



a rabble of butterflies

wanderings and ponderings in South East Asia

a selection of writings from time spent (mostly) in Indonesia and Malaysia between 2012 - 14

with thanks and appreciation to everyone that has given me a cup of tea, a plate of rice, rides, a bed or floor to sleep on, smiles along the way...

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The Developers

Labuanbajo, Flores, November 2013

His manner was brusque and a little domineering, and he seemed to inhabit it, like a suit. They drank beer and talked business - of places and people and prices - and complained in mock disbelieving tones of the workers and called each other 'love'. After he had left she complained to us of him. He had a grudge against her because she had refused to sell him some land. He had no morals she said, he'd just sell to whoever. He didn't care what it was going to be used for later, he just wanted a quick buck. She cared. 'What difference does it make to you?' they asked her. But she'd lived here thirteen years now, and twenty before that in Bali, and she didn't *want* to see it go that way. In Bali everybody had known them, driving around on their scooters, and then they'd just had enough; it was a travesty the way that it had gone, and so they'd come and set up here instead. And so she always asked first what they wanted to do with it. A few chalets and a swimming pool; ok, that was fine, it was nice, it was tasteful, but not these monstrosities like they were building now all along the seafront, blocking out the views. Only a year ago she had bought this land, built this bar, and already someone was building right in front of it. And there was nothing you could do - you just had to accept it. That used to all be white sand beach just there, all the way along to the market on the corner. Land reclamation they called it, and goodness knows what for. And he just comes in on a tourist visa as well; it pisses her right off. Her's is a registered company; they pay their KITAS. When the immigration pulled up incognito on a rainy Saturday night; "well I'm afraid I can't serve you a beer 'cos I've sent all the workers home and you can see that I'm bule" she said, and "well I'm glad to hear that" he said, flashing his card. But all of these, just out to make easy money, they're just in and out again every ninety days, and it's the same with all the dive instructors on the high street. None of them pay. And she gets so angry when she sees how some of them treat their workers (she had told us a joke about brain sizes), clicking their fingers at them as though they were not human beings. "One day I just exploded at her; 'don't you dare' I said. But I'm just not having it; it's not on. This boy down here, he wants to be a dentist, and I'm proud of him now that he can follow his dream." He smiled up at us obligingly. She knew the owner of the café - a French bakery - where I drank my morning coffee and ate rare pastries and proper bread. "Oh yes, she's lovely" she said, and she was. But I knew that my friends started their day there at five and ended at seven; that they worked six days a week with no real holiday. That their Sunday was filled with washing and their thoughts with work, and their evenings weary and their dreams still distant.

Words

The air is thick with words. They fill the atmosphere like a fog, hanging, half-there. Some seep into my skin. Some swirl a haze half-noticed around my head. I am awash with words.

Everyone is awkward when learning a new language. One cannot but be humble. Cannot dominate or posture. One does not belong. One is not at home.

This stumbling is the truth of us. This vulnerability lays us bare. We like to clothe ourselves in words. Learning to be awkward is learning to be true to oneself.

I had felt a little distant, a sense of not quite-belonging, with a discomforting tinge of treachery. But in travel one is always in exile. It is the ground and the premise and all relationships and interactions are built on this. Learning to live in exile is learning to love things for what they are.

I am ready to love it all again.



Butterfly Notions

Thailand, July 2012

Sitting on the white steps of the nested bungalow, my mug of t-shirt filtered coffee a passable triumph over circumstances of remoteness, the air clear from the rain but already settling into the sediment of day. Across the space; a hillside forested with coconut palms, tiny coloured boats on the ocean's edge, the beach still unpopulated save a few inching dots. Birdcalls that I had begun to recognise, but as yet unattributed sound. A juvenile papaya tree, and a brown shrivelling coconut, withdrawn into its rich interior to send itself sprouting hopefully skywards from its fallen spot where, still unrooted, it might yet stake its future. Scrawny black chickens occupied amongst scraggling undergrowth. Unfamiliar weeds. And in between, a myriad of butterflies; touching, brushing, skitting effortlessly in and out of visibility. Incredible colours and designs convey coded communiqués in worlds of meaning invisible to my voyeuristic eyes, interpretation consigned to blind judgements of beauty. Their reckless flaunting of freedom - the freedom of being here, now, in this tiny patch of stretching space; a freedom that we share - is thrilling, the strength of their delicate dust-powder wings to sustain them, flitting, airborne, under atmospheric immensity, exalting. The power to be lighter than this weighted air...

Enforcing Ramadan

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, July 2012

Today was the first day of Ramadan. People had been speaking of it with resigned apprehension, the way that in England many people had been speaking of the impending Olympics (as an unwelcome imposition to be collectively endured) but I hadn't quite understood what it all meant. One month - for the settling evening's crescent moon (the 'moonchild' declared my friend) to flourish, round, and thin itself back down to a wafer - before the daily fast will be replaced with food-oriented celebration (also, in some cases, for one month).

I met my friend in town after his day's shift. Instead of a lunchbreak, he had been let out an hour early. Starting at nine, he had not eaten all day, with only furtive fag breaks in fear of opportunistic security guards who might seek to extort money in exchange for a blind eye. We went to a special Ramadan market and pushed our way through unthinning crowds, largely Malay, to browse the length of it - three streets of little stalls under blue umbrellas selling handmade foods of all varieties. It took some time for him to jostle his way into a stall and emerge with a couple of brown paper packets of some tasty looking rice dishes. I was surprised to find a busy food market to serve the social occasion of the fast. People take it home to eat at the end of the day, he explained.

My friend is of Malay ethnicity, and therefore Muslim in the eyes of the Malaysian state. The other significant ethnic groupings are Indian and Chinese. Whilst all citizens must obey civil law, Malays,

Down the corridor queue portraits of all the previous pastors; deep eyed and serious with bushy beards and clerical spectacles. In soft black and white the Father transfixed my gaze with clear eyes, the angular jaw handsome and resolute.

The evening held still and quiet in the white electric light of this little dining room, separated from the wider, wilder night by old pastel-painted plank walls. The authority of position, intimately settled. Tinges of resentment, tinges of resignation edge that mumbling and misunderstood chuckle. The sediment of choices almost forgotten; health issues; a life given over to a grand imposing vision, now dissipated to small pleasures and a warm familiar love.

Mas E- poured us all more weak tea ('from glasses; everything always served in glasses') and we spoke the after-prayer (number 70) from the little worn red books and we cross ourselves and say our thanks and leave.



