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An Apostate: Nawin of Thais

By Steven Sills

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He assumed that in being exhausted from sporadic fits of sleep and wakeful spans of dull, hypnagogic thoughts matching the inertia of his confinement he would finally become ensconced there, in this train jostling him around, and at last fall asleep. This was his hope; but in the meantime there was a languid battle with insomnia and inordinate time that he, from his "exalted tomb," disdainfully sullied. A god watching the cookie wrappers that he was emptying into his mouth from the upper coffin glided downward like the leaves of a deciduous tree; he was remembering happier times and in this confined space it was taking him to the edge of madness. It seemed to him that society lied about it all: motherhood as the continuation of playing with dolls, manhood epitomized by competition and money, and old age the enjoyment of spending time reliving the incidents of the past. Children were not nice neat dolls to which one claimed ownership, manhood had to be more than having a heart attack from the stress of making a living and leaving all to one's widow, and old age, if it came, had to be besieged with problems of the present, which would be less painful than recalling happy times that fledged by and had no chance of being resumed once again. This moving world that he was in was like the 67,000 mile an hour projectile of the Earth, and he sullied it (definitely the floor of the Pullman car, but perhaps the world as a whole) with the crumbs of his fruit pastries. He just lay there with the hours like a corpse in a morgue, eating and filling dead space with his crumbs. Sometimes, to occupy himself, he would continue the same game that he had pursued three hours earlier before the seat-and-window thief left his friends and crossed over, annexing his space and engendering his expulsion. At that time, when he had been alone looking out of the window at the tussling shadows of trees and their counterparts, the light, on the rich verdant fields and on the rough and uneven wooden strips of the rotting platforms of the train stations of all these small towns, he had listened to sounds. Then a game of exhilaration instead of a game of the mundane, it had been an inane guesses that the particular car he was in would hit those coupled metallic bumps of the rails while on this incessant trip to Nongkhai, moving faster than both the train and the Earth combined, even if the movement was a desultory caprice with all this continual shifting of itself in present and past tenses as well as its futuristic daydreams, his mind tried to slow this weltering; it invented its games of distractions, its clutter.

Numb in numb thoughts, even though he was extremely cold in the air conditioned car he did not notice it all that much with his face warm and flushed by thought, which kept trying to suck him in and flatten him in its black hole of memory—memory as of her falling from a balcony; a woman's form, white and light—to him as beautiful as an angel—that seemed speciously able to rapture into a billowing cloud overhead. He knew that it was not merely crumbs that he was trying to sweep from this form but guilt, for numb as he was he had that much awareness lying there with head propped on a pillow. The crumbs on the blanket and the flimsy mat were merely a nominal discomfort to him, so it was not imperative to sweep away or shake off their substance; and yet to sense something else also so incongruous falling through space and time seemed reassuringly cognate. With the memory of that light, white American, Kimberly Debecrois—or something French—pulling away from his grasp of her hands disconcertedly, half blinded in tears but intentionally jumping, falling all those fourteen stories, and crashing through that plastic and metal canopy over the swimming pool at Assumption University, he needed his reassurance. To witness the sporadic dry showers of crumbs falling onto the recently

mopped but still noisome floor seemed cathartic. These actions were undeniably childish, but given the fact that the train personnel had mandated the passengers, as naughty children, onto upper and lower sleepers regardless of their will as paying customers, a marginal degree of contempt seemed judiciously appropriate. To eat and to sully was the quest of a man when caught on moving earth. He, Nawin Biadklang, ate slowly and pensively, making the condensation of crumbs and its showers less frequent than they would have been otherwise, for to consume anything was somewhat nauseating with the odor of toilets linking between cars permeating all and making all a drought.

And yet there was an even more salient stench. What he believed prior to sleep to be the fetid tennis shoes of this "sloven individual" of the lower bunk, this thief of window and seats (presumably Thai like himself although as sloven as he was, he thought, he might be Laotian), was merely the effluvium of his own damp socks hanging in a tiny net of one of the inner walls of what he labeled in his mind as his "tomb." Hanging there, these two strips of a cotton contained bits of his flayed soles from the friction of his life's stumbled movements and were now the bacteria's banquet; but, smelling their rot, he did not know that he and nature's interaction with him were the source. The smell often sent him on a molecular movement bumping and bouncing off the stored rubbish of his mind, so it was not entirely disagreeable. In many ways it besot him like orphic sound to a musician, or the tenebrisms of artists (Carvaggios like himself); but nonetheless he continued to project blame at the bearded anathema beneath him, and he still glanced down periodically at the floor hoping to find the putative agents of the odor, evidence to bolster his bilious conclusions, being in full denial of himself. "It's those shoes," he thought, imagining that the sloven beneath him, this seat-and-window thief, had kicked them opaquely under the seats that were now this bottom bunk, for imagining and knowing were the fusion of random bits of the fanciful, the real, and the probable in this overall perspective of what is true, and they were most often blatantly wrong. He knew this too.

He sighed unnoticeably. He compressed his lips firmly and tried to stifle the thought of slapping the head of the fetid one with his magazine, "Revealing Babes," which lay at his side. The title was in English but the nude women and what little writing there was within it were unequivocally Thai.

Once so titillating, a surfeit of the same fulsome images now made them numbly and insensibly bland like a familiar wife: illusory in intimacy and bewitchingly intimate in the illusion, the photographs in the magazine and the yearning engendered by them, like sex itself, were as pungent to his senses as his dirty socks; but only the molecules disgorging from those socks had consistency and longevity in their impact upon him. They mildly aggravated and stimulated without having the effect of flattening in frenzy—not that the subject of the ephemeral and unreal aspects of such a frenzy would vex him, having been such a glutton himself for silky, perfumed girls whose unique scent (this hybrid of perfume and sweat) seemed to riddle him pleasantly like tiny beads of shrapnel. Yes, he told himself, dirty socks were a more consistent, and thus a more veritable stink. Even with the prior knowledge that engaging in sexual activities would soon lead him into a vacuous afterward of having to stay with such a woman, such an exhausted presence, longer than the illusion warranted, and that experiencing such an exhilarating penetration of shrapnel would soon reopen all wounds of unfulfilled hopes for true intimacy, the hound was still inexorably obsessed with defecation, and the soldier was implacably enthralled with the excitement of being shot at by his female subjects even when he knew it to be specious.

To him there was little merit in the magazine now, outside of seeing it rolled up firmly and allowing the meretricious tool to conjure plausible scenarios of itself being used as a weapon. No, he thought, he did not seriously dislike this fetid sloven beneath him. He did not know him. He had not spoken to him, and by this time his dirty and hairy face with its certainty of being the rightful proprietor of the area of the window below— an area obtained with the aid of officers on board the train— was experiencing the ablation of fading memory. Still, the repellent fetidity had a familiar, fraternal theme that reminded him of his belittled, abused, and forlorn youth. The familiarity of a stink that he equated to his brothers was like going back in time, going home, and being in an antediluvian state within Jatupon (his former name and being) who was a vestige to him now as his fingernails were the vestige to claws. It was a time of being included in a group of home boys that he was excluded from and of feeling the pangs of loneliness that only prisoners of an institution felt.

The stranger was surely amusingly human, a caricature as all were, and hardly worthy of serious fixation. Engagement with him would be jocular levity and merely that. He tried shutting the curtain that slid around his "exalted tomb" but for an obvious reason that eluded him it only increased the odor. Deciding to relax there, and to be at one with the odor that no reticent grievance locked within his mind could rectify, it became him amusingly the way the peculiar smell of defecation would at last be agreeable to the noses of hounds. For a moment his brain was free enough of the images of Kimberly falling and his wife saying, "You should have jumped and not her," but restraining herself enough to bludgeon his arm repeatedly with a frying pan instead of the original target of his face, that he was able to isolate the culprits of the odor: those socks. Suddenly rebounding from his half hour of

petulance in his typical good nature, Nawin Biadklang chuckled quietly at his irascible hubris and abjured this moodiness that was part of the curse of his insomnia. The silent giddiness soon wore off with the itchiness of the skin of his broken arm under the cast. All his firing neurons once again became a cluster of pensive rumination.

Had all these years of being a celebrated artist of dejected Patpong whores gone to his head to the point where he could not remember having been as impecunious as a mendicant and poorer than the fecundity of dirt? And for the hound that he was who sniffed every one of his models, his Patpong whores, preceding and following his marriage to Noppawan, why, he asked himself should he object to odors? Dogs sniffed, claimed territory by the spills of their urine, and growled at each other, but which of them actually killed one of its kind? Which of them concocted plans that brought on the suicidal wishes of another, a more indirect and sophisticated form of murder, and by its disingenuousness a worse form. In a visceral objurgation, for one whose brain was being aspersed by sleep and yet could not sleep as if it were being drugged and dragged through an exit and then up to a second door that sleep could not open, he repudiated his earlier thought lackadaisically. He was guilty of nothing more than pursuing a human involvement. She had been part of his personal life, disturbing the whole, but an imbroglio as indispensable as being able to take a shower for a positive perspective of the day. No, he thought again, she sullied him or he sullied himself with her. As a pig wallowed in mud so did a man in a personal life. The physical aspect of intimacy was rapturous and easy. A man and a woman in the friction of bodies became one, but a one that was a different entity altogether—a fire of physical ebullience and pleasure. Had facile sex not existed, he would have sought intimacy solely in feelings, a thorny stem to hold if there ever was one. And had it not existed intimacy would not exist at all. There would have merely been the chiseling of ideas onto hard marble brains.

He told himself that when a young woman broke free from a man's hands, ran onto her balcony, and jumped off it, she was, in that last moment, the ultimate sovereign of her fate no differently than she had been in other aspects of her life. Kimberly might have found the environment upsetting, felt depression at the loss of a body departing from her and into Noppawan's hands, with chemicals amuck in her body and brain, and jealousy ready to fulminate, but she was as responsible for her last claim upon herself as she was for the formation of her life— "No," he told himself, "this is not right either." An internecine battle for a dominant perspective or a logical merger of the two variant types of ideas fought within him. How could he have saved her apart from a dismissal of his wife's ill conceived plan to begin with? And yet how could he not be culpable? It was an insoluble dilemma that frustrated his ability to live with himself.

A being's finality, he argued, was reproduction and death; and the factors that elongated or expedited this plan of nature could not have been in his control unless he had used some force on her, and that never happened despite what the police officers first believed. If he were indirectly responsible for manslaughter, his wife, Noppawan, was the indirect murderess. Barren Noppawan, marrying him, this celebrated container of lust, and having to justify his infidelities all these years in the name of art, decided that she might as well utilize the natural state of man for her own benefit rather than be forever victimized by what was beyond her capability to change. It was she who proposed that he paint Kimberly, her colleague and friend from the university. He did this; and behaving like a good boy, he feigned a professional detachment toward his study so successfully that he began to believe it himself. On canvas, distorting the French-American into an Asian half-breed and a lady of the night, he brought to his model vague Asian features and his notoriously whorish sense of dejection.

But Noppawan was as dissatisfied with this platonic aberration, if not deviance, as she had been with all earlier affairs. It was she who proposed this madness of him begetting a child. Begotten by the father and conceived by the friend, in a valid sense the child would be a production of all three and, according to this plan of hers, hers to raise. All three would be more or less active parents with Kimberly as a visiting one. And of course, she would be married to the biological father who made ten times what she did on a good month; his paternal role would be that of the "provider" as was the role of all fathers before him. Had they thought out a hundred ramifications to such a scenario it would have been hard to envisage any favorable outcome. But the maternal professor, wistful for that feel of a baby in her arms, scooted the glasses down toward the tip of her nose and espoused the most libertine ideas for a spouse. So obdurately fixed on a mental conceptualization of some type of truth her eyes scintillated and they, these sinners of the heart, became mesmerized believers in the idea that being free of the fetters of self restraint would be for the good of Noppawan.

Tiring further, cognizance seemed as the jammed toothed gears and wheels of a mechanical clock—it seemed so...as tired as he was everything merely seemed. In his last conscious moment as he faced the tidal wave that he hoped would claim him fully into sleep—instead of those smaller waves whose prehensile inundations formed such an ineffective grasp—he wondered if, as a wave or waves, whether their undertow led to fathoms of heretofore unknown reefs, whether sleep was formed of waves at all, and whether, as a jammed clock, it jammed so that something in the subconscious more worthy than a

record of time or mere sentient essences of the present could be measured or expressed. Ideas shifted around in his head like loose tectonic plates. They were a phantasmagoria in a sleep deprived mind. They had little consistency apart from the inundations of wanderlust of a nearly middle aged man on his inexplicable, cowardly journey to Laos. Sentience had its limitations; so why sleep seemed like a jammed clock for a few seconds, a wave for a few more, and then an edge of a cliff, a precipice, that intersected with the ethereal was as insoluble as why man in all this impermanence could master his fears enough to go out and forge his destiny.

Numb in his tenebrous tomb, it seemed to him that time was a man-made concept erroneously believed as fully real and tangible because of all the clocks and calendars, made to measure mortality, and things known to have already passed away. As the religious measured the ethics of their actions by those of the characters in their scripture, so was time (its tattered relationships, its solitary and jejune rides in coffins on board trains) a fiction to mark individual and collective progress.

But then, he told himself, he was not traveling to Laos to progress but to degenerate. It was a cynical assessment posed from a lack of self awareness of what he was in fact doing - that he was wanting to revert or abscond to a more callow and ingenuous foundation inside himself: to plausibly sully his body on the ground near an ancient stupa, prop his head against its stone spiral, and stare out into clouds and distant space. If in doing so he were to be perceived as another wealthy and indolent foreigner (usually German or French but not always so) suffering and despondent because of a katzenjammer from a previous night of quaffing Laos Beer, so be it. What would it matter to him? Perception was more fleeting than even the beings who were perceiving. For the man who would lean against a stupa and unresistingly watch the worms and fire ants, more electrically charged and shocked clay no different from himself, crawl onto his body, the gods and Buddhas would obsequiously hover around in mid-air.

Sleep deprived, he was, of course, losing it. His stance on the world, that concatenated state that gave him a sense of being grounded, was now showing its disarray. The foundation that he stood upon had been but miniscule shifting bits of plates, brain recorded sensory input all along, and he was succumbing to the vacuous, timeless illogic of dreams where the cohesive bits broke off and synthesized into something less real than awakened perceptions. Sleep was this remote alter-clock, this remote function of the brain deemed as less real and less cognizant than the other but that was in fact more cognizant within its fiction. This thing that he called himself, liquidated or became a gas that shot through a circuit causing him to fall into some type of a quasi-sleep.

He who was named 'Jatupon' on his birth certificate, he whose fetid brothers had called "Porn," — those brothers who in his early years had often made him terrified to move by swinging, striking, and brandishing their sticks; he who was never called a profane name from the shaking taciturn angel who silently recognized that he could not leave his wife for her, he whose wife called him "You prick!" on overcoming the shock about what had happened to her friend, was and was not in sleep.

His dream silence, which was even more asphyxiating than the carbon exhaust fumes permeating the heavy traffic that moved in slow increments down the street was a fog that was embedded in all living things and all moved through it. An elderly woman was walking alone near some type of a hybrid of Sukhumvit and Silom roads. Sensing that she was being observed, she paused between a salesman's ice chest of coconuts and bottled water and a woman stringing together jasmine rosaries from a small table. Looking around the sidewalk in both directions, she did not sense anything unusual; so dismissing her earlier thought and questioning her ability to assess situations accurately, she trembled at senility's brief chafing and purchased a yellow rosary which she then stuffed into her purse. The rationale behind the purchase had been to arrest fleeing sanity and, if anyone had witnessed this early, disconcerted behavior, to have that moment of senility's waning be expunged from human minds. Her intentionally looking aplomb into the rosary saleswoman's petrous countenance as she paid the money to her was a feigned attempt to project composure and went unnoticed. Indifferent in perfunctory movements, taking money and threading her flowers, the saleswoman was as pachydermatous and robotic as the old woman and everyone else was. Telling herself that the only means to forfend senility was to be actively engaged in mental diversions, she nonetheless sought any diversion that she could, to ignore, if not discomfit, this paranoid erosion of sanity. She went into Watson's Beauty and Health Care Store while trying to ignore this feeling that something was walking behind her, following the brackish, permed scent of that head of hair, as if an ocean of harmony lay within it.

Something slightly tangible; something partially impalpable with some of the thought, feeling and memory of this thing called Nawin was indeed following the luminary whom he thought of as 'grandmother', as if she were the setting sun. He halted and waited for her to come out—she who had as swarthy a complexion as he had with features so resembling his own, but with the particular habit of sliding her glasses down her nose like his wife, and examining buildings of an uncertain destination pedantically.

When she came out with her bag of goods she faced a gigantic television screen of video animated advertisements on the wall of a building across the street that flashed 'You prick,' 'Murdering philanderer,' 'You son of a bitch,' and 'Porn, your brothers are watching your ass' at the bottom of the screen. Nawin's life—his myriad faces of lost forlornness, the hes of many ages—was the background to advertisements about soap, beer, condoms, and cars. Repulsed by the foul language, she was transfixed by it nonetheless, until feeling the acidic rain that fell through polluted skies and the putrid city fall onto her skin. Opening an umbrella against the rain, she noticed that there really was a faint translucent man watching her. She grimaced at what she interpreted as a glowering figure and quickened her pace to escape him. Passing California Fitness, 7 Eleven, Robinson Department store, and a Haagen-Dazs ice cream parlor, she paused briefly at the Temple of the Descending Sun (Wat Kham) to pull up the umbrella that was briefly turned inside-out from a strong gust. Then she continued to quickly walk away. He stood there watching the shrinking form. "Grandmother," he thought, "Where are you going?" He tried to get the words out but all was mute including himself. He felt a sense of consternation to see her fleeing from him. He thought, "Why on Earth are you running from me now—why are you not making it up to me now;" but he had not brought her into existence and thus she was not his to possess. Whatever brought him into existence, he thought, was the sole claimant. Still there was a fusion of a being in love and this "grandmother" who was diminishing beyond the unassisted eye to register. Ambivalent between the emotional response of running after her, a sacrilege against the gods, and a logical response, a blaspheme against this positive mixing called love that was the only sense in being on this planet in its forever of affable and lethal associations, he just cried internally, silently. Hesitant in a life clogged in these conflicts that engendered ambivalent waffling and wallowing in futile rumination, he let her pass away. Immobile because of a cold rush of dread, he let the filthy acidic rain sully his head the way his thoughts were sullied in desperation.

Ruminating, he thought about how each year for his birthday she had fixed her American born, but not raised, angel food cake burnished in icing, and brought him to fairs to shoot the moving plastic ducks. Once she had taken him all the way to Bangkok for no other purpose than to allow him to see the sedentary reptiles there. He would often crawl through the window of her porch where shelves were cluttered in Avon bottles shaped in animal figurines, and when she saw him she would just chasten him mildly with, "You, yo-yo, get out of there. What are you thinking?" When he crawled onto her lap he felt the rugged velvety silkiness of her legs in panty hose and he would stroke them.

How cold her home was in summers with that air conditioner in the window of the living room on early into early morning chilling the house like an American winter, and he would snuggle deep under a saffron monk-colored blanket that was as stiff as it had been starched and ironed. Within that room where he would sleep there was a picture in black and white showing her in thick glasses with pointed silver rims on the frame and a long dress as she held him in a fulfilled and satisfied sense of pleasure. The image of the two of them—he a tiny child, but both of them children lost in time—was just a weathering photograph, a jaundicing pallid image lost forever, as a web page with an address that was indefeasibly and indelibly forgotten by all in time's thicket of images. It was one sentimental but insignificant moment lost in the compiling images of time—And here she was again, the one who had absconded away from them at their parents deaths in a Bangkok- to-Ayutthaya automobile accident, walking away from him hurriedly and as she did so passing the Temple of the Descending Sun.

"How foolish you are. Grandmother. And a rich grandmother at that, living in an air conditioned house instead of a broiling shack on stilts in the sylvan area of Ayutthaya. "Not yours, buddy; not yours," said a gecko that was crawling around his tomb within the train. "What?" asked Nawin, whining ingenuously. "The only panty hose that you have ever stroked are the ones you take off as a precursor to your copulatory sports." The gecko stuck out its tongue. "Brackish succulent skin of an edible silky velvet are always the way one likes it as long as they are young with tender meat and best of all, all vanillaly caucasian as an angel—and then the sand paper tongue strokes inside and out to get its salties and sugars. Young succulent skin whose scents, especially in their far from flowery holes, make silly male creatures repeat the delusion of intimacy time and time again like their fathers, grandfathers, and so on—young succulent skin as a varied brunch and dinner delicacy." The gecko released a dry acrimonious chuckle. "Speaking of eats, have you seen any mosquitoes in this smelly train?" "No," said Nawin. "Not a one." "What a pity," said the miniature, khaki colored lizard of the Chakri dynasty. The gecko glowered at Nawin with appetite and fixed interest as if he were an esculent appetize—the gecko crawling on the railing of the BTS Skytrain station looking down at the small womanly morsels and traffic below and amorous Nawin doing the same but as he glanced up dizzily at the facade of the colossal Intercontinental Hotel with its eerie pale-blue light diffused throughout, he felt like he was falling into a deep- blue eternal space. His soul, this odd inexplicable word that may or may not have a physical counterpart beyond the letters of the word, was falling into this alien, colossal structure with its lambent bluish light.

Then the edible Nawin woke, instantly realizing that his grandparents had died long before he was

born and that here he was, just a few hours from turning forty himself (he was going to consider himself 39 for as long as he could), arm broken, relationship with a wife broken, and girlfriend deceased most horrifically, cowering from his sullied personal life on an upper sleeper of a Pullman car in a train bound for Nongkai and nowhere. He realized that he who had gained his acclaim as a painter of Patpong prostitutes, and had burgeoned from poverty by his dismal themes and color, was all dried up in themes now. Creativity and life were, for him, veritably exhausted. Was this the middle life crisis that was so ubiquitous to man? He did not know.

"Hey guy! Sawadee khrap [hello]," he said with face lowered toward the bunk beneath him. He wanted diversion from any stranger who could plant him outside his own thoughts. The stranger chortled at the face hanging upside down before him. "What?" he asked.

"Why are you upside down?" asked Nawin innocently.

"I am, am I? Khrap, khrap [yes, yes], I guess so that you would ask me why I am upside down."

Nawin smiled widely. "Are you going to Vientiane?"

"Yes."

"To do what?"

"Partying there. You?"

"Sure, partying with you."

"Might as well have an early one then." The stranger raised a beer up to Nawin who put it in his hands and gave the prayerful gesture of the "wai" even though it was upside down. "How long can you hang that way?"

"Don't know," said Nawin.

"Don't try drinking it that way. I don't want you to dribble on me."

"Yes, of course, khorpkhun khrap [thank you]. Are those guys you were sitting next to earlier going to the party too?"

"Of course. Guests of honor, you know. They have overcome servitude in the Japanese owned/Thai co-signed sweatshops. Independence, you know. They will be facing starvation in Laos shortly. Early death is like being a marathon winner, don't you think? Guys who starve to death are the true winners because they get to the finish line first. Yes, a party for losing jobs and visas. Games too. My favorite is who will be the first one to dunk his head the longest in sunk drunkenness. And yet I am also partial to another game: which of life's losers will join the high ranks of the monks for a bite to eat and which ones will marry their sisters."

Nawin laughed out a spray of saliva but immediately regained self-control the best he could when upside down and having drizzled in public. "Oh my, so sorry, forgive me." For a moment he deliberately sobered his rolling caprice of laughter with the thought of the bleak scenario beyond the bold and refreshing honesty of the Laotian's words. "You've lost your jobs?"

"We have. Business slowed and our use is over. We will drift elsewhere in other temporary experiences. Don't worry about us. Don't worry about me. Why are you going to Laos?"

"For a while," said Nawin evasively. "I guess I should give you back your beer."

"Keep it. If I run out of beer later maybe I can ferment wine from some of the rotting day old rice I was trying to eat earlier and whatever you have stinking up your ass."

Nawin chortled uproariously until the saliva began an internal strangulation. Feeling as if he were choking he coughed for a couple moments. However refreshing this acrimony so unencumbered by Thai-Laotian etiquette was, it was not worth dying for; and so he retreated for a few moments on his bunk until dangling once again with an opened can of beer.

He thought again how this stranger defied the obsequious norm with a refreshing brashness that was like having cold water thrown into his face. But like a fish that was suddenly snagged on a hook, images of himself in poverty, which he did not care to recall, caught him within. His pleasure in the stranger waned as impressions of beings and beings themselves waned. He countenanced a mere smile which altered further into a wry, contorted, and ungainly expression that expressed little beyond the awkward fidgetiness of wanting to withdraw from social interaction. Tightened into the hook of memory, he unwillingly recalled the hysterical deprecatory laughter, guffaws, and jeers on that one mortifying day

in gym class when, at the age of eleven, his loose underwear fell through the legs of his shorts. From that point forward he did not oppose his family's will to have him toil along with them as a noodle worker in their restaurant. At that time he preferred serving food to being a viand for those who gormandized oddities. In this mundane world one who suffered from a peculiar bout of misery more dramatic than others (like underwear falling onto the floor of the gymnasium) was cannibalized as an inhuman freakish joke that fed their appetite for joyous contempt. At that age of eleven he just wanted to serve obscurely and enter the world of implausible comic book scenarios shortly before sleep. Back then noodles, comics, and sleep had given to him a varied but unaware extension of himself.

He considered pulling a few thousand baht from his wallet to give to this Laotian. Then it occurred to him that he would need to give the same to all of these marathon contenders, but he did not have that much money in his wallet nor was he so inclined to give what he had to one let alone the countless many. If it were unethical to know the suffering of an acquaintance and be unmoved to assist him, he rationalized, giving special favors to one with no regard to the masses did not seem any more ethical. So, as always, he hoarded what he had; and indeed he was one of those who had an abundance being a purveyor of turpitude as well as art which together was popular with both wealthy intellectuals and idiots alike. Such a trivial dabbling of philanthropy, he further argued, would more likely than not be money thrown into the whirlwind of drugs, liquor, or other exacerbated vice from which a self-deprecating fool more easily annihilated himself. And if he wanted to believe the false presage that such a nominal act would cause perpetual kindness the way a rock thrown in a creek begets one ripple that begets another it would not matter. He would not be able to successfully delude himself for long; at best he would be engendering a short time of ever diminishing ripples.

"Besides," he thought, "if this guy is so badly off, he should not be riding in an air conditioned car." It was a rather harsh judgment given his knowledge that the poor sometimes treated themselves to a bit of middle class opulence to make themselves connected to the society that they served and to sense that they could thrive rather than merely live. He repeated to himself that he would not pull out a few thousand baht and give it to a stranger who would resent him regardless of what he did or did not do. This was his conclusion in a sleep-deprived head that had too much crammed into it.

He then considered that sleep was a diminishing reduction of memory (a zipped file in a computer) but one where the zipping weathers away the details. He considered that, given enough hours over a period of evenings, sleep could even dilute the memory of Noppawan repeatedly swinging the frying pan against his arm—an arm that was still throbbing and itching in the cast.

Giving a thousand baht would imply having a lot to give and giving nothing would imply snobbishly holding back from giving what little he could, so he handed the man a hundred baht. "I can spare this. Keep it as money for transportation when going back to Vientiane."

"Sure, why not, thank you" said the man.

Nawin felt satisfied by his decision to give little. It was a compromise between wanting to ignore the sotto voce of thought that told him to give what he had and that which made him into a culprit for wanting to keep it for himself. And yet between both extremes there was the constant cynicism that the poor were merely pigeons and the more one threw crumbs to them the more they would come to eat. It was a way of not examining that the years of his life were pyrrhic: that they had given to him affluence but at the cost of diminution of his humanity—that each year he was becoming more pachydermatous than before with an inability to empathize with others which made them as disconnected to his life as a passing cumulous cloud. Only the storms, the headlines of the masses that he read in English from the Bangkok Post, would get his attention. A female beggar on an overpass with a child that she nursed under her shirt was no different than someone sitting on a fire hydrant as he waited for a bus. Still, he thought, this was what he would try to correct by a solitary wandering into Vientiane.

He noticed some lint on his shirt and flicked it off but really it was the stranger whom he now wanted to flick away.

"What will you do?" he at last asked.

"Starve," said the Laotian. Nawin saw envy and resentment in the stranger's face even though few things were absolute when being conceptualized upside down. If his were envy and resentment it was no different than the way many of his Thai friends often looked at him when finding out that he had an American passport. But then, everything was relative. Perhaps a Somalian would look at a Laotian in the same way.

"How did you hurt your paw," asked the Laotian

"An old war injury," sighed Nawin.

"In Thailand? That sounds a bit peculiar. You are a bit peculiar, aren't you? An accident that you don't want to talk about—some type of fight with a guy where you acted like a coward or a civil war in your own home that—"

"Hard to explain," interrupted Nawin.

"Okay, whatever. Now tell me what you are going to Laos for."

"Again for a while—a few weeks or so," said Nawin in jest but seriously believing that there was comfort in friends and acquaintances alike remaining strangers.

"Wanting to have fun with a Laotian girl?"

"Do you have one in mind for me?"

"I will sell my sister at a special discount for you if it doesn't cause more war injuries." These were mere words, flippant wisps of air to fill the vapid moments of time while confined with undesirable others on a train. They were of no more serious intent than the earlier conversation but the idea of selling a member of a family, or selling them out, was something too close to home. It was repugnant enough to make this paragon of honesty transformed grotesquely into an inordinate abuser—such were the fathoms of childhood trauma that a facetious play with words meant that devils could be made instantly from gods, and that gods were made from the muck of childhood sensitivities like any sand or snowman. He wanted to end the conversation abruptly but needed to find a graceful and amicable exit that would keep the one disliked clueless of this fact.

"You don't say? No, probably not. I've become spoiled by taking whiter meat."

"I saw your marriage ring when you first began babbling. Are you married to a European?"

"No, a Thai woman who is darker than us both. That is another story."

"Why did you marry her if she is so dark and ugly and likes to hit on you?"

He became more conscious of the barely bearable itchiness under the cast. It seemed to him that it would be a handy excuse for absconding to his bunk. And there he could rummage through his bag for a hanger from which to scratch with.

"Don't keep me waiting all night for an answer."

"It's morning now. She's not all that ugly and she is a good communicator. Well, my arm is itching. I need to get some powder or something, and besides I've kept you and perhaps others up long enough. I thank you for the beer. It is already making me drowsy. Excuse me, the blood has gone to my head."

"Okay. Whatever."

Nawin slunk back into what he amusingly considered his "tenebrous tomb" not that he found such retreats into himself so odious. Neither society nor solitude seemed to him as being all that commodious and so throughout every waking moment of his life he paced the two rooms of himself like a member of the Burmese National League for Democracy under house arrest. Having exhausted the reserve that fueled what extroverted characteristics he possessed, he just lay there finishing his drink and waiting for the liberating force of sleep to deliver him.

2

A prodigious, big boned figure of a woman with stiff raised arms that were erect, gesturing boughs waited for her man, not as a doting woman but as a martinet; and four times she demandingly called his name, 'Zero', and four times there was nothing.

(If his brainwaves were water flooding into his hard skull boat and the air-conditioned drafts that he tried to escape by bundling himself within his blankets were the battering inundations of oceanic waves, then it would seem that he was foundering in both the depths of himself and the world for every minute his restless, lopsided head shifted to the other side of his pillow. In the middle of the particular dream he was now in, he turned sharply on his left side and he would have fallen from the precipice of his bunk most judiciously in recompense for Kimberly's death were it not for plastic black straps that allowed him to be restrained there to his sentence of dreams— suicidal dreams periodically jolting the body but having little to do with her.) At last a man as fat as a tub and as sequacious as a child wobbled toward this woman, 'Four'; but, according to the feelings of the god, Nawin, that drenched the ground that they stood upon lugubriously, the two were not meant to stand together. No, the four and the zero were not meant to stay together and the zephyrs of the god blew strongly upon them to obtain their

separation. But those winds were futile as a device for prying away such an inspissated couple for once they were together this man and woman babbled to each other a mutually pleasurable one word jabberwocky despite the fiercely driven rains, hail, and the flash flood at their feet. The drone of these distant voices was of forty, and each repeated it to the other forty times. Forty was eighty times redundantly beaten onto his head as if it were a drum; and with a slight headache Nawin awakened.

He instantly realized that he was forty; and although he told himself that he did not feel any different, and that he surely looked no different than he had some hours earlier at the age of 39, and that to have had the span of years needed to successfully rise from what he was, was more of a blessing than a curse, the idea that he was a half rotten apple hanging loosely and purposelessly from a tree made him cringe and wish that he were not at all. Light and flippant, jocular and yet terribly morose, this self-destructive mood was nonetheless powerfully upon him for he could not stop himself thinking that forty was an end of virility, and that an end of virility was the end of manhood, the end of all. This suicidal taunting that was implanted in his brain from a dream snatched as a theme of fears in overall consciousness was, he knew, the result of turning forty in this tomb. Not wanting to confront the morbidity of this attack, he retreated back to sleep as if it were the sanctuary from negative ideas instead of being their crucible.

The gecko did not favorably view Nawin unzipping his skin and lying down in his tenebrous tomb in such a manner. A man behaving like this, instead of fleeing from its formidable presence was nothing like it had ever witnessed before, and it found the situation extremely puzzling. As preoccupied as Nawin was in escaping his carnal flesh and emulating those carcasses he and his wife were so partial to (particularly the slit middle aged husband and wife of a car crash in Ayutthaya who basked peacefully in the lighting of their glass and formaldehyde coffins in the anatomical museum at Siriaj Hospital), he did not notice that the gecko was glowering with its forty eyes— glowering at the man for being so inert when he should be fleeing from the reptile and for having undressed from his besmirched outer layer of flesh with such a crude, complete, and unnatural disrobing. The museum was an anniversary site Nawin and his wife had in fact gone to on a number of occasions to commemorate their youthful meetings there, and to see the freakish human pottery of tawny-brown or tanned ochre that had been of such comfort to them as teenagers. Back then, before finding the dead people and each other, each of them had been wandering respectively through an asphyxiating smoke that was as inescapable as a labyrinth and more confusing. But within it they retained a faint hope that the smoke would eventually disperse from the battle ground of family and that one day this abstract word, family, with nothing concrete in it would altogether vanish—vanish intellectually and emotionally the way the river goddess of Loy Khratong diffused through a child's years until the abstraction was gone from the mind as yesterday's smoke. With 'family' being a word marring their worlds, it was only natural that their hopes should be revived in these preserved entities of Siriaj Hospital. Once alive but now the smallest of freaks jarred on shelves, and the largest grounded in containers, they were a reminder that there was a stage of mangled life, of death, of being put on a shelf, of being displayed as a museum piece, and myriad other unknown possibilities. As it was with them, so family was a battle that would end as all battles ended. Battle grounds could become verdant again but this was not so of the battle ground of family and they smothered in each other wistful thoughts of a return. As a married couple they would occasionally take the Chao Phraya river boat to the museum so that they might reminisce about those meetings of their youth, thank the preserved specimens that had saved them from life, and maintain a lexicographical stance that words like "death" should mean precisely that despite the vehement denials, neologistic concoctions of a heavenly overture, and anthromorphic self-made mythologies of the masses. In some respects, despite the enormity of his size, Nawin was like any raw meat that the gecko had caught before; but never before had any of its prey skinned itself and by its own volition lay before it as inanimately as any torn, half uneaten comestible. The gecko watched Nawin who was poised like a reclining Buddha and staring at the ceiling that hindered the welkins. Although the skinless nude lying there was a bit like a boy praying after slipping out of his clothes, forgetful of getting into his pajamas, the gecko was not able to make this connection. It just assumed that the skinned and fairly inanimate human was playing dead to save itself from becoming its meat. But as time went by the inert human creature became so wholly opprobrious to the gecko, who valued a good hunt, that at last, as the small ceiling fan continued to turn arthritically, churning an unnoticeable, fetid draft of warm air in the direction of the man and the beast with a wobbling, scraping sound like cooks in sidewalk restaurants mixing fried rice but instead mixing these myriad, noxious odors of the train, it informed Nawin of his freakish obscenities with its tacit baleful eyes and scrolled tongue.

When he woke up his headache was worse. "A second commute is never good," he told himself (meaning the commutes to and from sleep that were as two onerous trips to and from Ayutthaya within a day). He pressed his palm against his forehead where his thoughts were taut and moved incrementally like the lethargic cold blooded reptile of Bangkok's traffic. Painful as his headache was, he told himself that it was just. It was a well deserved "mental flagellation" (meaning an excoriation of disturbing dreams for the sins of Kimberly's death, Noppawan's separation, and the general muck that

epitomized his personal life). He told himself that he did not suffer enough in his waking hours so a higher arbiter than will seemed to be his judge and executioner, and it was all just.

But was he really dreaming anything about them even in an indirect way? No, he had to admit, he was not having nightmares about the women he cared for—and he cared for them all with these two specially mixing in himself as paint, their pleasures and sorrows his tenebrism. He was not even having nightmares about being all alone, separated, and on a train trip bound for nowhere. Instead, he was personifying forty and being nibbled by a gecko.

It was darkly hysterical and he released a tacit, tickled guffaw in a strong exhaled breath, circumspect to stifle noise that could awaken the other passengers. The dream of forty was rather unequivocal but the meaning of the other was not so obvious. His best explanation was that geckos ate mosquitoes; in his youth, when snorting glue and swallowing amphetamines back in those days when his parents had died and he was working along with his brothers in a sidewalk restaurant and being molested as a "cheap date", he used to hallucinate about talking mosquitoes; so if the mosquitoes were Jatupon's only companion, they symbolized the self, a child of poverty that his name change to "Nawin" could not consume. For whatever his external changes and whatever label he gave himself, Jatupon, an abused and forlorn child was within. At least that was his version of the syllogism.

Amused by himself as he always was, he was much too curious at witnessing his sudden desultory moods of asphyxiating stagnation and foundering desperation within to ever be seriously suicidal. Still, he needed movement—the sensory details of the here and now—to override his ideas, to change him from what he was with every passing minute, and to prove that instead of being a man, he was merely an unfixed, impressionable, and amorphous blob. To air out his musty, old mind became more urgent with every oppressive moment in which he was increasingly discontent to stay within the hole in the embankment of the Pullman car that at times seemed a coffin or a drawer at a morgue, and at other times like a coffinless rot in a crevasse within the walls of a mountain. And finding that there were no more fruit pastries in his box to obtain oral pleasure—pleasure giving man a sense of being more cognizant than an automaton of space dust moving in vacuous time eating, drinking, urinating, defecating, and, given the chance, copulating (although there was little chance of that in the train)—he felt claustrophobic and climbed down the bolted metal ladder of the sleeper with the idea of going to the bathroom. As he did so he heard the Laotian snoring as uproariously as a siren and yet as mellifluously as the enticing song of a Siren.

