushed down by shaking hands
of mothers crying with hopes they wish could shield
their children's bodies
when the blast sends waves of sound
so loud it deafens the ground,
which quakes and groans and moans,
and breaks the house,
bursting it open, spilling its guts
all down the street.

There's the broken leg
from granddad's table.

There's the kettle
bursting and boiling too quick to whistle.

There's mom's laundry
never again in need of ironing
having found its final form
as singed confetti thrown

towards those planes
which fly so close, almost engaged,
but free to break for home,

which may not exist,
when they get back
if our fathers' presents are handed out
to foreign children, just like me.

My ears! My ears!
They bleed and ring with deafness
lodged too deep to think.

Its been so long the blood has dried
and died, so long the skin
has fallen off and blown away,
pieces of dust unmissed, unseen
blown over sea to find a field
where people plant and pray for life
to burst from seeds, then march back home
to bare houses where light
is scarce and mothers screech,
'Lights out, lights off,
no need for light when you're asleep.'

Late at night I hear mom ask,
'To kill, to die, are we better off?'
but she should know better,
the ground's too deep
for dad to hear her cry.

A portrait of death as an artist.

Light peels back the night from faces
with prayers engraved on chiselled lips

the mist of souls is teased towards the sky
by the sun that lifts the veil to peep

at death upon the ground
already calling those bodies down

the bodies of boys buried neck deep
in metal tombs no longer draped in laughs.

The water-colours of yesterday have dried,
like oil, becoming water-fast.

So time scrapes the scene and scrapes the scene
until all flesh is gone and bones are stones

that mark the beds of boys that overnight
joined their forefathers in the grave.

The tombs crumble into remnants,
overrun by the forest's creep.

Green crystals encrust copper,
swords and helmets lie exposed.

Earth draws the greens back down,
reds and golds blur the setting sun.

Black night tumbles from the sky,
pierced by time's perfect aim.

Some foreign field.

A can of Canada Dry ginger ale lies exposed, torn in half. A tramp sniffs it for booze. It smells of fruit fermenting in wet packs. His boots are rotten, toecaps lifting off dirt-encrusted feet. He looks like he has marched a long way, from a far off bunker in some foreign field to this hidden place under a leafy bush in St. James Park.

The green map of Canada expands, reflected in sodium streetlights, mixing with leaves and covering him with lines of longitude and latitude, like a thin wire cage.

Now the soldiers lack stealth as they march, feet tapping on thin aluminium. He can almost hear their communiqúés, the Morse code of tiny feet. The tramp shuffles deeper under the bush, allowing shadows to hide him from enemy eyes. Police sirens keep him on the edge of sleep.

Soft grass sighs as it is crushed under the running feet of a young boy, too young for cigarettes. He coughs up smoke in great mustard swirls. He looks around, eyes hidden under his cap with U2's Achtung Baby emblazoned on it. He flicks the glowing tip, sparks flaring bright, and lobs it like a grenade, into the ginger ale can. He flees.

Soldier ants rush out over No Man's Land and flattened poppies into their trenches.

There is two minutes silence.

The boom-boom of nightclubs shudder leaves, raining them down like shrapnel on the tramp. He flinches, retreating further into the ambush of sleep.

Waiting.

12pm

I hate waiting - always have.

1pm

Memories are littered with queues springing up, ambushing me whilst I rushed for trains, and zoo visits in torrential rain marred by people with umbrellas leaping out from under trees.

2pm

I wished, back in the twenty first century, that I had time to watch the tigers.

3pm

I waited in lines with other passive aggressives whilst many tigers died.

4pm

I wasted so much time that tigers became extinct.

5pm

Luckily I found the secret of eternal life by accident, whilst waiting in the Post Office.

6pm

The secret is to hold onto life so tightly that none of it can slip through your hands.

7pm

In time it became effortless.

8pm

The problem, as I found out, is letting go.

9pm

I searched for the wisest minds in all the earth and beyond.

10pm

I waited in long queues to see them.

11pm

They did not know - how I could let go. Wisdom, they said, is not holding on so tightly in the first place.

12am

I still hate waiting, even with all the time in the world.

Swan song for Peterborough.

A cathedral dominates
the multicoloured shops,
its stones hold choir songs
and memories of departed queens.

Its bells call out
but lives are brief
and memories shorter.

The splash of sound
spreads through the city
in concentric peaks and troughs.
The notes bounce off trains
reflecting down river

and mingle in trees and rushes
where cygnets turn their heads.

The swan enfolds them in her wings,
a white spire against the cloudless blue.

**‘Old Houses near St Benedict's Church, Norwich’
by Henry Ninham (1796-1874).**

Her soles are so thin
the ground almost kisses
her feet and the mud
of life clings to her
petticoat.

Benedictions echo
melodies for the fowl
that woke the day.

Music weaves into her
frayed garments, mending
with strands like silk and lace.
The orchestra accompanies her solos
winding on, looming in
the shade of over-burdened homes belching children
from distended stomachs. The men
are hidden under their shrouds of slavish works.

This is, life. So,

smiles are real
crafted oil painted curves,
unchanged by the lives
that moved off before
the paint was dry.

Tanka: Pine cones.

Pine cones filled with snow
litter the feet of tall firs
pointing ever skyward,
hairs on the back of the world
draped with miniature stars.

Falling.

The false weightlessness of F
thrills, as branches breAk
time stutters, turns, tumbLes
earth mocks the sky and fLees
blurring – stomach churnIng,
Dirt becomes profouNd
– a final restinG place.

Haiku: Bluebells.

Blood in bluebell woods,
where wolves walk and humans stalk
with silver bullets.

Cleave: Charm.

Don't let him charm you
don't listen to his promises his words like birds
scattering flies that flit from brow to
lash,
ready for your flesh, stroking feather kisses
on your lips
he squawks in expectation humming in your ears,
flapping inside your skull as he lies next to you.
Don't! Let him charm you!