An old man was sick; a stroke. He lay in the room behind, separated by a thin red curtain. In the front room the family was gathered. I did my round of introductions, touching each one lightly with the right-hand palm, and took my place in the circle, cross-legged on the fraying rattan mats. The light was calm and intimate within the wooden walls. Gharish pictures of a pale-skinned Jesus interspersed family portraits above the door. The men, on either side of me, conversed and joked with crease and furrow and gesture, enveloped in the usual wisping cigarette smoke, but for once it didn't bother me. The women balanced babies in the shadows. As the invalid was carried out to the next room by muscular arms, I glimpsed for a moment bushy eyebrows and a thin face with frail limbs. Coffee and cake was brought by the boy with standard stooping gesture in respectful deference to all the others in the space.

A prolonged clanging of dull bells drowns out the paltry crowing of the rooster. It's five o'clock. For the children of the boarding houses prayer before school. Strains of popular classics begin to fill the air throughout the village. An uplifting and inspiring regulatory noise.

The Village of Anam

Anam, Flores, November 2013

Despite the speed with which he had raced there, curving rather dangerously into the corners, my clinging terrified behind, the bus had already left. I sat on the kerb outside the little corner warung where a woman dozed on a bench in dim light no doubt catching up on missed hours, and contemplated my stranded state.

Soon I was joined in my contemplations by curious loiterers who questioned me with friendly interrogation. They did not believe that anyone would willingly sleep outside in a tent. "There is a Hungarian priest at the church the village above" said the man on the motorbike; "He's lived there for years. I will take you to him and you can sleep there." That was how I found myself at the house of the pastor.

His face was furrowed and fleshy, with what might have been jowls had there been a little more mirth animating that angular jaw. But fifty years an inevitable outsider with a solitary dogged superiority of one's own way must be a little jarring to that idealistic missionary spirit, the determination setting a little hard over the years, a little grim.

We sat facing one another across the long table ready-laid with dishes brought up from the kitchen – watery heaped kangkung and a big pot of rice ('every day just rice' he grumbled and shook his head in long-enduring disbelief); matchstick potato chips and ketchup; white rolls (his housekeeper had learned to bake them specially); and Chinese tinned pork, sliced, fried and quivering. A blue checked table cloth overlaid with plastic reflected in the silver pan, with knives and forks laid neatly either side of the plates.

Not a bad approximation, for all that time in noble exile; the quotidian struggle to create in this inadequate alien world a mirror – a moral model village – of a world whose image had long faded before the recalcitrant enduring sameness of these parochial wooden walls. "The legions of the faithful" he said.



as Muslim by legal categorisation, are additionally bound by Sharia law, whose pronouncements reach deep into personal aspects of people's lives. Individual religious practice (belief is not in question - there is no option for Malays to convert out of Islam) is a social matter, subject to legal enforcement. For a Malay to be caught consuming food or drink during Ramadan is a matter for arrest and social correction by way of compulsory moral counselling.

We thought to find a park or somewhere similar where we might be able to sit and eat free from the risk of prying would-be moral vigilante eyes. For an hour or so, we walked around the city, carrying our dinner in little plastic bags, trying to find a suitable spot. Too secluded would perhaps invite greater suspicion were we to be seen. The best strategy would be to find somewhere, perhaps closer to Chinatown, where he would have a greater chance of passing as non-Malay. Eventually we found some concrete steps next to a fenced off area just off a not-too-busy road. We sat and ate our little packages of rice, and fresh sweet soy milk - one ringgit for a little plastic bagful, better than any I'd had so far. At one point a man walked by. He comes into my workplace every day, my friend said, its the first time I've seen him out of work. Do you think its OK? I asked, and he nodded - yes he wouldn't care because he's Chinese. We swapped sides, so that I was the one with my face to the road.

Coming from a culture characterised by governmental lip service to the notion of individual freedom, I expressed my feelings towards the extremity of these intrusions into personal conduct in tones of disbelief. It hadn't so much occurred to him to feel it something crazy he said - since childhood he had been having to find hiding places to consume food during Ramadan (it's like the state still treats us as children). More acutely felt was the hassle and weariness that having to do this every day for a month would entail.

For non-Malays, the inconvenience would be limited to slightly lesser availability of food than usual. For my friend, and other non-Muslim Malays, who wish to eat when they are hungry, the practical problem is one of hiding out or blending in. Psychic apprehension of others first and foremost in terms of race is reinforced by state policies that empower its citizens to police one another's behaviour. The ethnic division propagated by these policies is a continuation of the strategy of racial segregation deliberately employed by the British in order to stifle any prospect of a united communist resistance to oppressive colonial rule. It is still there, said my friend; the government are terrified of losing this power.

This raising of spiritual and moral concerns to a social and legal plane means that individual responsibility is a matter of following instruction well rather than a self-motivated struggle to navigate a personal path. I asked my friend whether he had felt spiritual benefit from fasting at Ramadan during the time when he did consider himself Muslim. Yes he did feel that he was closer with his religion at this time, he said, but mainly it took the form of a feeling of safety, in knowing that you were carrying out your life in a good and moral manner and in a way that is socially prescribed and forms your social context. This subjugation of the individual to the social also means that people are not only regulated by the State and its tools of enforcement, but encouraged to take on this role themselves.

We finished our meals and set back towards Chinatown in the fast-falling dusk. One day down, another twenty-nine to go.

Butterfly-Human Mud-Puddling

Kuala Lumpur, September, 2012

In the park in KL there is a butterfly garden.

It is one of those strange places where tourist attraction meets (funds and enables) nature conservation - where humans on hiatus from busy lives get to see, for an entrance fee, non-human 'nature': wild creatures bred in captivity in something approximating their native environment. It is one of those places that seems to offer possibilities of intimate (and non-destructive) encounter with the natural world such as our lives typically lack, whilst at the same time relegating it to human-engineered spectacle (and consigning you to the position of passive yet all-powerful observer).

I learned that one way of identifying butterflies is by their patterns of flight - some slow and gliding, akin to birds, some erratic and flitting. I was surprised to learn that these creatures of striking colours, whose name invokes a poetics of summer, pump cold-blood around those little furry bodies, liking to bask in the sunshine to absorb heat through their wings. I also learned that, in addition to sweet flower nectar, some butterflies eat carrion (and very many rotting fruit), or at least the accumulated liquids thereof, that they draw up in thin streams through hollow probing probosci.