It was indeed strange that the disheveled being who was shooting fetid wisps of air as sonorously as a bagpipe should be both enticing and repulsive all in the same reeking breath, and Nawin smirked at the sight of his acquaintance. He feigned disgust, and this action mixed with amusement in a contorted, clownish countenance until the odd smile finally flattened for there was a peculiar sensation within that at first he did not readily acknowledge. To evade the cognizable he again ruminated on how odd it was that, now feeling as refreshed as he could be when waking from rolling turbulent dreams that wrenched his brain with a pain like the sprained of leg of a child fleeing a bully (albeit that the bully in his case was the deprecating voice within himself that censured him for being entirely lost at forty), he should not be able to decipher appeal or repugnance over something so simple as the pleasure factor behind the sound and smell of a man's loud breathing—cacophonous mutterings of a hominid or something quite orphic? This was his jocular deliberation so as to stay hidden from himself behind a wall of thought. Ultimately, however, there was a scaling of the wall and the coward was ferreted.

"Am I really feeling this way?" he asked himself. He knew that he was, for his body tingled with the titillation of one wanting sex. He thought how consternating and queer it was that after leaving his brother, Kazem, over twenty years ago without ever thinking of him or any man in much of any sense (including "that way" except in the most fleeting manner), that this man, this unshaven and uncomely Laotian, should seem sensual to him now. No, he thought, with a new idea repudiating the old, the only peculiarity was that as a casualty on the battle ground of family he should live so well and so long without having to continually purge himself of memory that could continually discomfit the present with its stench, rubbing its foul wounded body in recidivistic and wanton desire.

Still, he reassured himself consolingly; it was not so "queer" for an artist to love the beauty of form. In this world of lackadaisical automatons who never appreciated the here and now, the beauty of the human frame was there to be shown by discerning artists. He posited that his own artistic proclivities in conjunction with all the trauma of the past month (Kimberly's suicide, Noppawan's beating of him with the frying pan, and being locked out of the house when returning from the hospital) were putting him in a dust storm no more nebulous than that which he felt instantly at taking a shot of whiskey or when spinning one of his madonnas on a dance floor. It was merely a minute of temporary derangement that was quite natural in life, a game of musical chairs in which the chairs also moved. He further averred that a moment or two of confusion when waking up from nightmares was totally understandable and natural in life's craziness. But, he then asked himself, why would any artist have

this obsession in conveying the beauty of form unless he were painting over the background that tainted him? Perversion had the transitive root 'to pervert', and it was rooted deep with the years: it was familiar, it was going home, it was a homecoming to the illusion of that former family that could be argued to have never existed at all were it not for that almost impalpable stain that the perverted wore unknowingly like a light jacket.

Desire: what was it really? It was mad hunger for what one lacked. It was emaciated Haitians attacking a UN storehouse and a mind loose and spinning of its own accord like a top; and disconcertedly, he argued to himself in an alloy that was both a question and a statement, the encroachment of desire was surely a possibility only when the consciousness approved it with its reluctant nod. "Isn't this so?" he asked the mind which knew nothing but questions.

As much as these titillations toward the Laotian repulsed and frightened him and despite a tepid attempt at eschewing his feelings, he wanted the man, like a spellbound warlock whose spells, even when having a life of their own, went contrary to the intent. As abashed as he was by his compulsion to stare, there was nothing to stop him. No one was awake but himself. Uppers and lowers, they were all ensconced in tiny train domains behind their brown curtains. He was quite alone enough to elongate a momentary voyeurism to more. The burly stranger wearing only sufficiently bulged underwear was both handsome and ugly depending on one's perspective; and it was perspective by which all judgments lied. To understand the level of desirability or repugnance of a given thing (whether or not the Moslem woman sleeping in an adjacent bunk across the aisle with partially opened curtains was "with child," "knocked up," or a southern terrorist in disguise, or whether the train ride, one that every young boy would yearn to go on, was pleasant or not for the man he had mutated into) an overall mood was needed, a background color for the canvas based on faded memories falling through the mind as softly as leaves or as revoltingly as trash blowing on the ground.

Beams of light were able to slide through the myriad rectangular slits of the metallic awning that had been pulled down the window as a screen; and when somewhat blocked by forms in the environment the passing southerly trains became oblique. Obliquely, they changed the appearance of the man and in so doing changed the perspective of him. At one moment the light accentuated blemishes visible on his face and at another moment it diffused onto the whole countenance making it sleek and mysterious like tenebrous silver.

When the face was ugly its foul breath was fouler, and when handsome the snoring was a nice inebriating gust that picked up Nawin's kite; but in both perspectives the brazen Laotian in his impoverished vulnerability reminded him of Jatupon. There in tattered dirty clothes Jatupon, whom his brothers derided as 'Jatuporn,' was a vermin he could never entirely escape (scaling the prison walls of the subconscious as the boy did), no matter how many thousands of dollars in baht he was commissioned to paint his whores. For a moment he was scared of the Laotian as if having stumbled into a den of sleeping terrorist cells but it was the self that was his only terrorist. It was the self that filled him with stiffened, cold dread. Fortunately, with the walk to the bathroom, the attraction passed him entirely almost in the same moment it came upon him: Jatuporn was apprehended, and the self was placated as if this particular feeling were as inconsequential as all the other wind driven debris of the mind that had gone before.

If he believed that anything which overtook rational thought and equanimity in such a temporary, all pervasive and engaging burning, lacked legitimacy (and in a way he might have for he knew passion to be like the slight bitter aftertaste of too much cloying chocolate), it was of minor consideration being the Patpong prostitute depicter that he was. With lovely scented women (especially those in ovulation, which was every man's Venus Flytrap unless punctilious enough to carry a nosegay of multi-colored condoms) sensuality was wild flowers of searing energy popping up after a shower making the landscape anew. However, any titillation regarding a man was tremor and mudslides. It was his shaky world tearing apart, falling down the sores of its cracks, and being buried alive within the fall downward. Because of this, all he wanted was departure: in this case, to depart from the man, the spell, and the train, and as this was not possible, to again retreat into his once solitary bower.

Even with passion waning with every step toward the bathroom in a salvation of movement, his mind was preoccupied by wanting to reclaim the window and seat from the window and seat thief, so that he might let morning and movement pass through the orifices of his eyes to obstruct memory—a morning with shanty stations as gateways to shanty towns, rice fields and banana orchards with coconut trees occasionally spewed in, thickets of verdant weeds and knee high grass, sickly palm trees and two-story shacks where the bottom halves had such high earthy foundations and the true houses were the upper portions where drying laundry hanging from ropes were the only ornaments apart from distant glimpses of vehicles and amorphous motorcycle taxi drivers on the main street of some rural town or another. Until he could escape the man and the train entirely, until he could walk away and clog his mind with other things, there would be a window with which to take in various scenes to obstruct

memory—an annexing weed of consciousness to idle eyes. And the window would be his were it not for the Laotian's sprawling body clogging his space.

He imagined himself shaking the Laotian, kicking him on his hairy behind, and dragging him out of this annexed space. He smiled and internally laughed at such an absurd caprice. The mind was littered with such protective mines, which soared through the weightless space of ethereal consciousness. By his laughter such evil was not claimed and thus it did not make him. This was his enlightened thought in a partially refreshed brain granted by a nocturnal sleep which had also slugged him with a headache, made his clothes wrinkled and smelly, and left him with the need to urinate.

Chemical fixations and caprices went out of him entirely with his liquids. Urinating in this metallic East-Asian urinal embedded within the floor of a toilet sandwiched between two cars, he facetiously told himself that the fetid little space was his friend. Even though he did it with humor it was the stuff that Jatupon was made of. It was the animistic thoughts of a child. Feeling relieved to relieve himself of fluids and issues, he could have allowed the matter to stay there, but he wanted a guarantee that nothing like this would happen to him again. The dilemma was not knowing who the guarantor was, so he sunk himself into the Buddhist myths of his culture. Ubiquitous superstition, the guardian against creepy crawling memories, came upon him. He said a bit of a prayer, as much as any atheist could, to exorcise homosexual inclinations from his brain. The prayer, if it could be called such, was not conscious or subconscious thought but a type of semi-autonomous space-garbage moving in quick orbits within the mind.

Through deliberately imagining it to be so, he made a spell that transformed Buddha into a god even though there were no gods in Buddhism (at least not in Buddha's Buddhism), no netherworld of heavenly creatures, and no guardian Seraphs and cherubs—only the deadening of desire, in the soft strangulation of this illusion of self to engender a harmony that defiled the essence of being alive. It was a toilet Buddha-god to whom he could offer no oblation beyond urination and potential defecation.

Deep in his "soul" he knew that even if there were a distant god beyond the gods made in man's image, men were mere cockroaches before it, scurrying away from the vibrations of the foot with no understanding of the foot being a foot let alone as part of the limb of a body to a conscious behemoth entity. Such was man's ignorance of God or gods, of which the most intelligent believed nothing and the most ignorant believed the myths that made their besmirched flesh hallowed enough to be at one with them. He scolded himself for wanting a deliverer who would save him from the fleeting whims that haunted the mind, moving it like an empty ship navigating mysteriously by the mandates of erratic winds and caprices. He knew how opposed to the intellect such beliefs were when there was no evidence of intervention by the deities in life's barbarism and injustices, unless it were in the injustices themselves of gods favoring some and letting others perish which would be the same as the traits of any of the monsters of men; and yet he summoned his Buddha nonetheless. Such superstitions were normal in these vulnerable and tenuous corpuses and he was no different. He laughed; he amused himself like no other.

He looked at himself in the mirror. It was the same handsome face. It was not a half rotten apple hanging loosely from a tree—at least not yet. It was the same brawny body that had amorously begotten another male in the phantasmagoria of this world. He thought of this child whom Noppawan was no doubt jubilantly nurturing and pampering at this moment as if he were her own. Should the separation seem permanent a few years from now, Noppawan would no doubt tell her son a story in which, for some families, there were no daddies. She might say that in such lucky families children were delivered to mommies by the assistance of an angel named Kimberly who was quicker with her deliveries than any of the motorcycle delivery boys who worked for Pizza Hut. It was a mean thought against meanness done to him, but he decided that he would not berate himself for it. After all, he could not figure out how there could be any sin unless it were theirs. Disposing of guilt for a moment, he could see the obvious: it was Noppawan's idea for him to father a child through her friend; and prior to the affair how could he have known that it would lead to Kimberly's possessiveness and that in her post partum depression she would leap off of her apartment balcony at Assumption University? Like every affair of any nature one engaged unknowingly, so a beating with the iron frying pan had been totally out of order. He sucked in his lips angrily and told himself that he did not hate them which was not entirely true.

Having begotten a child made him feel that his use had been filled and that his virility had been smashed out of him most intimately by the hands of two women attempting to quench their maternal thirst with his apple juice and the seeds that were rife within it. He was a mushy half-rotten apple that they had squeezed most mercilessly to garner the seeds within his juice. In a sense they had raped him; and he argued to himself that rapes of the handsome, talented, and affluent types were the most common cannibalism in this modern world.

He thought about a Bangkok Post article which, three years earlier, had referred to him euphemistically as "The distinguished benefactor of rural girls in an urban profession." Back then, at the age of 36, he, Nawin Biadklang, had considered the sardonic comment both humorous and exhilarating, for every article allotting time and space to an examination of his self-absorbed ruminations on decadent living, no matter how critical and regardless of the domestic nature, like this one in point, was to him, then, like the first lick of succulent success.

As with all reviews, at the time of this article's publication he considered it, which now was the most recent critique of his oeuvre, as another exhilarating current of air enabling him to soar without much effort. Back then, he had been volant within the dopamines and endorphins of his own head, anticipating a maturity, a growth into the fit of his decadent skin, which would allow him, as much as a serious artist was allotted, to strut his succulence more fully on life's propitious catwalks of fame. That had been the initial impression that had come about, to some degree, from a rather inconsequential review published in Thailand; and it had been an impression and reaction not at variance to the impressions and reactions of all earlier reviews.

And yet a year later when the drawing of all his escorts seemed banal and jejune enough to be replaced by a celebration of the ordinary (a painting, for example, like a photograph in a locket, of his then platonic angel in the driver's seat of her car but from a perspective of looking at her through the exterior of a windshield and through the interior of a dangling jasmine rosary that hung from the rear view mirror; another one of his pedantic wife at a distance sitting on a bench outside the Assumption University library while sipping through a straw the juice of a coconut as she read a book through her heavy spectacles; an odd if not grotesque painting of Noppawan with the perspective from the forehead looking onto the dark, leaning moled hills, and blemished declivity of her face; "A Conversation on Surrogate Motherhood," as one painting was mentally entitled in which both women were at a coffee shop, and despite their restrained if not tranquil demeanor the room was filled with their unrestrained, desperate thoughts flying through the air in sundry shades of every color; and others seeming to him more insignificant and raw stylistically than the three aforementioned), he told himself that he was worthless as a painter. He became determined to remove his paint and canvases to a closet and to forswear art altogether. He averred inwardly that all his studies of aching prostitutes who were quickly manufactured off the assembly belts of this world, which stretched decades, centuries, and millenniums toward the past and the future, would not help one of them, being dead and unborn as they were; and for those escorts in his immediate present whom he gropingly attempted to befriend, to sooth their jealous reactions toward his unwillingness to divorce his wife and marry them, and occasionally tried to set up as beauty shop proprietors, owners not merely of sidewalk restaurants but of the open garage variety so common in Thailand, supporting them financially while they sought a high school degree or other certificate, and other futile attempts at empowerment, it appeared that what he had succeeded in doing for the dead and unborn whores was infinitely more. He had delivered no one to their higher potential. Art, he said, was a frivolous embellishment by those who were weary of enduring the ordinary. It was lavish and empty like a string of heavy jewels locked in a safe, or the accumulation of wealth to give specious dignity to the tenuous body of carbon called man. It did nothing for anyone.

It was then that, because of the article, the word, "distinguished," began to snag his consciousness. The word, when used sarcastically, suggested that one was a dirty old man, that acme of all depravity. 'Depravity' was an all inclusive word in which both playboys and bloodthirsty tyrants were erroneously locked in as cell mates. He had not even climbed far into sensual decadence, a different mountain entirely, with play for the playboy tearing his crepe paper heart the inwardly lachrymose and outwardly debonair way that it did, with these bouts of sensing a woman's genitalia as vapid holes being banged as empty drums from inside by a man's stick; these conclusions that sex was just a bored erumpent man banging on any tin trash can in reach for a bit of sound and vibration, and brief moments of total, pellucid understanding called enlightenment as to the absolute absurdity of an instrument of urination being used for intimacy.

He knew that if viewed alone, without the disparaging meanings pretentious and sanctimonious art critics gave to it, the word, "distinguished," was more good than bad. Still, he did not like the elderly connotation of it in reference to himself and he did not think that he was accomplished enough to be considered "distinguished." Nobly and decadently, he had spent many years chasing lurid themes and nasty girls merely because he, from personal experience, could empathize with innocence being snatched away by the hungry wolves of this world—or rather, the more complex commonality of not really being snatched by those fangs, but innocence, in the form of a thigh, being eagerly given to the waylaying wolves so that the whole body could survive. By being tossed morsels of the good life from the beloved abductor in exchange for a thigh, the body could survive and the brain would be more than empty space for it would have someone to love.

Regardless of whether the innocent were considered victims or volunteers, innocence was nonetheless baited and devoured. As a forlorn younger brother who was hated by all except for the one who would use him as a "cheap date," he knew. He knew that corrupted innocence was a perennial ache, which would ensue for as long as there were hungers. And for Nawin, this Jatupon (merely "Jatuporn"), it was an insoluble theme haunting him with many blissful nights and compelling his days to be slavishly spent in pouring color from tubes into imaginary holes on canvas.

Fine as it was in youth to vindicate injustice by painting his tragic madonnas, one could not exactly grow old that way and seem inwardly wise or outwardly respectable, not that he accredited the latter as having so much importance. Still it was a rather repugnant thought that he who wanted to become wise and enlightened once he entered old age would instead become just another distinguished patron of massage parlors, obsessed by vibrant youth, and having found no awareness from all his days beyond his sexual rhythms. From this conclusion he retired from art with a second and more puissant conviction.

Now he, this forty year old birthday boy in a toilet of a train and the stench thereof, was once again trying to recall this same article for he was wondering if the writer had really meant all along that he was an immature painter whose use of the lurid could only sustain him in his youth. For all these years he had been gloating in all things written about him as if none of it were critical or vatic; and it had never occurred to him that perhaps, by behaving so, he was making himself ridiculous.

He tried to recall it as best the copying and projecting apparatus of the human brain allowed so that he might reinterpret the critique, but the lethargic crawl of memory wobbled like an overweight, arthritic dog kept at a distance, and only that salient collar: the word "distinguished," snagged it a little within the thickets of thought that made up the illogic of his consciousness.

Somewhere into this third time of looking up at himself in the mirror for reassurance that he still possessed the same handsome face, he imagined something like an older man within scraping the vestige of his claws through the inner layers and then through the surface skin of his Botox starved face. The hoary phantasm of the stark, ugly possibility of self and the probability of one day finding himself no more distinguished than any old beast fornicating with youth made him once again reel on this, his first day of being a forty year old man.

Suddenly, a plethora of other articles published about him reeled through his mind like microfilm, but also in a most diminished and faded state. Some of these articles might have merely been the hype of writers at the insistence of gallery owners or independent actions of newspapers and magazines to give readers what they wanted: sleaze about a minor celebrity whom through his paintings and tabloid gossip they could learn more about than any snapshot of a movie star in bed with someone other than his wife. From tiny facts or rumors of facts about this exhibitionist god on canvas, the populace who were bereft of significant involvements could gossip about him to make friends with others equally bereft.

"No, my works are not salacious crap—well, not crap anyhow," he told himself, and laughed at his hyper self-criticism for it was he who had been the youngest artist in Thailand to have an exhibit of his work (a decade in retrospective) dangling nude with legs marginally wide open in the temporary art museum. His adulthood had been good indeed, he told himself; and he knew that he could go on savoring his success if only he could find an inspiration to probe the ordinary as profoundly as he did the carnal. "Strange," he thought, "that the carnal is ordinary but that the ordinary does not seem to be carnal," and he dwelled on this paradox that he created for himself until memory intruded on his game.

- What are you doing, he had asked Noppawan one late Sunday afternoon after returning from his painting and philandering on the floor of his studio.

- Why all alone and in the dark?

- I am not all alone.

- Well, good. Who is with you?

She did not say anything. - Noppawan?, he asked mildly as if addressing a sensitive child.

- I have my lovers too. Can't you see? As withdrawn as she was, her words were barely audible.

- I see Basset on your lap. I see that she loves you just as I do.

- No, hers is different...real.

There was silence between both of them and he felt she was not real but a miniature spirit in a

miniature spirit house that he needed to appease with gentle words of oblation. Still, there were questions to be asked: Why are you on a dining room chair in the middle of an empty room with the cat? Why is the room empty? he asked in slightly more critical tones but, as always, still gentle and circumspect with his wounded bird as with the angel and the madonnas. As an empathic man who knew what a landmine the personal life was, there could be no other demeanor for him for little did he want a battle of which rotting bodies and their stench would be the only outcome. - Why have you shoved all the furniture to the back of the room?

- I don't know. Comfort, said the reticent woman.

- Comfort?

- A mirror

- A mirror?

She said nothing until, like a drowning swimmer, words bubbled up from the disconcerting ocean of silence that she so cherished. - For the same reason you became involved with me, Nawin. You needed to marry someone who reminded you of what you were, how you were alone in your family, to remind you that the world was not right for someone else and it wasn't just you aching and mad in your own thoughts. So the furniture gets shoved to the back of the room, so I look into space.

- What?

- As a mirror.

- What does that mean...'as a mirror?'

For a few seconds she withdrew to the cat, petting it but with eyes that seemed to pass through that which she needed to neediness itself. Then she looked back at him—I don't find it lonely just to sit here.

- You should.

- Should I? I don't know. Being with you, not knowing what you think of me...you in these women's company constantly, and me in their shadows...Often I just want to be contained here in my space. Here I don't feel so inadequate to your women, or the need to deprecate myself so much for feeling that way...so inadequate to your disadvantaged, dirty women.

- I'm sorry.

- Inadequacies are fired onto me daily, you know, even if I do tell myself its inside me and that you do not pull the trigger.... No, it isn't the affairs. What you press against your body is none of my business. It isn't as if I need to inspect the underwear you plan to put on...if its cotton or silk, bikinis or boxers, clean or dirty...what you press against your body, who massages it, and how, I don't care.

-What can I do for you?

-Yes, strangely enough you are so decent. Husbands should at least be friends with those they have. I knew what you were when I married you. It's those inadequacies like going out in rags....If you like yourself before, you end up losing any sense of anything good about yourself in being with such a man....No, I can sit here for hours and not see anything so lonely in it. Its like Ban Chiang pottery locked in a glass display but at least in that container I have me. Out of it, with you, I lose me... at best, I have just an image of you from long ago in a special mirror nobody else sees.

-You don't look like my image. He chuckled awkwardly to lighten the mood, fully aware of conversation being an inept bridge to link any pair let alone the purveyor of pain with its victim. Not knowing what to say he changed the subject—Let's move the furniture where it belongs out of the corners. This was his response to silence.

- Why, people ask me are we, I, an archaeological anthropologist and you, a playboy artist, together. They feel sorry for me for they think it a graphic humiliation worse than rape. In ways I suppose it can seem that way when rape is such a private act...and this is not private. I brag about your latest paintings as if to say that what he does with his own body is his business; I don't tell him how and where to move his legs so why should I worry about his other bodily movements and functions; and I couldn't be prouder of a husband who explores the human soul through a vagina. I suggest it, although not in those words...not any words really. She began to cry. - There is no paint for me, Nawin. No canvas...just the clutter of a woman's home...countless things if she marries well...countless knick-knacks she has to move around and in which she has to reflect her thoughts, all in different parts of the house. She moves the furniture to see a world where the same pain exists elsewhere to prove to herself that it is the natural state so as to make all else bearable...I mean it is the natural state in a sense but

for other husbands maybe not to these extremes or at least not so openly depicted. If natural, a woman can console herself that it is not just the insanity of aching in her own head.

- Are you leaving me?

- No, I'm not so courageous. It will always be more of the same for me. So I am sitting with this so called goddess of Bubastis, this cat on my lap, and as I do so it seems to me that a cat is good for cuddling but a man with his premature pecker is not a cuddler...just a lovemaker. That is what he is good at. The Egyptians were right about there being a woman in the cat and a cat in a woman, for the two creatures need to feel real within the propinquity of touch. There with another non-threatening suffering creature of this world, touching to feel real, maybe it is just another mirror—just a bigger love, a fuller love and perhaps a more selfish love than a man and a woman feel but this cuddling with a cat is better for a woman.

The memory reeled around and played so distinctly that he almost thought he was there with his wife; but how much of it he had distorted to make it more meaningful, dramatic, and aesthetic than it really was, he had no way of knowing. The brain was always rewinding bits of memory, analyzing them, and splicing them together like film; and as were two people walking down a sidewalk without looking at each other, who were and were not together, so was memory—it was and was not.

Were articles dating back fifteen years adulation about the artist of his youth that might have been true words then but little pertained to the man of forty, or were his works tremendous talent that did not hinge on the salacious biography of the artist and would live beyond his short eruption of ephemeral years? It seemed to him, nonsensically, that they both were and were not. Nonetheless, it was absurd to merely think that over the past few years he had aged so tremendously that critics and commissioners of his work alike had lost interest in him entirely. The art critics had been writing about him, albeit less frequently, until he ran out of inspiration for his redundant themes, irrespective of the surfeited forms of whores who came in droves, each with slightly different circumstances, and each with slightly different expressions. "I was a sensation until I lost interest in beating and stirring up such muck, and none of it has anything to do with turning forty," he told himself, but he knew that it was and was not true.

It was true that just four years ago he, the once eligible but continual playboy, was appealing enough to be referred to as "Naughty Nawin" with those English words in their headings proving that he had not turned into mushy and deciduous fruit in the little over three summers since; but it was not true that as unseemly as his life might be in view of the fact that he was a glutton of the personal life like a boy in front of a thousand cookies he was the same as any foreign business holidayer of the masculine gender looking for the nearest brothel. His was more of a spiritual decadence. "Forty is just a number. You are as handsome as ever," he thought as he looked at himself in the mirror. "You stopped painting and they stopped writing about you. It is as simple as this"; nonetheless he did not believe in simplicity.

He missed the hype organized by galleries. He missed magazines catering to those needing a celebrity from whom they could learn intimacies, tiny facts or rumors of facts about the personal lives of the gods. He checked himself. His mind was going in circles around the word, forty. The circles were more of a vortex as, on bad days, when he descended for some seconds or more into early family and abuse, which could suck him in fully were it not for his active vigilance.

Examining himself in the mirror for the umpteenth time with a refreshingly spry countenance there to befriend him once again, he gave thanks to the mysterious forces that had given him a life where he might make a living presenting his varied depictions of himself with his whores on canvas (a whore of every type from every angle), fervidly contemplative of life's decadent urgings. Like a schoolboy twisting in the grass, he blessed the fates that had allowed him time to revel in his spinnings. Free to contemplate the unequal plight of man (or woman as it was in his case), to see color in forms and feelings and thought, to mix with forms by allowing licentious whims to twist around the kite in accordance with natural mandates to reign in those turbulent skies, he basked in others perceptions of him as handsome, successful, and affluent. Like juicy fruit on the stem, his days in the sun, as an elated appetite of women and an envy of men—at least for those who knew something about contemporary Thai art—were embarrassing and awkward to the modest Jatupon that he was; but it was the very furthest of human plights. Selling his paintings at ever inflated prices because of their worth and his celebrity status as their decadent creator, he had the ideal life. The creature of pleasure had to concede as much as this.

Smirking at himself, the wry smile soon fell flat at the thought that even ugly pimps who were affluent from their brutish, sexual peccadilloes might be considered equally sexy; and he sighed at his bland fame. He had gained it from portraying the same models in the same redundant and stereotypical theme to which he knew no variation; and whether or not those guilt-ridden self-portraits of himself engaging with his whores as stiffly as a Buddha were an exploration of his models or an exploitation of

them remained an unanswered question. He moved closer to the mirror and looked deeper into the image. The rot of forty, if it were a rot, was an internal degeneration that had not yet reached the surface of the apple except for a few premature wrinkles, which he had already stiffened out with Botox. He flexed his muscles into the mirror that like social interaction and painting reflected consciousness and reminded him of existing beyond the redundant actions of eating, urinating, defecating, reproducing, sleeping and all the other - ings.

Stepping out of the toilet as he was now doing, he posited that such banal and inconsequential movements as this were like copulation with a rife assortment of women, that movement provided men with a base physical consciousness that was indispensable to their overall welfare by making them appear more tangible to themselves than any images in mirrors could do. Still, while moving out of the toilet and pondering this new justification for male promiscuity within the corridor between the two cars, he inadvertently halted there before his image in a second mirror. "I am still a young man. Both mirrors say so," he lied to himself; and then began to wash his face at a sink. The tap water pulsated out in an extorted and convulsing trickle, pushing him a little into those turbulent memories of the recent past. Not wanting to think of Noppawan or the mangled angel who was no more volant and permanent than any pallid terracotta falling eleven or more stories (he had forgotten the exact number with the burgeoning thickets of neuron brush that were daily mutating the landscape of his mind), he looked into the image of his own eyes to reassure himself that they still had a young man's luster.

4

As he did this, combining the mirror's confirmation of forty with a sense of feeling no different than he had at twenty so that a nice conciliatory countenance of thirty stared back at him, he remembered another fragment of that earlier dream in a sleep that had been filled with such episodic starts and stops.

As the restless shifting of dreams like those he had experienced in the 'tenebrous tomb' were the chaotic composite of what the true self really was, they were also his *idée fixe*, for as an artist he knew that the true self was the only subject worthy of his delineation, his imagining, and that being awake was merely the desperate garnering of the true self's scatterings. In some sense being awake was a liberation from sleep, that anarchy of fleeting images, fears, and anxieties about the unalterable past which the subconscious lived over again and again in new arrangements like a news reel seen in various colored filters and in reverse of a young French and English teacher jumping from her balcony. It was a means by which, if not to erase or delete memory, to splice it, to fictionalize it, and to some degree begin again; and yet he judged consciousness to be even less real. Married one moment, separated the next, the boy was always growing out of his clothes or being stripped of them. And as the door of the fitting room by which people came in to wear him and be worn by him never seemed to shut well, allowing all whom he loved to briefly use him and be used by him to get a variant feel of themselves before going toward new entries, it seemed to him that the door might as well keep revolving. One might even stifle human growth if one were to try. This had been his supposition in maimed youth after his parents were jettisoned from their windshield by a Fate seemingly eager to part with superfluous human baggage, these burdensome nuisances, and he was too old to part from such inveterate conclusions now.

Being awake was a concoction of pasting together the fragments of subconscious thought. Whereas a biographer was a historian of superficial events, the artist was a cartographer; and it had always been his hope that collectively all artists (himself included if he were not retired) would in time be able to chart an accurate aerial view of the splendid, volcanic thrusts of the subconscious. He took a comb out of the pocket of his wrinkled pants and began to straighten his disheveled hair lovingly. Then in consort with his debonair image, his Siamese twin in the mirror, he put his palm on his forehead for it was aching numbly, and more numbly was his heart. And thinking of his own restlessness, he knew it would not end with ended sleep. He could tell this from the hammering taps of his present headache that were born of the travail of truly chaotic dreams.

He told himself that there was no reason to feel anxious; for what was a man if he were inwardly shaken by external vicissitudes? Many evenings before his self-declared retirement he would stare up into empty space from the bleachers near the lit sports stadium in that area where they both lived (an area convenient to Assumption University where his wife worked), sketch something, and feel warmth in the blackness and nothingness. A real man, he argued, could sink himself into blackness, knowing himself to be like a bit of top soil washed away in storm waters, and think nothing of it. So Kimberly was dead...so, he had a son by her in the hands of the wife whom he guessed that he was now separated from...so he was a forty year old man who briefly felt a queer amorous titillation of homosexual yearning and a phantasm of a tryst inside his head...so the tryst was for a Laotian in a train...so, like a poor man on a train, he was going to the capital of one of the most undeveloped

countries on the planet...so, he was running away on this December 5th, the king's birthday (Father's Day), seemingly oblivious to any agenda about what he was running toward. It was all a sinking of his dirt in eternities of black space and he told himself that he was warm and content within it.

The link of associated thoughts that had brought him to recall this particular fragment of a dream while staring into the mirror with a preposterous sense of self-satisfaction was oblique at best. It began with him looking into his sparkling eyes and his clear white smile of multiple brushings and whitening solutions, followed by a second in which he very well might have used the English word "gay" to describe his image had that abhorrent word of myriad connotations to which the worst were dissonant to the pleasant characterization of himself as a womanizer and a lady's man not been repressed. Then, to further avoid summoning the word which he forcefully restrained into his subconscious muck like a Burmese refugee to a sylvan camp in one of those northern provinces, he stared into his mirrored eyes deeply. He concentrated on how these eyes seemed to gleam more in certain seconds and how his face looked even younger and more handsome than thirty in these evanescent blazes or vestige flashes of his former being, the boy whom he once was. The delusion of thinking of his appearance as that of a thirty year old man or as one much younger than this made him think of being thirteen, frightened by his first wet dreams and the accompanying stink of his body, which he then supposed to be some type of inception of death or body rot; but it also made him think of that day his mother bought him some goulashes for thirty baht and how proud he, that tiny boy, was that she would spend so much money on him. The goulashes made him think of being coerced to trudge around with his brothers along the edges of creeks and canals where they, guffawing sadists and martinets, made him abduct and mutilate crawdads to recognize that he was no better than any other creature of the natural order that gloated at itself as one individual in a species of myriad predators. And finally crawdad hunting in Ayutthaya, the home of his forlorn youth, made him think simultaneously of being with his brothers scavenging and pilfering refund cola bottles in the doorways of alleyways so as to buy a little candy from a local store, and wall crawling geckos.

In this earlier dream that he was now recalling a gecko crawled on a wooden cross that marked a mound near the trash barrel where a family cat had been buried in a shoe box coffin long ago. Then on the upper portion of the cross, the gecko became limp and stagnant, hanging on two of its arms like a dangling Christ. Hanging there inertly, it inadvertently pulled on it, this lever, opening a strange, familiesque commiseration of the parents and mourning of the brothers just as they had felt it together that time as young children long ago. But these odd, cognate feelings over the death of a pet were like distorted sound waves that bounced off the back of empty space and none of them were present—not even himself—just a gecko silently hanging on a cat's cross...feelings of loss...dross.

He sighed. In being awake or asleep in a state of mind that was literal or symbolic, everything that was known to his brain such as the certainty of having been abused by family, the certainty of any past event, who he loved and how much he loved her, his responsibility for the tragic outcome of a woman's life, and his own self-worth, which fluctuated based on the height of the wave it floated upon, registered merely as likely possibilities and vague truths. Any aplomb that he projected could only belie this frantic attempt to make sense out of his impressions of the world—impressions like indentations of a cookie cutter on his doughy brain, and impressions that were interpreted and warped within the pull of memory. He knew nothing of the world at all beyond loose impressions of incidents that were refracted myriad times off diminished memories, twisting into something other than what they initially were before becoming the subject of his discernment as to what life was and what it all meant.

While pasting the fragments of the true self into a reticulate and concocted whole following sleep, it seemed to him (who, in boyhood, had once been envious of a 12 year old friend for being told to leave home when there was, supposedly, not enough food for him to have his share), that for those like himself who knew the worst of family and had long lived as outsiders along its landmine strewn fringes, such dreams—surely not of geckos and crosses on cats' graves, but ones no less poignant in conveying the same grief of being bereft of family—were common on all Thai holidays. For it was on such days that happy or speciously happy groups burgeoned rife on sidewalks as a type of rank urban wildflower; and on these days in particular, pedestrians like himself could not walk down a sidewalk without using a hand like a machete against these impermanent but nonetheless hard and obdurate clusters of families. As gregarious as he was, he was often driven at such times by an obnoxious predilection to cut through the thickets of their obscene closeness and at the same time to take special attention to avoid the steps of shopping malls where the roots of these blooming and ambulatory groups more fully tangled his steps like seaweed washed on crowded shores. On holidays like this, families were everywhere except in fetid trains, like the one he was currently in, going to Nongkai. It was for this irrational caprice among others that, like a relatively poor man in this jiggling and forward moving box, he was absconding on an economical and flightless journey to nowhere. Although the train had couples bunked together, overall it was pleasantly exempt of family, and as such it was a bit of a refuge to Nawin. He laughed at himself for he found the self to be more comically intriguing than any other

being.

It was on such holidays, as teenagers, that he and Noppawan, and the "they" that they both were, would go to the Siriaj Hospital Anatomical Museum to be with the dead freaks there, to sit on remote bleachers in tiny and obscure parks, to prop themselves on the ground against the side walls of public toilets near the Chao Phraya river with a small scattering of homeless individuals, and to loiter in other impromptu sanctuaries exempt of this urban seaweed known as family which both had an allergic reaction to.

He thought about how easily a man in these idle hours of a holiday could slip into a specific moment as a teenager or as a child. A boy always outgrew his pants and yet a forty year old man who was well educated, talented, and affluent would, at certain moments, find himself putting them on. In unblocked corridors memories could come to blast him with their spells and he would once again become a straggling boy fighting the pull of sadists on thin, stilted sidewalks along a canal. It was all very alarming and intriguing, and it prompted him to smile at the ironies of being human which totally confounded him in a most pleasant way.

Thinking not only about the dream but the family that once was, it seemed to him that any positive memories were a torturously slow and bitter sweet poison unjustly administered to him, someone who already resided fully as an inmate of his own brain; and that had he been totally bereft of love when he was young so as to be raised by absolute fiends, making him into one himself, it would have been almost preferable. It certainly would have been more liberating than just being confined in a memory chamber where periodically he could recall vestiges of family happiness enough to remember some specifics but otherwise only felt their deep residue. Having their intrusion did nothing for him apart from causing him to wish for what could never happen again.

But then what did he know? Without a good night's sleep, how were any of his ideas anything but minutely sensible at best? If anything was for pulling and clearing it was this weedy thicket of messy ideas in a landscape heavy in leanings toward sleep.

5

He was not exactly sure why, at the moment of contemplating this rather non-germinal seed of love that was there clogging space within his manhood, that this unpleasant recollection of his attraction to the Laotian suddenly interposed between the concept and the peaceful equilibrium that he supposed that he sought—an equilibrium that he supposed everyone sought when not bored with the tranquil and the blase. Still, it undeniably did, the way the subliminal thought of his dampened socks in the upper tomb still seemed to be aggravating his nose. He wanted to tell himself that the brief titillation, so clearly a phantasm of his own making, had not been real. It was easier than telling himself that Kimberly's death and his separation from his wife were not real; and yet he knew that even if he were able to successfully repudiate this one—this tenuous abstraction, this memory of such a queer feeling—as though it were merely the disconnection of a somewhat sleep deprived brain, such a repudiation could only be successful when he was at last off of this jejune train and out of its monotonous rhythm, and had other stimuli pumped into his orifices. Then it could be forgotten like evaporated dew on a warm, sunlit day. Until then, the stranger of the bottom bunk in underwear camouflaging an erection was tangled in the burring thickets of thought that permeated his mood as a mildew on the upper roots of a tree.

He felt disconcerted and a little anxious, and this apprehension was beginning to make him, he who had not had a shower for the past 24 hours, sweat odiously and stink as his elder brothers. He stopped himself thinking of them for beyond this point these uncultured beasts, long banished to the status of abstraction with years of no contact and diminished memories, were a forbidden subject of contemplation by the declaration of the monarch, Nawin, in the kingdom of the brain. This strange, disconcerted sense of himself was almost like a dizziness. It was as if in part he had momentarily slipped out of his body and brain to become an on-stage caricature whom he, an audience of one, was watching obtusely. He was watching himself, a mute who was trying to give a desperate soliloquy, through his only attribute of wordless, dilated eyes. He snorted and snickered at this discombobulated and confused state that was so unlike himself. His forehead somewhat furrowed in the contemplation of his puzzling idiosyncrasies. Then he wet his hand with a bit of tap water and massage-slapped his face with his fingers the way he spread his aftershave. The purpose was that of sobering himself from delusion; and he told himself that the headache was part of a slight fever. He convinced himself that he was cooling his forehead from it but this was not so. In fact the atheist (that same one who, once his child was born, had sat at an empty swimming pool contemplating what his role as father should be, but was interrupted by witnessing the manager bringing in her oblations of food, incense, and wishes for prosperity to the house of the spirits—a dollhouse on a pedestal, had inadvertently scrutinized her, and then filed the diminishing video footage into his mutating brain under the disparaging category of

"S—superstitious Thai" and "T—things not to do") was now using tap water as holy water.

If in the past he thought it both amusing and peculiar that he, an artist who recorded moments in time, should perceive memory as such an assault he did not think it so strange now, for this particular recollection of the Laotian seemed like the hand of a minatory stranger smothering his face and he was somewhat frightened by it as he had been by the actual incident itself. At this particular moment he yearned viscerally for the Laotian, the stranger, to awaken and remove himself from the train at the next stop; and yet as the man was going to Vientiane, there was little or no chance of him leaving before the last stop of Nongkai. Nawin considered the fact that he could not spend an hour or two (whatever it took to get to the last stop) absconded in the bathroom, ostensibly hiding from him but really hiding from himself; still, he would play the moments of impulses in their respective order and for now the fetid metallic tiled bathroom with its metallic floor-based, urinal-shaped toilet was an oasis for the handsome lambent image of his that gleamed and scintillated from the mirror. He splashed a bit more of the water onto his face and felt better.

From non-germinal love hadn't the thought been of that stranger, his father, and then from the father had it not been of the stranger from Laos? Specifically, ruminations of being a kinder man than he wanted to be and obviously not succeeding at that to a memory of the father, and from the father to the Laotian: this, he supposed, was the chronology of his recent thoughts. He assumed that recollection of that titillation was preceded by a memory of his august but haggard restaurant-working father swaggering toward a second-hand reclining chair, telling him to scram, and seating himself with right foot resting on the left leg, thumping its smelliness into the air of what he always declared to be his home, his domain, like a judge with his gavel. Nawin was not all that sure of this being the cause, or how one would determine a cause of a most peculiar and perverted thought as this blown in with all the other perverse ideas of his subconscious when, for whatever reason, it was tossed a bit further on top of all conscious rubbish (of course, as always, he was for the most part successfully blocking out the copulatory sport of the second eldest, Kazem, and that one's playground). He may have hoped, even though he did not believe, that isolating it would be the means to an instantaneous cure from all perverse ideas not of the heterosexual variety; and for a moment he frantically unblocked most neurological corridors, no matter how stygian, until contemplating this senseless contemplation made him feel a bit nauseous.

He used humor to distance himself from this recollection of momentary derangement or crazed but inconsequential titillation by telling himself facetiously that the reason this incident was now being shot like darts into his realm of contemplation was as a form of dogged, fraternal torture inflicted by one sadistic part of the brain against the other; but as fraternal recollection could only exacerbate the headache with the introduction of more dull emotional pain, he tried to block off turbid memory and listen for the sounds of metal being kicked and folded, upper tombs going back into embankments, and seats being readjusted. Hearing none, however, he assumed that the officer who was in charge of the removal of linen and the return of the bottom bunks into seats was asleep. Being forty and not having the desire of the thirty-nine year old to make the awkward climb up the monkey bars to the upper bunk where he would once again stare into the walls of his tenebrous tomb until all elated sleepers were awakened and summoned to their descents, Nawin decided that he would loiter in this toilet, at least until someone needing to relieve himself procured his removal with a few hard and eager taps on the door. The titillation, he tried to pacify himself, was merely one more inconsequential item of rubbish blowing in subconscious gusts and like wondering if, across the aisle, a female passenger who was wearing the hijab was a southern terrorist, it meant nothing.

He had to admit that it was futile to ponder whether the barren and the fallow might be preferable to this annexation of space by a rather non-germinal seed of love that had been planted within him against his will. He could hardly extirpate it, and if the seed had stunted growth he knew of no inward manure that might cause it to grow any more. And as for manure, his thoughts jumped track within their locomotion so that he might change the persistent discourse in his solitary brain; it was peculiar that this substance should be the nutrient for growth just as it was peculiar that an instrument of urination should be the means of intimacy between a man and a woman or for that matter, a man and a man...a man and a man.

The unpleasant memory of his crazed but momentary attraction to the Laotian again returned to him as faithfully as a lover and as sadistically as a brother; and for a second he contemplated jocularly whether or not bad memories were merely shot as a fraternal infliction by one part of the brain to another. The query seemed even flatter and more pointless than before. With the same redundant churning of thought, he reminded himself that there was no point in quickly returning to his cubicle. He might as well dally until one of the officers of the train returned to remove the linen and readjust the seats or he would have to lie in the tenebrous tomb as dormant as the seed of love that existed within him.

As one of the Earth's honored higher creatures who could be consumed with a lick of nature like the 200,000 of last year's tsunami (thousands that at one time were pictured on posters dangling from bulletin boards, and pedestrian blockage rails near the Khao San Road police station and the National Gallery) it was apparent that the planet was non-welcoming of the higher guest. The world was a most peculiar place just as he was a most peculiar being within it. The fact that the peculiarity of both was rarely contemplated showed how base, inherent, and instinctual factors shaped the good and the conventional of all things. He chuckled in a couple latent, audible wisps of air at his strange mind (its creative intellect and its redundant recycling of old ideas) to which his white teeth within his brown face seemed to jingle and gleam in the mirror like ice-layered tree limbs shaking in the wind. He thought about how a man lived in his self-made shack believing himself to be a king in a palace and how his ideas were as laws that he assumed to be sanctioned by destiny, but when things went awry such a common man would in all likelihood say prayers to counter his bleak prospects. He would send them into the ether of Nirvana with the burning of his incense. Sound and sturdy atheistic ideas like those experienced by Buddha before Buddhism or Christ before Christianity could only be sustained by exceptional men as long as they had good health, the necessities of food and shelter, scant relationships at the very least, and some occupation to direct time and thought; for otherwise the scaffolding of higher and wiser vistas would teeter and break, thrusting a man who was trying to balance himself on this scaffolding of tiered thought into that abyss of perceiving the world as an amorphous blob that was continually being twisted by supernatural forces.

Still, he could not quell this concept or misconception that if only he had been treated with unrelenting contempt when he was a boy, as he very well had been but without these sweet respites, it would have "toughened [him] up" (meaning that if he had been granted nothing apart from the worst memories of his former family, he would have been as tough as a champion Thai kick boxer when not wearing makeup and a dress in the sense that no conscience would he have had to intrude onto his public and private life, no pathetic themes would he have seen in the eyes of women whom he intended to use for pure pleasure in the brothels, and no pain would he have encountered in simple walks along Bangkok's mendicant ridden sidewalks and pedestrian overpasses). He sensed that such a scenario would have been a liberation from the revolting non-germinal seed of love, and that liberation from it would be a license to use as he had been used in the sadomasochistic quid pro quo or bartering for pleasures that defined human interaction. It seemed to him even more clearly than ever that if he had been allotted the entirety of contempt when young he would not have known enough of love to miss it. It did not, however, dawn on him that such an escape, even if it did not lead him to a fated time of being locked up in one rat infested Thai jail or another as one more of life's anti-social miscreants, would have vitiated his humanity.

He made his erroneous conclusion as if even a conventional 9-5 job and TV to bed existence, which was willfully ignorant of the world at large, were better than someone seized by sorrow when trying to seek pleasures and nude discoveries in every seedy domain in Bangkok; and as if in this obsession to concatenate a frenzied body to the pleasure receptors of the lower brain and then to that upper brain that was empathic to human sorrow in so much horror, he failed to deliver anyone (for it was true that painting delivered no one to a better existence). However, in a field of serious endeavor, a discipline, he was able to see the flower in myriad events deflowered and plucked and beauty in the ugly. In a discipline he found empathy, an openness to the world, rather than apathy, uniqueness rather than replication, and in-depth understanding of himself that made him an individual, a complete being, rather than a speck in the mass, a human cow in a herd. It was not true that painting saved no one for it saved him to himself. And if he failed at being a good person for lack of role models throughout his life, it was through no fault of his own. Still, all in all, he thought of himself as a 'pretty good,' Patron Saint for those who had been treated perversely. Had he, Saint Nawin, not done his best all alone with the resources he had to build his cathedral and temple to atheism, Wat Nawin? He felt that he had.

He told himself that he was as obsessed by his colors now as when he was a five year old child; and that he was still imbuing his black and white world of early servitude with crayonic paint and chalk as if it had never ended. He ruminated on this early being whom he still was, in part or entirely—a being that existed regardless of changing years, names, and social-economic status. He could not recall anything much of those very early years beyond the residual traces of a boy being allowed to take periodic breaks from bringing bowls of noodles to the tables of his parents' customers. Those were still-life images of himself seeking crayonic ebullience that could glorify his and humanity's noodle shackles. Weren't those first images, he asked himself, undecipherable, waxy smudges on discarded paper that had been wrapped over meat? From his rather indistinct and diminished memories he supposed that they were, but the attempts were the same as now: to evince a moment in time and despite its bleakness to sense it as precious within form. And if his depictions then and now were imbued with more color than that which would have been a true rendition of the scenes, they were soft and sensitive aberrations of love that could be pardoned.

He looked straight into the irises of his eyes—eyes that, when not sparkling and jovial in social exchange or lustful and burning from carnal angels that set them ablaze, seemed, when sober, so inordinately tender. Those eyes were surely not just portals to a rather non-germinal seed of love within him; but even if they were such, and his love of women was little short of a vaginal sport (to the immature dabbler that he was who failed to be a he-man and a happy hedonist), still there was more love therein than a failed marriage could prove. No, he said to himself more resolutely, these were compassionate and suffering eyes.

He pondered his effeminate sensitivity. He did not want it—he never had—but there was nothing that he could do about it. If he were to pretend to be as insouciant and aloof as so many men, this rather craven fleeing from self would be an even more egregious departure from masculine virtues. Sensitive eyes did not entirely eclipse his joy. To women sensitive, boyish eyes were alluring. This fact was proven in his having had a plethora of them even in recent years. Most importantly eyes like these, he told himself, accentuated a youthful countenance, and for any man of forty youth was the breeze that set his dog scampering.

Then he recalled that portrait of King Rama V, Chulalongkorn, hanging in the National Gallery. The depiction of his Majesty was with eyes that sponged up human suffering. "Mine are the same," he told himself; and thus his own were majestic and august even though no royal blood was puissant within the undulations of his veins.

6

It seemed to him as if old ideas in slightly new arrangements, such as this obsession with an aging self and his ineptness at long-term relationships, were quickly, dizzying, and incessantly being repeated in his brain. He, another recycled being with recycled thoughts, was ostensibly a creature moving forward with the train but in reality a macrocosm of the ideas within him; and these old ideas continued to circulate around the edge of his brain like hamsters whose impressions were that with each push of the nose they would find exits leading to the vertical, the forward, as if there really were a forward within one's cage, within the ideas of one's head.

Had this particular car of the train felt like the rest instead of seeming cold enough to preserve his meat, he, this being who was constricted to the tight walls and smells of the train, would have blamed this peculiar dizziness that he was presently feeling not on the perennial chasing of old ideas nor on ideas mixed with the bad molecular smells of the toilet but, as he was sweating more than he was accustomed, on heat. In lieu of this, he told himself that his dizziness was from being drunk on the self, a plausible theory, and yet he continued to quaff his sumptuous reflection in spite of this conclusion.

The reflection was of a swarthy, handsome man, with tender, toasty eyes glazed in ideas as if spread with honey. Was the reflection an exact replica of what he looked like? The question troubled him for no matter how long he thought about it, the accuracy of a reflection was immeasurable and the subject was insoluble. All that he knew was that the reflection was of a much younger man than his actual age: that was the consistency, even if moment by moment in each barrage of new light, his age and appearance seemed to vary. And he would have stayed in the bathroom for a half hour more staring at himself in that same way in the hope of isolating an exact age for his physical appearance and to gain certainty that his youth and beauty would not submerge with the next emerging moment had a fierce loneliness not begun to consume him like fire.

So stark was it that, to some degree, it seemed that he too was on fire, that he too was plummeting as if from one of the infernos of the World Trade Center while gusts of wind were carrying to him the barely audible moans, screams, and demonic laughter of other fallers; it seemed that he too was flailing his arms against becoming a swallowed morsel cast down the vast expanse of the deep gullet of devouring skies, and obsessively- redundantly bewailing having jumped from a window at all. These torturous feelings and thoughts were beyond loneliness. It was as though the bogus concept of one's self-importance had slipped off of him entirely leaving him exposed to himself and acknowledging that he was naked and bereft of soul, a speck that was a billion times less important than a disregarded crumb flung off a kitchen table by a finger tip. He was merely a falling speck of minutiae that if not thudding unheard like a landing water balloon, smashing and exploding onto a rock in a desert, would finally decompose no differently than all other bits of matter.

He did not quite expect it and yet how could he expect anything other than that fierce loneliness would befall him? The fact that he was taking this aimless trip at all was evidence enough of sensing himself as a plastic wrapper that was being blown in miscellaneous winds. And here on board this random train, chosen for having a departure time coinciding so well with his arrival at the train station (a train instead of an airplane so that there would not be an inordinate distance between him and his wife; for if there were such a vast distance it would, for him, have been a sign of a near, looming, and

pending divorce), movement was painfully curtailed when it was so desperately needed to curtail pain.

During the past few weeks since the tragedy and his wife's flogging of him with the frying pan, he managed the throbbing of his arm with pain medication, and his loneliness by filling his thoughts with feigned urgency and shuffle. He threw out canvas (completed paintings, partially completed, and blank for all did not matter), paint, pallets, and all other dirt, trash, and clutter of the space. He attempted to change the studio into an apartment by adding a bed, a couch, a refrigerator, a kitchen table, a microwave oven, and basic electric burners. He had a pharmacist fill a renewed prescription and engaged in mundane actions like grocery shopping that could belie the desperate surge of loneliness. At that time it was successful; but here on board this train taken randomly from all trains, there was no motion to hide behind, and just the obvious reminder that he was random, without destination, and out of control. Having no-one and yet as any mortal needing to cling to a consistent source to foster the illusion of permanence and worth within himself, how could the dark suffocating nets of loneliness not envelop him? How could they not? Even for such a man whose only sense of family was to look at it as a make-believe concept, a mere abstraction, which time erased or, if having something material within it at all that could be grasped, which was always snuffed away, washed out to sea as last year's tsunami victims, but needing to be washed away, vanished like Bonaparte, Hitler, Mussolini, General Phibun, and one day even the emperor Bush, but leaving its stain—a stain that would trouble the mind and upset a positive mood as any fading but never fully diminished nightmare. The stain was memory, a vague copy of barbarous family preserved in one's wretched thoughts, preserved like the male and female corpses at Siriaj Hospital who, despite their slit bodies acting the part of striptease artists of human entrails, had always seemed to him to resemble his own mother and father in their late thirties. How could they not? Even for a man who perceived all women to be programmed with urges for whoreish involvements to gain independence from the parents within the union of a man, to rob a man of the juice required for baby making and that occupational obsession of baby rearing, and foremost to gain a parcel of land to call one's own (a perspective Nawin, the empath of whores had gained from society overall and not so much from his mother and wife who both relinquished money for the love of poor men, although he himself was no longer poor having quickly ascended to the ranks of the affluent). More saliently, with this imagined tryst of himself and the Laotian being continually replayed inside his head, most ominously how, as much as an hour earlier, could he have been anything but certain that loneliness would soon be descending upon him in that dark, suffocating net? A middle aged man traveling alone on a train to nowhere, Nongkai, and then to the sister city of Vientiane, could hardly be exempt of internal lonely burnings any more than he could feel stable when twirling around in this chase within the self no matter how insouciant or cocky he seemed when reflected from others in a figurative mirror or himself in the literal one.

"I don't need a wife—certainly not one who blames me and not herself even though this surrogate mother arrangement hatched out of her egg and not mine" he told himself, but being so dizzy there was not much chance of him believing his insouciant thought. Latent ideas were supposed to be the real ones, but there was not much that was true in this thought clutter, hoisted up to convey a positive self-image, beyond attempting to persuade himself of masculine nonchalance and a wish to repudiate a vulnerable neediness that was sticking to him like glue to a boy's fingertips. And no matter how many times he tried to wash it away its grittiness was extant.

After so much decadent thought about the Laotian the implosion of his solitary tower was an inevitability.

For the most part he regretted having thrown his telephone into the garbage at the train station. He lamented it; but it was done, and had he not done this he would have humiliated himself both in the emasculate and the deprecatory sense. He would have spent the trip calling Noppawan incessantly, and if she answered he would have shown his true visceral remorse ingenuously, which she would have interpreted as an admission of guilt. He might even have begged that she let him pass through the same doors, his doors, that she had made anew with recently acquired locks during his in-patient time in the hospital. He could not think of anything more emasculate and self-deprecatory than innocently showing deep sorrow over the victims of events in which he had had an inadvertent role, and being perceived as pleading guilty because of the admission. It would cause him to suck in his bottom lip while thinking to himself, "As if she had not urged it on—as if I would have had this relationship with Kimberly, as much as I may have wanted it, without this being asked...twice having it pushed onto me..me who am weak when importuned twice on such matters...weak for beautiful women... not that I have ever had situations like this one presented to me before. That is right. I am especially weak on new and intriguing situations and this 'please impregnate my friend and make me into a mommy' bit was a completely new thing for me. Little in the world is really exciting and new so I succumbed. What can I say? As if the impregnation idea were not concocted by these schemers in some coffee shop or another a year ago...by their own admission it was." More alarmingly, if he had not thrown away his Nokia he would be calling Kimberly's apartment over and over again as if there were a possibility that

he had tripped over his thoughts, that she was not dead, and that her alleged death was just one more item of rubbish blowing in his subconscious gusts.

7

Inebriated, he was a passive receiver of the sweet stench of human waste and of the residual cleansers and ammonia that seemed to dilute the former. It was just like in childhood when he was a passive receiver of the dual stench of family, this sanitized word also reeking of and under an ostensible cleanliness. And while he made the association of a literal stink to a figurative one, acknowledging the possibility that each could be exaggerating the other and thus proving that he did not have a clue what was real in this capricious self, he thought of that visceral yearning long ago to believe in family. As a child he wanted to believe in the purity of it and yet, having to justify the indelible somehow, all that he could do was to conclude that it was he who was wicked, that it was he whose ingratitude toward the family that conceived and sustained him made him unworthy of their association. Still the flame, the puff of smoke, and the stench of childhood had come and gone so quickly. It almost seemed to appear and vanish over night. And here he was like magic, a man materialized out of smoke and hot carbon residue, and his own august, tenacious, and still reasonably intact will—even if now he was in the toilet of a train, alone and obsessed by a hope of seeing the flame of youth in an aging self.

Familiar as family, and made fouler yet by that association in the mind, the toilet was an increasingly nauseous place for him, and he felt increasingly peculiar within it. He only felt marginally connected to the whole of himself for he was experiencing seconds of a fleeting self as if he were watching part of it on stage doing and saying nothing in particular while the partial audience of one continued to wait for a soliloquy that would not be forthcoming. It was a most disconcerting peculiarity, this inanimate and uniquely discombobulated show, as jejune and surreal as spinning his head dizzily while watching the lifeless dummy of himself the only prop on a barren stage. "Am I going crazy?" he asked himself many times but he knew that thought was merely a symptom of his thinking too much all alone, his sputtering like a car needing gasoline.

Believing that he had little ability to make sense out of life after Kimberly's death and perhaps even before that, yet needing life which was, after all, touch, a link beyond the self, he raised the dust tinted window to sun, greenery, and wind. The toilet tissue reeled out as a streamer and began to take off like the tail of a kite. Sun fell into the bathroom like confetti. He laughed in that ineffable joy of liberation from musty chambers of thought. "Is this true?" he said to himself. "Is it true that all anyone needs is a strong gust to slap across his face? Is that all?" for the wind was carrying light and levity to the cryptic and stygian corridors of his brain. For a moment, as he wound up the loose toilet tissue on the cylinder of the toilet paper holder, he was as convivial as one could be when in a party of one. "I guess so. All anyone needs are simple pleasures pouring into the orifices" he said; but as he stuck his head out of the window, allowing wind to massage him hard and orgasmically, he saw emaciated and barefooted monks in soiled saffron robes stepping outside a rectory that was near a temple. Then, there was a forest, and a few minutes later from a cleared sylvan embankment, the stench of billowing smoke. He saw a burning wooden "castle" that had been concocted around the departed to at least ensure a physical arrival in the ethereal when heavens and the spirit were just conjecture or faith, that adult fairy tale. He saw a family of mourners grieving as families were meant to grieve and meant to care, but all he knew of them moved faster than childhood in the rush of the train. All that he knew was from one glimpse. He thought about how quickly after the death of his parents in the car accident his brothers had sold off everything and had carried him, their slave by default, off to the big city of Bangkok. There had been no time for mourning and yet had he been given time to mourn, little reason to do so. He smiled ruefully since he felt that this equating of the fundamental human institution to a stench or other pejorative similes was a ludicrous misjudgment based upon conjectures from the stunted, pathetic, and sometimes perverse experience which made up his understanding. As his belief in family was slowly being restored he felt the sad yearning to be in that clan of what was no more, and to grow old and die among them like the departed. When it was his time to die he wanted to die in this manner, in love, with his unburnt bones sent out to float in the embrace of the river goddess. Instead, he was sure that, after a two hour, two thousand degree baking in a fancy furnace at a modern, westernized crematorium, his bones would become a gritty white sand which no one would care to keep in an urn; and that although his obituary would have the significance to become an insignificant news item, no one would mourn him personally. He closed the window and sunk into himself. He rationalized that his reason for shutting the window was to shut out the world, which to him was a bad place. It churned up the poor and the desperate, forcing them to feign a spiritual connection to get a bit of food in their stomachs, and it disposed of beings and generations of beings like a consumer throwing out beer bottles.

He knew, as much as one could know from the few tiny apertures leading to the cramped little cell of

the brain, that it was in his best interest to leave his toilet theatre of one and loiter in the aisle of bunks. There he might wait for an opportunity to engage in a moment or two of small talk with staff members as they slowly materialized into vapid space to sweep and mop cursorily before passing into the next car of the train. Just a brief moment or two of feeling himself a real and solid presence in the company of others (if only in an inconsequential conversation of being asked to move from an area blocking the dust mop or being told that this particular car was smelling more and more like a locker room) would restore him to himself. There would no longer be the slight oozing away of the self or, at times, those marginally desperate eyes of one who, having a philosophy of needing no one, did not think that he had a reason to be desperate.

For a moment, the walls of the bathroom began to spin around with his mirrored face, and the faster they spun, the more the lambent reflection in flight became former diminished copies of a dominant trait of a mutating self that must have sustained cohesiveness in these former beings of what he looked like at various ages but was no more. For a moment he felt that he was imploding and he slapped more water on his face believing that he had to be suffering from a fever (surely not a nervous breakdown as his anxieties were not that acute) and yet, placing a palm against his forehead, it did not seem abnormally warm. He laughed. "Of course it won't feel warm when dripping from water," he said aloud. Then he thought of his laughter. What was it, really? It was being cognizant that one was a fickle, disorderly creature whose emotions and experiences made him into a different man with every new minute of his irrationality and his blind stumbling, and yet not being morose about it due to the fact that he maintained some degree of logic and awareness of himself.

He was certainly different from the man whom he had been as an undergraduate at Silpakorn University, young and herded into massage parlors after soccer games by his classmates' proddings and his own urgings. Thinking of his simple life then, he yearned for those former thrills that had once let him be purely free of the entanglement of barbed neurological connections of relationships. It did not occur to him that if he were to have casual sex now as he did then, such extreme pleasures would interfere with attempts at extension, this adding of scaffolding and stories to the mature mind of a mortal being. He was thinking about extreme pleasure not only from the wish to be detached of the entanglement of real relationships—not that he had any of his own now for he was still suffocating in the debris of what was before—but due to his present need for it to suffuse over his headache as cold as an ice pack.

"Something happened to me," he thought. "What was it?"; he thought for a few seconds and remembered. "I began to draw the sadness of prostitutes to compete with my peers—to show how clever I was. Then I married Noppawan to share my success... to confirm that it happened through her and for her to enjoy it...and then there was this mixing and fusing of selves like colors that could not be separated without destroying what they were painted on. Earlier, when I was still wet behind the ears, my life was certainly less complicated" —meaning that as an undergraduate in his late teenage years he had not yet gone astray from hedonistic aims.

Now in the little casual sex he had, eroticism found itself impaled in envisaging exploited frailties and male aggression behind the façade of the beer and chip gaiety of prostitutes and clients sitting around stages of dancing girls. It was pointless to determine whether or not the competition with peers or maturity itself were culprits or facilitators of more meaningful interaction, and it was pointless to determine if this artistic competition with peers had aggravated a dormant tenderness and empathy that might well have been left alone for a happier existence. He possessed the sixth sense of empathy now and it was not the type of thing one could discard. "So," he thought, "I've gotten older. It is surely better that way"—meaning something to the effect of, "So there is now this maturity with its yearning for connections to others, an aggrandizing of a petty self in union with another, making strangers of the night less erotic than they would have seemed in youth...so, there is empathy...so empathy of a former sufferer of this world to present sufferers is my lot...so I made some badly constructed bridges to women in the past as relationship building was new to me, maybe I can be a better engineer in the future."

Early into his career, he halfway believed that in his studies of the dejected Patpong whores, petrous automatons of suburbia, desperate homeless mendicants blowing bird whistles at pedestrians near the Chao Phraya river pier, and himself, an outsider inside the travail, the torture, the jailhouse of this unjust world, that he would somehow redeem all. He did pay the nude models who posed for and lay with him but apart from this, neither in amorphous smudges on tattered paper as a boy nor disciplined depictions of form on canvas as a man had he in the least contributed to the redemption of his thralls. And for all his money Jatupon was still there within him shining with tender King Rama V's Chulalongkorn eyes of suffering for his people. Those smudges helped no one but himself and for all his money he could not buy the thing that he wanted most—a hardened mask and protective gear similar to that which he had worn while fencing in his undergraduate days at Silpakorn University which might fortify him from being impaled by dejected beggars, peddlers and their carts, sidewalk restaurant

workers, whores, and monks who were never given a chance. Suffering abounded—it scurried away from the heat of the sun like a legless mutant seeking the slippery shade of shadows on the sidewalks and it would be there through decades, centuries, and millennia to come regardless of temporary external forms.

Had he been able to raise them to their full potential he would have been a missionary with a mission instead of the sordid, missionless man that he was, drawing the oppressed, but as they were connected to him really drawing the self. It was a self that was embedded in the personal life like a tree in its filth. It was obsessed by being besmirched and colorizing the besmirching. It was obsessed by dopamine, adrenalin, and serotonin within for all that he put on canvas—at least it was before retiring and giving himself to indolence, making Noppawan, perplexed at what she could converse about with her retired spouse apart from the names of the bimbos he was copulating with.

He slid down the bathroom wall into a fetal position on the floor as he was obviously imploding. For a couple moments he meditated into nothingness, and had no thoughts beyond a recognition of himself as fallen debris. It seemed real to think of his brokenness and that the pile on the floor was absent of self. He wanted to stay like this forever but thoughts, like muscles in a fresh corpse, began their spasms to be restored. They fought for redemption of the illusion of self despite his own will to shut down. He pulled a bag of cannabis, a lighter, and some rolling paper from his bulging pocket, assembled a joint, and smoked.

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Seated in his fetid corner, he was tacit in thought, still in its fathoms like a corpse in a sunken and forgotten ship of long ago, and he stayed in this state of sediment and mire, nothingness and abyss, until startled by a sound of flapping and the stirring of more than the usual continuum of sharp wind. Startled, he turned toward this movement. In a split second he saw wings and then the hard eyes, head, and beak of a black bird sharply changing course when confronting itself in the mirror. Then a couple seconds later it was gone and there was nothing novel to see. It was just a reflection of himself staring back at him, this mere self. To him, a separated man without a relationship who was besieged by a redundant, torturous sense that all along, without being aware of it, the sordid grains of his life had been blowing incrementally out of his open hands and were now passing away with an exponential conspicuousness while he remained here absconding in a toilet of a train; it felt as though he were sitting in a collapsing sand castle waiting for an ultimate asphyxiation. "It was there—I am sure it was" he told himself (meaning the bird, that which was fleeting and had already fled) as if knowing the reality of something so inconsequential with absolute non-human certainty would prove that, despite doubts, his was a stable and sane sense of reality. And if a stable and sane sense of reality was not really possible in the skull-restrained jiggling of his jellified brain that told itself that it was more than all right, saner than the herds of men, he did not want to know of such things.

To calm his racing, startled heart beat and damn off the adrenaline that permeated and burnt through thought to the rigid ready-to-respond posture of his muscles in a spreading ethereal of flaming gas, he made the dark omen jocular. He told himself that the bird was the ubiquitous symbol of a man running from his own image figuratively while retaining a fixed stare at the literal one. He might have even believed that there had been no bird at all if it were not for his racing heart and the simple fact that the window of the toilet was open. The two together made the bird's existence more plausible (at least so the self said if it meant much in the mixture of inhaled cannabis smoke, swallowed antibiotics, and pain killers that had to be stretching and distorting perception by thwarting the natural flow of neurotransmitters into different speeds and in new spirals of circuitry and thought). And yet even if this copy of the bird that was branded or molded on a bit of his brain had diminished to the point where it was now as unrecognizable, weathered initials engraved on a tree, or an outline posing as form, that did not mean anything. Did not a year in the life of a boy ultimately vanish without even an outline? All that he could say for sure was that even if it did not happen, that which did not happen was gone now. He chuckled and found pleasure in tilted equilibrium juggling its lit torches of ideas. Then he thought, "Maybe I should have gone to a beach in Phuket the way I was thinking I should earlier at the train station. Watching the waves, I could have forgotten." It was a natural enough response as embedded as it was like an instinct. Intuitively one first sought large bodies of moving water, a tangible version of eternity, by which to compare and measure oneself. In so doing, his problems would become minute with the man; and this was what he meant, for the train ride out of Bangkok was doing nothing for him. "But really," he continued, "how long can one be immersed in waves unless washed out neatly with a tsunami and there is little chance of that happening again anytime soon." The main reason that he had not gone to a beach had little to do with fear of boredom. It was for fear of seeming to himself as one of "those old retired nobodies with money" who waited near the waters edge for death. To him those waiting for death who sought non-failing amusement in the waves which acted as their sedatives were a lost and lifeless abhorrence.

"Anyhow," he thought as he sucked in the smoke of his reefer, "about the bird, what am I thinking? Who gives a fuck about the bird? Why am I dwelling on this bird. If the bird came in or not it couldn't matter less. It does not even matter if I never know anything and just go from one belief to the next under the influence of whims" for it seemed to him that reality was the obsession that we were under in the immediacy of the moment. If the ultimate decay of one's exterior form made his existence dubious, he argued, the tenuous and watery interior life of a man's mind was even more that way.

With images of wings fluttering salient in his imagination, desire suddenly began to percolate within him, tingling the body like an intimate pot vibrating and ready to boil over with life, and soon he wanted a resurrection from his fetal position on the fetid floor. He wanted to fly and yet all that he could do was remove his clothes. At first, it was to be only the removal of his shirt for he needed to block the marijuana smoke from exiting through the crack of the door. Soon, however, his pants and underpants followed suit in this denuding. Soon they were there caulking the crack as well. And as wind of the open window swept over his nascent nakedness, dispersing the clouds of smoke enough so that he could see fuliginous figures within the world of his cramped toilet, he began to masturbate to the movements of smoke-clouds.

Within, he was seeing diaphanous geckos on top of the ceiling scurrying hurriedly out of the smoke of the toilet and through the other cloud he was ogling a loosely robed sheik of an olive Asian complexion who, fairly and most saliently naked in the most critical aspects of that word, sat on a rock.

Four of the geckos had appearances of his former women as much as geckos were able to resemble human beings. There was a dark, ugly one with spectacles like Noppawan. There was a white angelic one like Kimberly. There was one like the pretty white Thai, Porn, with black hair bowing to her buttocks. There was also that self centered one of childish exuberance radiating its face like a skipping five year old. This gecko was similar to Xinueae, whom long ago he had bestowed the nickname of "Chinese Karen" so as to commemorate the day in which he had learned that he was American by birth. Altogether the reptilian insects were also like these former girlfriends in carrying off his love with their eggs as they ran off to others who promised them an immediate fulfillment of biological urgings, for in reproduction there was not only the continuum of existence but womanly purpose in nurturing posterity, and such happiness had statues of limitation on it. It was not a literal smoke that they were fleeing from nor even the asphyxiation of being alone. He could tell this. It was a symbolic smoke of dying without purpose that they were trying to escape. They knew that the flaming impetuosity with its smoke cloud of being in love so as to beget children was as brief as the body's ability to replicate. They knew that nothing was more asphyxiating than a passing cloud that they had not breathed in. They knew of no grief worse than a barren existence in which they had not done the mating moves in a timely manner that were part of that illusion for meaning and purpose in their lives. To not see life as a rushed activity that one needed to bungee jump into and to run out of time to breed was a capital Sin-u-ae in organisms whose sole purpose was to reproduce a bit of the self that was a composite of replicating cells.

And as for the Laotian sheik, there he was sitting on a rock. Nawin, while masturbating, which he called "stroking the bone", paid most attention to him who had a voice that ripped through the silence. "Since you were about ready to go on your trip to the states, Nawin of the Thais with your American passport, we decided to delay you for a while and show you our cave. An hour ago we took the liberty of putting a nanotech bomb comfortably in your ass. Rest awhile and you should be able to get around tomorrow even if now there is a little pain. We had to seuter you with whatever we could find, you know—wild poppies for one. Don't worry—no plane cancellation for you and you will not feel any discomfort at all when sitting on this flight to Washington in a few days. When George Bush Junior puts the medal of freedom around your neck there will be an explosion never witnessed before. He and the entire capital will be a second and third Grand Canyon. But for now, as training, know me—my smells, my taste, the shape and feel of the contours of me. Know it as training!" It was then that Nawin ejaculated most volcanically onto himself and the wall. He did it with exquisite visceral pleasure and pain like a Thai elephant making his debut as an abstract artist. A minute later he was hand washing himself at the sink. Pushing down on the tab to get his dribble it seemed to him that every man was a dilettante artist.

From a hot Tuk-Tuk taxi ride leading to the train station to being a carcass in a refrigerated car, and then from thinking himself as a member of a couple with marital problems to one slowly sensing in his lone journey out of Bangkok that he was separate and separated, he was now journeying through the toilet of the mind that was as fetid as a brother's sock and as explosive and debilitating as the non-ending barrage of critical words from the miscreants he knew familiarly as family. He was being flushed down with the floating and volatile excrement of memory and where it all would lead he did not

know. As such he thought,

- Nawin, what are you doing in there so long? [He was recalling his wife's callow voice from that first week of their marriage] Nawin? [As the marriage was new, her irritation was new; and novel and so it seemed to transcend the barrier of the door to mix sweetly with the falling waters and the rising mist of the steaming shower] You know, you did not marry the bathroom [It seemed a dulcet resonating warmth emanating to him from all directions].

He remembered how as he stood there listening to her voice and scrubbing his naked physique, he suddenly became preoccupied for the first time with wanting to isolate just why he had this belief that he was inordinately handsome when really he was as dark as dirt. The facial contours and muscular physique seemed a little better than average (whatever that meant) and he was "just right" in not being too tall or short with genitalia that were larger than ordinary, but not freakish or even extraordinary. What, he asked himself, made him special? His sullied attractiveness could even be perceived by some as mediocre were it not for the fact that this mediocrity of masculine symmetry was made extraordinary by his interactions with women and their numerous touches with which his mind had been filled over the years. Perhaps, he told himself, these women were aware of nuances that he, a male and the subject of the inquiry, was ignorant of. However, more likely, this being groped had nothing to do with being handsome at all. Perhaps he was merely a non-ugly entity glittering in a bit of fame and affluence that made one popular. In his case this surely meant being portrayed in the newspapers as naughty Nawin, the artistic savant who pursued his studies of common whores with the most uncommon diligence and when dressed, was regimented in fashionable attire that anointed the brown body of Jatupon and transformed into Nawin. So, in the bathroom he asked himself whether the gropings were really for his beautiful self or for characteristics that made these women feel beautiful in his presence. Wildly, he surmised that if he were a preserved, inanimate corpse like that in an anatomical museum this being handsome would be seen as something that was ugly so undoubtedly being attractive had little to do with physical appearance. A woman did not want an inanimate corpse of a man to stand in front of her bed but one to move with the symmetry of her movements and in public to make the unit of male and female gleam like the Emerald Buddha and scintillate like the golden roof of a temple as a hallowed luminous body. It occurred to him that subconsciously he knew this all along for it had not been the gropers whom he had married but she who knew him longest, she who had witnessed him in poverty when his dark skin seemed a revolting filth. He had married Noppawan for truth. Thinking this, with a bar of soap in his hands, he gloated in the marital bond and spoke to her.

- No, nothing comes before my wife. [he said the words in gargled mutterings distorted by his giddy softly cackling laughter] The bathroom is just my royal consort.

- What did you say?

- Forget it. He was basking in being missed, which was being loved; nonetheless, he could not help but that repeated dulcet tunes were cloying to any listener of music, that a repeated tune eventually became travail to the ear that required variety, and that love was no different from any other sweet, diminishing thing. Rinsing off the soap it seemed to him that surely love sustained itself briefly on finite fuel which was pumped from mutable rigs and that sooner or later when the energy was depleted, with much less that could be tapped to keep him dancing inside his head, he would see togetherness as the constricted space that it was. If a man were missed when he went into a bathroom and the bathroom was a subject of jealousy it was obvious that the one who missed him wanted warm, glowing, and perennial felicity and was dependent on him at all moments and that she would be pulling his leash to have him with her at every turn which made she and her male spouse, "them," as if they were handcuffed together. At any rate, that was his fear; for they who in childhood had spent so many years confined and tortured in a cell only to become adults feeling, despite amicable and gregarious facades, inwardly guarded and stiff with each new approach of another human being, an ability to rest in love's embrace was impossible.

At the mirror above the sink the fixed eyes recalled his own voice of youth on that day.—I am waiting for you to come in and wash me, he spoke loudly to transcend the bathroom door and the material world with thought.