An intricately patterned orange butterfly alighted on my hand. I could feel its sticky feet, and a slight pulsing of tiny pockets of displaced air as it fluttered to find a favourable position. It then proceeded to unfurl its proboscis from the tight spiral which it had been keeping neatly out of the way between two pixelated spheroid eyes and started sucking up little puddles of sweat from my hand. And at regular intervals, would curl its abdomen underneath it in an eyeblink flicker manoeuvre and spurt out a sizeable puddle of clear liquid towards its head end, that it would then proceed to suck back up.

For about fifteen minutes I watched and felt this little butterfly engaging in an intensely intimate yet anonymous encounter with my hand, oblivious to or unfazed by my giant-eyed interest, as we mingled human-butterfly bodily fluids, in an exchange impenetrable to my understanding.



there are many women who say no, who say that they still want to work. But at the time that I got married, in Indonesia, a man could say that he didn't want his wife to work."

So I try to temper the manifestations of my alien outlook and minimise the clash. Because choice or lesser choice, the fact that it is, if nothing else, requires a certain respect and sure in thirty years it's inevitable that one would come to inhabit the role. A choice constrained by circumstance, now the basis of a life's investment. They are excellent cooks. My friend's mother washes the dishes properly. Her family never visits the doctor. I smiled at the photo of the maid's little boy in Lombok - she supports him through her work.

So I continue to rage at the context, whilst enthusing with appreciation at those little motherly overattentions that stifle and entrap (that enable, undemanded, at their own expense); the values that never had any other choice, that now crystallise as parental pressures once again. On the bookshelf of my friend's house in Jakarta I was surprised to find a copy of *The Feminine Mystique*. It must be my father's, he said; my mother never learned to speak English.

Bali: Dogs and Offerings

Denpasar, Bali, October 2013

"Have you noticed how the dogs in Bali are particularly sensitive to the presences?" asked the teacher. "Perhaps it's because they keep eating all the offerings" I ventured. I had noticed that the JCO in town put pink-iced mini doughnut on theirs (had noted it with an empathetic scavenger's eye - old habits die hard). "Well, that must be it" he said, "they're all souped up on spiritual energy all the time!"

I had not taken it so seriously... in fact the observation had been G-'s, not mine; "it seems the street dogs have a great symbiotic relationship with the systems of ritual here; the humans put the rice out for the gods and the dogs come and eat it for them." "Perhaps it's that the gods take on the form of dogs in order to accept the offerings" I said, and we laughed at the notion of the gods incarnate in these scruffy canine loiterers.

Every morning, absorbed in my own rituals of coffee and cycle rounds, I brush with the women who, amidst enveloping incense haze, wrapped tight in sash and sarong, bend and proffer before the shrines to lay intricate banana leaf platter arrangements on thresholds and other places where indelicate feet trample.

All these human hours, these labour hours (women's labours) - the intent and concentration, absorbed into these tiny tasks. Relentless ritual to please and appease those unseen spirits of the otherworlds that are overlaid on our own.

But then, what makes a place sacred? I wondered, other than the residues; the intangible accumulations of all that has been done there, that which is left after the doing. What is the offering, but that of human life expended; a tiny mundane sacrifice?

That which we consume, unknowingly, unthinkingly, in that which we consume is made invisible in distance, in passing through the threshold of monetary exchange. It is the surplus of this sacrificed human life; haunting and unseen. Human life made gratuitous.

The spirits are not blind to it. They meet it at the threshold. Freshly prepared fresh-plucked blossoms, cigarettes and rice. They consume the invisible remainder and leave the thing. They feast on the human essence. And the dogs eat the wastage; the material surplus from the sun-wilted heaps that accumulate on the roadsides throughout the day.

Marriage

September 2013

We are both thirty years old. “Thirty is late to be getting married in Indonesia” she said. I had been told as much by many a disapproving ibu. We were washing clothes in plastic tubs, water slopping onto the concrete floor; me rather slowly, my water slick with seeping brown grime; her’s (a little too slippery with detergent I felt) a family load full, manipulated with mechanistic scrub and twist.

“Did you imagine that your life would be like that when you chose to get married?” I asked. “Well, I didn’t think about that” she said. “When you are an activist you don’t think about things like that, but in Indonesia, if our parents are sakit hati, we want to stop them being sad. We want to make them happy. I just felt that we were both activists, so maybe I could have more freedom that way.”

“And do you feel that you have it?” I asked. “Well, yes, he gives me freedom, but the difficulty comes from our parents. I don’t really have any connection with what I was doing before. Sometimes I feel stressed, but then I try to just calm down. I try to adjust.”

I floundered inefficiently outside the doorway, my feet splotted black from the splashes of water that I had rung out into the dust. She brought me coathangers at and told me there was nasi goreng in the rice cooker if I wanted to eat.

Her demeanour invited independence. She inhabited the role with familiarity. I recognised the gestures of hospitality from the many houses in which I had been made to feel welcome. The expectations absorbed so well. “In Indonesia, we feel happy when we give good service” I was once told, whilst his wife, who had made the cookies, smiled on by his side.

Sometimes I have to remember and fight the complicity, or perhaps complacency that would transform acceptance into assumption. That would turn me back into a child to be mothered, as many would have it should I yield. It’s taken a long time even to accept.

In a suburb town near Kuala Lumpur, I found myself in a house with a maid, from Lombok. She laughed when I tried to make my own coffee and wash my own dishes, as I guess you’d have to laugh. It was the first of many such blunders.

Sometimes I feel treacherous at feeling trapped. Being pulled around with instructive hands. Given mattresses and fussing safety and walls when these things were left behind even before I really dreamed. And really, who am I to feel trapped that will pass through but briefly? Sometimes I fortify myself with tiny rebellions, as though still a teenager: I’d prefer my nails not cut down to the quick so that the dirt has no room to enter; I like sitting on the floor; I sleep without a pillow; don’t need to shower three times a day. But then I do also have borders to maintain.

“Don’t be angry...” said my friend: his mother had washed all of my clothes. “She thinks that if you wash, and if I wash, and if everybody washes by themselves then perhaps there won’t be enough water.” She was probably right, and it’s probably true that I never do the dishes quite so well.

I found the air freshener that was making me queasy and put it outside the door and tried to open the windows. Later I found my toiletries arranged, and the toilet scrubbed.