- I am not that kind of woman, she retorted to feign an independence of her lover that was not hers. He chuckled at that which could not be believed for only he, her husband, understood that her wish for it was just that. Hers was the ingenuous voice of a romantic who believed that he brought the world to her for he was the new world, a real family replacing the dubiousness of a former one, which she had repudiated and dismissed as just a bad dream. In that sense they were both perfectly alike.

There in the bathroom, in this luxurious condominium overlooking the Chao Phraya river, the water he felt and could not seem to leave was not the water of a rich man pampering his longing for hot showers but the cold rain of June in which a much younger version of himself stood behind a food cart

fettered in noodles and pork, a boy named Jatupon who served soup to customers under a leaking plastic canopy. In this state even the cognizance of his wife being outside the door faded. There was just the recollection of servitude under a cobbled leaking roof that was trying to fly off like a kite. For a few minutes his self-awareness remained as the poor servant he once was until he heard,

- Nawin?

- Okay Honey, getting out now. He turned off the water, wrapped a towel around himself, and exited.

- Nawin, she said a minute later as he came out dripping in a towel, why do you have large stacks of new underwear in the closet. She was laughing at him.

He smiled coyly. - You never know when you will need clean underwear.

- This one stack alone must have fifty and they are totally unworn with tags attached.

He smirked. - The idiosyncrasies of man, he said.

- Weirdness I would say; but he knew that she understood. As someone who had known him in adolescence as Jatupon, and had seen JatuPORN, as the fraternity called him, weep in the museum of preserved corpses for the wish to be as deceased as they, she knew the poverty that he was. He knew that she would assume the stacks of underwear to be a repudiation of what he was. He knew that she would not mention this, as indeed she did not, and he loved her all the more for it.

"What do you want?" he asked an enormous gecko that was staring at him, distracting him from inhaling a new cloud of smoke after exhaling the previous one.

"You" or "Youth" it said, [He was not sure which one the thing muttered] "I will eat" and it began to eat a long sheet of paper like a poster which had his photograph as a noodle worker on it.

"Stop that," he said but the recalcitrant monster continued to eat regardless of his wishes.

- I am not Panyaporn any longer, said one of his favorite models one day in his studio.

- Is that so? He smiled.

- You are not drawing the woman you think you are but a stranger of another name, she said.

- I don't mind strangers, he said. As they are strange they are full of unknown possibilities.

Besides, imagining someone as other than pathetically human is terribly erotic. Don't you think so?

- Why are strangers more erotic models, Nawin?

- You mean why are strangers more erotic creatures in general. I don't know, he said playfully. Human beings are quite lovable, you know, their painful journeys, their tragedies. At least I think so. But the first brush stroke or caress of a stranger is not love. It is different. It is uncomplicated, buoyant, and mysterious like melting into the flames of a goddess."

- Nawin, I think that you hide behind your canvas. I think that you are a pervert hiding deep in your paint so that women won't see you for what you are. They believe that you are different. They think that you aren't using them but admiring their beauty when really you are no better than any man who abandons his wife to come to women like me.

- Of course not. No different at all. All men feel the same in being with others. There is no love in it, no empathy, it is simply melting in a flame. Melting... and it is a melting substance that releases its enzymes and eats the source of the flame. Hold still while I draw your chin! That's right! Drawing prostitutes, fucking them, it is all in consuming and being consumed by beautiful flesh...flaming angels if you will. It lacks love because love is baneful to lust and making love... an obstacle to reproduction, you know. Illusions and delusions— life is dependent on them. So you are not Panyaporn. No, I didn't know this but then how would I unless you told me. I wonder why the face and voice are the same, the body, the long hair falling onto the breasts and burying them, and the salient nipples peaking out of the burial demurely.

- The name, Nawin, the name! The monk told my mother that it was an unlucky name and I needed to have it changed.

- I like your name. I cannot see anything unlucky in it. For what reason? Why do you need this name change?

- To escape bad luck.

- Yes but how? You are with me so I cannot see how are you unlucky. She shrugged her shoulders and he put away his brush and walked over to her. You look like a Panyaporn to me.

- Either you believe in the monks' intuition or not. My mother does so I have a new name to improve my life...to become more happy, wealthy, successful.

- Poor and ignorant men in orange cloth leading the nation of Thailand and the simpletons within it, he thought. Still he smiled, for the Buddhism of the Thais had such ineffable beauty the way a sunset was both true and lovely and he did not know why. He did not want to think but to devour his girlfriend's succulent skin in voracious kisses and he did just that until she backed away. What is wrong? You are with me. How much luckier can you be? Do you give your mother the money you earn here?

- Of course. She is happy to have it. She is pleased to sell my looks.

- You are lucky then. So do I still call you by the nickname of "Porn?"

- No my real name. My new one is best.

- What is it?

- It's too long to say. Let's just call me Bun. Porn is too much like my previous name.

- Like a bunny rabbit as they say in English.

- Take me out of here, Nawin.

- Here? he asked.

- This world. I want to go with you to another place.

- Rabboplanet, I bet. All bunnies like Rabboplanet. The gravity there is so light that in one hop a bunny can stay midair for ten minutes.

- Rabboplanet, she said in rapturous veneration as if contemplating a utopia. He looked up at her, contemplated her sincere wistful ecstasy at this contrived word, and guffawed. Then he knew love for her, that wish to give any resource that he had to deliver her to a better life.

He thought of leaving the bathroom again. It was different in the mutable mind that knew and remembered imperfectly.

- Nawin, you know that there is a closet back here? And in it is another one of your mountains of folded underwear. Why would anybody need so much underwear?

- A guy can never know. One day he might be shooting some balls on the court when suddenly his underwear falls from his hips down to his feet like a hoola-hoop and all in front of the other players looking down at his equipment.

She laughed, thinking it was a joke, for what did she know of poverty? She knew the grief of family which had aged, enlightened, and separated her to be bereft of the giddiness of youth and this was plenty. Pain sobered one to the injustices and suffering of the masses. But for he who knew the inordinate burden of both there was a twice-fold enlightenment that came to him. It was an emptiness like the vibrations of blowing into a hollow bottle and an ache as eternal as a mortal could know.

The marijuana had numbed his headache so for the most part he could ignore the lifeless aching. It was not all that different than the monotonous chants of Buddhist monks that were broadcast from speakers hanging in tree limbs of certain residential areas of Bangkok. The sounds of bees and nagging wives one might not be able to ignore, but a headache, active but flattened in cannabis, was a throbbing numbness that almost felt titillating. Still, mental pain could excel a bit of the lesser and more manageable, physical pain, even when one was lucky enough not to have both exacerbating the other. Thus, he felt the duress of loneliness making him slide deeper into disconnection as the stimulating and riveting air rushed through his hair.

Feeling more and more disconnected by the minute, he finally released the joint to the vacuum of winds outside the train. Then he waited a minute for a sufficient amount of zephyrs to flush out the odors of the smoke before grabbing his shirt from the crack, dressing completely, and stepping out of the toilet. A stranger who had been timid at knocking squeezed by and went into the toilet. A train

officer who had been responsible for placing the linen on the bunks was now gathering it from the cots and stuffing a wad of it into a crevice beside the sink.

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Leaving the toilet, he walked toward his seat, which was in the eleventh car. His movements were slow as if this shivering from the coldness that descended onto his carcass in the "refrigerated car" were the cause. He wanted the warmth that was in the other parts of the train but more wistfully, for a warmth that was less superficial. It was a yearning to be, if only in proximity, in some way connected to the lives of laborers within who were going home to meet family for the long weekend of Father's Day, the king's birthday. Before him a train official was removing the linen from the bunks of the passengers who were already awake and there was a mounting pile of blankets, sheets, and pillow cases on the floor as though for him an augury to a fallen but still scattering life. Suddenly stopping at a distance to wait for it all to be cleared away, Nawin wondered of the laborers in these other cars who were bringing their new families to meet the old ones. Were they not conscious, he thought, that the families manufactured from having "banged their cocks" in Bangkok were the only reality (a reality, such as it was, exponentially longer than the carnal devourings of flesh and pleasure that were the impetus for the conceptions of the offspring, but no less ephemeral)? Did they not know that upon leaving the reunions their extended families would be relegated to the faces of strangers in the foggy back alleys of memory in which they would exit as maternal, paternal, avuncular and aunt-like outlines of diaphanous faces and stick figures only to be restored a little from time to time with letters and telephone calls? Did these laborers not know that their own loin-begotten families conceived by emotional and physical frenzy were easily diminishing puffs of smoke that in a brief space of years would replicate into other puffs of smoke before entirely vanishing, and that the labor of ethereal man to keep a puff of smoke there in his clasped hands was to no avail? Never to be made sagacious by the wisdom of perversion, were each of these myriad aestivating dwellers of arid complacency to never experience as he had a rude awakening of fraternal molestation in cold showers from that only family member who genuinely cared about him and whose insertion of hard riveting love almost seemed true with brothers who knew and yet said nothing beyond the distortion of his name to Jatu-PORN or the equivalent thereof and with parents who knew and did nothing but to continue the usual mandates of errands and chores with more vitriolic contempt? No, fortunately for the masses of men they did not have his background. They were innocents content in their illusions as innocents did when innocence was bliss.

He smiled bitterly as he glowered into space. He realized that he was groping and swinging his aspersions madly as a blind man piercing the air indiscriminately with his stick and yet at the same time he was writhing in himself, eager to escape his own skin. He was curious about the family men whom he had seen many hours earlier walking contently enough to the "cattle cars" at the train station accompanied, demarcated, and limited by wives and children while at the same time censuring their perfunctory lives. If his thoughts were in part an iconoclast's blasphemy against the family unit, a group that comprised all groups, they were also full of regret that, beyond a work of art, a mortal man could not change into the livery of another's skin, of a child who was proud of his Biadklang name and the parents who owned their own rice and noodle cart that was part of their sidewalk restaurant, of being their son if but a slave who was reproached and disparaged most awakened minutes, and of being in a fraternity, an eternity of belittling words sported against him to get the grin, chuckle, or tacit endorsement of the father emperor who, when at home, crossed one leg on another in his recliner and thumped his foot in an erotic gavel. He abjured devoting so much thought in this vein; still, the high of the marijuana was at certain moments lifting his grave ideas like a magic carpet, allowing an exhilaration of uninhibited thought even if the turbulent ride was dependent on intermittent gusts.

Hydrogen clouds detonating into stars; stars exploding as supernovas and the debris congealing into planets; microorganisms of those planets that became extinct, stayed the same, or evolved; male life forms in some of these worlds disgorging bodily fluids within partners who would sometimes conceive new offspring; this expended energy producing offspring that was animated or still-born, born with health and beauty or defects and predispositions toward degenerative illnesses, and all was chance in this spewing forth of matter. Pondering this around ten feet from the toilet in a part of the aisle which was an intersection between the two cars of the train, he knew that even with this proclivity for imploding in his own black hole he too was a bit of an exploding star, a spewing mess unto himself going randomly forward.

Standing there, wanting the worker to suddenly finish his task so as to allow him to proceed to his seat or bunk, he could only sense an oblique and loose connection to himself in the obscure light. Eagerness for any activity was curtailed in a man whose self seemed to be oozing into his shadow, and he was no exception. As much as he was capable of, he wished repetitively for his expedited entry into the car but minute after minute it was blocked by this encumbrance of a train officer. His tepid eagerness was not so much for a return to the confines of a space that had been designated to him but

to end a silence that was becoming more disconcerting with each passing moment and from a concern that the time of waiting there would sink him further into himself. He wanted to smoke a cigarette to have something to do. It was not nicotine or an oral sensation to clog the void of space and time that he so much yearned for but a mental conceptualization of himself with a cigarette in his mouth which when matching the reality of actually having one hang there would be equated as insouciance. Doubting that a relaxed mental outlook was really garnered with such an ineffectual drug as tobacco and theorizing that its efficacy in making one at ease with the world was not so much from the nicotine but the pleasure gained in graciously sticking out one's cigarette to the world, exhibiting nominal contempt for the planet by blowing smoke out onto one's miniscule sector of society, and concocting a sense of defiant and invincible imperturbability in a world that he knew one should be perturbed by. It occurred to him that imperturbability was really the aim of any smoker; and he posited that lacking a quality caused one to imagine a quintessential form of it, to stencil it onto the brain from the pattern of the ideal (man with cigarette, detached, and triumphant in a haughty and complacent indifference to all), and then to persuade himself that he was the paragon of that which he was lacking. This being so, the billboards in Bangkok showing images of the cigaretted man alone, felicitous, and nonchalant or felicitous and nonchalant with a felicitous and nonchalant partner smacked of an unreality slated for destruction.

Uncertain if it were at all permissible to light up a cigarette anywhere in the train, if he would be reproached and fined if he were to do so in this particular area that he was in, or if he even wanted to smoke at all, he floundered ambivalently before dropping the subject altogether. Still needing to have something to do, he re-combed the breadth of his unwashed hair and beyond that continued to stand aimlessly, inadvertently smelling the effluvium from his shirt which in the space of twenty hours had become its own unflushed toilet. Then there was a sudden need to defer to larger movements of the moment so he backed against a wall near a sink in the corridor to get out of the way of the officer who was now officiating over two large bundles of wadded linen that he was dragging toward a container near Nawin's feet.

He certainly could have easily felt better just being there with awakening, groping creatures of movement like himself and would have begun to do so in this moment of proximity to the train officer except for an unsettling feeling that was a precursor to the siege of memory. Being in this darkened aisle, he felt as if he were once again the adumbrated boy whom he once was. It was as if he were that being who was scared to advance beyond the back corridor leading to and from he and his brother's room at his parents home, for fear that his presence would be despised by all. He snickered at these craven impulses for a few seconds but this coarse and bitter fire of laughter quickly incinerated what was jocular within it. It occurred to him that the boy's perennial sadness had so fully overcome him that it was as if what he had been experiencing were nothing other than an attempted coup. Jatupon's thoughts had briefly usurped his mind; and even in repugning the advances and regaining this mental kingdom from the boy he was certain that Jatupon was probably still there hidden behind a hill of gray matter, wounded but waiting for an opportune moment to initiate a new attack. As he was forty now it was rather obvious that these insurrections would be ongoing throughout the entirety of his life, that the insurgent named Jatupon, whose suppressed, raw, mauled emotions and thought were as intransigent as his own will within these skirmishes, would attempt to control critical sectors and regions of his mind at unsuspecting moments, and that behind the scenes he would attempt to influence and discomfit key decisions in the mind.

When the officer was gone, he remained stationary for a few moments longer to allow, or ostensibly allow, the free passage of the toilet goer who was returning back to the car, and then for a glass bottle of Gatorade as empty and hollow as he was to roll quickly past the toes of his bare feet. More significantly, however, he stood there leaning against the sink to feel something solid beneath him as the train was seeming more and more like a jet in turbulence as if, for a social creature dwelling in the waves of his stagnant body of thoughts concerning his social relationships, there really were any turbulence beyond that which was there in one's own mind. Throughout the minutes of waiting in the aisle it seemed to him that conversation was becoming as imperative as air to breathe. He needed the vibrating air of speech to interpose between his thoughts so as to stabilize a ruminating spiral into self-destructive, non-sensical darkness where there was a risk of losing all that was tangible in himself.

Like with most strangers, in both of these brief encounters with the linen officiator and the toilet goer he had respectively greeted and smiled at each of these individuals at the moments of seeing them with a sawadee khrap and a gracious nod of the head in place of the wai. As a result of being high, the expressions that he had exhibited then were exaggerated and ludicrous and generated little reaction but eyes attempting to avert him. They had given him reciprocal greetings but they had been begrudging utterances of asperity and dismissal. Thinking of this now, his smile deadened to a bland and withdrawn expression as strangers, these treasure chests in which conversation could unlock knowledge and spontaneity, seemed empty and exhausted resources. It was not only true of these two

men but of those he saw at a distance now awakening in the car before him (some who were seated lengthwise or dangling their feet from upper or lower bunks): they were all diminishing steadily to remote and alien presences.

Standing there as he was, for a moment he had to hold onto the sink for the physical world seemed to be turning into a gas. For a few seconds he imagined geckos flying low in an air born mist moving like low-flying, prey-seeking pelicans and then, as they receded from him, like squirrels hopping over the caps of the waves of a river as furrowed mounds of the dirt of a field. As the mist thickened into fog, they became less and less visible. The only thing that was salient was the immediate past impaled by feelings of regret and futility for that which could not be erased and redone. There was just the immediate past which could not be consumed, altered, or forgotten. Recalling it and reliving it again boosted his stress. It was as if he were there at the Italian restaurant with Kimberly and his wife. It was as if he were once again foolishly, gullibly, and jubilantly agreeing within the surreal flickering candlelight of the table to father Kimberly's child and this agreement was being done not only with the hope of releasing pent up sexual energy for this foreign woman who had been part of his moral code of unapproachables (concocted morality the equivalent of timidity and hardly a virtue at all) but also to have something from a life that was so unremarkable and indistinct when lost within a middle aged fog. Every man by getting married divorced himself from his parents, but it was only in having a son and making his link to the concatenated continuum of life that manhood was obtained; and whether or not his parents were alive, spirits, or nothingness beyond loose elements, a man had to commune with them and declare his manhood in this way. This is what he had done, more or less, in marrying sterile Noppawan, and completing fifteen years belatedly with Noppawan and Kimberly; and yet he could think of no battleground more deleterious than family. When he was a boy, had the Burmese been at war with the Siamese, like the elephant wars of yesteryear, he would have enlisted as a soldier, for to be impaled with metal blades was less of a travail than to be impaled with mental ones, these spoken words; but ironically here he was now in his own sad concoction of family as one diminishing plume of smoke begot another.

And there on hardened benches or pews with the dust of the open windows smiting their eyes were these laborers in something slightly more opulent than cattle cars. If they preferred to be in this air conditioned car that he was in with its padded seats which had folded out into sleepers the previous night, he, the laborer that he had been born as, would almost have been inclined to go in there and stay with them. And as giddy and light-headed as he was from that which he had smoked, he was tempted even further to go into the tenth car to randomly ask sundry individuals for invitations to one of their family reunions but that within him which retained logic and a sense of the socially acceptable and plausible was only moved to laugh until his body jiggled like Jell-O at the absurdities that ran through the human mind.

Shivering and immobile as he was in the "refrigerated car," he thought of himself as a half dead carcass with sexual energy and desire having been recently depleted in a bizarre, depraved masturbatory experience that had confounded him for being contingent on oogling and grazing over an imaginary version of the Laotian in his head, and regrets about Kimberly having churned and re-churned his thoughts into a liquidated mass. It seemed to him that he was as bereft of viscous thoughts sticking to the surface of the brain as his own readable perceptions of life. He told himself that he just wanted to return to his bunk, cover himself up, and return to sleep. His brain was on a descent from its high, but it seemed to him that even if he were to land gracefully in a field of his choosing he would be whipped around in the winds of this world regardless of what he were to do. Unless he were to return to the landing strip of family his whole life would be for nothing and yet that landing strip was on gaseous Jupiter and the strip was ethereal and waving as though a gas were being pumped into it from underneath.

He knew that even if he had a telephone, all his attempts to reach his wife would be futile. There would be the same perennial ringing in his ears as when he was at the hospital broken at her hand, in the driveway locked out of his own home, in the hotel room womanless, alone, forlorn, lost, and directionless, half hoping to become a nice couple's foundling at the train station. If he were to borrow a telephone and call her now it would be wasted, unrecorded effort at making contact as a scream in space reverberating forever through and for nothing; and yet he was reaching a hand into an empty pocket nonetheless, as if his mobile phone had not been thrown into the trash barrel at the train station. He was subconsciously bending his fingers as if they were clasping the Nokia 3660, and he was tapping imaginary numbers into his palm. Then he recalled the plausible which deflated hope and imagination to earthly things. He noted the possibility of never seeing her again. It occurred to him how the plausible and real were part of his daydreams. Even in them he could not shirk reality where calls to her would be as calls to the Nirvana that was Kimberly.

For a moment he felt that same intense nosocomial sadness and regret which had caused him to cry in front of a nurse a few days earlier. If she had judged him, it had been a judgment of tenderness; but

for him the emasculate act of visceral mourning over Kimberly's death in front of this stranger had been so mortifying that it was worse than spilling the content of one's curved, plastic urinal onto the bed sheets. Thinking of it now, he decided that if ever again overtaken by the tragedies of this world, slitting his throat would be the only act of self-decency. That did not mean, however, that he expected suicide to be his eminent end any time soon for it seemed to him that he could make a distinction between the negative occurrences surrounding a life from life itself, and that two people, for whatever comity that they displayed in love, were volatile wills like tremors of changeable landscapes in which the suspension bridge of a relationship was tied. Sometimes things just fell apart.

Standing there in this back corridor that was permeated by the dulcet stench of the toilet, he spent a few moments breathing in and out as deeply as he could in his own dabbling of lay yoga. It was as though he were a vacuum cleaner in reverse regurgitating from his bag the filth of this world. Then he told himself that Kimberly's post-partum depression and her swift leap into the elements had not been his fault (fault not having yet been officially determined by Bangkok police officers who, in this ambiguous situation, were perhaps as circumspect, finicky, and slow to move as squatting, urinating bitches in Lumpini Park, enamored and distracted by some such bitches, or preoccupied with matters involving the location and use of drug pushers for target practice). He was not one who could divine evil events but merely a participant banging and being banged as one of life's billiard balls. In a further attempt to calm himself he rationalized in an analogy apposite to an artist that any ostensible relationship might appear as a fusion of color in all this mixing, but the color could recede and when it did there were just two individuals staring at each other in black and white from distant corners. All relationships receded in a world of impermanence, said the atheist bombastic to himself most piously.

He told himself that it was true that the present moment was the motion and commotion now registered to the senses with the past gone and the future not yet nascent. Then he told himself that although yesterday under logical scrutiny seemed the epitome of archaic and antiquated happenings and had no bearing on the present, it propped up today the way the distant past depending on family background was a solid or unstable foundation that was the pedestal for yesterday. Then he concluded that although the past was unreal, it constituted the present and could never be repudiated successfully. And as for regrets, any sentient being had regrets over negative, adventitious happenings. Still, to expend one's rational powers trying to expunge the negative happenings of this life with intangible thought seemed the most absurd act of futility.

Now relaxed in an objective distancing of himself from prevailing emotions, he conceived an idea for a painting which he did not care to ponder. It was one which, even with the right artist, would not work well as a series, let alone as one image and yet there it was projected onto the canvas of his mind as if he were destined for it. It was story and images in which a hoary man with the appearance of the train officer was moving as one urban speck in a peripatetic herd of pedestrians when for a second his phlegmatic demeanor identical to those around him was altered by a spontaneous surge of despair, a feeling which in turn caused thought about the meaning of his life to imbue and pulsate from his face. Needing or desperately thinking himself to need the continuum of former friends, he grabbed his cellular telephone from his briefcase and called one, only to find that the man was now a stranger who was distorted in age and mental outlook from that which he remembered. Then he attempted to emulate his earlier stoicism but he kept seeing shadows of the form of his deceased wife stretching out as shadows in front of store windows. Abjuring the idea of dialing the telephone number of their former home together, he did it nonetheless as if there were a chance that she would answer and tell him that her staged death had been a practical joke. Hearing an automated voice telling him of a disconnected number, he cowered into the crowd and seemed to wither there. He envisaged this as if it could be transcribed into art and as if he, a retired has-been who had merely reproduced whores and slight thematic variations of them, were the right one to depict it.

As this was not a given second but a series of changes in a few minutes of a man's life, he soon saw these scenes in a chain of diminutive beads. Every other bead would reflect the present dilemma and alternate beads would portray a significant person in his life. The significant others would be mirrors and a light source that would give some visibility to a huge diaphanous face of the man that the entire chain outlined. He was, after all, a reflection of those whom he was trying to desperately contact and it seemed to him that they should make up every other monad and that their eyes would be attempting to look at the entirety of a face that they would never be able to see fully. As it would be an anecdotal work on a large canvas, each scene, each bead of this outline of the man's face, would be a punctilious and time consuming feat to render. He did not have a clue whether the motif was incandescent or prosaic and insipid. The only thing that he believed with some certainty was that if the painting was worth doing he was not the man to implement his ideas. For in comparison to a Caravaggio, a Titian, a Michelangelo, or a Da Vinci, he knew that his talents were the top of the bottom tier of dilettantes, and even a knowledge that he was able to render his own mediocrity with the splendor of originality was not helpful. The thought of his mediocrity was asphyxiating to him and he again pondered that he was

merely a prostitute painter, a fetid and odious "nobody" within the demarcated self of a Nawin Biadklang that he could never transcend. He fretted about his place in the world as if the masses of men ever found a voice within themselves, as if his earlier paintings, which were still being collected, valued, and traded, had vanquished with him off the artistic scene, and as if his brief inclusion in an article about contemporary Asian art in Newsweek had meant nothing at all.

The train officer clanged each of the metallic ladders with the handle of a butter knife while repeating, "Nongkai in one hour. Breakfasts for those who ordered them." Then he began to pull down linen, shoving tenebrous toms back into their embankments, and readjusting bottom bunks. Nawin relinquished the idea of returning to his seat anytime soon and sat down on a box of clean linen where he contemplated the article. He recalled: "Nawin Biadklang's paintings are almost like a hybrid of Montien Boonma's Buddhist sculpture with an amateur painter's penchant for easily obtained nude models in Bangkok's red light district. Biadklang's talents at present are clearly dwarfed when compared to his predecessor, the most important Thai artist of international significance; but then youth is often seedy and so are his works, studies of prostitutes that make up his oeuvre. The combination is a somewhat refreshing exhibition that succeeds as a study of the oppressed and the human condition." It was a passage that he knew by heart and yet one where the writer's meaning still eluded him.

Then without meaning to do so, the self was eclipsed and he was asleep in a nap with its expeditious transit into a percolating sea of images. He was deluged in raw feelings, the construction material of thought, which the movement of those images brought down upon him. Within one series of loosely concatenated images, one dream, he (he or something similar as one part of himself seemed to be an audience of one watching the Nawin debacle from an objective distance) was in his mother's car driving to her home. They were returning from a cemetery in which they had failed to commune with even the positive memories of the deceased. They were inadvertently deviating into that distant, solitary region of themselves where negative and defunct memories continually reverberated against bluffs of the mind as faint, unresponsive echoes. The short journey to her home seemed long and dull and thirty miles into it they both felt ill. She asked him to stop the car so they bought some fast food and turned into a parking lot along the Mississippi River. There they began to eat while looking out onto the sodden waters under darkening skies. There was a flock of pelicans flying overhead, and geckos trying to elude the birds by floating on top of the mist.

"Look over there," she pointed. "They must be making their nests under the bridge."

"What is?"

"What is?," she mocked. "The pelicans!"

He looked. "I don't to see any of them making a nest," he murmured.

"Well, maybe I need to take you to get some new glasses."

"No, that's all right," he said. He tried to look again but this time he was distracted by an eerie roll of thunder which sounded like the ambulatory movements on creaking floor boards of the residents of an upper apartment heard from one story below.

"To the left, under the bridge. Can't you see?"

"Oh, I see them now. I bet so," he lied blandly. "A lot of them seem to be clustered over there, don't they?"

"It's got to be nests," she said as she rolled down her window to gain fuller clarity. Sitting in there with his mother, it occurred to him that their relationship was merely a spoken list of adventitious occurrences recorded by the other's senses. On this day, it was ornamental designs engraved on tombstones, xanthic blooms of Magnolia trees, the flight of birds observed from the car, and now nests under a bridge. Yesterday it had been the number of buds on her rose tree, the clothes he had not brought with him and needed to purchase at Wal-Mart, sheets and pillow cases that she needed to buy there, grass that needed to be mowed, food that they wanted to eat, a bathroom that needed to be cleaned, and other incidentals that they happened to relay to each other. As such, there was nothing personal in it at all. Still, she had nurtured him when he was young. She had been the one who had fed and clothed him, made him soup and gave him a wet washcloth for his hot forehead when he was sick, had him get out of thunder storms, told him to never walk across the street unless in consort with the masses and only at green pedestrian lights or when incoming traffic was stalled at red lights, and given him a sundry of unrecalled, commonplace items that forged the early bonds of affection. Even though she was not interested in him now, she was his mother, and he wanted to at least feign an interest in her, for feigning often became believing if acted persuasively enough. This thought that altruism was

the impetus of parental love, the purest of love, and he told himself that regardless of the veracity of the claim he should go on thinking it was true for if he were to cease believing in its goodness, all other forms of love would be instantly rendered as mendacious counterfeits. Also, the superficial evidence of words and facial expressions often belied the inner feelings and sensitivities that might be active within these guarded human creatures. He always felt her disapproval of him even in the most favorable situations, but with the intangible and often erroneous nature of feelings, how would he know that it was not his own imagination? Furthermore, how could he on any day, let alone a day of returning from a cemetery, look into her haggard countenance and pass judgment on her as unloving? If shopping, meticulous housekeeping, gardening, and commentary on nature were her only subjects of concern and her only crimes, it seemed to him that they were rather innocuous ones. If she fortified herself by clogging her mind with these activities it seemed to him that the impalpable self needed them for definition and that human beings had to clog the space of their brains with at least some nugatory issues in order to have any degree of sentience. And yet, in her curtailed life, which was so fortified by the distractions of the plants she grew, domestic chores that needed to be performed, and diurnal trips to and from Wal-Mart, he knew that she immured herself from self-reflection. She, an active defiler, had to know the stench of her former family and yet it always seemed to him that she pretended the rot and her role within it did not exist. And more importantly, the absence of a mutually agreed past left them bereft of a present, rendering talk on the most trivial matters arduous if not ineffable.

Silence overtook them until at last he concocted something to say. "You know, birds like that quickly abandon their newborn. They have so many of them that they can leave their survival to chance."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked pugnaciously, as if comments on the maternity of birds were an oblique critique of her role as a mother. Then, sensing the absurdity of the association, she tried to modify his perception of her. "I mean you don't know anything about pelicans, do you?"

"Just an article which I looked at before we left the house." He lied. He had not read anything. It was just that he did not know what to say to this human being who was reliving a former role as a maternal autocrat, a mother whom he had outgrown long ago. This had been his lie, his benign artifice, to connect with her somehow, although the benign contained its own acerbity.

"You always did like to read."

"Yes," he smiled.

"Books and paint but rarely doing any work. That's the way it has always been with you, hasn't it?"

"I am a famous artist now. I make more money than—"

"You are nobody. You are no better than the rest of us."

"No I'm not," he admitted and pressed his lips together into a contrived smile that hid his teeth. For a moment he was reticent to say anything at all, but fearing a worsening imbroglio if he continued his silence he asked, "You've never seen pelicans here?"

"No. I said that before. I don't remember even hearing of them in this area. They are normally from warmer places. Florida, the newspaper says. I guess all of them came out here from that area."

"With a road map and a desire to see the Midwest for their holidays," he added facetiously. It was an utterance meant to make their relationship congeal in levity and friendliness but he immediately sensed the sarcastic nuance within it and that he was as much stating his own displeasure at seeing her once again. He knew that he was making things worse. "Maybe they've been in the delta all along but migrate up the Mississippi River during abnormally warm springs."

"Whatever!" she responded biliously. They were silent for they were perplexed as to what they should say to each other so the woman and the middle-aged son whom she was ashamed of (at least the taciturn disposition, pressed lips, and sunken eyes seemed to be a suppressed animadversion of a being whom she wished that she did not despise) wondered about the ramifications of saying nothing at all.

"I wish that your father were here to see this with me," she said. Unmarried and living away, he was failure personified so why would she want to be seated inches away from him? Maybe she thought that he should never have come home. Maybe she thought that he should have run away before having his first wet dream at the age of twelve thereby allowing her, even decades later, to frantically hope for the well-being and return of that perennially missing child of her imagination. Even worse, he wondered, maybe she preferred for him to be dead instead; and yet he did not know those as her thoughts or how to know much of anything really.

This was their respite after seeing the marble stones that indicated where his brother, Kazem, and

his father lay, but now he was as bereft of words as he had been then and he was straggling tortuously in his head the way he had wandered with a numb and aimless gait around the tombstones. He had returned from Thailand to restore a relationship and more importantly to once again be with his mother and hear her call his name and yet for this earnest effort how could he speak with her earnestly? How could he say that he was glad that at least some of his torturers were buried underground, or admit that his best thought toward the devil who was his father was that he should rest in peace. He could only nibble his hamburger, slurp his chocolate shake, offer to share some of his onion rings with her, his stout mother, which she finally did take, and remember, as no lobotomy or other expurgation of specific memories was yet in existence. Visiting a cemetery for a man was supposed to engender lachrymose thought rather than tears and vented memories tenderly spoken; but for him whose life was an aberration, it had merely evoked minced silence. And this, his silence at the cemetery, which had flagellated her with the unalterable past, now made him repugnant to her.

At last something good, the mellifluous and the true, began to trickle from his brain and pour in with the saliva of his mouth. "I'm here. I know it has been five years—you needing to help raise your grandchildren or whatever required your attention during this time—grandkids or not, it doesn't matter... I'm not blaming you—but finally you relented and we're here together, and I am glad...glad to be here with you." It was there, a harnessed wisp of liquidated air in his mouth, but as he believed that she would only despise him were he to release the words he replaced sentiment with the mundane, as strange as it was. "Did the newspaper explain the geckos? Their migration here seems odder yet. The fact that they float up there eating bits of the sky seems odder than any pelicans migrating this far north."

She got out of the car and went to them, her birds, as nearly as she could approach them at the edge of the river, that body of water that was distended in fish and sewage and barely able to move like a fat man after gormandizing at a buffet. When she returned she had him change positions, took over the driver's seat, started the car, and they drove away. By this time the air was thundering with such a noise of pelicans that they could no longer hear the creaking of the air under the weight of the geckos.

"I don't understand your hurry to get back"

"Your Aunt Helen and Uncle Jake will be waiting. I plan to eat ice cream and cake with them even if the guest of honor refuses to go."

"I did not refuse. I simply pointed out that the invitation was ten days belated and followed you giving them some furniture. You know that it is less of an invitation than a token payment to make sure that the giver keeps giving. How obvious can it be? They haven't communicated with me for twenty years, so why should they bother now? And as for this idea of yours that if I don't go I don't love you, maybe it successfully manipulates children but it is rather reprehensible to adults, wouldn't you say? If I were to go what would I say about my personal life? I'm forty years old, unmarried, and they are bound to ask. I can't exactly continue to stammer out some evasive nonsense to the question about my involvements: that I am still looking, or laughing uncomfortably and ignoring the question altogether— whatever I said or did last time. I really don't remember what I said. Maybe it was that I wanted to get my career in order first. Maybe I was silent like a mental and social retard."

"Don't go then!"

"What?"

"Don't go. I don't want you to be there. You aren't welcome."

"I want to know why in all of these many years you never even show the least interest in my life relationships, friendships, where I travel, where I live, what I do."

Her face cringed at the steering wheel and dashboard and he could see in it repugnance at what she believed to be the turpitude of his life.

"Why can't you ask anything?" he importuned.

"I don't want to know anything. Go back to Thailand and do God knows what. You don't even live with anyone do you? It is just sex. Your life is just filled with sex."

"You don't know anything. How could you with nothing ever asked or said. You make assumptions without knowing anything."

"What you do with your male friends—your sex life, I don't want to hear about it. It is private—your private business and I don't want my nose rubbed in it."

"What has your nose been rubbed in, Mother? I have a girlfriend and a child—a child. For God's sake, look at the pictures in my wallet!" he pulled out a wallet, unfolded it, and flipped the photographs randomly.

"Get them out of my face. They are the same ones that you sent to me—the ones I glanced at and mailed back to you. It's not your child. It has nothing to do with you and less to do with me."

"It's my child," he yelled.

"Don't you dare raise your voice to me. Don't you dare raise your voice to your mother." At this place that in youth he had referred to as home for lack of anything more substantial, he quickly packed his bags and thought of how concocted and sententious morality was. It seemed to him that it was the equivalent of timidity and hardly a virtue at all. It was seeing shadows and monsters in that which deviated beyond the boundaries of one's awareness and only this. There were clearly wrong actions, actions of hate, but these were not issues of morality but the loss of a logical restraint to instinctual passions of destruction for the sake of self-preservation. He told himself that he would and could break off the relationship for to not do so would make him the mimesis of the bad they thought that he was, and if he believed that he was bad he would relinquish self-control and in a turbulent rest allow himself to be overtaken in a vortex of destructive passions. He had gone through this much of his life without in the early juncture of his youth having constructive role models. Still he had concocted his own imperfect expression of love as others who had been muddled in family. As they did with the years of their lives, he also tried to fine tune what benevolent love existed within him and would go on doing so, sometimes even accomplishing it.

He woke to human contact. It was a nudge.

"What are you doing?"

"Oh," said Nawin while smiling. "I was just trying to stay out of your way."

"You can go back to your seat now, I'm done."

Nawin stood up and the dream, like flooding river water, receded back to its usual course. Deemed as unreal and untrue, it was relegated no differently than other repudiated and forgotten experiences within the continual shove of movements in time and by a consciousness which only accepted the reality of everything new that flowed into it (At this moment, for him it was what the senses were recording as the linen officer departing into another car, the drab and fetid qualities of the train, and his constricted space within it as he continued to flee his fumbled personal life, which he remembered all too well). He shook his head and scoffed at the dream where a dim sense of reality persisted. Pushed further into the past with every mounting moment, it still discombobulated his present reality with its magnetism. It had been a mere dream but when he was in it, the images had seemed so clear, motivation had seemed less cryptic, and he could not help but wonder if in sleep the awakened state would seem dreamy if dreams had cognition of such a state.