I was drinking coffee and being not as helpful as I wanted to be in the kitchen. “When I married, my husband said that he didn’t want me to work any more.” She looked at me with fixed gaze. “He said that if we were to get married, then I would have to give up my job. So I did – I was a teacher before. Now,



Later, I learned that this butterfly with slightly ragged orange wings of the ‘nymph’ variety, was mud-puddling me. Mud-puddling is an insect (but mainly butterfly) technique to supplement a nutrient-poor nectar diet (flowers don’t like to give too much away). It involves whole communities of (mostly male) butterflies gathering at puddles, which often contain traces of animal excretions, to suck up and filter the water for minerals, particularly sodium, which explains the attraction to my sweat. The squirting of excess fluids from the abdomen occurs after it has passed through the butterfly’s body for filtration, as they ingest vast quantities of liquids in one go. I suspect that in reingesting it, it also helped this butterfly to lift the salts and minerals from the surface of my skin.

This is what I learned of the value of sodium for butterflies:

“Sodium is passed by the males to the females during mating. Males transfer this sodium and amino acids to the females together with the spermatophore during mating, as a nuptial gift - it enhances reproductive success. This nutrition also enhances the survival rate of the eggs. Each male can mate with multiple females, so with each copulation, the sodium/nutrient stock is depleted and he will have to puddle again.”¹

Other minerals and amino acids are useful for various physiological functions, particularly the creation of pheromones and sperm.

A little while after having taken our leave of each other (having had its fill), the very same ragged orange butterfly came and found me again in a different spot, and started mud-puddling the sweat behind my ear.

My skin had an ever so slight scent of flower nectar. Flower nectar passed through butterfly gut. That my excess bodily fluids, recklessly discarded in unthinking droplets in the endless effort to keep cool, could be put back into a cycle of use; transformed into butterfly love potions and caring mineral provisions for larvae yet to be formed, feels like a blessing; an offer of communion, of collusion as creatures, in spite of our mutually selfish intentions, although, for my romantically preoccupied nymph collaborator, I’m sure that my clumsy incomprehensions are neither here nor there.²

¹ <http://butterflycircle.blogspot.com/2008/11/why-do-butterflies-puddle.html>

² Probably somewhat illogically, I feel much less kindly towards the mosquitoes that relentlessly pierce my skin to draw vital life nutrients from my blood. The carnivorous Harvester butterfly also feeds on woolly aphids in this way.

Rumah Api

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, September 2012

I think it not unfair to say that, by and large, Kuala Lumpur is about the most uninspiringly dismal nullity of a place, the most soul-crushing bland triumph of the crusading capitalist imagination of any capital city that I've ever visited.

I feel thankful to the anti-Gods that within the midst of this breeding ground for shopping malls glimmers the defiant spark of Rumah Api - 'House of Fire' - and the awesome punk kids who keep it running (between day jobs and studies and the general shit that comes with living an alternative lifestyle in Malaysia) as venue, radical social space, home and refuge.

The evening that I arrived, walking three miles from the wrong LRT station in a tropical storm, there was a grindcore gig. We spent an hour sweeping floods of filthy black rainwater out of the basement with brooms.

Rumah Api is first and foremost a punk space. When you live under an authoritarian religious capitalist government that makes it state business to regulate your private and moral life - a government that only recently (with election time) decided that listening to punk music is not a heathen act under the dictates of Islamic piety - to call yourself a punk, and all that that entails, is already an act of resistance inviting backlash (though not necessarily always matched with political consciousness). But as well as running gigs and free rehearsal space, Rumah Api is an explicitly anti-capitalist anti-authoritarian space, with informational and fundraising events, and an infoshop - Pustaka Semesta (the people's library) - running out of the bedroom of two of the guys who live there and stocked through donation, personal effort and personal risk! There is also a permanent open welcome for visitors and the KL Food not Bombs group, which for the last ten years has been running a table in town every Sunday, formerly ran their kitchen here and gets their veg from the market across the road.



Taking turns, we stirred the liquid for an hour, creating a craterous centrifugal swirl and then turning it back on itself. Tiny vortices surged and dissipated and currents collided in frothing slopping chaos before realigning themselves once again into one rushing flow.

Stray splashes doused our skin, were exchanged with drops of sweat.

After an hour we stopped and the water settled a reflective brown surface. No rush, no movement, no smell, save a clear and fresh earthy aspect like morning dew or leaf litter, or roots freshly exposed.

We sloshed a bucketful into the tin container and, hoisting it onto his back, baseball cap cocked, he strode out to spray the fields...

Yogya Kembali: Experience and Memory

Yogyakarta, September 2013

Only when one has left a place and returned to it once more does it ever really start to feel a home.

Every action, every experience is formative of our personhood. Everything we do will be reabsorbed into the thing in process that we are ever becoming as that which we already are. That is just one reason that every action, every word, every minute gesture or half-noticed moment bears the weight of utmost responsibility. That is why our watch must never slacken.

Slowing down to let fat ducks, squeaking fluffy ducklings in straggled tow, waddle across stony village paths, I thought of childhood visits to my grandparents in the Cotswolds. Bumping along on dusty roads, nestled in the fetid squelch of decaying sugarcane dregs, I watched the stars and thought of all the rides I've taken, strangers met, stories shared in distant landscapes. Familiar shaggy dandelions, in the cooler mountain air, nursed in polybag pots with the dignity of rare orchids, and I remembered the summer days of overflowing abundance and that joyous yellow field on which we stumbled.

All experience is overlaid with memory. The past lends depth of meaning to the present, and as experience accumulates, I find pleasure in iteration. In patterns, and echoes, and secret connections.

When I arrived, without friends or purpose, and everything was new, and everything was unknown, I was alone, and unattached. I had not yet any connections. Though I carried the strength of it inside me as a golden glowing orb, my life, my community was severed. And I free-floating, untethered, vulnerable. I had no alliances.

Now, returning once more, across the blank enormous sea, my thoughts wander up amongst the teak trees; their gigantic leaves gently rustling, and I remember my astonishment at the chewed wad of red-stained leaf and spittle in his palm, and the proud punk in Pati who wafted the aroma from the steaming heap of rice, and waning patchy light in Blora woodland, and mushrooms scouted from afternoon haystacks as our feet sank below the level of the horizon in the soft gray squelching mud...