Contrary to the dream, he had never known his mother in adulthood and apart from being born in America and living there for a few years, possibly the bastard of an unknown father (at least that was his conjecture to explain his parents separation then and the degree to which he was flouted afterward over so many years) he did not know America. This was apparent by his conceptualization of the Mississippi River where motorized gondolas moved around high rise condominiums only to depart into a canal the way they did in Bangkok. Whether the dream attempted to indict him as a homosexual or depict sexual ambiguity, he could not see either one as exceptionally true at mirroring his image (truth being that—a mirror). He certainly was not a homosexual whatever queer caprices might come upon him—sexual energy merely flowing without direction or destination were it not for mores and a negative, positive, or hyper-inflated interpretation of one parent or both as role models which barricaded the momentum and, like crags, altered the flow. No, he told himself, he was no more queer than any heterosexual—it was just that what was most pleasant in one's bleak environment at a given moment became the playmate and intrigue in one's head to which innate energies were channeled in its favor. And of his relationship with his mother, as she had died when he was fourteen years old, there had not been enough time for a rupture. He recalled that this mother in the dream had not been his own but a macabre, ersatz face stolen from the naked, preserved corpse with the slit chest at the anatomical museum at Sirij Hospital who the fourteen year old child, Jatupon, had rightly or erroneously believed in his grief and neediness to resemble his mother—the details of the face of his real mother having diminished like the engraving of a name in the sand after the first wave.

whole but surely remained as something inappreciably more cohesive and tangible that was either lost or banished and forlorn within the present jungle- thicket growth of neurons, and caught in the weeds and brambles of failed possibilities. He thought that with sedulous and indefatigable will, even more paths could surely be trodden within his growing array of brambly chaotic connections; and that eventually from this somewhat circuitous trudging through memory and thought and being nearly blown away in volant whims of his biochemistry and penchant for pleasure, these paths would bring him nearer to those lost bonds of the past (not to her who, of course, was deceased and when alive and enervated from perennial work and exasperating children and who had despised him placidly within the ameliorating parameters of maternal instinct, but to a recollection of her the way she really was instead of the distortions of memory that had her as a weathered and defaced countenance like a featureless rock or, at other poor attempts at recollection, merely the ersatz of that preserved female corpse seen at the anatomical museum at Siriraj Hospital; to recall something like her face from those early and less bleak childhood memories when she would begrudgingly join him and his brothers as they played netless badminton and volleyball on a dirt road near their home; to let these memories of shared smiles and laughter, mutual pleasure that registered as "love" with such beings, permeate his consciousness as pleasure in its imprint of memory was the only perception of how close a relationship it had been, and whether or not he had to some limited degree been valued as an instrument of pleasure, and so in a sense cared been about; and to reluctantly acknowledge that he was one of those beings who was susceptible to love, that mixing and receding of color, a mere human even though to him this word neither defined nor demarcated him very well). The next second he was thinking of male Silpakorn University students whom over the years he had seen at various outdoor restaurants near the campus, each eating and laughing in his group indistinct from all others, but when solitary would often be reading a comic book and riveting one of the legs under a table though not in a queer sensuality toward comic books; the phallic gestures were a satiety of virulence that was innate in a man. The throbbing of legs was a venting of superfluous flowing energy that by its sheer force could be channeled one way or another or both to the objects of one's intrigues, these friends who possessed admirable traits that he lacked. Then, more probingly, it occurred to him how unlike the womanizing playboy artist that he was, that a truly unperverted mind had no sexual orientation at all: that for such a being the pleasure of intrigues, these soft and low beds of earth that from His affable magnetism surrounded Him, were the natural course from which His, an Unperverted Bisexual's liquids, would easily flow into. But for the perverted, like him, who for the most part allowed themselves to be channeled in one particular sexual orientation, their limited intrigues were not so much an interest in these intimate associations as they were a replication of the same parental model, or a finding of the antithesis to one or both parents or the reminders of mothers and fathers interaction with each other that such a mind cared to emulate or reject. Then he pondered how common he was (not that he, the supercilious one, believed it with fears of being a commoner ravaging his psyche and compelling him to contrive the august demeanor and beliefs that he had as all beliefs were contrivances and fortifications against one's fears). He pondered how when out of academic and artistic circles, as in this train of passenger-rustics and professionals who still clung to their agrarian roots of Nongkai or Vientiane, his presence was glanced at and dismissed like anyone else; and this caused him to wonder if he would even be remembered in artistic circles five years hence (not that, he being a part-time lecturer at Silpakorn University and full-time wastrel—one who had to some extent rid himself of art, relinquished himself to the void, and remained divorced of the artistic omphalos as well as the paint brush—to be followed by, were it to happen, a physical presence which might expunge him from the planet in some accident, there would need to be five years for public memory of his work to be forgotten). Then, to avoid thinking of man's insignificance, he returned to a sexual theme, that personal sanctuary, as ineluctable appetites constituted so much of his mental faculties and preoccupations. He thought of how the women he liked most were more often than not a docile antithesis to his mother with the notable exceptions of young, recalcitrant, and sexy martinets of selfish whims imposed as laws who when with that same draping and tangled curl of hair and the same totalitarian streak to squelch all males seemed just like his mother, or what little he remembered of her beyond his castrated will under her auspices. Present relationships were for all heterosexual and homosexual perverts based on the model of the parents who had been of an adequate, deficient, or excessive nature, as caretakers causing a given person to reject, accept, or fiercely need what had or had not been given to them. He had no sooner concluded his deliberation that one's choice of intrigues was in large part due to one's interpretation of failures and successes of parental and espousal models than, before he even knew it, he was at his seat and the Laotian was saying unto him a hello, which in the Thai- Laotian that they had concocted hours earlier was still "Sawadee khrap" with the accompanied gesture of the deferential wai.

"Sawadee khrap. Sabai dee mai? "

"Sabai dee. Where have you been all this time?"

"Above you, of course, sleeping."

"I mean since 5:30 when you thudded to the floor."

"Oh, sorry, did I wake you?" Nawin's concern in this matter was only marginally genuine. For the most part it was feigned for the sake of kindness and to thwart this voice of distraction from his subject of deliberation. He was preoccupied with a bigger worry that, prior to going to the toilet, the stranger had seen his eyes grazing his body. He was wondering what gestures or facial expressions might indicate that the man had seen him ogle his body, if he indeed had, and yet the reason for caring what another individual thought of him eluded him. Had not art, this flaunting of his portraits of female whores with his own whorish self-portraits to which both parties were portrayed as locked in self-degradation, and going to these exhibitions of his work with an arm locked in that of his best friend (legally a wife), Noppawan, shown that he was free to express his desires in his own mode without having to subscribe to another's moral ordinances regarding the energies that exuded from him? With such a force there needed to be rules of restraint so that one was not sucked into the vacuous oblivion of desire and did not lose rational cognizance in the meaningless frolic of sexual quests, which were the mere insatiable manipulating urges of an animal and could so easily be the sole and altogether forgettable essence of a man. This he knew from interaction with the inordinate array of bitches who pawed him with their love (their needy and myriad convoluted yearnings for no other reason than a handsome figure to admire their flesh and thereby gain the illusion of immutable beauty - a neediness dirty as their underwear which he more often than not successfully tugged off to be intimate in their flesh and their and his own selfish caprices). He needed restraint, but to him those ordinances should come from within himself, this prowler's own creative and logical prowess.

"Yes, definitely a loud thud; but it wasn't from the noise so much as that smell that cascaded down with your body."

"Smell?"

"Yes, but I don't want to think of it, thank you. No more of that. So tell me of your adventure this morning."

"What adventure?" he chuckled softly with a sotto voce of scoffing asperity as if there had been no earlier adventure on the metallic toilet floor. He said it for in a sense it had been unfitting, a secret aberration even to areas of his cognizance that could not accept anything but the thought of himself as a lady's man and womanizer, it was true.

"I don't know. As I have nothing better to do, tell me where you have been."

"The toilet, mostly," said the body ogler with an embarrassed laugh as if this trifle of where he had been (this masturbatory exercise in the toilet of the train) were not worthy of speech instead of being a paramount expression of repressed, latent forces that had been compressed within him for so many years. It was still his assumption that as a sleeping body was beautiful with its breath rising and lowering the chest rhythmically like a raft on an ocean, so an artist, the appreciator of beauty in the mundane, would have an artist's aberrations from the insensate throngs, and as such, such appreciative aberrations should not be judged as anything that was particularly queer or at any rate queerer than anything else. Just being on the planet at all, a successful conception from one of competing sperm spilled out in a moment of two people needing, from a transient mood, to subscribe to an illusion of intimacy in a physical experience, was queer enough.

"I suppose looking at that handsome but middle-aged face deteriorate in the mirror—I mean when you were in the toilet. Right?"

"Maybe. Something like that."

"Well, that's a bit odd if you don't mind me saying so. Even a woman would not dare to pee or stay in front of a mirror that long."

Nawin laughed. Like his expressions of love in his juggling of women that was and was not the love he claimed it as being, he had moments of a predilection for mendacity like a boy wanting to hide himself within the shadows of a field and to remain there indefinitely, never to be discovered. He spoke mendaciously and yet to him it was not really a lie. "I wasn't there all that long. Afterwards, I just waited outside the toilet for the seats to be readjusted. Just waited back there, wasting time." Of course "wasting time" had consisted of that adolescent masturbatory sport, which he had conducted earlier in that fetid toilet, a water closet that was more tin than tinsel; and as he thought of it once again with a mischievous grin, he thought of this use of the source of the fantasy for pleasure, the Laotian, without much compunction. Then he thought of himself as guilty for not feeling guilt until recognizing that these new sexual urges were as a volcano spewing out old molten churnings of lava. So of a volcano, he thought, so of a human psyche. He accepted this change to the contour of the surface for ultimately

(according to his rationalization), as queer as it was, like everything else, there was nothing new or strange in it.

"And while waiting outside the toilet you were probably staring at yourself in one of the other mirrors, weren't you?"

"Yes, but how do you know that?"

"It would have to be a guess, wouldn't it, unless I can read minds, at least in some imperfect way. In this case it is not so much reading minds but faces."

"So what is in my face?"

"It doesn't matter what is in your face. I don't need to look at it all that much. All upper class Thai darkees are the same. Cleansed and made beautiful and white by money they are a vain lot—solitary cowards behind face fortresses. They are like the Chinese in that sense, and both Thai lightees and darkees with money pretend to be of a higher species. They try to avoid foraging, disease carrying primates like me. Their fortresses are built from fear that lack of money will make them have to acknowledge that they are merely hairless monkeys—no more special, no more potential to matter than any animal."

"You think that I am like that?"

"Well, each person is a bit different. You don't seem so bad. Let's just say that for now, you are a nice guy in a snobbish sort of way" (meaning that having been given a bit of money the previous night in that gesture of unbegrudging levity as if it had merely been the sharing of a bag of sticky rice, a smile from this giver, Nawin, since these Thai compatriots saw smiling as their highest attribute, and voluble conversation beyond the vouchsafed utterances given to a repugnant laborer from a country that was poorer than Thailand, he could hardly hate this particular Thai with that quick primeval xenophobia, in which hominoids reacted to those strangers of a different and potentially deleterious group). Nawin had to be put in a special category slightly different than the usual brand of rich and dark Thais of money. Nawin chuckled abashedly as he tilted his august face to the floor. Then he lifted his head and, in the way of the Thais, a morose, soft, and artful smile alighted on his swarthy countenance like a lambent shadow of a descending airplane across a naked field. He became aware of how much he needed other human beings, these jovial extensions to his limited domain, these pleasant respites from redundant churnings of thought and the hauntings of memories, and he knew that he would feign any interested smile to get the reprieve. "Did you have a good sleep?"

"No, not at all, if you really want to know, which I couldn't see that you would really. Personally, I've never minded a little stink: a sock here, a shoe there, even women smelling like raw, rotting tuna down where a man wants to go—I accept these things. Things that get used get smelly. But that which was stinking up there was of no use....unless one were to capture it, put it in a pill somehow, and sell it off as a cheap form of methamphetamines to truckers, bus drivers, and maybe even guys like me who want nothing better than to stare into space on a bunk all night instead of sleep."

"My socks?"

"Your monstrous socks!"

"Was it that bad?" asked this American Thai, Nawin, with an awkward laugh. He was feeling a sense of exhilaration at being with one who was unlike demure Southeast Asians' superficial demeanor. Like a Nawin Biadklang painting in being so wanton in declaring sordid reality as such, so seemed the man; and Nawin liked what was true and like himself.

"It was like drowning in molecules—at least a little. Still, I survived it all right, so it's okay. Morning came."

"How did morning make a difference?"

"The train official removed those rotting monsters with tongs."

"With tongs?"

"Tongs from the restaurant car."

"With tongs from the restaurant car?"

"Big tongs. Forceps, maybe. Well, something like that."

"Where are my socks?"

"Above you in your bag. I told him to bury them there. I hope that is all right. I hope that it didn't contaminate the rest of your clothes too much."

"Ground contamination is always the better of the two options," Nawin said as he sat down. His zipper which was still open from his bathroom adventure parted suddenly like the spreading foreskin of the V of a vagina. The Laotian looked down at the off-white pee stained hill of underwear within and yet the artistic demigod did not notice. "Airing out the old elephant, I see."

"What?"

"It can't always be happy to be kept away in its smelly stall, now can it? A little air can be just the thing for its mental health. Also a good airing out is as good as soap and water. That's always been my theory." The Laotian grinned mischievously, and then looked out of the window.

Nawin supposed that he was making reference to an elephant in a hamlet, one in a forest, or one in a field of a passing landscape. "Do they put elephants in stables?" asked Nawin with ingenuous naivety as he pondered the meaning of the Laotian's questions.

The Laotian burst out in a laughter which started out as a mild guffaw before burning away any acrimony against opulent Bangkokians, their ignorance, and more specifically, this rich Thai's obtuseness, to become a pleasant and embracing cacophony of good will.

Nawin noticed a blanketed entity at his feet that puzzled him and made the reason for the laughter cease to matter. Then the Laotian spoke and the blanketed one who was half on the floor and the two seats before the window was forgotten.

"So, a rich man like you doesn't know where elephants are kept but then why would you? I guess it wouldn't have been something that you would have studied in college." He waited for a response but all that he got was the artist's furrowed look of puzzlement followed by an aloof stare. Like a faithful childish protégé who was fascinated by the most mundane of motion and noise, Nawin, an animistic thinker even in this more than waning prime of life, began to listen to the fan that rotated above the luggage. At first he was merely wondering why the fan was now on, stirring the cold air, thereby making the air-conditioned area seem colder yet; but as he listened to its grating squeal he imagined that he was hearing the fan talk to him all so discreetly. It was whispering that the vibrations heard by the man who was supposing it to be the actual sound of the fan were fallacious. It was saying that, as with the sound of the fan, so was the Laotian's voice and all specious sound: that sound, by being heard indirectly if not vicariously, existed only as an adulterated sensation. According to the fan true sounds were unknown for one was not hearing what true vibrations sounded like inside a given source, but was merely hearing the air vibrating from its disturbances, or more obliquely one was hearing disturbed air from a vibration that then became disturbed and distorted once more in hitting the eardrums and this thwarted sound, correctly attributed as originating from a given source, was incorrectly attributed as being the real sound of that source. Likewise, said the fan, the Laotian's cologne and aftershave, like any smell, were a diffusion of higher concentrations of molecules to lower ones, so he was not smelling the scent of the man mixed with the artificial chemicals as they were on him, but the scent of him within his perfumed mixture as a less dense concentration oozing away from the man, leaving him and diffusing with other molecular scents, and the more one was at a distance, the less distinct this or any smell became. Sight was unabsorbed color that was exuded from a given presence although the mind believed it to be the filling in, the materialization, of the object's outline. All senses seemed fallible, and the world of the senses seemed like a voice echoing in a canyon, and no more real than that. It suddenly seemed to him that his own marriage, an abstraction concocted in his and her head, and then spilled as ink on a tenuous sheet of easily torn paper made hallow in ceremony, and by a deistic, bodily fluid overseer, imbued less sense than the nonsense the Laotian was speaking. This thought that a caring relationship grounded in many years could dissipate with such precipitancy by a mutual friend jumping off a balcony was proof of the vaporous quality of all things. It tortured him in one deranged second for all was a phantasm of the mind and the phantasmagoria of an impermanent existence. It made him feel his true proportions as a disintegrating speck in a microcosm of the galaxy.

He once again recalled Noppawan's summary of an incident that should have been an augury to them both. It consisted of facts bloated in an imagined scene. Momentarily distracted at hearing the window sliding on a sill, she was unconcerned and returned to typing her handout at the computer in her office at Assumption University when a premonition suddenly shot a cold and macabre sensation through her mind and body. Running to the back of the office, she saw Kimberly in a black rectangular hole of the open window. She saw her in that empty black hole of the self fluttering loose, tattered, and free like a banner on the fade of the university building they were in. "Oh no, Kimberly. Come down from the window. Please." "I want to die," "No, you don't. There are so many people who care about you. You don't want that!" "No one cares. Not really." "Oh, you know that is not true. Unlike me, you have a ton

of friends and close friends in me—Nawin too. He would be here in an instant if he knew that you were so unhappy. We didn't know it was so bad, Kimberly. It's late. Come down and go to bed. Things always seem clearer in the morning when emotions burn down in sleep." "I'm just a hole to men here—nothing else." She was crying but her weakened voice undulated loudly with strident, random words. "A pearly white sperm receptacle here and there, in America and France, just a woman, another one, with nothing special in her. I'll never find anyone to spend my years with, the way you have with Nawin. I'll never have someone like him." "Please Kimberly, life isn't easy for any woman. You think living with him is easy? All these women he paints and pants after. Come down Kimberly. We are the same, you and I." "It's different. You have him. I just have all these others whose only use in me is to make claims on my body for to them I am only a tool for pleasure." "Sometimes I wish that someone would claim me. He is not mine, you know. I just share him in these compromises of marriage." "You do share him, don't you? Will you?" "What?" "Share him with me...not like them but like a marriage—the three of us." With a display of their desperation and sometimes given concessions in love, such people never committed suicide. That was what he and Noppawan told themselves immediately before and during Kimberly's impregnation and pregnancy: that she would never really kill herself: that had been the belief.

These voices (in large part his own imagining but plausible and faithful to the outline delineated by Noppawan's narrative) resounded in his brain and, in consensus with his own verdict on himself, they condemned him. Still he snuggled up to them for a middle aged man with no one was naked and discomfited in purpose. Holding tight to what had passed away he believed that he was less lonely even though conversely this snuggling to imagined abstractions with female bodies, facsimiles of what was that was distorted into what was not, made him feel even more lonely than he would otherwise have felt. He imagined these voices of the past and the dead, and yet for all their distinct clarity, they were at best half-imagined impressions, half concocted indentions in the damp putty of his brain. In reality they were as behind him as the township of Udon Thani that the train had now passed through. They had parted with him and fled like the bird that had witnessed his homosexual solo-eroticism in the fetid toilet of the train. How alone he felt; and the thought of the three of them shopping for baby clothes together, watching DVDs, or roasting marshmallows on the ends of sticks held over a barbeque grill near the swimming pool of his estate made him queasy. He continued to query himself incessantly with what-ifs. If he and Noppawan had invited Kimberly into their home, he wondered, would none of this have happened? And yet it seemed that something else could have taken place. Had this invitation been made and accepted she might have drowned herself in the pool. Who was to say she would not have done so? He excoriated himself for appeasing his guilt with such a morbid thought. Maybe tomorrow a mega-sized typhoon of global warming dimensions would pass over Bangkok and clean the slate of people like himself, obscene drawings of human denizens; but then he was going northeast to the sleepest of the world's comatose capitals, Vientiane. What could happen to him there? Only if he were to ignore the illustrated signs of a man being electrocuted that graced the whole of Vientiane, and grab a low electrical wire would an end come to him there. Only then would he end his umbilical connection to this immoral world where existence could be so randomly and arbitrarily obliterated to some, as life's gluttons watched it as entertaining news from their television sets, and where under the wrong circumstances a good man might become a looter, a thief, a prostitute, or a beggar.

"I said, if you weren't listening, that I guess it wouldn't have been studied in college. Why would you know if an elephant is kept in a stall in the back yard, tied behind a tree of a neighbor's penthouse, or kept in a neighbor's wife? Elephant studies can be confusing to any novice especially when he doesn't make a distinction between the two species of elephants. Honestly, I think that with both breeds, the figurative and the literal elephants, there are stalls for them. It is certainly true of the figurative when they can be tamed enough to stay in stalls."

"You know, I don't have a clue what you are talking about. You are rambling shit like a crazy man."

"You don't?"

"No, but I'm okay with that, really. I'm just listening to your amusing nonsense and not caring particularly whether or not there is anything at all sensible in it."

The Laotian laughed until the point where he had difficulty swallowing his saliva. Then he coughed, and regaining his voice, he cleared his throat. The grave expression of gagging on his saliva as if were as gaggable as ox tongue, roasted duck gizzards, and fried cockroach in burnt rouge cream at a Laotian restaurant attempting to emulate French cuisine, only lasted a moment and then he smiled, putting at ease disconcerted Nawin who was now rising from his seat as if being called on to perform the Heimlich maneuver. "That's good. More people should do that—not be so serious all the time... just realize that you are fucking around with your time, keeping your life from being entirely meaningless with a personal..." He could not find the word.

"Experience?"

"Yes but more. 'Titillation'—titillation here and there; but I think that we did have a subject. We were talking about elephants if I remember correctly." His words did not come volubly. They were forced and contrived like one intent on seeming educated. The sentences were spoken slowly like one in search of latent words that were once heard somewhere but, because of social-economic privation, stagnated in unfamiliarity. "I have noticed that in this, your country, rural compatriots sometimes bring elephants into large cities in the hope of selling their fine fodder to the pedestrians so that they might have the experience of elephant feeding."

Nawin was amused at the strained efforts the Laotian underwent— with some formality of diction—to impress him. "Yes, in Laos too, I would suppose."

"I don't know, really. I haven't seen people pay money to feed them in Vientiane, if they do, but that doesn't mean that they don't. But it would make more sense doing it in someplace where the people are filthy rich, and I guess seeing large literal animals is a bit of a novelty in cities like Bangkok where they are so used to the open exhibition of the figurative breeds. I'm just trying to imagine those silky hands of yours scooping up elephant dung off sidewalks. I am trying to imagine how someone like you would cope in being a beggar pulling an elephant down the streets."

"No better or worse than other beggars. What would give you the idea that I am from a privileged background? Believe me, I am a self-made man and these "silky" hands, as you call them, have done a lot of things. Do you have a name?"

"Boi."

"Tell me something, Boi, I'm curious; do the beggars with their elephants just sleep with them randomly on sidewalks? Where do they go after shoppers go home and man and beast need to sleep?"

"It's a mystery," said the Laotian and then grabbed one of Nawin's hands. "Thai silk. Just as I thought; if these things were not so large or so strong, or at least stronger than the average woman, their texture..."

"The silkiness?"

"Yes, the silkiness—the silkiness might seem to some like that of a woman's hands. Fortunately you are darkly complected. That makes you more masculine in a pretty boy, middle aged man sort of way." Nawin chuckled at the absurdity of someone making a study of his hands. "You haven't exactly used these things very much in hard labor, have you? Yes, if they were not so large and strong they would pass off as women's hands. What is it that you do for a living, anyhow?"

"I am an artist."

"An artist? That would explain hands like these. What do you draw?" he asked while returning the hand.

"Naked women."

"And people pay you for that?"

"They seem to."

"Do they pay well?"

"Yes, of course. I am a rich man according to you."

"In Thailand, one finds both the calloused and the silky types but in Laos even some of the higher government officials are workers in their secondary vocations. They all have the damnedest hands."

"What? Do you study the hands of government officials too?"

"A brief survey, I guess. I wouldn't think of it as a study."

It seemed to Nawin that the two of them were merely crows cawing at the night to give texture to the air and all vacuous substance in order to make themselves and their world seem real. It seemed to him that small talk and bantering were, as the Laotian said, titillations to make something personal in the void of time and space. "How do you know that I'm a loafer?" asked Nawin with a laugh.

"Did I say that you were?"

"I don't remember. Maybe not exactly like that but you implied it anyhow. How do you know that I am a loafer?"

"I don't. I just guess that you are."

"I am, you know."

"Are what?"

"A loafer. Not much of an artist now. Retired."

"Retired?"

"Uninspired. They are synonymous words."

"Why would anyone want your paintings? That is what I'm trying to figure out. Video porn... DVD porn for those with computers, okay. They are closer to the real thing, aren't they?" Nawin smiled widely. He felt reaffirmed and grounded in the inconsequence of vain, lofty pursuits and his retirement finally felt good. Then the Laotian said, "There is some real porn that I am witnessing right now. It is too bad it's just that of any locker room scene" and then he pointed down at Nawin's open zipper.

Nawin looked down and smiled widely. He was before the Laotian in an unzipped state after having masturbated to an image of him in his head (the same type of illusion that a man had in copulating with his wife to keep illusory human existence on the planet at all) and yet he felt no particular compunction for what he had done or what a man tended to do with his own body in the privacy of his mind, or in the intimacy of a real embrace. In all cases it was the massage of his own body to ease himself from the stress of thinking, knowing, and having to live in a world of illusions. It was the massage of one's body which one rightfully owned if anyone did (certainly not one's partner) and thus this acknowledgement repudiated, and rendered inane words like adultery and perversion.

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Left to himself for a moment, he slipped into a brief sleep where, once again, he was with Kimberly. He too was a prey of gravity, and they were falling rapidly from the balcony of her apartment in the Queen's Tower at Assumption University. The two of them, morsels down the gullet of skies, seemingly torn by winds active as enzymes, pummeled the air futilely with desperate, flailing limbs in an attempt to swim through the air from whence they came but could never return. Hardly an occasion for declaring *mai pen rai*, still there were scarce traces of hope; and as hope was consciousness, there were scarce traces of the latter as well. If, as scared as he was, he was cognizant enough to have a group of interrelated thoughts beyond the perennial wish for "God", which redundantly played in his head, to save him, it was in reference to a belief that there were some actions that could be reversed. It seemed to him that as a change of one's mind could cause a departure to become a homecoming, so there was a remote possibility that this action could also be reversed. Maintaining hope and consciousness, wisely, it did not occur to him that such a return was physically impossible since beings plunged through life just once. Shrieking as they punctured two large holes that made one prodigious gulf in the thin metallic tiles comprising the awning over the swimming pool, they plunged together, splashing into a fiery inferno of loneliness before the last of their inevitable, lethal descent.

He woke, fully startled to find himself in wakefulness. Concentrating on where he was to allow the excesses of the saturation of sleep, a more temporary reality, to be shaken from his sodden neurons like wetness from an animal's fur, he then did nothing further. He merely allowed it to slowly evaporate from consciousness. It seemed odd to him that in all these diurnal commutes between wakefulness and sleep that the mind should continue to allow either of these two states to overwhelm the other. It seemed odd that after so long it would continue to be sequacious to trust what was experienced in either of the chemically induced realms but then, he asked himself, what choice did it have? Was not sand layered by wind and waves? It was; and so the human brain was molded with whatever energy and force happened to be applied to it. Then, in the next second of thoughts, it did not seem odd at all; and conversely, he speculated that perhaps most individuals considered both states specious and succumbed, like prisoners, to the coercion in apathetic numbness.

Was it not so in this city of Bangkok where incense was snagged in carbon exhausts and its residents were engaged in amusements to escape their small speck on this rock of the planet? They were a lackadaisical ethnicity and their amusements were definitely petty—the young chasing balls and finding the extent of their physical prowess; carnal youth in sexual peccadilloes; the worker ants who, when not at work, and no longer succumbing to that role that gave some structure to their existence, spending time in evening revelries about owning their own businesses; elderly women engaged in Tai Chi and their husbands in Chinese checkers on park benches; the poor along the canals, clustered in evenings near their neighbors' shacks for beer and cigarette pilfering, sometimes the men comic book swapping and always musing the day's pettiness amusingly; the rich speculating on how to invest and have more, seeking large flat screen televisions and the fastest computers at Panthip Plaza, the most

fashionable clothes in the best of malls, and exchanging tips on how to improve their landscapes and gardens; but which of them, in the thickets of men, felt or thought deeply about the world? They were as wild vines that grew with the rest of nature on the rock of the planet and sprawled human entanglements and preoccupations thoughtlessly upon it.

It was only from the constancy of waking in the same bed in which he went to sleep, waking to the same issues that he went to sleep with, and finding himself next to the person he fell asleep with the previous night, that sleep was considered sleep and not wakefulness, and wakefulness was considered wakefulness instead of sleep; and yet knowing this did nothing for him. He felt discombobulated as though this dream were of more substance than dew over the eyes that he would eventually dry from, a sandstorm within the self where, were it not for his own angst, that same regret that he felt a dozen yesterdays ago and was a constancy that would commandeer a lifetime of perennial guilt-ridden tomorrows, he would not know reality if it were to swallow him. "I feel a constancy of pain and therefore I am," he thought satirically.

For a couple of seconds he noted how, from where he was positioned inwardly and outwardly (pinioned inside himself as he remained seated a few feet from the window) the swath of fields and outlying roads of small towns hurried past him in an incessant green and grey smudge of flat images. Even though they fled by incessantly, they were like pop-ups from a children's book; and for a few additional seconds he began to withdraw into a self that was deflating surreally into a diminutive and flattened form in an imagined land of stationary pop-ups where the unreal was still and preserved instead of the seemingly real, which was always wide-open and fleeting. Then this too, this relinquishing oneself to the void to cease this expending of one's energy in sifting through all of these illusions in illusionary existence, formulating "reality" based upon garnering the most plausible of the illusions, ceased with hearing the loud yawning of this stranger named Boi. Glancing at him, Nawin displayed the notorious Thai smile which was always feigned and hospitable with the genuine warmth of wanting the recipient to like him if not of needing to be liked. He did it almost like any reflexive jerk, a physical retreat of the body, as he ruminated on this word, stranger.

When, he asked himself, did a person cease being a stranger? Had he not known Noppawan since he was fourteen years old (as if years meant anything)? Had they not become soul mates for the reason that each of them had possessed empathy for the other innocent being charred in the torturous hells of family? He had and they had; and yet upon gaining a child from him she had treated him with indifference as if, having obtained what she had always wanted (one of her husband's sperm fertilizing an egg and allowing her a son even if it was through her best friend), he was now irrelevant and made all the more so, weeks later, at Kimberly's demise, when she locked him out physically as well as psychologically. He had not even known her. In all of these years of marriage on top of those comprising their friendship of youth he had not known her any more than one did the strangest of strangers.

"Still tired," asked Nawin.

"Of course," said Boi. "There is little sleep for a man bunked under another man...especially when under a man like you and with socks stinking like that, like an elephant's breath...not that the socks were the entire problem. Those were finally taken away in the morning when I couldn't bear it anymore. They didn't bother me after that. It was..." He stopped.

"It was what?" asked Nawin with a relieved chuckle, grateful for flippant conversation to interpose his silent ponderings. The idea that a Thai and a Laotian could not engage in conversation without an elephant trudging through it almost tickled him to tears.

"I don't know," he smirked knowingly. "I am used to sleeping in the mornings so after they came and removed those contaminated articles of yours I could have fallen back to sleep. For a while I attempted to wave away the remaining cloud of stink so that I could do just that. I rested quietly enough after a time. It wasn't as if I was asphyxiating from those smells any longer. The cloud was still there... extant as they say... but I could have slept were it not for this weird feeling that somebody was looking at me—looking at my body. Have you ever felt that way?"

"No."

"Not at all?"

"No, I don't think so. Not really. I mean with my wife. Maybe at times she watched me when I was sleeping. I wouldn't know."

"You wouldn't know?" he mocked. "And these models that you say that you paint, would you know it if one of them watched you while you slept?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You do paint them?"

"Yes."

"And get butt naked with them, I guess, if you paint them as nudes. Who wouldn't, or at least who wouldn't attempt it unless he was 100 percent gay?"

"Of course I am intimate with my models. That goes hand in hand."

"Do you ever watch them as they are sleeping?"

"I guess, maybe once or twice. Well, now that I think about it, I've painted a few in restless positions while asleep. This is an odd question to be asking me."

"Why? We are friends, aren't we? A friend can be one of hours and not years, and it is still a friendship, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," he said. It was the same question that Nawin had postulated silently in his own head and he felt even more inclined to call him a friend for this affinity to his own private ponderings.

"If it were me I would not get any sleep at all. I'd be staring at them continually. I think it is the same for you if you are a painter of naked beauties; but then maybe they are more cute and handsome than they are beautiful."

Nawin smirked and then grimaced. "I'm not sure what you mean by that," he said but he knew, or at least sensed, an attempt to deface his masculinity with homosexual innuendos and thus he manipulated his words and actions accordingly. "Anyhow, most men would consider them quite beautiful, think what you want." Having said this, and glad that he had, he still was not content for the Laotian to think what he wanted and so he pulled out a wallet that contained some slides of his favorite paintings that were there with some of his favorite condoms. Deliberately pulling out the former and dropping one of the latter, he showed some of the slides while stuffing a condom back into his wallet. Boi held each of the slides up to the light of the window and squinted. "Well, what do you know? You are an artist. What are these beauties that are your subject matter?"

"Ladies of the night. Patpong professionals for the most part."

"Beautiful."

"Do you think so? But then what is beauty? An overweight middle aged man can be considered appealing to an anorexic and her thinness, sadness, and youth can seem beautiful to him if both lack qualities that the other possesses, or have qualities mirrored in the partner which makes them feel less alone. That is my theory, for what it is worth."

"You are a deep one, aren't you?" asked the stranger.

He thought of his own limited sex symbol status. In this decade and a half of being glossed onto covers of esoteric art magazines and the photographs of him with articles being emblazoned on the back pages of Sunday newspapers, this married but eligible hedonist with a sensitive stroke was considered handsome and debonair, luminous in sensuality, jaunty and recalcitrant, and an empathic sufferer for those whom he studied and represented. He was alluring for these qualities and most importantly for being fully comfortable with himself as such. He, "Naughty Nawin," was a luminosity in artistic circles who was more desirable for having been desired by others; and yet in all this time he sensed it for the inferior illusion that it was. In a world of complete illusions, a plausible reality was really the thing that was most desired and clung to and so he had clung to Noppawan, a girl who hated family as much as he did, and yet by clinging he had made a family with her. He had forfeited bachelorhood, as much as a Patpong artist could, and had slipped himself into their union only to find that the woman he was married to could not conceive a child and that by her being infertile his days of bachelorhood (except at least on a legal piece of paper) would be as perennial as the wild flower days of his life. He knew illusions so well, for they were his art to convey truth in fiction and reality in abstraction. He liked producing color on canvasses that would act as a mirror of indictment on this world, where the weak were depicted as abused and falling prey to illnesses like the dogs that were born in the streets, kicked, starved, mange-ridden, and dead early and hideously. He saw this perennial cycle of victims going on forever and only nuclear bombs falling like cleansing rain stopping it. He knew how like a magician he could cast a spell on others through his canvass, but he also understood the potency of words and by words he might now circumvent any suspicions about his sexuality which, the way he saw it, was "straight" and intact, despite a few strange caprices that blew in here and there.

"Supermodels and actresses are considered universally beautiful but I don't think it has much merit. I think that beauty really is in the eyes of the beholder for the earlier reasons that I gave. It is only because of the extent of their physical curves of femininity which are beyond the normal range for most men to find in a partner that supermodels and actresses are depicted and believed as some type of a universal beauty. They would only be considered slightly more beautiful were it not for their fame. The fame makes their style of beauty become embedded into minds as something supernatural. In most cases, I think, beauty is just what we lack. As I am a man, I lack the tender touches and graces of a woman, those gentle curves and scents, and responding like a man I want to thrust myself into that gentility whose hands worship a man's physique. I want to rivet and devour." He knew that his words would be considered outlandish in Thai society where everything was done with maximum freedom but never spoken, and he knew that his turgid words, spoken as if he were the professor of beauty, would bore the most pedantic. Still, that was the aim: he wanted to take the stranger on a meandering path of circumlocutions that would shake him from earlier thoughts and deposit him in this concept that he, Nawin Biadkang, the prostitute artist, was and forever would be a lady's man. "Women are the viand of a man's eyes, the fruit for the bon vivant." He used French words that were retained in English without being Anglicized to give puissance to what he thought of condescendingly as his befuddled mother tongue. In that respect he was no different than any supercilious upper class American or Englishmen who required superior utterance even though to most of the contemporary world's populace the elite language was base English itself. Then he glanced toward the aisle and surrounding seats for although not really embarrassed by his words, ensconced as he was in his role as a libertine, he was deferential enough to worry that he would inadvertently bludgeon a listener with his peculiar thoughts. He then became inexplicably reticent although no one was listening.

With conversation continuing to seem cogent, moving on stretched, unraveled ends, Boi was on the verge of accepting Nawin as a womanizer and might have possibly done so were it not for the artist's cowardly withdrawal into himself which befuddled the befuddlement. Nawin had turned away and was staring at the fan clipping speedily at the air. There could be no other interpretation other than that this Nawin (on the birth certificate, Jatupon, a word that still thrust a cold chill down his spine as cold slackened his pace, freezing him to danger), feeling uncomfortably seated on exaggerated truth, was becoming fixated on these rotating blades dicing the air the way the second hand of a clock seemed to suggest the dicing of a man's life incrementally. Due to the extent of his boredom, to Boi he was a suspicious character, an ambiguous puzzle needing to be solved and a landscape of contrasts to set his claim upon. Nawin sensed this intrigue but gained no satisfaction from it. All that he wanted, he told himself, was to relax and not think so much when thinking was such morbid drudgery like an impoverished gold seeker sifting through mud and obtaining merely that. "Wasn't my reason for coming here to purge people from my life, and live purely in complete empty space without needing others to plug up my loneliness," he thought. "And yet here is one more bit of dross stuffing my gutter."

He realized the impression that he was making and so he smiled and looked into the stranger's face. "So, did you like the paintings? —not that as slides held up to the light anyone could see them all that well."

"They were done well."

"Unlike you who have probably gained a lot of various skills in your labor, I don't have many practical skills. I can't fix anything. Not even a drawer that is ajar in a night table. Never learned to cook anything but noodles from my parents' restaurant and my brothers' noodle stands. But I know how to draw naked whores. That is for sure. I guess it is my gift."

"If those slides are your own work, you do, my friend. You draw them so well, so exquisitely, so astoundingly with all the feminine curves and wiles just right; and I am sure that after you paint and love them they sometimes like to watch you sleep and you like to watch them sleep. But that was not the nature of my query. I am meaning someone whom you don't know all that well looking down on you. Like I was earlier this morning, you are not quite asleep and so you hear him—yes a man, as it is a man's breathing that you hear. Earlier I was lying alone here in my bottom bunk drowsy but not asleep when I swear I heard someone drop from an upper sleeper and got the sense that he was examining my body, wanting it. Strange, huh?"

"I would imagine that it would be," said Nawin.

For a moment he was stunned to have these crevices of opaque light so heavily and obliquely invade the filthy corners of his mind, the dark enlightenment being alluded to, both parties seeming to peer onto it (he himself undoubtedly so and this smirking of the Laotian and his eyes that seemed to pierce his soul so knowingly could not have equivocal interpretations). He kept debating whether he should stay or go and found himself, due to his indecisiveness, floundering in desperate ambivalence. Clearly he wanted to move to a different seat so in that sense of knowing his own dominant yearning and

witnessing it unopposed by contrary yearnings he was not ambivalent at all and yet, he asked himself, how could he just go? To go so precipitously would be rude even if done with the obsequious gesture of the wai (although even this was complicated by the fact that he was the older and vastly more affluent of the two parties and should not be the one initiating such gestures); and to leave for one of the now vacant seats would only aggravate suspicion. The idea of the Laotian having proof of his decadence would dog whatever specious tranquility he hoped to have in a vacant space of his own. He could stay. True, it would be uncomfortable but then, he told himself, there was not any option for solving any problem that was ever entirely perfect. He was uncomfortable now, and would surely be even more so with the passing moments. Such discomfort would sprawl like a dark vine onto the minutes, strangling them like a rope, or in excessive growth smothering them like a baby buried in its foam bath. And yet if he were inordinately resolute if not obdurate in staying where he was, would not the tempestuousness pass away easily by acting the part of a god? Zeus-like in shooting his thunder bolts, albeit thunder bolts of conversation against that soft epistemological core of a man's mind which realized that nothing was known absolutely, he could easily impart the venom of doubt. He could lead the conversation into inconsequential matters such as the latest news about these Moslem separatists in the South or the seventy year old saffron frocked monk who mistakenly pulled out glue from the medicine cabinet, inserted it into one of his eyes, and then allowed a colleague to remedy it by applying paint thinner into his hallowed orbs. Anything believed to be known, could be doubted as illusory when the possibilities of the present were continually supplanting those of the past. By continuing to talk it would become more real than the Laotian's vague recollection of him staring at his body. Still he did not know what to say, and feeling that discomfort, he wanted the closure of all communication with a stranger who knew him more than his own wife.

These homosexual feelings had swept out of nowhere, and they had put him in an inferno of desire, which only masturbation in the toilet had been able to douse (this particular desire all the more savage for being so alien to adulthood). Still with the appropriate undaunted response such a caprice and aberration did not need to brand him in the Laotian's mind or his own. And yet this chill that seemed to drip onto his spine like water from a leaky pipe in the tiled ceiling of the bathroom, was incessant; and perennial was the trepidation that the Laotian should know the cryptic depravity that lived in the messy far reaches of his brain, and the latent whims that gushed out from his childhood memories. For a few seconds Nawin was able to stare at his curious rival with a resolute confidence and a lambent smile but it did not last, and so he stared out of the window and withdrew back into himself. He once again began to romanticize those cars of laborers with their families. It would be there, to them, from which wafting scents of dirt, rice, and wildly lush and weedy greenery, lost molecules from the whole, would pour into open windows. It would be there in poignant rushes of wind slapping their faces that, complacent or even content, these laborers in shared travels to the homes of extended family would find meaning in their relationships. From the illusion of desire and love, of transient rushes of feeling, the families existed and became the boundaries and summation of themselves—accidents and stumblings from that which in ignorance begat the unions and material presences to which they tolerated, and to some degree cared for, as they were extensions of themselves, their fate.

The bundle (the feet on the Laotian's seat and head leaning against the edge of his own) began to move and like a decarpeted Cleopatra her face became visible and it was beautiful.

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Throughout these moments of the conversation she, whoever she was, had been at his knee all along even though, oddly enough, her presence had registered in his brain with the vaguest of awareness. Now that he was fully cognizant of her, he perceived this oddity of having overlooked her earlier as a somewhat amusing anecdote in a listless, perennial train trip largely in need of even the most dull amusements, a fact which was droll to him in its own way; and yet outwardly he hid his smile and tried to restrain himself from glancing downward. He told himself that he did so out of Thai modesty which mandated some degree of reticence, or at least a bit of a reluctance, to broach questions (being installed by cultural indoctrination this was the most frequently used program which, when lacking an operator's manual for one's life, even iconoclasts like him would switch on reflexively in an effort to make an appropriate social response before reconsideration and subsequent action). Indeed that did have some bearing, but for the most part his silence was in the hope of keeping her there longer.

Clearly, she was now exhaling her warmth onto one of his knees so, he argued to himself, why not patiently allow the query of who she was to emerge slowly with her presence when waking would at last tear open that cocoon. As bereft of women and relationships as he now was and as confused as he was by what had transpired inwardly immediately before and during his odd release in the toilet, it was quite pleasant to imagine her as a more docile and devoted member of his long throng of scattered harem over the years and now, at the age of forty, decades of adulthood. He knew that this desiring of a woman to stay on his knee was not all that different from the previous night when with beer in his

system and insecurity at being chased by the 4 and 0 which were almost as tangible as stalkers, he had hugged a pillow to secure some limited sleep. He knew it, and he knew that this repugnant human weakness suggested that the peace of mind he hoped to obtain by a Buddhist trip into Vientiane could be easily ravaged by wild desires as random and pointless as the landscape of weeds and sedges about the train, for desire was innate as the yearning to breathe. This wild mono-homo incident, he somewhat cogently told himself from the more than nominal truth that was therein, had merely been a release, a mechanical need to discharge a full load of semen rather than a desire for one of the same gender; and he fervently yearned for the obsequious knee doter to stay where she was for as long as it lasted, not that he would have disturbed her repose if it were not intertwined with his own pleasure as well as a need for a secure sense of self-identity. Was not that, he asked himself, what made the distinction of a kind man from the rest of the predatory male animals: a patience and tolerance of others' happiness, and a willingness to invest time to secure it even at the cost of one's own discomfort? If so, kindness was the virtue of the former he, Jatupon, who, in lost, forlorn boyhood, when not wanting to disturb sleeping cats allowed them to lay hours at a time on his lap. He guffawed silently in his own mental chamber at such sanctimonious, thrasonical ravings, for childish behavior of long ago was not evidence for his untenable claim of being a kind man and thus a good one. It had no relevance to his barely nominal interaction with the beauty that was sleeping at his knee. Furthermore, he recriminated himself, his fame came in depicting the exploitation of others which was in itself a type of exploitation even were he to reside in the deepest squalor as an expose journalist, a Mother Theresa, or some other paragon for ending injustice and suffering. Had not his whores sought deliverance for themselves and their impoverished families because of him? Had not jejune sojourns been made to the homes of their respective rural families where he had to eat with them as one of their members? Had not a belief that he would leave his wife for them and an innocent expectation that they would be redeemed by this deliverer burned within their breasts, hearts, and clitorises? "Am I a good man? I rather doubt that I am," he disparaged himself. He even doubted goodness. One never interacted with anyone unless pleasure was in some way associated to it. A human, even the best of them, was hardly the making of a saint. Clearly, were they not so soft and his need for love so great, he would not have stayed in that uncomfortable posture on a tree stump outside his parents home, long ago, to allow cats to sleep upon him.

This idea that pleasure was interconnected with all pursuits, a viand of a thought, could well have become a repast if not a banquet for discernment; and as an artist's dissertation was done on canvas, ideas for a painting, now raw feeling boiling to the rim, were on the verge of being shaped in his mind. And yet, he dismissed them. He repudiated them by telling himself that he would never rank as a great artist, that he was void of color, theme, and technique.

A knee doter—he could barely hold back his laughter (how easily he was amused by himself, a wonted practice from the vestige of childhood along those banks of the Chao Phraya river in Ayutthaya when solitary play with the elements inherent in air, rain, and dirt and the chase of an idea scurrying through a mind which was barely aware of its presence, brought him peace from the incessant barrage of disparagement meant to stomp upon him, their cockroach, in that war called family). The verdant landscape, now near Nongkai and her sister city of Vientiane, came incessantly toward the passengers as the train moved through it. It came intimately. Every minute of a man's life that was not in sexual intercourse, he thought, was in an intercourse of a very different kind, in union with circumstance and thereby impregnated with new thought that made him a new man. A knee doter, he inwardly chuckled (once again he was pondering how easily he was amused by himself, a practice he had become accustomed to from the vestige of that hell called family in which, if one's sensitivity was intact enough to not laugh at a sundry of crude commentaries such as the father's daily repetition that it did not matter what a woman looked like as she could be denuded and a sack put over her head, and these manly attempts at being the most clever one at belittling the other (mostly aiming for him, that easiest and most sensitive of targets) these rudimentary and vulpine or wolfish members of the pack would attempt a full annihilation of him in words—all of them that was but his brother and tacit protector, Kazem, whose hard eyes were his fort, but whose gun would discharge later in his rectum). He found this peculiar idea of her as the obsequious love slave, as much as the source behind it, not only amusing but arousing. It had always seemed to him, fettered as he once had been in ideas and paint, obsessed with transforming sordid memories and thought into color as he inexplicably gazed at a barren wall of canvas, that one never made love to a woman but a facsimile of one in one's own brain which that brain distorted to meet the orgasm it longed for. It always seemed to him that the craving for women was merely for a spark to stimulate fire in the vacuity of the brain so as to liberate it from catatonic list, the result of boredom, and thus orgasm was merely for oneself even if by chasing illusions of "love" a real child materialized along the way. Thinking it now, it was nothing new for him, for to him, Jatupon, who was once in love with his brother and scrutinized the validity of human emotions thereafter as Nawin, feelings were gossamer threads of chemicals prompting puppet man to breed and breed elsewhere. Marriage had at least taught him that tempestuous feelings of love and despondency could pass if one gave them little credence and by being unmoved by their promptings one could at least have some

years of success in obtaining a consistent uxorial presence in his life. Love at first sight that was felt from brief encounters was merely a neediness for an interesting presence to stir up one's passion for life and end loneliness. It was always transferred to a conceivably obtainable sense of beauty by which to obtain immortality in a DNA continuum. For even love from a sexual encounter, to have any substance of reality, had to be a reciprocal neediness ground in years of friendship. And yet a woman was a whore whose penchant for a parcel of land and a branch of a tree to build her nest was an instinct that was as fulsome as the worse of human hungers. His mother, to get her few scanty goods, had closed her eyes to his suffering. His wife, now that she acquired his child, took over his domain and changed the locks. Ironically, here he was lusting after a woman once again for did not every man require intimacy like butter that would melt and fuse him and his sausage onto the woman and her egg? Did he not secretly want a woman's bypassed stares in the minutes of anger to diminish him into the dissolved umbrage of her shadow like slinking into shadows of an alley to taunt thieves and cutthroats to have some limited intimacy with death?

He allowed his ruminations to quickly shuffle through his mind once more, for they amused him tremendously. Then he redundantly centered on one in particular. Throughout this nascent conversation with the Laotian, whoever this man was, who perhaps used a nickname-alias of Boi as an easily worn but also easily removed one word summation of himself, this pallid, young female with flowing hair, just as he liked them, had been inches near his thighs and he had barely even noticed it, as he was preoccupied with this bizarre homosexual caprice that had rushed upon him an hour earlier as zephyrs from the subconscious, and thinking of ways to repudiate any judgment of him as a homosexual that might be in the mind of the Laotian. Eagerly succumbing to desire for the girl, and perhaps even exaggerating any desire that he did possess to feel masculine within himself, he deliberately glanced down at her even though he was once trying not to do so. She looked like that nurse at Siriaj Hospital who had been responsible for catering toward him whose wife had broken his arm with a skillet and his heart with those words, "The son that you and Kimberly brought into the world should not have a hateful person like you as his father! Get out! We're through!" For ongoing emotional comfort and to set up dates for caresses he would be calling that nurse, smitten as she was for his good looks and his marginal celebrity status. He would be doing it now at this moment were it not for having thrown away his telephone at the train station.

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Although more clinch than original, an idea as trite as an aphorism ruminated in his head. He told himself that ideas were nothing unless one acted upon them; and yet from a less cognizant mélange of disorganized feelings which had not been refined into thought he was really meaning that fervent, peculiar whims prompted all pleasurable acts and that unto themselves these saccharin gusts that bate were of no substance unless, in opposition to society at large, one partook of them fully by allowing them to saturate to fulsome, insatiability in behavior that was in complete accord with their perverse dictates. In the brief space of that moment he repeatedly averred this facile idea silently in his mind. He willed belief into it like pumped air into a holey inner tube which, like in his filthy boyhood in the still filthier Chao Phraya river in Ayutthaya, for a brief time of escaped labor, he would ride.

Ideas are nothing unless one acts upon them: the thought was not at all novel even if this particular context for it was. It seemed to him to have Buddhist or Biblical implications which he supposed as having been transmitted to him long ago through someone affiliated with a temple or a church, although he was not exactly sure how or when such an idea had been passed to him or how it had become so embedded in his brain even if brains were, for the most part, mere sponges. Oddly enough, there it was, even in such a man so unfettered by moral restraints as he was. It was like a blood-sucking mosquito but quaffing away analytic and synthetic processes of idea making, aggravating placid delusions in fever, and muddling the mind in an amphigory of simplistic human nature, which when unchecked, was really more carnal, multi-dimensional, and beastly than anyone would care to presume.

His prudish behavior on this day was diametrically opposed to the Nawin of old who on virtually every other day of his adult life but this one, from influences of feelings and underlying thoughts which he hardly recognized, had followed his carnal whims with women inordinately. A being, after all, did the tricks that nature prompted him to do for the sweet bait of pleasure and so from the perspective of carrying out those functions that biological creatures were meant to, the physical and perhaps only basis of morality, his own behavior was exemplary. In the seats of his car parked around forested areas within Bangkok's outlying roadside parks (the woods therein avoided because of the bigger probability of the brambles of "queers" accosting him), in forests far from the city, against walls of women's toilets in gas stations, in discotheque parking lots, in hotel rooms, empty upper staircases, in boyfriends' and husbands' beds when they were out, several times, under banana and durian trees in one particular father's orchard, once in a pimp's bedroom when he was out, many times in the villagers own bedrooms

while they slept on living room floors eager to take advantage of his copulatory pleasure to get a bit of financial support for their families and fame for the daughters' whose beauty he, the surrogate husband, would preserve on canvases, abandoned buildings and tall skeletal structures that were never quite built after the 1996 financial meltdown, once backstage with a Russian ballerina after a performance of Swan Lake at the Thai Cultural Center, several times between two enormous trash bins at a stadium and once under its bleachers, never in his and Noppawon's home unless occasionally with Noppawan herself but very often in his studio, he had released his snake to a mostly strange and less than angelic array of females who too were victims of poverty and exploitation. Both them and a smaller second set as well (a set to which each respective woman behaved as both friend and lover until invariably insisting that he obtain a divorce from his wife, a strident and resonating demand that despite his wishes to the contrary, always caused an avalanche of debris to fall upon them both in a closure of the relationship that turned as black and mordant as light sucked into a black hole and that was as indelible as death) he would massage as gently as wind since, according to him, the Nawin massage was more effective at loosening inhibitions and making the body malleable to sexual positioning than the prying and twistings of the Thai variant, listen intensely to their troubles during pillow talks in which he reflected their feelings like a psychologist, and kindly ejaculate into them the venom and bite that were the gifts of his body.

With today perhaps being the exception; throughout his life it always seemed to him, the exponential adulterer that he was, that carnal caprices should not at all be repudiated when they were all. Every rare, sublime thought that managed to get through the savage millennia did so because of sordid, procreative energy which manufactured the generations despite imperfect performances of maladroit sperm missing their targets, the targets most times missing, and even the walls of the missing targets sometimes being some other type of wall, a wall like his own wall, a man's wall.

If from a Christian source, the idea must have originated with his aunt on his mother's side who had once dabbled in his life with feigned love back in those early days of Jatupon when he believed that this bit of extended family, this refined lady of an exceptional marriage who was blood of his blood (which she had willingly sold by buckets to a hoary senator with age blemishes) would at last tug him back from the precipice or at least intercede when he was foundering in the abyss of family. Back then there was a belief in deliverers who would reach for him while uttering charming, mellifluous words which all of the family members would accede to. Back then there was a belief in forgiveness, the righting of wrongs, that a time would come when both mother and son would feel comfortable enough in each other's presence to almost be able to speak openly about what was happening to him in this monstrosity called family, that there would be a time of not having to fear losing any remnant of the maternal instinct for love which she still possessed and occasionally demonstrated in brief tacit glances of commiseration, that a day would finally come for this open admission of the truth (although now he believed that it probably never would have occurred even if the parents had not died so early in that fatal automobile accident, which had led to his subsequent indentured status as a noodle worker behind his brothers' food cart and the late evenings/early mornings of becoming, even more gratuitously, his brother, Kazem's "cheap date," his "free hole"), and happy endings for this putative, perennial propinquity called family which he had once thought of as an everlasting substance that would one day satiate him with meaning, and like a tsunami drown and bury his tiny, forlorn existence in its eternal watery mass. His youth had cowered in the corners of the shadows of family, and he had stayed within them complacently, cognizant that every cockroach that was not smashed sooner or later found a more preferable exit, and that although it would seem forever, this time of the impermanent first family would just be a brief space of years within one's lifetime.

Art had been his way of taking umbrage. It had been his way of committing that monstrous deed of giving a voice to the miniscule cockroach by inserting a man's vocal cords within it. How in early boyhood could he have known family to be merely half-remembered battles, and diminished faces of long known and scarcely understood combatants that the memories and critical intelligence of an adult would present to him? He had believed in the magical restoration of it then, child that he was, as if self-interest were not a priority in human beings. Integrity was rare and integrity for his sake rarer yet. Should he have expected something greater from his aunt? To her he had been cute, and so not having children of her own, she had dabbled in a love for him, pampering him for a time with her neediness. She was, after all, a human being seeking her own happiness as he was; and unlike him, she probably never had a clue what happiness was really. However, he did know despite often living contrary to its precepts.

By his account happiness was seeing meaning in the blowing branches of a tree on a murky, partly cloudy day that was as ambiguous in weather as purpose, and expecting nothing greater from his environment or fellow men than ambiguous and random happenings on such a gloomy day. To find a bit of pleasure in what was and not expect anything more: this was seeing innate value instead of creating ideal scenarios, which were bound to not happen and lead to disappointment.

The mystery of obtaining happiness was not so confusing but sexuality, that ever changing river, was. As many times as he pondered again this recent event, his ruminations churned up vacuity and uncertainty for he still did not know whether or not this mono-homosexual experience of masturbating one time to the image of a male in a toilet of a train on a day of panicking over having turned forty constituted a thought that was acted upon, and so the aphorism did nothing for him. If meant to liberate him from guilt or cure him of sexual depravity this nostrum had less efficacy than a placebo.

It was not only them, whomever they were, but he himself, whoever he was, that seemed to meander on the outside. He was lost like an insect crawling on a seat of a roller coaster ride which, designed for thrills as it was, lacked purpose. This ride on and of the world in forty rotations around the sun, which had changed him both physically and mentally since his birth, seemed to him now as meaningless as a pail of water being twirled around forty times in centrifugal force. The Earth had bore him as another product cursorily begotten on an assembly line. A product did not transform a factory, he thought, nor did a man change the world, or even leave any indelible sign of himself before being dumped in the landfill.

Images of a stern female four with a broad boned body and a balding and obese zero with one arm taunted him in his, arguably, depraved imagination. They were salient neither in nightmares as it was not night, nor daydreams as this word only had positive connotations, but in a sense, daymares. In them the couple were walking through the rain toward their home. In his mind's eye zero was still scrambling for his keys when they, the husband and wife, arrived at the doorstep. "You are so disorganized," she reproached. "God, I hope that you did not lose them again," she excoriated. Forty times the zero quietly stomached the abuse as he continued to inspect all of his pockets for the fortieth time. He knew that she had married him for his purchase of a parcel of land to which she could build her nest, for union with sperm from the only man who had exhibited some interest in her, and for a financial provider for her birdies. He knew that, altogether, she had used his body because of an instinct to seek happiness in that which would place her on the throne of maternal monarchy, and so her insults not only seemed unwarranted but particularly contemptible. Furthermore, he could not understand why, when she knew the reactions that getting drunk and shouting her invective as intense as imprecations would cause, that she continually insulted him. More times than not he would be provoked to beat her, pull her around by the hair, and continue to slap their forty children from time to time for caring about the shallow smackings of the mother instead of the mental flagellations that she rendered unto Him. Despite the bruises and black eyes that he gave them, he knew that she would never take them away, for a woman, if anything, was a prostitute of a bird. Obeying instinct, she would do anything for a parcel of land to have and maintain as her nest. Was this, as some type of a singular image, he asked himself, the subject for an abstract painting? It was for someone else, he retorted.

He thought, "Have I, Nawin Biadklang or whoever I am—whatever I call myself, done anything remarkable within all these forty years?" He posited this question as if this subject were now a relevant matter to deliberate, and as if, after having scanned through a quick shuffling of vapid memories, a self-judgment had not already been rendered on this matter. Actually, before posing the question his feelings had already concluded that although having risen to upper middle class from dire poverty as an accomplished artist he had not even made one single painting that was so unique and extraordinary that no one else could have made it exactly as he had done. Feeling had rendered in him the decision that he had failed at anything beyond making himself more affluent than most, and so the question held no purpose. He was just a man with a brief and puny life, and as with all men he ate and expelled, sought pleasure and reacted reflexively against threatening stimuli no differently than any common, self-preserving cockroach. It was true that in a man there was self-awareness more keen than in other animals, but from it one could not help analyzing his own insignificance which he would then have to repugn by absconding more fully in the professional and personal domains. Fabricating illusions of grandeur in ambitions and love, he could keep his life busy and fortified from encroaching questions.

For all of Nawin's messy colors in art and living life brightly (his playboy activities, the television commercials, and a month on a soap opera, which came about from his slight fame as a renowned artist and an attractive presence) he had not become a Leonardo Dicaprio let alone a Leonardo Davinci—not that Davinci would have necessarily known his own greatness. He was discontent with himself as being so was endemic in mortal, human creatures who at best could leave no greater legacy than their own puny thoughts, and at worst found their voices mere echoes of the environment, and their only means to halfway preserve themselves was to have offspring partly begotten from the lust of their loins.

He, in his lifetime, was not as much of a renowned painter as Montien Boonma or Chamas Kietkong were in theirs. For meaningful Thai art of international appeal one turned to them and not him. His works were a familiar leitmotiff of sordid, dejected whores to which ideas and representation of forms were, for critics and buyers alike, secondary considerations. This suggested to him a deficiency in the technical mastery of his craft and made him yearn for other pursuits. At certain times he had been obsessed by having celebrity status and at other times he had loathed it, but overall he had resented its

intrusion much more than grading art survey compositions at Silpakorn University for commercials, and the daytime melodrama sidetracked the continuum of his life as an artist by keeping him from scholarship and his own creative achievements. Thus, he had done what pathetic, impotent males of the second category often do: he had fathered a child.

It seemed to him that whereas mildly abused individuals added links to ancestry, homosexuals, from the severity of the abuse committed on them as children, or from good common sense, became broken links and thus remained unchained. In that sense, he was definitely not "queer." At least that was what he told himself. Then it seemed to him that there was a certain heroism in being a childless presence, stopping the replication of a damaged element and accepting fully his impermanence. However, he was not heroic in that way either. He was a mere womanizer upon whom his wife had urged a full, unprotected sexual union with her friend to gain a child. Even in considering all the scores of women whom he had had protected sex with through the past two decades of his life he would hardly be a record holder of this marathon either—not that spilling body fluids to say that one existed would, he judged, have been all that less significant than spilling paint.

At a station immediately before the destination of Nongkai the train stopped and a door opened to three villagers who were selling their fried rice and pork in Styrofoam containers. "Khao pat moo. Som sip baht [Pork fried rice. Oranges, ten baht]" they proclaimed on both sides of the aisle, and like bells their voices summoned him out of himself. The Laotian was still seated in front of him as before, but with a furrowed forehead and a smirking countenance as if puzzled not by what to say but on how best to say it. The woman, still seated in part on the floor, was now stretching her arms. Seeing that she was awake, the Laotian's furrowed field of a forehead became smooth, and the subject of contemplation he was fixated on seemed to vanish. He raised his naked foot, and with a profane toe denuded his partner's bangs and began to massage her forehead. This continued for some minutes until she bit the toe.

"Bitch! You're really vicious. Look what you've done. It's probably bleeding now."

Nawin's jaw lowered with his mouth slightly agape. In disapprobation of his culture he sat stiffly for a moment in tacit and obdurate silence, but with glances down at what was beneath him. What was beneath him was beauty.

15

Even if he were to say that it was a new beginning for himself and, unlike other nocturnal prowlers, that he was now a nascent creature capable of appreciating the simple pleasures of the day in a more abstemious lifestyle, there was the immediate past to repugn the assertion. There was that nurse at the hospital, whom from earlier exchanges of smiles, looks, and brief conversations, he was able to obtain her telephone number shortly before being discharged from the hospital—a woman he would be calling now had he not thrown away his mobile telephone or "moh-toh" as Thais (though not him, the inwardly surly, cultured man that he was and an American Thai at that) called such devices. Was he not still a glutton for intense thrills? Was he not always at least nominally enraptured by someone or something different than the other intrigues that had come before? The women of the past had proven that he was as had that which had happened to him less than an hour earlier.

Disagreeable for the source of its arousal and made vulgar and fetid by the association of having been done in such a filthy toilet, this experience had been a particularly odd and abhorrent intimacy with fantasies that he was not accustomed to entertain. The fact that these fantasies had opened the gates to his ejaculation in the toilet of a train was for him an unpleasant reality, not that intentionally trying to avoid thinking of it was, in his judgment, such a wholesome act either for it did not make it less part of his own thoughts and experience to stuff it into the sockets of his brain like one's dirty socks being shoved by a foot under the bed at the knocking of his door and he would not be much of a man to cower away from himself so easily. It was still disconcerting since it was both odd and distantly familiar simultaneously, a combination that made him feel flushed down the toilet portals of ineluctable memory. Masturbating privately wherever he wished was for him as inconsequential as scratching the area of his pants that covered his scrotum when experiencing a particularly strong itch, and yet this carnal escapade was different. It was deviant more for him in the sense of diverging from the mainstream than anything significantly pejorative. Still, it was for him a most sordid encounter with himself even if, to his satisfaction, performed in the purest of form—being free from the self-delusion of love. To him, all sex was making love to oneself but coupled naturally with a woman it did not seem so sordid, even though it perhaps was, while being impure enough as to seem as if he were really making love only to her when the contrary was true. Thus to him making love to a woman was more sordid as a consequence.

In this morning encounter with a fantasy and a hand had he not, despite himself, been enraptured by that dark and bearded male partner of the exquisite, pallid creature beneath him? He had. It was not possible to repudiate it as much as he might want to, given the fact that, despite the earlier release, a cool titillation that had never quite left him was once again reasserting itself by soaring and tightening his groin and it was not for the girl—at least not yet, although he hoped for transference—but for this Laotian boy, Boi himself.

This "sick" experience, he argued, had been in large part from insomnia, and the insomnia from visceral loss in his life and from the numb pain of his broken arm. Also in part it had been from the jerky movements of the train after being "a bit sick" to his stomach in the wake of having drunk that watery Laotian beer -with its strange pungent punch like consuming a liquid version of French cheese which always bit back- that Boi had fed to him in his bunk. This had to a lesser degree discomfited his composed mental state as had the acknowledgement of having turned forty. These factors had made him "sick" or a little offset from his mental equilibrium and yet it seemed that he was not over his sickness. He was sick even now.

With women he just wanted to be mildly tipsy and never quite inebriated, and so he would be slightly infatuated with one after another. Even though he wanted the continuum of each one's friendship and to learn to appreciate each as the unique visual, social, and sexual creature that she was, finding no ultimate beauty, the quest for it always seemed to facilitate the making of them all into ephemeral entities in his life when impermanence was making him dizzy. These fleeting figures were sunsets which he never quite wanted to catch when cognizant that there was new light waiting on the outskirts of the horizon. Thus they were as amorphous and mutable as the pursuit for beauty itself. He knew; and if, he postulated, all organisms on the planet were in some respect lovely and loveable, an excitable reverence for the perfection of their forms (even the oldest and most decrepit human, or a single cell microorganism was perfect in contrast to the debris of dark free flowing elements of space), why then did he judge a given person as being beautiful or ugly? It was an unjust contrast to something else more or less visually appealing and it seemed to him both procrustean and ludicrous when every entity was worthy of portraits and every organism on the planet held the potential to excite him in love. It seemed to him that he should be unendingly rapturous to all beings of the world, and yet if one were amorous for all clearly the brain would experience overload. Perhaps the reason one person, two, or three, for a while, became a man's myopic fixation and were thought more beautiful than all others was so that the brain would not experience this overload at recognizing that all forms were equally luscious. This might well be the meaning of a man's fixation on one or a single small group of "beautiful" women—a protective mechanism to stop brain overload. Within one's vicinity and propinquity, an individual registered a finite array of physical traits and characteristics not quite like his own until a next batch would catch his eye.

So that liaisons of sometimes two each day had not become four, causing all aspects of the man to be extinguished but the ragings of appetite, Nawin had taught, for many years, art survey and drawing classes at Silpakorn University, graded papers in the teaching lounge that was exempt of pretty young things who were such ugly distractions to a man who was hoping to seek higher realities than visual and tactile stumblings, pursued jogging, swimming, art, and scholarship, and each week loitered near the golden Thai pavilion or "sala" overlooking the lake at the Bangna campus at Assumption University. There, he would wait to pick up his teacher wife, watch the stretching of geese assert a land based prowess after floating toward him and his bread crumbs, and attempt to once again appreciate simple pleasures. A journey there once or twice a week, like sports and art, helped him to find peace of mind by focusing an aspect of himself less connected to innate appetites and filling Noppawan's mind with an illusion that she was the only one despite the many, an illusion both appreciated as indispensable in congealing and solidifying their relationship.

In loss and tragedy so great that all life seemed a lugubrious and murky haze he knew that at any second he could fall to pieces and yet here he came anyway. On this train moving toward Vientiane Laos, this world capital no different than a country town, this little bit of Paris with a lot of dirt that was the sister city of Nongkai which he had seen once before. His aim was the same: the restoration of self. He was traveling here to find that life was still good despite poignant loss, to part from what-ifs, remorse, guilt, and shame, and to find himself in simple pleasures that he believed were the foundation for appreciating life. He did not know, but it seemed to him that higher pleasures were synthetic, built from tenuous material on a sturdy foundation, and most of the tower had crumbled down and he was there on its foundation, its base, bruised, lacerated, bleeding, and literally with a broken right arm in its rubble. Alone, he wanted to journey to Nongkai so that, undistracted, he might enter Vientiane to contemplate the song, squawk, and flutter of his own thoughts. When simultaneous to some similar song and rustling from the birds themselves it would be reassurance from nature that the fleeting essence of matter and the personal loss he was experiencing at Kimberly's suicide, and the subsequent separation of his wife after beating him senseless with a frying pan were natural. It would also be

testament that life was bigger than his myopic perspective of it, beset, as he was, by tragedy. However, on this train, as everywhere, there were palatable humans who continually discomfited his peace of mind like the chocolate fan poochai (fantastic male) and his vanilla fan pooying, who he supposed was his girlfriend, seated there in the confined space before him.

It was his wish to go on a solitary journey where he might be in the vicinity of itinerant others like himself for reasons like his own, while staying aloof from them by a peripheral association of glances. He might sit dreamingly for hours at a time at a sidewalk restaurant or on the ground before a stupa in Vientiane, eat vegetable and cheese baguettes (the American cheese variety of course) and watch Europeans go by on their rented bicycles. From these glances he would be part of them without allowing them to disrupt his Buddhist contemplation; however, knowing which of them were cultured, and which were merely backpacking hedonists might be hard to determine with mere glances, and if he felt that only the latter were there, he would think that he might as well return home for Bangkok was the prime bivouac for such characters. For what he knew, this rustic Paris might well be the dernier cri for such lost souls like his or, conversely, a Mecca for middle-aged men fantasizing about Laotian men's erections. In either case, or nothing of the sort, he was going there by train as if he were not able to pay for a plane ticket as easily as the average man could pay for a ride on a city bus. Of course this particular car was air conditioned, and riding in it, despite its coldness, was certainly more comfortable than the "cattle cars" linked from behind; but coming by train at all was an attempt toward simplifying his life and it was as close to the Jatupon whom he once was that he cared to ever be again.

He knew it without dwelling upon the point for the latter activity would separate him from others even further: despite an impoverished and savage childhood, he was a refined man although hopefully demure enough not to believe it too intensely or allow it to exude into his interactions beyond a surly air softened in a warm smile. He could have taken an airplane. Refined men always did but here he was in this particular car of this particular train hoping to find balance after falling into the stone and dust rubble that intense pleasures had brought upon him. And yet, he told himself, if his own experiences immediately before, during and after his ejaculation in the toilet portended stygian events to come that would have him wallowing in base instinctual drives, so be it. He smiled and thought how his life was an unpredictable series of unconnected episodes. It was as if he were at a sanuk packard (amusement park) and torturous suffering was mixed into the thrill of every ride. Although seeking and favoring "sanook" in all matters like any great hedonist, realistically he hoped to learn something within these vicissitudes.

So the Laotian called his partner a bitch. So she bit his toe, kissed it, and now had her own foot on his lap. Why should any of it matter to him? They were not subjects under the dictates of his sovereignty, and who was he to be didactic, he who looked at a given moment as an experiment of the convergence of people and thought? He was sovereign of nothing. The two women of his life, his major connections in this existence, had in part due to his own actions, evaporated like all lost essence of family so what sententious dogma did he have to pontificate? Clearly the Laotian woman was not bothered by these mere wisps of vibrating air, so why should he be? He knew that he should not be so irascible. He knew that he should not be brooding about a pejorative word used on this woman, a creature who seemed to flourish in the word and for all he knew might be well suited and defined by it. Still tension of his own making about how wrong the Laotian was to have uttered his pugnacious, rude, chauvinistic, and socially inappropriate word seemed to alter the air so that it was viscous and palpable. True, as a minute or two wore on the tension seemed to be diluting slightly in the strong daylight which was pouring through the windows but still, as confined with them as he was there within this small space, breathing seemed to be a more arduous task. Tension seemed to also sully the floor which was already fetid enough due to whatever stench the train officer's random spot mopping with ammonia earlier in the night had not covered.

And there she was with both naked feet resting on the Laotian's lap so any reaction that he might have in defense of her at this time, even if it were mere silence, seemed inane.

Escaping them entirely with his mind, he found himself trudging through a prodigious mire of memories which would have been better had they stayed in a diminished state, a staid frame of mind which would have made them more easily accepted if not appreciated. One particular memory began to percolate within him and boil over his rim. It began to be the sole activity of consciousness in a reality so vivid that it was as if he had fallen through a portal in time. He was with her again and she was exactly the same. "Kimberly, I should be painting that expression instead. What's wrong? You've seen that one of Noppawan a hundred times before." "I am just seeing it in a new way. You are the world to her. You can see it in her eyes—so much love for you and you are the one who painted that love so lovingly." "I'm drawing you now, aren't I, if you would stand still? Haven't I done plenty of you?" "Still, this painting makes me wonder what I'm doing with you. She is my friend." "Whom she chose to give birth to our child—yours, hers, and mine." "A son... the ultrasound showed it, you know..we'll be having a son—yours, mine and hers. Maybe your connection to me will be special for that reason, but you love

her and I shouldn't be doing this." "You are in your fifth month. It's a little late to go in reverse now, wouldn't you say? As I've said a hundred times before it was her idea. She knew that I wanted you and that I was trying to repress it since the two of you were best friends. She wanted children through you, and this pregnancy is your gift as a friend to her. She enlarged marriage to include you in it so we are all married in a sense. There's nothing to feel regret about." Then this memory, which had seemed so vivid and concrete, dispersed as if it were sound, smoke and wind..

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Thais with a disposition and willingness to scrutinize their own cultural suppositions were rare but for those who were so inclined to repugn family and Buddha, if only in outward aloofness and tacit pondering, little remained sacrosanct from intellectual dissection except for issues in reference to the king, for to cease to revere him would make one something other than Thai. That is what he thought at 8:00 A.M. as he heard the king's anthem playing at a distance from a passenger's radio. That was what he thought, and yet had the moment been different he would have thought differently. He knew that what he was, what he claimed to be, was merely from being in the particular situation where he found himself. Now in this car of the train among these strangers whom he did not particularly like, hearing that rather bland melody repeated, one more of the daily repetitions throughout the years, and as always feeling that strong inhibition which made him not able to even acknowledge to himself this blandness, his disposition grew a bit peevish and restless for he kept telling himself that every moment he remained here was aging him toward his forty-first year. Having one birthday in a train was bad enough, he told himself. He did hardly wanted another one. The moments seemed like hours, unmovable as boulders.

As Nawin heard the anthem he saw that the three food salesmen, in concert with everyone else, were deferentially erect and motionless in response, and noticed that there were no more strident cries or other such tonal annoyances of khao phat moo, phad thai jae (noodles and vegetables), and kauy-tiaw (noodles) with some sauce with a Laotian or northern Thai dialect name, at any rate shrieked beyond recognition. Noting that any delay in getting off the train would be a brief one and that the freelance food salesmen would be gone with the slightest forward thrust of the train, he pulled out sixty baht from his wallet so that he might quickly buy one container of each for himself and the two passengers whose space he was confined to. It was only polite to do so and any effort that he might make to give less credence to his feelings of disgust toward them would make the rest of the ride more agreeable. Besides, as feelings were so interlinked to perception of a given event in a given moment like attack dogs that were often standing in late evenings by the doors of banks and randomly barking at the scents and movements of passers-by and their shadows, they were not reliable gages for assessing reality and he did not give much credence to them.

The gambits of feeling, senses, and logic were even fallible when working together. To trust one exclusively over the others was a madness equivalent to an artist falling in love with his subjects, an inebriation of the myopic he had always tried to avoid in the hope of going beyond the "reality" of one's petty associations to an exposé of exploitation and tacit desperation in which the viewers would see the whores residing within themselves. This Earth was in one respect like a huge amniotic sac of impermanent quasi-reality in which he seemed to be a six billionth major cell of some inchoate but never complete organism that was being tossed therein. In another sense it was diametrically different and he seemed a complexity of contradictory feelings, logic, and sensory input like partly functional gages and gears that he manipulated and was manipulated by to move and assess movement in this nebulous terrestrial cloud or fog he found himself in. To some degree he was part of a cell if not an entire cell in the gestation of the making of a life and the Earth was merely a cluster of cells if not an entire organ in the inchoate organism called the universe; and yet to some degree it was as if he was a probe slowly feeling its way in a very small acreage within Martian darkness. One thing that was certain was the intricate and confusing number of switches and responses in himself. Even with logic, if a compassionate man had only this, he would continue to stay stationary in any situation he happened to find himself. It was feelings of pain that urged a man's extrication so that he might find situations and quests more worthy of his time. So he thought while hearing the ending of the anthem.