Making Biodynamic Compost Pt. II

Imogiri, Yogyakarta Regency, December 2013

“If I’m not in a good mood in the morning” Alex stated cheerfully, “I very soon am once I get near my cows. They tell me exactly what I’m like, and they notice cosmic happenings. A cow relates to its total environment. She is steady, calm, placid and harmonious. Her digestive system is a veritable cosmos in nature, the most refined on earth. The manure that comes out of her is up to 25% microbes...”

“See that cow! Her horns are on her, so to say, to hold in what’s taking place in her magnificent cosmos of digestion and metabolism. Deer have antlers reaching out, exactly the opposite of the cow’s horn in expression. Unlike cows, the deer constantly communicate with nature in a state of alertness, with a certain amount of fear in the background, the exact opposite from a cow’s placid demeanour... A mature cow has horns and if they are later cut off, that polled cow will ‘go dull’ and never be the same as when she was horned.”

Alex turned to explain: “when one looks into such a cavity, washed clean, one gains the impression that if one fell into it one might never get out again.”

- Tomkins and Bird make BD500 with Alex Podolinsky in *Secrets of the Soil*.

A bit of bamboo marked the spot. Under bare brown earth lay treasures interred.

Scrabbling fingers dug down disrupting the loose soil. Dully gleaming with the residues of secret subterranean processes, one by one the cow horns were unearthed.

With hollow knocks we tapped them out tumbling: crumbly compact yellows; rich red densities like clay; translucent latticed roots. All alive with life, infinitely invisibly complex.

There is a mundane magic in these little balls, this composted cowshit, rolled between our palms. But then the magic’s always there, in the soil and in the leaves, passed over in our blundering, practical apprehension of the world as apparent to suit our size and senses. And then what is magic anyway, but those alliances, the encounters and the transformations, that occur without of our own sphere of habitual operation? Without of our understanding?

Mechanically wetting, pressing, rolling. A convergence of cow and cosmos; of microbial lives and moon-pull and minerals and human sweat and human needs and the song of blessing that Pak Lawu sang as we worked in the afternoon’s still tranquility.

The next day we stirred twenty little hardened balls into a vat of water. A late afternoon sun streamed slatted and piecemeal onto a straw-scattered workshed floor. Dust flecks danced in suspended light with idle golden flicker.

“Rumah Api is a small group of people with the common goal of contributing to build a stronger and more politically active punk rock movement. We are a small group of individuals that have joined together our ideas and abilities to work on numerous projects as past of a single entity in an overall struggle against tyranny and oppression. Everyone likes to pigeonhole and this is how we prefer to look at ourselves: our politics are anti-establishment, our outlook is punk rock.”

- graffiti on the wall



The radical punk scene in Malaysia is pretty tiny. The first two events that I attended there had crowds that you could count on fingers and maybe toes, and a grindcore all-dayer (which was jam-packed and sweaty) brought punks from all over the peninsular as well as Indonesia, Borneo and Singapore, but day-to-day the support network comprises a few familiar faces. Which makes it all the more inspiring that, in the belly of such bleak prevailing capitalist ubiquity, Rumah Api still burns a steady flame.

Fumigating

Malaka, Malaysia, October 2012

In the peripheries of my dozing consciousness intruded commotion: interrupting daylight; noises - a humming outside the windows getting louder; a shadowed figure in the half light, in boxers, confused and stumbling... I turned over and wrapped the cotton sheet around me, unclothed, before I recognised the noise and snapped to violent lucidity. A scabble to close the windows. Masked fumigators patrolled the streets like plague doctors, stoic in the function of necessary public service. Noxious white clouds blossomed up from ground level, like dry ice, like purity, cleansing the atmosphere, sterilising all. We ran up to the roof and felt it alien in our mouths and heavy in our lungs. Unable to escape the rising haze we watched the chemical clouds roll hungrily around the helpless morning streets.

Aid-ul-adhr Ritual Slaughter

Batam, Sumatra, September 2012

The prayers carried on until dawn. Strained loudspeakers blared a crackling cacophony of invocations into the defenceless night air. In some ways I had to admire the brash righteous unsociability with which it commandeered the space around it, but then no one else seemed to find it quite so jarring. And in any case, I rather prefer the idea of this (wholly tuneless) holy racket as sacred sound - the emphasis seeming rather on process and effort (choruses of kids compensated their lack of ability with volume and enthusiasm) - than a tentative mimicry of some contrived notion of heavenly harmoniousness.

The festival is aid-ul-adhr, and celebrates the faith of the prophet Ibrahim (In Christian tradition, Abraham), who trusted in Allah so completely that he was about to sacrifice his own child before Allah intervened at the last moment (it was just a test of faith all along!) - so instead Ibrahim sacrificed a goat. So in commemoration, people donate goats to the mosque to be ritually slaughtered and the meat distributed among poorer members of the community - an admirably functional interpretation. This slaughter forms the focus of the celebration.

The goats bore placards around their necks with the names of the donors, and seemed fairly oblivious of their imminent fate, tethered to the fence next to where men dug holes in the dusty earth to catch the blood, happily munching on weeds. There were also three cows. The audacious blaring noise of the previous night's prayers had mellowed under the hot glare of morning to a single, continuous, altogether more tunefully contained refrain, to invoke blessings throughout the slaughter and upkeep the form of ritual.

Everybody was crowded around. Kids ran everywhere. It took the full team of men in blue t-shirts to contain the struggles of the first cow which kicked out precariously as its legs were tied, but eventually it was laid down and hoofs bound, its head on the block and its neck stretched over the hole in the ground, restraining hands covering its eyes, raising up its chin, stroking its flank.



Malang: Kerbside Coffee, Wheels

Malang, East Java, June 2013

Streaming solid, stealthy and multiple down wide-tarmacked roads. This had been my destination for months now - my promised place.

I had found my friend again. He had pulled up beside me with brown paper dinner in hand, perfunctory intimacy and habitual ease.

In a few months they had set up Malang's first bike courier company. The third in Indonesia after Jakarta and Surabaya, operating from a junk-piled friendly front room. With blithe disregard for the mountainous terrain they power up the hill to Batu without gears or cares (the hill that I had just spent twenty minutes rolling down).

Now the roads stretched out before us, glittering with orange lights, conduits to our fluid dominion.

Friends converged upon the kerbside. In lamplight, low and comfortable on concrete, I sipped thick chocolate rum, sweet and profound. A self-built bicycle stall, with a stove in one side and ice-box in the other and stickily stencilled black print. Later I had a coffee too. Local coffee; the best I'd had in Java. It warmed my heart and my gullet to a quiet effusion.