Inwardly having great humility and reverence toward King Rama IX, he nonetheless facetiously told himself that this opportunity to eat a scanty sustenance was provided by the king himself and that royal cuisine of this nature was not to be passed by. "khortoht [excuse me]," he said, raising his hand and motioning to the nearest salesman to come toward him. It seemed odd to do so, for he was feeling the desire to turn in the opposite direction toward the Laotian himself, so that he might say, "Phom tongkarn khun [I want you]" and "Phom gamlang ja pai gap khun [I will be going with you]." Odder yet, his mind itself retained the hauntings of Kimberly, who was even more similar to him than Noppawon in being a little of this and that, and belonging to no group or family for she was French-American, and he Thai American, or at any rate an American Thai, and, unequivocally, both were expatriates of this

world.

As if it were not ironic enough to lack superstitions about ghosts and all else and yet have his mind so discomfited by the creaking, rattling, and shuffling of her presence in the dark corridors of his mind, he was possessed by inexplicable, ineffable desire for this individual before him who was of the same gender. The rattling chains of the former were feeling, instead of sound and, understandably, this rattling was from the stress experienced by remorse; but the latter was a burning sensation less explicable than the other as if he was possessed, although there was nothing to possess him but himself. Together the phantom of that tacit, gentle soul of a woman and the possessive fantasy of the rough and naughty Laotian were trying to overtake him. They were mental poltergeists and he was the source of his own haunting.

He had boarded this train in part because he was trying to flee Kimberly and yet were he to fly without cause or reason, he knew that she would go with him to Niamey in Niger just the same as Nongkai in Thailand or to Vienna the same as Vientiane for she was an ineluctable memory of myriad of these ineluctable memories that he would lobotomize in minor whittling of his brain with a pocket knife if only he could. Many times, marred and blurred as she often was, Kimberly and those not so far gone memories of youth which were equally hideous in their own ways, would detonate like a land mine inside of him when he was tired, causing him to falter into depression and the unconsciousness of deep sleep. Still, what could be done but to freefall in sleep, hit bottom, and awaken rejuvenated with the sun? One could not dispense with a mind the way he had his telephone. In a sense, of these apparitions from the subconscious, she was summoned from nowhere phantomesque, and yet like weeds thrusting from a rocky landscape without reason after a cool rain. As in that memory a minute ago which had acted an entire scene upon his mind, Kimberly, hybrid of weed and flower, was there in his mind's eye like rife dandelions. Even though now she seemed to be withering within him once again, and he was at least cognizant of his pull toward her, he seemed to be falling more rapidly and with greater force toward this rocky slope covered in dandelions and fog, compelled to fall into the lap of beauty and death while the final impact remained suspended from an incessant retreat.

Even now, he thought, she was more distinct than the smudges that came from the contrivances of conscious will when attempting to remember, but that image was diminishing with the seconds no differently than subsequent attempts to recollect her consciously garnered less than was exact with the passing days. As with other hauntings, he felt startled, and spent a minute or two trying to recollect himself within disconcerted thought but that was especially hard to do this time since his mind was crowded by that visceral, recent occurrence that was one more presence in the haunt of memory.

Strangely, even if done immediately after glancing at her photograph, or after seeing slides of a painting of her, which was an impression of her and him both, were he to try to remember her exactly it would be an act of abject futility. It would give him nothing but a blur. He could even concentrate on the specifics of her wearing that turquoise dress that he had given her, a combination of the color, green, that she liked most and the ethereal blue aqua vitae lakes of her eyes, and it would not matter. Attempts to consciously bring her back would extract nothing but smudges and visceral pangs of loss. The hauntings of memory hadn't any more reason to be than the screen door of the shed at his home (exclusively Noppowan's home now through his default in not exerting his innocence and in not shifting the blame back on to her, the proposer of their doom) which opened, closed, and banged around in the winds. But when she haunted the oblique corridors of his brain there was nothing opaque about her. Clear as reality, he was often able to remember not only her, but also a continuum of moments in their interaction together and, as now, the ensuing shock would cause him to stand for a minute or two lost in himself while trying to find a way back to the present moment and analyzing and reanalyzing this thought process as if hoping to find a switch to turn it off. So his mind droned on like this, as it always did after a deep thought of her image, until he was able to find enough of himself to make the choice to part from her.

Glancing out of the window for a few seconds with his hand still motioning toward the salesman, he watched Thailand's vacant greenery, a pickup truck on a distant road, and a water buffalo standing in what should have been a modern rice farm. These images continued to peel and fold back behind the train no differently than the people and events of his life. This, above all, was why he had subconsciously chosen to come by train. It was an instrument for illustrating his impermanence so that he might accept that this was the natural course of all things even if human intellect knew that nature was vile and that this impermanence should be otherwise.

"Sorry, I got carried away," said the Laotian to no one in particular. It caused the girl to laugh and then look up at Nawin with a broad smile. As much as her smile could speak, it seemed to be saying that expletives were the norm. It was as if that smile were saying that profane and abusive names were merely a mode of expression, like bantering, that gave visibility to something as impalpable as a relationship, and that she enjoyed whatever he wanted to call her as well as Nawin's intrusion of

silence which was meant to be a reproach against Boi. Thinking of how a smile conveyed language, it seemed to him that even the walls of the train were speaking if he would just listen to them. It occurred to him that if thinking so was childish, animistic, and all things Piaget, life was more meaningful with this chimera.

"Anyway, it doesn't look like it's hurt," said Nawin in an attempt to bring closure to the subject of the toe.

"Yes, I think you're right."

"Is Nongkai next?"

"It's the next stop—the last stop. Are we friends now?" he asked Nawin of the Thais who chuckled good humouredly in reply as if the earlier retort of surly silence had been from some other self. It indeed had been, in his opinion, for each minute, if not mentally connected to its predecessors, could be unique from all others and unpolluted in that sense. At least that was what he thought and so he laughed magnanimously. "Why not?" he said with fresh amusement in being with the Laotian. "Maw ni khrap" he called out to the salesman pointing to all three and handing them each twenty baht. He distributed the food to his acquaintances and the young woman pulled herself up into his seat.

"Ambrosia, food of the Gods," said Nawin.

"The Gods must be cheap bastards or starving rice farmers to consume something like this."

Nawin laughed. His eyes became focused and dilated like those of a baby intrigued by the newness of life. Meeting an iconoclast in these parts was a sumptuous treat.

"That is his way of thanking you," said the girl. "You are so kind."

"Mai pen rai. Yindee torn-rub khrap." ["Think nothing of it. You're welcome"], he said fully, captured by her mellifluous sound and how the smile lit up her face right before the spoonful of rice was placed in between her two rows of teeth.

"Reunions are so nice—you and me and you and my sister, her Thai toilet friend. She's been talking about you, you know, ever since she passed you coming and going from the toilet—this handsome, middle aged man who is obsessed by his image."

"Sister?" He was stunned.

"Oh, yes my sister, not my girlfriend. You thought she was my girlfriend, didn't you? Well, not really. Are we boyfriends from chatting and drinking beer together?—not so much but who's to say not or never. Earlier when she passed you she was wearing a cap, a man's jacket, and what else?"

"Sunglasses," giggled the woman.

"Yes, sunglasses to hide herself from being noticed when she isn't as beautiful as she wants as if foreign laborers are likely to encounter a lot of important friends everywhere they go. We hardly know a soul here except other Laotians. I bet when she passed you, you didn't notice her any more than you would any androgynous clown walking the streets of Bangkok."

"A clown?" interposed the woman.

"A beautiful clown."

"Well," explained the woman, "I was in a hurry to get to the tracks. I hadn't washed my hair so that explains the cap. They don't have a station back there so I had to wait in the sun at the tracks. It was chilly. Do I really need to explain this?"

"Your hair's fine."

"Yes after washing it in the sink and blow drying it, but it is uncombed now."

"Beautiful, isn't she?" He knew that Boi's meaning was not fraternal and that that which should not have repulsed him but did was now being replaced by that which should repulse him but did not.

"Free of connections, free of clutter—unfettered—and happier for it, I suppose," he thought as if disconnectedness from others, freedom from circuitous movements around and preoccupation with people would free his thoughts rather than free him of thought. Thought was surely the material

assessed in abstraction, but lustfully eating his food with the foreign acquaintances of that country of backward brethren he did not consider that issue consciously. To some degree he was like those who in the monotony of their circuitous movements around material possessions and a preoccupation with them came to remote areas like Vientiane to find more to themselves than the accumulation of money and objects, but his retreat was more from the loss of people than the dismissal of material possessions, and his departure was not out of choice but the circumstances that had brought about the need to extricate himself from inordinate pain. He did not so much want fairly empty rooms in a guest house but the totally empty realm of his mind. He knew that he would not be considering the subject of whether or not disconnection was propelling him to happiness unless something were amiss or lacking in his life. What was once the clogging of his brain with the mauled grammar of students' redundant essays in art survey classes, women whom he was involved with, and was obliged to attempt to make happy (such an inordinate amount of women, as his heart was a sponge of sorrow, caring deeply or loving adventitiously and incurring feminine wrath for it all, who were paintings of this life and mattered to him as well as mitigating those sorrows, the result of injustices), a futile effort that had ended worse than imagination had reach. Having students to maintain professional interaction with as altruism and being a benefactor allowed him to stretch closer to the ethereal realm of virtue and also gave him more tentacles for assessing reality, and the somewhat plagiarized and hastened research and cursory art coinciding with old themes that had been done to maintain his position at Silpakorn University had now been replaced with freedom to ponder vacuity. And vacuity he pondered unceasingly for, in this train, emptiness rode in him as he was riding in it. Vientiane, he derided, was not a destination any more than the Buddha's Lumbini forest. His time might have been better spent had he stayed in Bangkok seeking prostitutes to draw in the city's Lumpini Park (p for porn), and yet here he was for some reason going to that final destination of Nongkai, the sister city of Vientiane.

He was like an empty wrappers of those fruit filled cookies that in boredom he had gormandized the previous night for they had fallen from his bunk during his restless sleep to be, for a time, caught in the reigning randomness of the fan's winds. And yet contrary to the social animal that was man, placid acceptance of his disconnected state was in a sense a spiritual retreat; and it was, after all, as a spiritual retreat, more or less, that he, an atheist, was hoping to facilitate by coming to such a lackluster and lackadaisical city like sleepy Vientiane where there would be no distractions to cordon off this theme of vacuity.

Affluent and unfettered by property, which seemed at any rate to be entirely lost to him with his wife having changed the locks on the doors, he could go anywhere to become something different. In that sense he was truly free. He knew that and reminded himself that he should be grateful for it, but like any social creature he needed a mind stuffed with clutter to have the equilibrium that would deliver him from being random movements of an unstable, empty vessel lost at sea and unto itself. Whether he was on a spiritual pilgrimage or being flushed down to Vientiane as defecation in a downward deluge of his own whims he did not know; but in either case he was free (free, that is, when not fully wracked in guilt about Kimberly's death and all that had led to that grotesque spectacle which he had no power to change) and freedom always felt good. To be humanized from mechanical actions, not that he had carried out many of those in the past year of his premature retirement, and denuded of pretensions by lusting after two or three young beings who had passed to the toilet, as well as the two seated before him, was in essence like being found; and they who were found were encompassed in thought like birds to air. It was good, even if much of the air was sordid and polluted and ineluctably so. Nothing was lonelier than the loss of thought and being compressed into the agenda of the day, the cluttered interaction of interconnectedness he only in part liked because of a loathing of it taking him from himself. If he were to work for a month in a factory like a dirt poor laborer (he was indeed swarthy as most Thai laborers and once of their class), return to the sidewalk restaurants which were his inception and, he posited, probably were his true destiny had he not been so insolent to repugn them, or even to return to Silpakorn University, such an experience of once again doing work would give him a fuller appreciation for what he had; however, even with this satiated and cloyed sense of leisure that often seemed perennial, his indolence seemed the preferable course. A flight into the World Trade Center towers of oneself might be in part a flight down to a sordid hell but he, an artist, although a retired one, would hardly repugn it if it were.

While eating with them he stayed silent. Was it so peculiar to scan each of these acquaintances respectively with circumspect glances, to do so apprehensively (more apprehensively and yet more often to the male than the female of this brother and sister combination as she, whom he barely knew at all, was nearer and the sexual interest would be more conspicuous), and to let the erumpent odors of both, imagined or real, send him on a molecular magic carpet ride away from the mundane and the tragic of this world? Was it strange to occasionally think of them as his friends when not really knowing much about them? It was probably, as he now lacked anyone in his life, a normal reaction. With his telephone thrown into the trash at the train station, he even lost the nurse whom despite his brokenness he was able to inveigle with tender caring questions and full attention toward the

caregiver, a charm that wooed her as all who felt no one in this world listened to them. Was it so peculiar that he should feel comfortable in a brother and sister combination when it was quite apparent to him that they were intimate beyond sibling love? It was an intimacy that to most would seem repugnant but for those who were in one way or another abused, molested and maligned in youth, and whose thoughts were stuck in that mire of sediment and sentiment still (sentiment because, tragically, it was rarely all bad and thus stayed there like sludge slowing the victim's thoughts), they who were perhaps under a different name than now, who were once in their own brother's arms, witnessing perversion as he had in seeing this earlier foot kissing of siblings was a homecoming. To see that others were so engaged made the taboo subject a human tendency frequent in the subconscious though never, or at least rarely, in deed as this molesting of a woman who happened to be walking on a sidewalk. With the witnessing of such an aberration he was freer than he had ever felt before. For a moment he felt a rush of dopamine and serotonin that almost made him love the siblings. Was this "love" really for them any more than he was really "loved" by those who needed someone to listen to their ideas and truly care for them with no other motive than this? He supposed it was not "love" in any pure sense of the word. Still it was good that he was no longer having to persecute and banish memory and thought, or having to consider that part of the brain vile which was the trash receptacle of repressed thought and thus, he theorized, his body was feeling amorous in celebration with sexual feeling as if he were being tossed into the air like confetti. Perhaps a celebration, as all human actions and interconnection, was just the macrocosm of the innate chemistry within (in this case the party within). But what did he know for sure of the demented, or at least aberrational aspect of this brother and sister relationship? How did he know that his conclusions were warranted? He did not know anything for sure as little or nothing was known conclusively.

Once in those beginning stages of his molestation he had spoken to his mother. It was an oblique reference but the pain in his facial expressions (furrowed eyebrows, sunken eyes, and the slight and irregular quivers of the lower lip) were easily interpreted even for someone like his mother who was accustomed to some amount of pain always embedded into those features. She understood what was implied and flattened it vehemently by contending that "nothing had happened" and that he was "crazy." How was he to know now, twenty years later, with absolute certainty, that it had happened, as his vague memories recalled it, for memories were impressions dented onto the clay of the brain and were so easily defaced. Certainly memories did not become more real in time. And if he did not know his ability to know how would he know the relationship of a couple of relative strangers absolutely. Epistemology was the study of nothing for nothing could be known absolutely no matter how much the brain yearned for certainty. He could sense that the Laotian knew that he liked him as well as the girl. He could also sense that not only did the Laotian like her as well but that what he liked most was Nawin knowing that he liked her. It was all amusing to him. He sensed it but how he sensed it from a smile, a look, and the length of a look he did not know.

"May I have a sip of your water?"

"Sure," said Nawin as he gave him the container that was on the seat near his leg. The Laotian drank. "Do you want it?" he asked his sister in respite from quaffing the water, but without waiting for a response from her he once more drank voraciously and then tilted the bottle to her who bent forward toward it. He fed it unto her in what Nawin, ostensibly a neutral third party, was inclined to think of as an obscene gesture. It seemed obscene despite the fact that it was merely the drinking of water.

"Yes, my sister has been talking about you—well we have, really. She says that in going and returning from the toilet that she saw a handsome older man at a mirror. It had to be you, don't you think?"

"An older man?" Nawin mocked. "Not me then—impossible," he said facetiously with a contrived chuckle to disguise a sigh.

"Is that so?" asked the Laotian. "Maybe you just look like a well preserved older type. Anyhow, you were gone much of the morning. It hasn't given us much of a chance to talk."

Was the obscene truly so, he posited to himself, or was it just oversensitivity about doing something, or being associated with others who were doing something not considered the norm? If it were the latter then so much oversensitivity over something so insignificant as the kissing of a toe or the feeding of another water seemed crazy, but if it were the former why did he not just excuse himself to the toilet and remain absent until the train stopped or from some tenuous excuse withdraw to one of the many newly vacant seats?

Nawin nodded and smiled. Then he stared out of the window so as to have a pretense to turn to a woman's gentility. He glanced at her directly with a shy smile. She was no longer eating but wiping her mouth with a napkin and stuffing her Styrofoam container between the metallic cup holder and the window.

"Would you like some gum?" he asked the woman as he pulled out a stick from the pack in his pocket.

The woman smiled with closed lips and a childish, exaggerated shaking of her head.

"She's not supposed to talk to strange men let alone take things from them," said the Laotian with a grin. "However, you can send it this way."

"Sure," said Nawin. He gave the stick of gum to him.

"Thank you, kind sir," he said with a brief gesture of the wai and a quick denuding of his stick of gum.

With a more solidified judgment that their actions were obscene Nawin began a slow unwrapping of his own gum; and yet not wanting to judge precipitously on nominal matters where he could be mistaken egregiously, he decided that he would remain seated where he was and not leave them. And if obscene, why would he want to leave them when the obscene seemed so comfortable to him despite his moral objections of himself for it being such.

"Kind sir?" Nawin mocked with good humored bantering. "I'm not seventy you know."

"You are such a touchy person. Now 'sir' bothers you. Clearly you aren't twenty anymore," said the Laotian. "There is nothing wrong in admitting that. It is an exit we walk through briefly to join the majority who are thought old by somebody or another. My sister is twenty-one but that too will pass."

"Yes, age is a state of mind," said Nawin rather unprofoundly, smiling widely and readjusting his opinion of the Laotian who seconds ago he had pegged as a pachydermatous brute although perceived more erotically for it. As this issue was germane to him, he thought that nothing truer could have been spoken. He felt an attraction to this Laotian named Boi as a human being, and this attraction seemed to flush out the tense congestion of hormones in the traffic jam of his groins.

"As she could not use the sink where you were at, she primped where she could—at that nasty metal sink in the toilet. Since she primps for a long time that means that this man was primping for a longer time and she saw him—you, that is—still at the sink of the corridor when she was leaving. It had to be you as you still weren't here when she returned and woke me up."

"Maybe it was. What's the point?"

"No point, my friend. An observation. For the longest time we kept thinking that you would be back at any moment. My sister was so disappointed that she had to sleep off the depression. For me, I was just puzzled—kept thinking that you must be doing something strange back there but god only knows what. Your name again is Nawin. Right?"

"Nawin Biadklang."

He felt a chill in the spine of his back and a burning sensation in his face with this absurd and paranoid fear that the Laotian knew what he did privately in both thought and action in the toilet. "He doesn't know a thing, of course" he reminded himself. It was obvious that the Laotian had found a means to make him feel intimidated in generalized words, but laughter and a warm smile, he told himself, would burn away that fog.

He thought about his earlier name and the time he had changed it. At the age of sixteen a monk who had been concerned about the tragic implications of the name, Jatupon Biangklang, without much awareness about the circumstances of his life, had guided him toward a more fortuitous appellation; but now, as he was saying it, the fact that he had changed his first name and not the last seemed a bit surreal and disconcerting as if he had a different head placed on his body or the same head placed on a different body (which, he was not sure). Still it was good that he had done it even though it had not been done fully. Unable to lobotomize memory, and being Thai, hardly able to repudiate the name of even his savage tribe, what other way did he have to separate himself from Jatupon, a wisp of air that in his mind still seemed pornographic? "Over two decades ago and none of it matters now!" he told himself. Still the cliché of the past not mattering belied reality. If the past, having founded the present, ceased to matter so would the present to the future which would mean that all would be immaterial.

"Remember me? Sabai dee mai?" said the woman to both men.

"Khrap. Sabai dee" Nawin said.

"This is Nawin Biadklang, a nice enough Thai, I suppose," said the Laotian to his sister. "Last night I gave him a beer that put him to sleep like a baby, but those ferocious socks of his roared on through the night stinking up the entire train. Still there isn't much point in detesting a man for his stink especially when I have to ride with him and he seems a good enough man even if he is Thai."

"Thank you for the meal, said the woman as she gave him the prayerful gesture of the wai."

"Mai pen rai" said Nawin with a returned gesture, a broad smile, and a few seconds of sustained eye contact.

"Don't mind my brother. He likes you or he wouldn't keep talking to you."

"I like a bit of bantering. It has made the trip less monotonous." He said this but in considering his time in the toilet it was a vast understatement.

"He tells it the way he sees it."

"Good. I like that sometimes—all the time really, as long as it is in limits—not stuck on the bad which is vicious nor on the good to obtain an advantage. Then I guess it is fine—fine for me. Did you come in at the last stop."

"Two or three back. Udom Thani. I was working in a women's garment factory there. Siam Pooying. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

"Maybe your wife has."

Nawin ignored the inquiry.

"He got laid off in his factory so I decided to quit and go back too."

"Where are you both going?"

"Our father's farm."

"What about you?"

"Taking a break—a vacation—needed some time away"

"A self appointed vacation," interjected the Laotian. "Must be nice. And what about that ugly brown wife who beat you up? Are you going without her."

"Yes of course. I rarely go on vacations with ladies who bludgeon me with iron frying pans."

"Didn't like you drawing nudes?"

"Something like that."

"He claims to be an artist," said the Laotian.

"You saw the slides," said Nawin.

"Yes, I did. Some naked beauties."

"There, you have it then, but whatever you want to think about me is okay."

"So if I think you are a boyscout—"

"Then I am."

"A southern terrorist with a bomb."

"The government seems to keep them from becoming menaces to the other provinces but if you want to think that I am one, and that I've come this far with a bomb, so be it."

"A pervert who shows naked pictures of women to strangers on trains?"

"Well, that would have a bit more of a foundation in reality wouldn't it but then would I really be showing slides?"

"Our mother's birthday is next week. If the two of us were not your distant cousins from the tiny former kingdom of Laos, now a bankrupt communist state of rural peasants, we might even pay you to draw her or for that matter my sister."

"No money," the girl laughed as she slumped down in the seat.

"Only rice sometimes."

"Is it expensive to do that?"

"What?"

"Commission a painting."

"Yes. Quite."

"A thousand baht"

"Sometimes times fifty."

"Are you that rich?"

"No, it takes a long time to paint and I don't do it much anymore."

"So, my sister will be your model and inspiration. Pay us money to draw her and you can sell it in Bangkok."

"A portrait is nothing. To make it into art is what takes time and I don't like going through that pain anymore."

"Why have the slides then."

"So they will be with me."

"She would be a beautiful model. This is no common face."

"Yes, but I still have to feel it, or want to feel it."

"You must draw her. You could stay with us while you do it."

"Let me think about it. I've got to go to the bathroom now, adjust my sling, take some pain killers."

"Sure," said the Laotian.

"Excuse me," he told the woman, took his bag from the upper suitcase rack, and left but thinking of a nude painting of the brown and white of the couple the whole time.

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He was examining his mirrored face privately in the toilet as the train slowed down and then crept to the station with a jerky forwardness, as if it too were caught by a backward pull if not a penchant for backward inclinations. Hardly impervious to sensation, he did feel this slowing of the train, felt the thrust of the stop, and heard the jostling of bags and the eager voices of departing passengers. He was even aware of a few minutes of silence and then a less vociferous noisiness when train employees came into the carriage to stuff the linen into bundles and, through open windows, toss them onto the platform of the Nongkai train station. Still, hearing it all as he did, it did not dawn on him that he should leave.

He had come into the toilet to see his reflection via a mirror and to abscond from these Laotian siblings long enough that they would dismiss his friendliness and construe his absence to mean a disinterest in them as potential models even if, as odd as it seemed to him then, he was interested in them as such and more. If at moments feeling extremely solitary and purposeless in his indolent, terrestrial drifting, being dragged in the vicissitudes of life, and trying to catch his breath from it all, he told himself that he would rather asphyxiate than relinquish his undiluted leisure. Lonely despair might in certain moments make him want to cling to people, places, and routines instead of breathing them in and out in a natural context for a changeable world. Specifically, it might make him inclined to return to that excruciating labor of painting or sabotage a trip like this one by allowing people to clog up his brain and distract him from the void; but these were only desperate caprices and nothing more than this.

It was such a handsome face that was his own, and was now pleasantly seen to be staring back at him; and yet staring at it as he was, he was trying to isolate the specific changes a simple year had made to the contour of his face, and attempt with blurred memories of himself instead of numbers to somehow devise a measurement so that he might conceptualize what havoc a year into the future would do not only to himself but also to that of every man's face. That was attempted for he was dwelling incessantly on why for the first time on this physically and mentally painful day of his fortieth birthday someone had spoken of him as an older man. Still, to subdue a growing feeling of aversion and

loathing of the day, as disheartened as he was by this insinuation of him being a middle-aged man, which of course he was, he tried to recall whether or not on the previous night he had told the Laotian that this day would be his fortieth birthday. Had he done so on that evening when the two of them had beer in their hands, the comment could be dismissed as mere bantering from a boorish buffoon and yet each time he recalled or exhumed this fresh corpse of memory it had nothing like this on it. Thus, to be corrigible to the self he concluded that as it was impossible for his face to have deteriorated significantly in just a day it was likely that a year had changed it ever so slightly and that these slight changes were exacerbated temporarily due to a lack of sleep. It was true that his sleep had been rather sporadic and inconsistent the previous night. This restlessness, however, was not only from lying stationary when he was unable to preoccupy himself from that pain and discomfort gained after his wife beat him with a frying pan, but also from his witnessing that horrific jump from the balcony and then Kimberly's mangled bloody corpse with missing arm, contorted neck, multi-lacerated face, and empty eye sockets along with the broken pieces of the metallic awning being extracted from the water of the swimming pool.

The fact that the train had stopped was an adventitious happening like a cloud out there hovering in the sky. It was something that he knew, but he did not seem to recognize as the awareness was scant and did not seem particularly associated with the self, which needed to see personal importance in matters for them to matter at all or for a given object or situation to instill a passion within him. Thus, finding no reason to leave he stayed to contemplate this loss of beauty if it was indeed lost.

Had his beauty depreciated significantly in one day, or even in one year, it would be one more comic incident in this tragic adventure of life. This was what he told himself; and smiling a little at that thought (the rational voice therein reassuring him and giving him smug confidence in the friendship of the self that no circumstance of life, apart from death, would take from him), he could not see why it mattered that he looked forty, and yet it did. He wanted to recollect exactly what he looked like 365 days earlier. It was not difficult to remember that birthday as it had been a particularly odd day spent with Kimberly and his wife. They had been drinking wine, eating the oddest of sautéed dishes, as cultured French cuisine demonstrated: with a bit of oil, wine, and cheese any part of a given creature could be successfully cooked and consumed with exquisite barbarism and taste, when he heard this odd proposal of having Kimberly become a surrogate mother hatch out of his wife's head and thud into the bread basket. With the proposal made and calmly deliberated by all, he had gone into the toilet of that restaurant, had gasped for a moment, teetered for another, and then had stared onto a reflection of his face for twenty minutes. Satisfied at seeing the same face as that of his thirty eighth year he had returned to the table where the topic had not been his age— only, all so indirectly, his sperm. Sitting there awkwardly, he had been drawn into suffering, that empathic piercing into another person's pain that seemed an unwanted obligation subjected onto one by the gods, if there were gods and he believed that there were none considering the smashing into pages and limited scope of man's story book understanding of things.

At that restaurant he had understood her fully: the requisite for an end to her neediness would only come from the neediness of a child of her own. From needing to care for one so needing to be taken care of she might be able to imagine a baby as caring exclusively about her since by needing her totally it would satisfy some of her needs for someone to care about, someone of her own, or at least allow her to have a distraction for forgetting her husband's philandering ways. Unlike an ocean, there was no means to measure the sadness of a wife. If it were greater or smaller than such a body of water, he did not know— only that it was large indeed.

Pondering why it was that people would think of him as middle aged now, when no one had ever done so before and why he might be considered old by some when at least to himself his reflection seemed the same youthful glimmer that it always was, a weariness in his features due to an irregularity of his sleeping patterns (a weariness that as weary as he was might have been impossible for him to see) still seemed as the best explanation.

"Am I really going to waste this trip painting them and then having to tote the final products back to Bangkok? I cannot think of anything more disagreeable," he reiterated to himself with what he hoped would be puissant and cogent reasoning. "What is the best way to get out of this thing?" he asked himself. Then it occurred to him that he did not need to devise any strategy since the train was obviously stopped, and all its content of beings dispersed like a flatulent gas.

He slapped some water onto his face. "Time to go," he told himself; but even with this assertion he was in a fusion of daydreams and faded memories that added color and exact details to his thoughts—a more poignant fusion than that experienced in trying to recall the facts of a given situation as they really were. He thought:

"She's beautiful isn't she?" asked the Laotian.

"Yes, I would say so," said Nawin. "You don't have to persuade me on that point. It is just the time required to do a painting—a real one with a theme, a mood, symmetry, perspective, things like this and I am on vacation. Anyhow..." Her dainty face looked like the nurse at Siriaj Hospital when he was recuperating from arm surgery; that same one from whom he had parried questions about the nature of his arm injury by posing innocuous questions about her own life in order; the one whom he listened to intently, and as a consequence was able to make her believe him to be the kind human that he was instead of the broken man that he was, or the flirtatious playboy, that he also was; the same one for whom he had swapped cellular telephone numbers to no avail.

"Taking a vacation from not working I guess."

"Exactly."

"Good for you. That is the life. So, you think she is pretty."

"Yes."

"Do you want her?"

"Maybe. Maybe I want you."

"What?"

"I mean to model. Not now, but maybe someday when you are in Bangkok. Both of you I think, although there is no way to know until some sketches are actually done or for that matter the beginning of a painting if we even get that far." Then the woman was there kissing the toe of the foot that rested on the seat and made up the phallic arch of a bent leg, and Nawin was looking at them with surprise and envy.

He opened the toilet door and then bent to pick up his bag.

"What are you doing in here? Mister, it's Nongkai. Time to go," said a train officer. Then to reproach a fellow officer who was responsible for the trash he ejaculated, "I thought that you said you checked the toilet. Why was someone still in here?"

"I did," the man responded. "Maybe he flew in through the window."

"Flew in through the window? Is that before or after you checked the toilet?"

"Of course afterwards." Both men laughed.

"I didn't notice that we stopped. I am going now, sorry," said Nawin as he exited the train and walked out onto the platform.

Then he was out of the tiny train station and walking on a paved rural road not sure where he was going or what he was going toward (a left for a couple kilometers would bring him to the center of Nongkai; to the right, past the border crossing and the Friendship Bridge, were the rural outskirts of Vientiane; and between these destinations, finding nothing worth doing and yet as creature of movement needing to do something, was the human mind—his at any rate); but he did not care.

The couple were obviously gone, evaporated like wintery early morning condensation on windows of hill tribe huts. They were gone as the mucus and saliva that was surely spat on this road by some of yesterday's passengers. This being so, he tossed his hands into the air as though now relinquishing his will to fate and circumstance that could raze elaborate plans as it would half-hearted good intentions like his own. Then he smiled. He recognized that he had achieved what he wanted in part. The primary reason for absconding to the toilet had been to apprehend such philanthropic tendencies; but sexual feelings and desire for intimacies or friendship aside, most of his reason for wanting to continue the association was to help them financially for he understood too well that to be poor and blown in different directions by injustices and random fate was an ineffable wrong.

How the male had caused memories of abuse, desire for love from the former abuser, and a whole hot stream of perverse fantasies to percolate through cracks in the surface veneer of consciousness he did not know. Still there it was—this need for love, this wish to immerse himself, if not into the arms, into sex with another being and surrender to this prevailing attitude that one was nothing without someone. He smiled again for his own peculiarities did not cease to amaze him and he was pleased that neediness did not overtake him completely when it could so easily do so during this difficult period of his life. From telling himself that sorrow was a universal rather than a personal issue these waves of neediness hit the sides of his boat with vehement force but did not capsize it. His need for love, his neediness, was not so great and from this fact that he was secure in the poundings, he found the inundations somewhat

titillating. It was a macabre period in his life but one to be survived intact as the distinct individual that he was.

He avoided a pack of Tuk Tuk taxi drivers who were vying hungrily for his patronage and walked along the edge of the road as a cool breeze of the north pressed itself into him. He enjoyed this sensation with the appreciative response to simple pleasures that a small child entertained, the feel of tall and rich, verdant weeds poking the edges of his toes in his leather sandals, and the redolence of the morning air that increased with the rising temperatures of the fire of the sun, though that would be, by noon, over-baked and the air would have nothing in it but dry intensity, and empty space where thought would not grow but was confined like a climbing vine. Despite wistful tendencies to the contrary, he was relieved to be rid of the clutter of recent acquaintances from his thoughts. And if, he postulated, this were true of the Laotian, the nurse, and all of the myriad others, was it not true of Noppawan and Kimberly as well? Did he not want to get rid of all clutter? And while thinking this he inadvertently stepped on a dog, which made him stumble.

Before he gained his balance, the creature cried out and ran to the road but rather than begin immediate howls of imprecations it whined pitifully. "Hoop park, hoop park! nyiab," (shut your mouth, quiet) he told the dog with a softness that belied his harsh choice of words. As he bent down toward the creature he noticed its loss of fur, that its skin, seen through the multiple spots of barrenness, was flaking, and that its eyes were still and sunken.

"Sawadee and bonjour to you, Indonchinese pooch," said Nawin with a laugh and a quick nodding bow with his head which was then replaced with a stiffness in both movement and expression. He could not be amused by another's suffering. He could not be happy when cognizant of so much suffering in the world. The sensitive boy was within and no flippant levity on his part could shake him loose. Just because manhood had piled hard layers onto him did not mean that boyhood had been peeled away. "Poor thing!" he said while reluctantly patting the head of the filthy creature as though adverse to petting it fully while less reluctant sensitivities absorbed its sadness like a sponge. Bent as he now was to it he was emotionally and thus physically paralyzed; and if it were to take an hour or two for the creature to become disillusioned with him and to roam elsewhere, he knew that he would wait with it until such a time came. But for now, here it was fixated on him and wavering ambivalently between hope and belief that humans were the good, the god, the sustenance, and the deliverer—its cries as supplications of prayer. He kept thinking that as there was no god, god was an obligation to all humans who were in their own way, able to imagine such an abstraction and climb into its costume. It was their moral duty to ameliorate the suffering of smaller creatures, and to man himself; but the dilemma was not of one suffering creature on the precipice of life but an uncountable number of them and help of one was unjust. Furthermore, it seemed absurd to cease his own plans and prioritize a dog by getting it tranquilized, and put in a cage for a ride back to Bangkok, a long-term solution (as opposed to offering it food merely to delay the creature's hunger and ease his own conscience), but an impossible one, when in a sense he did not even have a home to take it to. To walk a long way to seek food of which he had none (not even one of his fruit filled cookies) was not much of a solution either; and yet all there was, was the suffering of the moment that he could take pains to counter no matter how many insects he trod on, or how many micro-organisms his immune system killed while he was doing so.

Telling the dog to stay, he went a kilometer or two through serpentine gravel and dirt roads until he found a raan aharn (outdoor restaurant under a canopy) to obtain some meat to assuage its hunger; however when he returned with the food, the dog was not to be found. His were merely good intentions that came to no avail in an intransigent world of changes. Had there been an obscure god whose oblique influence was in urging humans of means to help the weak and vulnerable, beneficence would have been a frequent activity instead of the rarity that it was. In this situation his attempt had not only been futile but it had exacerbated misery since now, somewhere, there was a dog that had been humbled by a god (a god who earlier had stepped on one of its feet and a tail) only to be reproached with a monosyllabic, "stay," and abandoned to stray away disillusioned.

This dog, suffering from malnutrition and lack of grooming, was prey to parasites. They laid siege on and within him. As all that were at a disadvantage, were neither the strongest nor the fittest, and had a vulnerability exuding from them that made their brief lives ambulatory carcasses that would fall with a brief amount of time, he believed he was like this. And it seemed to him that despite being immured in talents and wealth, that his vulnerabilities would bring him down like a sick hound; and so he suffered for the dog in that spot he had found him in. He was bent as though seated on the ground but with his buttocks never quite reaching the dirt and he stayed this way numb and thoughtless staring into nothingness.

remained in the same spot within the same squatted posture as before while his thoughts remained apprehended in remote, dark cells of his opaque mind. His actions (or a lack of, which in this perspective would be equally inexorable) were even peculiar to him, so more with a general feeling of apprehension rather than any specific isolated thoughts, he felt that he might be, rather than questioned whether he was, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, even though nothing like this had ever happened to him before— not that such a history had to be a prerequisite for frayed nerves in the incessant Heraclitus nightmare of shifting ground under his feet, or within the stress of life's chaotic disturbances, to make him impervious to the impact of tragedy.

Kimberly who, to her demise had been of tragic course his wife's friend and his special intimate, had plunged to an unequivocal death, despite that which he had power to imagine. Although he might envisage himself reaching out and blocking her from running to the balcony, thoughts of this nature, myriad natural but immaterial and inconsequential wishes, were an enormous amount of energy expended in futility all because of the sentiment of the human heart and the belief that human will, which could alter the jungles of the world by repudiating the natural forces and the limitations of man, could also alter death. And as for Noppawan: apart from being his wife and best friend, she had also been his attempt at creating the reality of a caring family to replace that which, except for certain times of resurfaced memories that were not easily extracted and were as brief and spurious as a child's nightmare, now (buried under layers of more immediate past the same as dirt) for the most part seemed to have never been, and as the former family—a family which the child within him once believed would continue forever—had been nothing but a civil war of sadists, should never have been. She, as his new family, had lasted longer than the first, and yet the longevity of caring rather than the brevity of cruelty had made her no more real than the first.