In the evening he cycles several kms up and down the hills from home to magically transform this vacant pavement, this hostile concrete city space, into one of warmth and commonplace communion.

We stopped a while, and then we were gone.



Blora: Boots

Blora, Central Java, May 2013

In the stillness of the evening darkly hung; waiting. With machinic roar and clatter the forces of ownership and authority returned, bringing with them the dust of day - the outside world - to settle on subdued planks. A beam through the darkness; suspension ruptured; purpose again restored.

A definitive figure, upright, outlined blackly against shadows indistinct. He sat in the chair - the nearest chair - to unlace his heavy boots. A little shy; yes, I was part of the furniture, of the shadows quietly awaiting. Quickly I regathered myself to assert my humanity whilst the sphere of his dominion seeped around the edges that held insufficient refuge.

Kulon Progo, Gawai

Kulon Progo, Yogyakarta Regency, Harvest Festival, June 2013

Gleaming red: in doorways chillis heaped in exuberant abundance. An impossible red; a red of ostentatious defiant luxuriance; in defiance of the stark black sands from which they come, and of those that would deny this abundance. Of those who would uproot and overrule it, along with the hopes, the labours, the ingenuity, the community, the survival prospects of all of those whose resolve has made this coastal black desert bloom life-red sustenance.

A sign in the communal meeting room says “Usir!!! Pertambangan. Kami sudah kaya tanpa kalian.”¹ Even on this harvest day the shadow of oppressive outside forces (the state, opportunistic foreign investment; the sultanate of Yogyakarta) and their instruments of power form an ever-present shadow, as they do in daily life. “To plant is to struggle”² say the words emblazoned on the banner from behind the festivities on the stage. Having survived a community in struggle with the land, having won a hard-battled stewardship of its productive powers, all promise and corporate enticement must seem tricks and glitter compared with the magical alliances that draw from the depths those defiant irrefutable reds. So now, the struggle continues, but now embattled with the forces of foreign interest; of cold capitalist calculation.

The day is grey and drizzling and we sidestep mud-puddles and tramp in fluttering raincoats through the thin stretch of fields to the land's edge where the Java sea froths and rages in a frenzy of riptides and confused collision. The fertile stretch is only a few fields deep, precariously exposed to the sea-winds, before relenting to barren black sands and wilderness. But here crowd quivering chillis, long-beans, knobbed gourds and watermelons, under the protection of windswept coconut palms whose partnership spurns magic. Tiny watermelons sprout from sprawling vines, resting their bulk on soil that crunches gravelly underfoot - mere black grit to all appearances. But deep, the taproots etch out invisible minerals; secret life-giving minerals; ancient minerals, gently etched by tiny pushing roots. The same minerals now coveted by the corporations and their rapacious machines.

¹ “get out! mining companies. we are already rich without you.” ² “menanam adalah perjuangan”



Each killing was accompanied with prayer and an attentiveness that gave the act an appropriate gravity, but it seemed of little difference to the animals, each of which protested for its life before being overpowered, bound, contained and its throat cut by the imam. I wondered whether, trussed, overpowered, surrounded, the animal - unable to move, unable to resist - might come to something like an acceptance of its impending death.

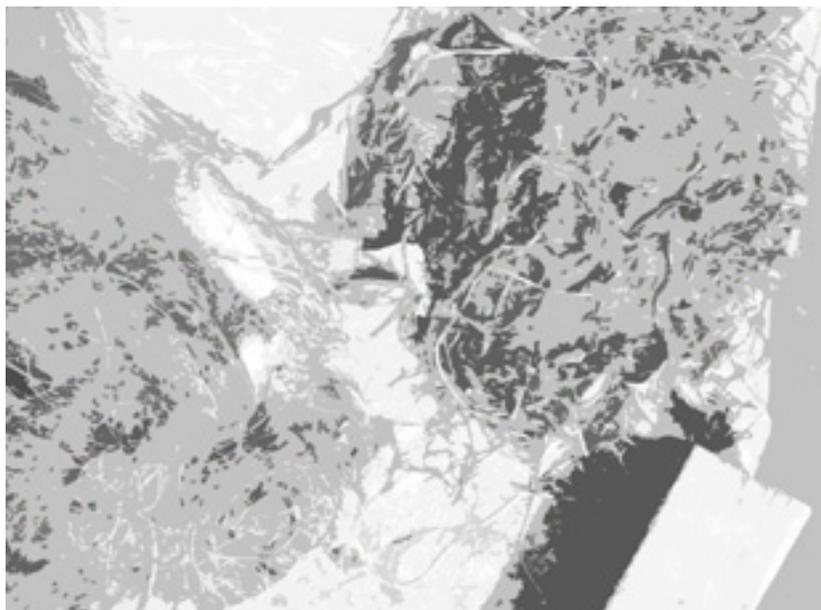
Whilst infinitely more humane than industrialised slaughter I don't doubt, the killing still took a surprisingly long time - the cows particularly requiring several muscular, carving cuts, all the while their bodies heaving and sometimes accompanied by growling defiant breaths. The purpose of the ritual seemed more on respecting the life of the animal through prayer and blessing - an acknowledgement of the benevolence of Allah - than to alleviate its suffering in death. It was easy to identify with the fear and struggle of the animals - an empathy which I could see reflected in the grim seriousness of the kids who looked on in fascination - but I fought hard to keep this separate from any attendant inclinations towards hypocritical disavowal of the processes, the human practices - of which I am a part - that gave rise to it. I wondered whether the human hands laid all over its body, some stroking, patting, imparting empathy, might succeed in conveying to the animal any sense of calm in their constraint. In my mind, I tried to communicate calm, but my perspective was one of spectacle.

After each killing, the animals were dragged away (the cows by multiple heaving men with ropes, the goats by their ears then strung by their hoofs from rafters) and skinned, disemboweled, dismembered by more skillful hands. Slowly they were transformed from live creatures, whose sentience and spiritfulness were somehow emphasised at the moment of death, into familiar meat. And I marvelled at the way that life could just disappear with such manipulation of the body, and I wondered what life was, and where.

Fishing Nets

Silimalombu, Samosir island, Sumatra, October 2012

“It’s like life”, said Ratna, indicating with a nod the tangled mess of fishing net, knotted into puzzles by a night’s winds and waves. We held the edges out and watched in wonder as she deftly unthreaded metal rings from the slimy mass. “Some people find it too confusing, and so they never begin”. It was a rare bit of work done together, despite our minimal helpfulness. Most of the week so far at the ‘ecovillage’ project, we had felt decidedly spare and in the way. Having spent twenty years in the city, clearly her capacity to see with a certain clarity of vision through the knotted entrenchment of mundane village life, both removed from and acutely at the mercy of the increasing incursions of global capitalism, was sharper than most. Her ideas for making her land sustainable and her practices low-impact - a transformation of old habits - was enough to earn her a certain mistrust with some of the neighbours. Her strategy, she explained, was to introduce change just a little at a time - everything slowly, slowly. And to integrate with existing practices - every morning at dawn she took her little wooden canoe out on the lake to catch fish to sell on the market, as do all the women here. And it seemed to be working - slowly she was earning attention and respect. Sometimes, coming from a political mindset of ‘everything now!’ it was difficult to appreciate the efficacy of this approach, through the frustration of useless hours spent gawping over mealtimes at ubiquitous trash TV, watching rubbish getting dumped out-of-sight out-of-mind amongst the weeds, and workmen washing their paintbrushes and women their clothes with chemicals in the lake (from which came our thrice-daily meals of fish). Nonetheless, we remained flummoxed by the interwoven threads, the three of us gazing in awe as, like a magician performing tricks with hoops and rope, she returned the net to functionality.



Making Biodynamic Compost from Manure-Stuffed Cow Horns Pt. I

BumiLangit, Imogiri, Yogyakarta Regency, April 2013

Slanted light fell across the dust path and moss-bricked beds. He upended the sack of irregularly sized cow horns, accumulated piecemeal over patient months, and the rest spilled out in a hollow clinking heap. I picked one up and stuffed a lump of fresh, soft, grassy manure into the far tip of it. It squelched into place. When I had done, it spilled out of the top like an ice-cream cone.

Slowly, slowly, we worked our way through the pile, stacking the ready-stuffed cones against the wall, to be overturned in rows onto the dark, rich earth. My friend is happy as he explains the peculiarities of the process. He has been waiting a long time to try this out. This is the first time in Indonesia. We have to factor for different sorts of seasons. Sat on the floor, legs crossed, manure-splattered; scooping, stuffing, squelching down, stacking...

Mas N-, barefooted, shirt buttoned low, his trousers rolled up to his shins, walks towards us between the long vegetable beds with a tub of steaming fresh cow-shit on his head slopping unhelpfully down onto his shoulder. This one is a little wetter than the last. Four times digested already, and now reclaimed and recycled to become fertiliser of unmatched potency, reassigned to places in esoteric alliances surely unforeseen by its bovine benefactor...

Later they will be dug up, emptied out into a bucket, and stirred in alternating directions for one hour; no more, no less.

Merely sprinkled on the earth, a handful of the resulting compost, mixed with water, will be used to treat an entire field.



me a constant stream of coffee in my blood to stay awake in the classroom, and that evening on the front porch). It is easy to recognise the teacher in academia - they're probably sitting at the front. In life we can all be teachers and learners simultaneously. Sometimes we have to struggle with power dynamics to be able to realise those roles. We have to be able to recognise the capacity of each other to impart learning regardless of relation. It's not enough just to write down notes, but requires a greater self-responsibility for maintaining a critical attitude and sifting which information is to be retained and which to let pass in the moment (for recognising wisdom and closing our ears to bullshit). In life, knowledge tends to be more dissipated; there is not the same compartmentalisation according to specialisation; no syllabi and structured progression. It's less likely that knowledge will come in a condensed, concentrated lump, so you have to retain, cross-reference, draw connections between morsels gathered yourself to develop completeness of perspective. It requires constant review and evaluation. There are no folders of notes, no exams or revision periods. It is easier to forget, but occasionally, like in those moments of occasional midnight essay euphoria, experiences can suddenly draw themselves together in webs of incredible understanding.

Capacity to learn is largely a matter of attitude. About developing the skills of listening and review. It was my impatience only with the format of hanging out 'doing' nothing that closed me off to the recognition of its potency - of such spaces and such times as inherently educative and valuable; not just as a place that a workshop can be arranged. I'm learning that if I'm fed up with small talk, with 'omong kosong'², I can also take it upon myself to elicit. That barriers of language are not absolute, and that learning itself is not just a matter of accumulation, but personal critical uptake and application (as opposed to the absorption models of academia). I'm learning the ways in which this application doesn't always have to take the form of 'action', but that understanding naturally flows back out into the social sphere through the small unthinking inevitable actions that form our days and interactions. And that personal learning inevitably has a collective dimension; that it doesn't just come from books and end in essays that no one ever reads. I'm understanding again the ways again in which the separation and specialisation of knowledge (being incredibly knowledgeable in some areas and extremely dumb in others) has a penchant for feeding into persona and ego, and too easily allows us to be stupid in other ways. I'm learning again to be wise, explorative and diligent in the little things.



¹ my school is the universe

Sukabumi Regency to Bandung: Trucks and Trade Routes

cycle-touring Jakarta - Yogyakarta. February 2013

From the engulfing monotony of Jakarta's sinkhole days, it was exhilarating to feel once more connected to the natural cycle of day. Cycle-travel always enables a pleasurable keen synchronicity with the diurnal rhythm. Passing hours are measured in distance travelled and in slowly changing landscapes, such that time carries the additional tangibility of space in a way that a sedentary daily routine lacks. Departure and arrival mark the start and close of day, and the segmentation of rest and meal breaks give the time in between a lilting oscillatory character as energy resources are depleted and replenished, before finally exhausted.

Although our departure, inevitably, was on 'Indonesian time' rather than objective time (at half-past five Ibu was already awake to ensure that we did not sneak out without having breakfasted first), a morning mist still hung heavy in the air, fuzzing our view of the mountains ahead of us on the newly laid road. By the time the sunlight broke on our bodies, sweat-drenched from two hours of uphill exertion, we could appreciate the replenishing powers of its warmth.

The first two days out of Jakarta had been characterised by the same start-stop traffic and chaotic crowding as the city itself as we traversed its vast sprawl. As well as traffic, the road has been a conduit for the seepage of the Jakarta mindset; an "MTV mindset" my Jakartan companion complained, though he did not care to elaborate. Where perhaps, in times past, travel and transit would have been conducted by the seas, now Java's roads are the arteries through which ideas and economics flow. That the road that we followed represented livelihood for many through whose lands it passes was clear not only in the trucks and buses that continually tried to run us off the road, but also the mishmash of enterprise that crammed its edge for the length of the journey, in tiny stalls, or carried in baskets between stopped traffic.

Ascending the hills in the afternoon, in the dusty wake of endless cargo trucks, the roadside businesses that blocked our views of the irregularly-cragged far mountains changed from trade to industry. 'Does anyone cycle up here?' my companion asked a group of curious kids with their backs pressed firmly against the fence for safety: 'no, we only use motorbikes'. Everything up here has gotten up here on this same road; a world whose existence is entirely premised upon motorised vehicles.

The diminishing reserves of the rainy season unleashed themselves upon us in the evening and by the time we got to our destination in Bandung we had been fifteen hours on the road. A motorbike collected us to guide us to the bottom of the last hill of the day, and my joy at the relief of arrival and the promise of a bed for the night was magnified by a painted skull and crossknives on the kitchen wall, a bowlful of garlic, a rusting opinel in the drainer and an oversize spanner dangling on an undersize nail. This is the home of the Bandung pirate punks.

Learning from Life

It was in the mindnumbed jostle of Jakarta, amidst an oppressive atmosphere of artificial aspiration, that I found the first of many communities of exuberantly friendly punks at the Taring Babi house; punks who spent their days in artistic endeavour and their evenings invariably singing songs with themes of togetherness and welcome and laughing maniacally and who printed badges that said 'alam raya sekolahku'.¹

Since then I've passed through various collectives and intentional spaces and the theme of mutual learning occurs often, but too often as a trope. With my activist background and culturally instilled work ethic, it took me a while to understand and appreciate the value of time spent 'ngobrol' - just hanging out and drinking coffee, eating gorengan (everyone but me smoking) - not only in terms of sociability, but also as a basis for connection and exchange and for the sparking of ideas and the development and organisation of political praxis. I appreciated the way in which all the punks that I met seemed to have a clear and eloquent understanding of their political values; talked about them, sang about them, and put them into practice in their spaces and their habitual welcome.

Within minutes of walking in out of the night's shadows to the welcoming glow of the Taring Babi house, I had a cup of strong black coffee in hand and was squeezed into a corner of the sofa on the front porch, listening to a longstanding member of the collective explaining what they do and how they do it. A little later on in the evening, we transplanted ourselves - a raucous rabble of punks on motorbikes - to a free gig in another part of town where there were ceremonial mountains of yellow rice and other communal food (I couldn't quite reconcile myself with the greasy, gristly crunchiness of the chicken feet that everyone else, it appeared, was enjoying immensely) and everyone seemed to know all the words to all of the songs and hopped up on stage to join in accordingly.

It took me a long time to appreciate the manifold value and depth of this kind of hanging out time because, try as I might to resist it, I know that my inclinations and approaches are still shaped by very Western values of productivity. On lots of occasions since, I've found myself frustrated with the ways in which, in typical terms of complaint, talk often fails to materialise into action. But then that is the nature of bases: sometimes they flourish to further fruitions, sometimes not (such frustrations are inevitable when 'action' is valued over understanding).

Within the anarchist scenes of Europe, mutual learning is built into the structure of collective engagement with workshops, skillshares and the like, in attempts to challenge the top-down models of institutional learning. But perhaps one aspect in which these models fall down is their perpetuation of a division between learning time and the rest of life, in a manner akin to the way that capitalism separates work and leisure time. It's been a while now since my academic 'career' foundered in multiple mires of financial insufficiency, political indignation and self-doubt before sputtering out in an ignominious anti-climax of apathatic neglect, but it's still taken a long time to break free of the mind-set of academia. I hadn't really realised how entrenched I was in the academic way of doing things (I really like learning in academic environments; I cherish the feeling of intellectual stimulation and progress) such that it had come to define my understanding of what learning was itself.

'Alam raya sekolahku' is an instantly intuitive idea, but actually it's a really difficult thing to learn from life. Learning opportunities are relentless, requiring constant vigilance and focus (it took

Next door is a tofu factory. It leaks wastewater into the brown river that gushes outside the guestroom window and fills the air with a sickening smoky haze. I descended the wet stone steps into the yellow-lit room of woodsmoke with a meagre 5000R note in my hand and was returned a full plastic bag of fresh hot yellow tofu assiduously selected from a steaming vat. We mashed them up and fried them with chilli and garlic and shared them between us all with white rice...

West Java's South Coast: Roads passable and impassable

cycle-touring Jakarta - Yogyakarta, March 2013

I was trying to gawp in wonder at the inordinate abundance of stars sparkling overhead, but it was difficult, because my eyes and mouth kept filling with the choking dust thrown up by the relentless procession of oncoming yellow rumbling trucks and the bumps in the road kept threatening to throw me off the back of the motorbike.

We had gotten as far as Pandangaran, over the last defensive ridge of hills, trying to keep our wits about us as we squealed and slid down the last treacherous heavily-trafficked stretch to the coast in the rain. Then finally we had had to abandon our bikes for a ride in a pick-up along the churned-up coastal road. We were backtracking on ourselves a little westward, tempted by contact details for a collective open house where we could stay and word of a beach that was a well-kept secret.

The secret was guarded with a roadblock and password and climbing the slippery track between salt-wind battered foliage we found but a solitary fisherman perched precariously (from our perspective) on the edge of an overhanging crag, an invisible line descending from a handwound spool into fierce surf. We had been told stories of vast swathes of the coastline being sold off (or under threat of being so) to international surf brands among others - the people that live there cut off from the seas which would have sustained generations. A small charge was levied at the end of the road for community-organised upkeep of the road surface and drainage, and as a result, the ride along this obscure little road was pleasantly unbumpy.

Similar tactics - traffic control, roadblocks, charges - had been attempted on the main road, the only road from Pangandaran (on which I was now eating dust) in the early days of the iron-sand mining, predictably to be met with government intimidation and repression. A high government official had been fiercely behind the project - there is hope that with his retirement from office new opportunities for opposition might arise. But for now, as the onslaught of obnoxious dust-swirling trucks that had intruded upon my reveries seemed to reiterate with jeering rumble, the establishment of the industry here seems to be almost a wearying premise of daily life, breaking up the road, destabilising the river bed and obscuring the stars.