Each day, feeling as if being drowned in the cold numbness within that seemed to come from without, humans clung to the material: money, property, friends, spouses, families and positions. For in this spinning world where people and things could quickly emerge elsewhere or vanish from the planet outright, mankind's entire quest was for less ethereal realms in which to claim a firm reality. Thus with obdurate will a man's evaporating substance was patted as firm and solid as possible. For Nawin, however, the most plausible of the ethereal which he had taken bit by bit and pressed into this substance of "reality" was like a glacier that was fast breaking apart to the point of being sheathes of floating ice, and he was witnessing its enormous shards from afar. These enormous fragments were in a prodigious fog; and they included a vague recurrent thought that the dog was there with him, was coming to him, or would be there with him. The thought was circuitous but stalking, and whenever it reached that pentacle of the brain that was the true self which judged the merits of his own thoughts and actions as well as the intentions of the extraneous beings whom he interacted with, he almost believed that he was still with that creature—the dog with its small clusters of ochre fur, he with his ochre wisps of obsessive thought, both cognate in that sense; the emaciated dog, an innocent that from its starvation was prey to disease, he having been the prey of four sadists and one sodomite in a family which decimated if not entirely obliterated the joy of his youth, and would have a reverberating effect throughout his life, both cognate in that sense as well.

Artist of nude portraits of ladies of the night, a professional womanizer, a celebrated genius, a rags to riches story: was not the life of this indolent playboy prince of paupers enviable to those males who appreciated the esoteric field of art and knew of his name? And yet his was a damaged container, a broken jar, and with time there could be no other course for his wanton licentiousness but to spill from not just a few cracks but every crack, and in so doing spell his doom: so he felt and perhaps half pondered in a new modicum of nebulous thought. He feared that he and the dog were innocents that existed to be slaughtered and it would not be just a partial slaughtering of innocence from within to exist in the world, which all creatures had to do to survive, but a devouring of the gentle, the weak, the disadvantaged, and the maimed.

The catatonic was between an edge of sward and pavement leading away from the train station, between sluggish and futile conscious thought with its maelstrom of subconscious feelings, the disconnected randomness of fleeting images underneath, and complete inaction, and perpetually bent toward something when, except for insects, weeds, and dirt, there was nothing there. To him the tactile and the visual, the palpable, had to be there, only lost temporarily in the weeds like a dislodged contact lens, and yet nothing was there. His numbness made intake from the senses seem surreal and incredulous, since that which was recorded by the senses was adventitious and distant from a self that in his case was slipping away in its own right. The senses were becoming faulty instruments for receiving signals while this abstract form of sympathy, adhesive to nothing that was concrete, seemed burdensome and unshakable. This state of feeling deep sadness not only for the dog that had left him but the entire world was like being paralyzed by the pellets of a tranquilizer gun even though there was nothing halcyon or pleasant in being shot with sympathy unless, in more lucid seconds, it was in considering the fact that he should be grateful that it was not empathy. Nothing—not even the dog, the

catalyst that it was—seemed the direct cause of the pathos which did nothing for anyone and made him in better moments look like a young tree with sagging boughs after a tempest, and in worse ones a defecating homeless transient or the distraught middle aged man that he was. Apart from this fulsome feeling, his was the full numbness of a shadow dragged about by some colossal and incomprehensible figure.

Dogging him no differently than the persistent fly that for whatever reason continually returned to that same puddle of oily sweat on his right temple only to sometimes be shaken away all so mildly with a brief thrust of his head, there was a persistent, distorted, and grotesque memory or daydream that posed as fact. He kept thinking, if it were indeed thought to be cognizant of so little, that he (as adventitious as he was at that moment) was around fourteen years old, swatting at flies, and pushing a cart of grilled pork down unknown streets in Bangkok. Scores of sparsely furred dogs began to follow. The further he went the more there were. And the more there were the more security there was for them in the communal mob, and the more aggressive were continually standing upon hind legs trying to attack the cart and rob its booty. Through this time of being chased by this desperate canine mob with its ineluctable barking of mute voices that howled the essence of the void which epitomized the planet, there was a background wall of a standing rack or trellis on which used shoes hung like vines for pedestrian purchasers; an occasional bloody limb dangled from one of the ragged sports shoes, and a gecko hung on one of the shoes' tongues. The gecko was many of one, omniscient and omnipresent, looking into his eyes knowingly. "The world has damaged you thus and thus you will be," it conveyed tacitly with those eyes and then by it or from subconscious thought he knew that it was a dent or crack in an item that gave it its feature even if the ungainly shape would lead it to be easily dropped from a maladroit grasp and break asunder into myriad fragments. Yes, he felt alone, with his cracked past he was doomed. He had hoped for interaction with the dog as benefactors did with the poor when needing nothing from them unless in a minute way to lesson injustice, to do something virtuous which might make one a bit more than merely another avaricious creature seeking more than mere survival and pleasures greater than comfort as means for its betterment, as well as to feel grounded in reality (one physical body making an impact on another); and yet before he could do anything to help it, the dog had vanished, like the flame of a candle in a puff of wind, and now all that was tactile, all that he could touch, was the air which was as ghostly as his thought. Whether his inaction came about from a brain so active in its meaningful albeit subliminal cogitation, or from an idiot who was foolish enough to stoop down to a presence that was no more, like revisiting the rubble of one's childhood home and expecting the pieces to reassemble themselves, he did not know or even ponder. He did not decry or rationalize it, but experience it and pass through it as one did any fog.

Ostensibly, he was bent toward that which he must have still imagined as the presence of the dog, and for his part would not have known any other reason for his squatted and sedentary posture, if any at all, than for its sake. More saliently, however, this positioning of himself in such a way was, in part, because of a deep melancholy over all those who were gone from his life and regret for all the experiences that they had given him—experiences that had accumulated and embedded carvings onto the walls of his brain until there were reliefs of inexpugnable, defunct memories, aggravating the past so that it was alive in him still. Most of all, he was in this posture because subconsciously he was still bent over the rubble of childhood, expecting the pieces to reassemble themselves. If there were gentle and sublime moments in the distant past, tiny shards of some shiny splendor in the rubble, to him it would almost seem impossible that they would not be eventually restored somehow. And to him any fragment of that which was love, that mutual delight in being in the presence of those whom one was familiar with, had to be salvaged but not knowing how this was to be done, he conceptualized the shards as having the innate power to reassemble themselves, as if those rare occurrences of some degree of familial harmony had power to resurrect and reshape anew a distant, unhappy past that had ended decades ago. Despite knowing that everything moved ineluctably forward with its tattered past being dragged behind, it was only natural to have moments of being mesmerized by those shards and fixated with fixing the unfixable.

For at this moment he was remembering, all so dimly, a time of awful sweetness in the bitter, a darkness tinged opaquely in light. It was a dinner in which he had been so nervous among his family and their sadistic barraging of him, the youngest, with disparagement that he had dropped a plate of food in the kitchen, had found himself threatened with a belt, since fumbling a plate like fumbling a ball would, to the pleasure of all the rival team, exact a penalty, had seen Kazem, the molester, impede their father from swinging his belt, and then had witnessed Kazem's custodial role of cleaning up the mess at the game's closure. No, there had not been any closures for, back then, it had been one game stretched out over the years with pauses in the action each night in the respite of sleep that was sometimes interrupted by a different game entirely. Had there been nothing but pain from this former family, it might have been easier for him to move forward with his own life than it was. His life would have been that of defying the members with every impulse. However, in doing so he would have found himself merely an irate puppet moving against the pull of the strings instead of conducting actions in support

of the rational principles of man himself.

From a distance the waters of the canals flowing into the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok often seemed a pure bronze with sun and blue sky peering into the whole, but close up the diluted pollutants reeked of one identifiable odor. In the same way were the thoughts of a man's mind as they flowed into the consciousness that judged their merit. Once accepted they were part of a web of thought that often seemed brilliant in beauty and intricacy but when looked at closely was merely a refinement of man's sordid cravings. Would it have been better to look inside himself less than he did? Would he have not appreciated life more to feel and examine himself less? He had posed the question myriad times but the alternative in exaggerated form was one of choosing to be as unaware as an insect, and this was hardly the preferable route for a semi-rational creature.

Was kindness toward an animal or a human being possible without first feeling the suffering in the other and then wanting to appease if not extinguish it with his own actions, pursued not so much out of benevolence per se as from imagining any efforts as appeasement of his own suffering? He would have postulated that question brazenly had he been in his right mind but as he was somewhere in left field, stuck in sediment and sentiment, there was still merely unrefined thought and it consisted solely of raw feeling for feeling was all that he was capable of. By feeling so much, he exacerbated more by feeling a repugnance toward this effeminate trait of inordinate feeling.

When the thought of the dog was not present there was merely a trail of vacuity in his mind like the swaths of trodden weeds in a forest; however, when it came with regularity it vexed him and seemed to make an enormous rut or trench in his brain with its periodic passing, into which all his other embryonic thoughts, as nascent and inchoate as they were, fell. This was the source of his numb but all pervasive headache.

So here he continued to remain alone in this posture of a defecating dog, within this strange catatonic trance, and with a numb aching in his head. Still it was more comfortable than not for him to sit here for the retinue of weeds and his own shadow mingling restfully within them would not abandon him as long as he stayed where he was—at least this was how he felt. If now, a few hundred yards from the train station and in the open air, he was feeling lost, forlorn, and numb through the lack of purpose that epitomized his life, it was reassuring to think that the sky above him was an everlasting awning raised there to shield him instead of the receptacle that it often was for the urination of some obtuse god. Likewise, it was certainly pleasant to smell redolent fresh air after twelve hours of the rank agglomeration of repugnant orders in the train to which the fetid toilets were the main source, and it was more pleasant to think this than reside at the bottom of a god's urinal. Such was his state of mind and it was as peculiar as a stone cognizant of life growing from it, a bird trying to fly while feeling the memory of the ground tug hard at its talons, or an ambulatory man with a continual sensation of being paralyzed.

Much of what he saw around him was obscured in a thin veil of single memory. It was as if there were a faint light of a small excerpt of a movie, a scene repeatedly projected onto the blank walls of the brain and his intake of the outside world via his senses, in which Kimberly, most often kept free of the impact of the awning to the swimming pool, fell again and again torturously. Now, as with every moment since her death, it seemed that he continued to see concrete images of the world (the hospital room and the big Hualamphong train station in Bangkok, the Laotian siblings and the food hawkers, his mirrored face in the toilet and the big hole in the urinal leading to the train tracks, the rice fields and the wild grasslands, the water buffalo and the starving dog at Nongkai train station) through this single drak-filtered reel of translucent visual images. For many days now he questioned whether or not it was normal to grieve in this way but now with the collapse of thought there were no more questions.

It was certainly not normal to stay sedentary in this posture or to grovel for deliverance or resurrection from some unknown force that he imagined to be the caretaker of this field of broken dreams. To that he sensed or understood but not enough to be motivated out of his catatonic state for he had lost sovereignty and restraint of himself. A lack of a history of mental illness meant nothing for, had he been able to consider it, entire foundations of long established cities had fallen under enough visceral shifting of plates so why not his own? And as if this were not enough there was forty: the stiff broad shouldered female with the erect arms making her autocratic pronouncements to a tacit and obese zero of a man who stood beside her, and this couple had been his birthday present gained alone in the jolting movements of a train. Youth had recoiled or found itself resupinate from a collision with this single word.

He was startled by a driver beeping his horn and gesturing for him to also come into his blue three wheeled tuk-tuk taxi. The tuk-tuk was driving by with the last of a small group of foreigners who had straggled out of the train station later than he, but from the same train that he had. From the appearance of their wet and tangled hair when the tuk-tuk was slowly passing him by he assumed

subconsciously that they had taken showers in the train station restrooms and, like him, were now probably on their way to Vientiane. Foreigners that they were, he was as foreign as they and then some not because of an American passport, which he had although having it, he neither lived in America nor from it traveled there, but because, even though not always feeling a connection to the world, he felt more that he was a citizen of it than a citizen of any specific country. In accordance with the mandates of travel guidebooks to see as many sites as possible regardless whether or not such brief exposure was in fact true experience, they would no doubt sightsee by day and then in evenings release their communal and sexual yearnings by drinking "Beerlaos" with their kind, eating western meals, frequenting nightclubs, and returning with partners to hotel rooms that were some of the most nominal within world capitals— that or some such agenda—before going to Luang Prabang and the Plain of Jars. As material as the tuk-tuk and its passengers were, in his mind that which sped away from him wavered between the palpable and impalpable like an incongruous quark. The vehicle sparkled iridescently, stopped, and started as if blinking though not of the irregularity of the visible but of the inconsistency of the real and the material.

His entire array of thoughts, despondent and almost unknown to him, seemed emaciated and aloof like the white water buffalo that an hour earlier, from the train, he had seen standing dumbly and staring back at him bewilderedly along the tracks. So numb he was in his own despondent realm with such minimal awareness of the prowess of his internal and external faculties that rational scrutiny of action and motivation was not readily possible. Recognition of himself was a witnessing from afar as on a distant bank on the Laos side of the Mekong River. It was merely a stranger seen acting out his peculiar extemporaneous role from at a distance.

Within a nebulous understanding of where he was at and what he was doing and the abnormality of it all, the catatonic was able to recognize the fact that this perennial squatting would seem to others as though he were a homeless and disoriented beggar trying to defecate along the road. No matter the gentility of his intentions in waiting there in this odd manner, by the experiences of squatting in traditional Asian toilets a witness to his execrable posture would ineluctably link it to excrement. Had it garnered the cynosure of security guards at that present moment it would not have been much of a surprise, not that had he lost his mind and found himself instinctively performing more natural toilet activities in the open his actions would have been innately vile for primitive actions of primate forefathers had led to the present. Civilization and all that was refined was constructed on the backs of those barbarous corpses.

Understanding immediate happenings based upon those further in the past, scheming about probabilities of the future based on past events, and floating on hopes while dragging along the weighty past, the present "reality" was only seen in glimpses. Crazy action was merely ceasing to glance at or assess the material world around his physical presence. As for posturing as if to defecate along the road, surely any restful position was no better or worse than others if blood circulated well enough through one's limbs. And as for actually formulating an actuality about something by unequivocally defecating along the side of the road, it would not have been all that different than the elimination that dropped daily out of the open holes of the floor based Asian stools in the toilets of Thailand's trains. It was true that, unlike a man squatting toward the ground in the open air, under the weight and impact of a moving train exhaust of this nature, was desiccated and blown asunder as a vapor, and many times in the twelve hours of confinement he had watched the freedom of his own stream fall upon a metal rail and imagined or witnessed—he was not sure which—it vaporize instantaneously before him. Sedate as waves of an ocean hitting the shore, so the stream of urine falling onto the hot metal relaxed and rejuvenated him for to see, and what was more, to accept the temporary in the natural order was a respite from human will which tended to oppose it and believe it could thwart what was Heraclitean in all things.

If he did not think his behavior odd, he certainly felt its peculiarity nonetheless, and thus he found himself disconcerted and spinning ever so slowly in a thick and viscous void. If there were hot flares of blood rushing into his face warning him that his vastly peculiar and mortified state was on the precipice of insanity they were not cogent enough to motivate him to stand and walk on; but then why would they and why would he reject this petrification within for, despite his wealth, he was no better than a disconnected, homeless transient himself; and if feeling was raw material to be refined into thought, what he was mining within his lethargy might only be ostensibly inconsequential.

If, when impeded from performing services or playing his meager role in the production of goods to be sold to insatiable consumers he found himself unemployed and eventually reduced to a beggar who did not even have two baht to pay for the use of a public toilet, there would be less urgency for refined means in conducting natural tendencies. He would do his natural business on the streets; and with frequency and in the company of others of the same meager resources, that which was once base would become the norm. When the individual was desensitized further in compounded experience these natural activities and the natural means of doing them would become reflexive actions once again

which would evoke little or no thought. Eating and eliminating wastes were necessary functions so the human mind refused to consider them abhorrent and animalistic. That which was judged was how he did them, but even this changed when deprived of the tools of so called refinement. Prisoners with no utensils other than bolted bowls would not find them humiliating after some time. So he thought most dimly—he was actually thinking and was aware that there was a vague he from behind who was monitoring these thoughts. He smiled. The smile was in part because such an entertaining idea, even though he did not register its content beyond recognizing it as amusing, had brushed against him lightly; but mostly he smiled for knowing that thought was now turned on and from it self-awareness was forming.

Leary of the peculiar, a security guard and one of the train officers who witnessed and scrutinized the man in this posture of one defecating with pants still up, made occasional orbits around him like Mars in its closest rendezvous with the sun. Whether the odd one was insane by having been overcharged with an excess of dopamine, or lethargic as of those who had been smashed by bereavement, they would not have known. Separately, they suspected the individual as chemically dependent and entertained the idea of seeking police involvement, but now lacking evidence for any conclusion they continued to observe him from a distance. Then a second security guard appeared out of nowhere, materializing with the sounds of his portable transmitter and receiver in nebulous static blaring from his hip. Less wary, he meandered sinuously until he made his way close to Nawin who was thinking: "Those foreigners in the tuk- tuk must be in Laos by now—going to Vientiane as I am." He smiled at the guard, staring at him with deliberate eye contact in order to project lucidity, which was after all a director's projection, a concoction, when man was a strand of knotted strands of chemical impulses, feeling, thoughts flowing down and dashing upon the banks of memory. "Sawadee khrap," he said with a wai. "Sorry, I guess I got lost in my thoughts. I just broke up with my wife. A lot to think over."

"You broke up with her or she broke up with you?"

"Maybe the other way around. Anyway the better half is gone."

"Where are you going?"

"Well, I am debating that actually. Nongkai has a Buddhist sculptural garden, doesn't it? Vientiane too."

"I guess so. I've never been to either one. Never stepped into Laos."

"You never wanted too?"

"Not really."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know. Too much trouble to do it I guess. No passport. No particular wish to see people who are poorer than here."

"I see. Well, I need to make a left I guess and then walk straight ahead for a while. Will Vientiane be to the left or the right?"

"Right."

"Can I walk there?"

"To the border yes, but you will need a taxi to get anywhere else."

"I'll walk for a while and follow what looks good. Thank you."

He began walking. He was almost at the juncture when he heard the beep of another tuk-tuk.

"Are you Nawin?"

"Yes."

"Somebody left this at the train station. The officers have been asking people they happened to see if its for them. You slipped by so one of them said to bring it to you. Are you Nawin Biadklang?"

"Yes."

Nawin took the sheet of paper. It was the telephone number of someone called Wichian. In parenthesis it said "Boi."

As another inconsequential member of this species riding the promptings of caprices toward that which was most pleasant, a pleasure in its own right, as with the activities that were deemed as pleasant, most of his choices could not be anything other than irrational. And of these irrational and erratic choices, he thought further, most were often made from antithetical impulses to which one was not measurably any more pleasant or worthy of being followed than its alternatives. He was seated at a table in a restaurant of a guest house, wondering obtusely why he was there. It was, he mentally noted to himself, a most peculiar feeling to have come somewhere, to know oneself to have done so, and yet to remain clueless about the aim. It almost felt as if, while in reverie, he had been snatched from his idiocy at the train station and placed here in the city of cognizance without his consent when in fact he had walked three kilometers before tiring and then succumbing to being swallowed in that blue cockroach shaped vehicle, the tuk- tuk, which had then driven him further into the center of Nongkhai.

And so, restless, he stirred the foam back and forth in his hot Cappuccino, hoping without knowing why to soil all parts of the inner embankment of the cup, and only taking occasional sips as he became increasingly pensive. He thought to himself that had he cared to do so, which of course he had not, the money that he was spending on the coffee alone could have bought two or three meals for those who scarcely ate anything on a given day. He began to think about how peculiar the world was with its interdependent members that made up units of one entire whole; and that interaction of one species with another was merely for the need to gain sustenance outside the unit, that the frenzied propagation of a species to ensure its continuum was kept in check by voracious predators; and that individual persons, considering it an enjoyable sport, incessantly tried not only to sustain themselves but also to thrive by hoarding avariciously or seeking pleasures gluttonously at the sake of others within the unit, striving for even more so as to think of themselves as successful in partaking of the good. He thought of how this showed life for what it was: not that of laudable creations overseen by a creator, or at least forlorn entities of a godless universe interacting with benevolent energy, but of comestible viands seeking to elude predators. The whole thing seemed an ineffective and barbaric system of incongruous, animate bits seeking some means to barely coexist, and as such life was not so laudable—neither of god nor of goodness—even though in every culture, and every religion, he supposed, common practitioners believed in both to create a pleasant perspective of themselves and their place in the world. Even Buddha, who did not believe in god became such as a statuette more rife than a crucifix. The morning stimulant was not so hot that he had to barely sip it, and yet he did for cognizance of the rife and innate selfishness of man seemed to constrict his throat. It was a constriction as slight as his compunction; and the subject was forgotten entirely as he poured maple syrup on his pancakes.

Eating a bit of one pancake, he looked out onto the traffic with its lethal confetti of exhaust fumes which, when moving closer to the buildings, diffused and nominally enveloped pedestrians on a nearby sidewalk. He once more pondered that he did not know exactly why or from what impulse had led him here. The inexplicable nature of it all was like that subway ride to the Hualamphong train station. There, clearly for him, it had been a wombed departure from the travail of interconnectedness with those strangers within seeming to him as a family of distant and tacit, insular beings who were cognate in their desire to arrive in a train which would take them from all that was painful—such had been his need to flee from suffering that the faces of strangers, no matter how happy or bland their expressions, seemed comrades of exile; and yet there, most opaquely, he had chosen to sit down. It had been next to a boisterous woman holding a cellular telephone talking of some poor soul's uneventful dating experiences. He could not have known anything of her beyond this and yet of the two vacant seats available he had chosen to be next to her instead of sitting beside a middle aged woman whose face was sunk toward a book; and the reason for sitting in one seat over another was as inexplicable as now. And so, assuming that all was not destined and man had choice about all matters, he had chosen to check into this guest house in the center of Nongkai instead of going straight into Vientiane. To some degree it had been because of the weight of the backpack. It had become increasingly heavy against his shoulders with every kilometer of that long walk. Confusion also had had its bearing. Not knowing what to do or where to go, with each possibility seeming equally insipid, he had selected a place to rest and think out some contrived purpose for himself. If not able to formulate a plan and purpose for his travels, here at least he had a place to rest physically when swimming frantically against this mental eddy. For all his disconcerted strokes, his itinerant meandering, he told himself that even though he did not know when it would happen he was certain that he would wash ashore eventually and when he did he would have contrived something to do, some urgent matter to pursue, some purpose for himself.

He pulled out that sheet of paper from his shirt pocket. He glanced at the name and the telephone number and recalled the faces of the Laotian and his sister as they rode next to him. Was he really to end an uneventful retirement for the sake of these people? Was he, for the sake of seeming a compassionate human being to himself and not merely another selfish being on the planet, to pay them for a miniscule part in posing for some portrait that he was neither inspired to draw nor inclined to tote

back to Bangkok? Where would he even obtain paint and canvas? In Laos? Well no doubt they had both within the capital city. If prehistoric man could find ways to dye a cave, Laotians, people of a very similar linguistic and cultural distinction to Thais, could not do less. He could do sketches of them. It would not take long or be much of a burden to carry around and he could leave the family a couple of hundred dollars, which would mean the world to them and be a negligible and hardly noticed loss to himself. It might even restore him to himself; but then did he want to be restored? A restoration of a thoughtful pornographic artist from a third world country was not such a gift to civilization. He would never equal the great artists of the world and of prostitute painters he was one of myriad in contemporary Southeast Asian art alone. The sister was beautiful by his standards of beauty—youth unblemished with skin the pallor of fresh snow; a background of dirt and poverty, a subject he could relate to, and yet unlike those of a swarthy complexion, not appearing as such, with hair that was long and dark as the void, subdued eyes neither scintillating of inexperience nor petrified as ancient granite, absent of bra, nipples that pointed and teased their way toward every curve to which the imagination slid down like a hand to remote and sodden reservoirs. But it was not her beauty that called unto him, but an intrigue with the perverse so that he might know if his suspicions were warranted, and more saliently, to know the economic deprivations and desperation that made siblings into lovers, if indeed they were that. He folded the paper and stuffed it into his wallet against a condom.

Maybe he had diverged into the center of Nongkai and had checked into this guest house to divert and check, if not totally restrain, an inordinate curiosity about the perverse. This trip, the best he understood it, was meant to have a spiritual element—at least to the extent an atheist whose wont of thinking had denuded god from a vast being cloaked in the sacrosanct was capable of. Being bereft of agenda or aim did not necessarily mean being bereft of an overarching theme founded in malaise; so if not sidetracked, he had (for lack of a better term) a spiritual theme that if pursued with aim could easily surpass the agenda of a monk. After all, and of course he would never openly disclose this most secret assertion, a monk was merely a poor man seeking education, food, and an end to loneliness, and all other nakedness under a saffron robe and a sacrosanct Buddha was not even the physical substance of a needy monk. Nawin told himself that his time here, if not perverted and aptly spent on the spiritual, would allow him to step out of the egocentric, crumbling tower that he was in. If nothing else he could watch ants use twigs as bridges and freeways and in so doing become aware of the existence of a tiny fraction of the 90 percent of all life that was smaller than a chicken's egg. He could then appreciate a cognizant activity and social order other than that of his own or his own dominant species. If he could lean against a stupa and be in awe of the sun baking his face like a brick or appreciate the titillation of wind caressing his head like that of a Cambodian child-beggar patted by a foreigner, he would at last be alive.

Still that had not been his main reason for taking a room. It seemed to him that there was no main reason at all—only the pull of some tremendous gravitational force, that ineluctable void which had influenced him to take his wife's best friend for a mistress and bearer of a child and all for reasons that were only in small part to fill the barren heart of a wife of a fallow womb—a void that had prompted his subtle rejections of Kimberly as his main wife, for how could he have left Noppawan behind or renew himself from the philanderer that he was—a void that had been a catalyst of the ensuing consequences.

To have a child! Regardless of their education or the significance of ideas that bred in their heads, women needed those replications of their physical beings to feel complete. This was exacerbated in marriages, since in thought, if not in deed, marriages were with philandering men who were replicating creatures no different than them albeit ones obsessed by impulses for pleasure in wet disgorging with the multitude. It was no wonder that with the void as immense as the universe itself and the final surrender to it inevitable in death, one sometimes had delusions of it as the lap of a long lost grandmother and found herself/himself plummeting into that lap from one's balcony.

Long ago Nawin, who at birth was labeled Jatupon, had been a teenager caught in currents and countercurrents of his own. Back then, he had needed his new Bangkok friend, Noppawan, desperately; and so by taking her, at the age of fourteen, to meet his osseous, ochre friends, the dead corpses at the Siriaj Hospital Anatomical Museum, he in a sense had thrown up his arms to indicate a need for love. She by embracing him despite his wish to seem intrepid before death had shown an understanding of what boys could not say in words. So like a blossoming bud she had opened her arms to him and let him fall into the petals of her embrace. So, while surrounded by the shelves of these dead beings basking in formalin, he had cried in her embrace remembering, an hour earlier, Kazem's use of his body, a type of interactive gesture or embrace which he had sometimes called a "sport" and at other times a "cheap date."

Twenty five years later at certain moments of weakness, he still needed love even though the neediness in the content of the word abhorred him. Were couples who stayed together for forty or fifty years to be so commended? The neediness of people in mutual dependency was worse than newlyweds addicted to the pleasure-highs of being in proximity to their spouses, the extensions of themselves; it all

was like the monstrosity of a one right legged man and a one left legged woman walking together and it sickened him.

Nawin got up and went to the coin operated telephone. He dialed his home telephone number numerous times and then his wife's mobile telephone number. He did this in the hope of expressing something—admiration, sentiment, respect, gratitude, he was not sure what, but certainly not love, as he had a pure aversion to that word—he did not know what to say, and it did not matter. There was merely that recording telling him that the numbers were disconnected. And so he felt disconcerted as if he were now walking through the gravitational force of a different planet. He went back to the table and drank the rest of his orange juice. It was to be expected, he told himself, as nothing was permanent. He took a deep breath and then breathed out fully. He felt disheartened, but not all that desperate. If a wonderful person, one who had gone out of his life, and who was so salient in such a critical time at his youth, had gone for good reason, he had no reason to question it. He had been blest to have her save him from the abyss as well as providing him with the ensuing friendship of marriage years later. She now had his money, his child, and her independence and he would bequeath these things unto her unconditionally; and so, he told himself that he must release her, exhaling her and breathing in others like respiration. He stuffed the five baht coin into his pocket. No, if he had loved Kimberly and Noppawan at certain times this was enough love for him in a lifetime. If he had experienced one malevolent family early in his life, this should have been enough of an augury for him that long ago he, Nawin Biadklang, should have forsworn a second round of it and vowed to maintain a single and original life thereafter. He was an artist: compassion, ideas, exposure to new people, licentious impulses, and the inspiration of dead geniuses on canvass must override this anti-Heraclital wish to cling to stable objects.

In the petty routines of man it was rare that one was impacted profoundly by some being other than one if the volumes of dead sages, and yet she had done this for him. Even though this incident had happened long ago he still admired and even loved her for it. He told himself that with time he would become even more professional and accomplished at compassionate portrayals of life in his paintings and his interactions, even if it were to take thirty years, when his testosterone levels had finally plummeted. And for those who never had anyone there, for them, he, at least in theory, wanted to be there the way Noppawan had been there for him in his youth. Maybe, he told himself, he would visit the Laotians. He was not sure.

Thus, here he was sitting in the restaurant of a guest house watching a pirated DVD on a big screen television and eating his pancakes with maple syrup. For whatever inexplicable reason, he had chosen to check into a guest house in the center of Nongkai and here he—Nawin, Jatupon, or whatever label he gave himself—was baffled by his choice. He could merely speculate and eat his pancakes the same as any Western foreigner, but with the voracious enthusiasm as he had when, long ago, devouring them in America as a four year old child.

He was eating pancakes rather than the French Toast that he was more inclined to order for the sound of the French in the toast made him feel queasy. When he finished eating and was bored with the movie he plunked money, faces of the king, under a salt and pepper shaker and without saying "check bin [bill, please]" or waiting for the waitress to pick up his money or bring back the change, he left the guest house as irresolute as when he came.

A cloud came and past; followed by others, darker and more voluminous. On the sidewalk, near Soi 43 where he happened to be passing, lightning refracted from the pavement and his sad solitary figure on this King's birthday/Father's Day was lit in flashes of eerie spotlight. There were strong winds animating the inanimate, which gave the already animate that sense of flutter making him, for a time, feel an elated sense of being that surpassed reality but this, like the lightning and the cloud that had been the precursor of the storm, were illusory and passed as well. His loneliness was weighty but the winds made the gravity of it all insignificant. Then there were sheets of rain pouring from the sky, he had tried to escape under an awning, but a hole in the center caused this miniature waterfall and made those under the awning cluster closer together to avoid it. He went into a shop. A rack was full of postcards with photographic images of Nongkhai's Buddhist sculpture garden and the Friendship Bridge between Nongkhai, Thailand and Vientiane, Laos. He could write to Noppawan, he told himself. He bought several postcards but he could not think of several friends to send them to—he had acquaintances by the droves but friends? Minus Kimberly, there was only Noppawan. He returned to his table at the guest house and ordered another cup of Cappuccino and a croissant. He took out a pen from his wet pockets but it would not write. He laughed. No, neither rain nor lugubrious tragedy would wash away the gloss that covered his cracks for he never ceased to be amused by the incredible, the ironic, and the peculiar of everyday experiences.

Looking out the window and thinking how peculiar such a rain was in December he turned toward the movie and in so doing noticed a young man in tight wholly jeans and jacket waiting at the door. He

did not know why but he knew what he was there for and without thinking he raised his hand and snapped his fingers abruptly, but it did not get the man's attention. "What on Earth was I thinking? What a relief," he thought. He chuckled at his droll existence of near misses and the twisting turns of fate. A woman seated at a nearby table pulled out a laminated photograph of King Rama IX. "What a simpleton," he thought, and smiled at her as if she were a child carrying around a doll. His heart was palpitating less, his blood seemed to be cooling, and his thoughts seemed to be less obsessed by the sexual and the peculiar. Then someone sat next to him. Unlike himself or the one in the denim jacket who both had a golden brown complexion, his was a muddier, more turgid tone. He was also more muscular just as he remembered was his brother, Kazem.

"Sawadee khrap," he said.

"Yes, what can I do for you?" asked Nawin.

"Just thought I'd come here and talk with you. You looked lonely. Thought I'd cheer you up if you needed cheering. You snapped your fingers but the other guy didn't hear you. I've heard and have come."

"What will you do to cheer me up?" asked Nawin with a sheepish grin.

"Better not say in words but I snap. You do what is pleasant for me and it will please you."

"Free?"

"Give me a 500 baht gift afterwards if you want."

Nawin paid the bill and led him to his room.

21

He listened to the frequent gusts assail the window panes. They were a hybrid of breath and force. They were muddled articulations in brawn. In that respect, he told himself [at that second he was thinking of his own childhood as a reference, since the centripetal domain of his myopic existence was all there was], the howling in the denigration of night was figuratively no different from the diatribe of human speech, and yet being literally both it felt entirely strange. He listened intently for whatever else there was for him to do as a unit in this barren room of post-sensual darkness inside his own head; scatter and drift with the wind? The gusts of this peculiar storm in the middle of the dry season seemed to be attempts at conveying meaning, ineffable sounds from without transforming to thought that smote recriminations within, and this he listened to as well even as he smiled wryly to think how superstitious he was to attempt to augur some cosmological significance to his petty existence from adventitious happenings. Smell equally condemned him: sweat evaporating from chafed skin of bodies reft from a union of friction; underwear tainted by residual liquids and reeking that odor sweetly; and, for him, immured in a poorly ventilated room of a guest house, it was nighttime and there was the saccharine stench of rotting male flesh everywhere.

Circumspect, he was unable to trust that there was safety in falling asleep [he could not feel otherwise with his wallet there in the top drawer of the bed-stand near that body], and thus there were long minutes of darkness made darker yet by being awake with eyes closed; mind somewhat assuaged by what it could repudiate from illuminating visual sensory input; thought, nature, and a connection to both seeming more acute despite the fact that he felt tired; and all of this a less pessimistic perspective garnered in certain seconds only to be lost in others. For his was an episteme of concurrent antitheses where, from the impact of human will, bits of knowledge like a mixture of adulterated pollutants that comprised the canals in Bangkok, were thrust into composite waves and counter-waves of ferment; but when will sped elsewhere it all reverted to its stagnant origin as waves of cogitation and cognition like waves of water resumed their former states.

All that he could know absolutely of himself within his droll, droning thoughts was that the perspectives he was trading shifted from variations of mood like different or seemingly different selves kaleidoscopically making it so he hardly knew a consistent self at all. All that he could know outside himself was that right now, perceived with gravity but variable nuances of optimism and humor, he was definitely in this room and, as much as he might wish to extricate himself, he was not alone.

Stretched out stiffly on the bed like a cadaver (Why so rigid? Why at all negative? he asked himself), he did not have to see the objects of the room again to feel a cold, surreal, and alien remoteness in their presence nor did he have to be deceased and within a state of rigor mortis to be so inert. Yet! (fuck!), he thought in Thai for that expletive implied how intimately disconnection could be felt; and as life, more than thought, was allowing oneself to be besmirched by the saturations of feeling, validating

it with action, which then was the catalyst for more feeling, he asked himself whether or not after the massage that he had rendered like a slave to another's sense of pleasure and this being riveted for such a lengthy and hellish twenty minute duration which had just ceased a few moments ago, he were really living life. He was, he told himself, and what was more, by this one intimate act with the man and the void he was connecting himself atavistically to that antediluvian period of early self in which he had been sodomized so hard as to rupture childhood irreparably and to be condemned to this morbid repressed pain his atheist's soul, his all-too human, mind—a mind which even early on had been a refuge to a harmonious and familiar voice within.

This pain was for so many years seldom thought of, but now that it was thawed like a creek, it flowed it's bane as microbes and water. Pain, once necessitated, was now necessitating the diminished memories of the diminutive boy whom he had once been— diminutive as the creature had been banished and repudiated all of these years from the belief that only a man's appetites and actions within the present moment were real. Back then he had not bothered to postulate that a present bereft of foundation was like a cleft chunk of a planet floating aimlessly as an asteroid; and that if fully connected to himself; the boy might not be a diminished fictional character any longer while the man might become more than a tailless lizard with a regenerative head. Thus, this being bedraggled and besmirched in painful intimate sport was for him a homecoming.

There were so many voices of the past in the wind. They were distinct in themselves and yet, swallowed and digested by the wind, they were part of its reeking breath: brothers, parents, extended family, evanescent friends of youth, distant cold bits of memory less than specter and dust; Noppawan and Kimberly, his only two portions of love, which, as a self-contained being, he never needed but delighted in ravenously as one who lacked and was in love with those who engendered such lovable feelings (the feelings of being in love being that which were loved most); so many female models, so many desperate, delectable whores with defunct eyes of hopelessness, dead embers with a slight wistful glow for possible deliverance for which men roved like the dimmest of spotlights; so many relationships; so many desperate others no different than the whores (was there a male or female who got involved, let alone married, to worsen one's lot or to become best friends with the self, brazenly riding through loneliness on a solitary raft? No, never!). There was snoring. There was putrid breath, sweeping the side of his face. There was effluvium from the individual lying next to him and this was a type of wind as well.

No matter whether it was done as perpetrator or willing victim, no matter what the particular genders involved were, or the positions of riding or being ridden, the sexual union of two people was in his conclusion a mallet lunging its mass forcefully into dark, dank, and constricted space, a club forcing entrance into narrow passages not designed for its presence, and an overpowering of a being to devour but also to inflict servitude and pain while obtaining that apogee of pleasure, the brevity of orgasm, which could be gained in no other way. A mélange of croquet and billiards, polo and wrestling, this sport and aggression performed in the heterosexual role could cause the conception of a child more readily than it could cause venereal disease, but deviant sexuality was conjoined for sexual desire of every kind was definitely a crude and barbarous means of getting a specie to interact physically so that under an obsessive and specious sense of rapture and intimacy and a wish for extension of self by annexation of another being or being annexed by him, different apertures would be explored at various times and from human curiosity and experimentation, pregnancy might ensue.

Yes, he told himself, by being amenable to pleasurable promptings in an intimacy with a male half his age, and finding himself suddenly middle aged and needing to become enmeshed and invigorated in his beauty, he was living life as animals were meant to live it. Infidelities of every kind within this godless universe gave men, even gentry like himself who were cloyed by leisure, a rapturous respite from their roles as automatons and thus they were an essential sport of man. For the naive this conduct led to some months of being in love but for a worldly adulterer like himself it was minutes of indispensable intoxication. He continued to listen to the howling wind. It seemed to inveigle and beckon him and he found himself wistfully and sequaciously summoned to its cryptic codes. Did the wind not entice him to make his naked form denuded further so that he might become as amorphous as it, to be amalgamated with wind, and to slip into it wholly? It did; and yet it seemed such a grotesque hybrid of breath and force with these continual elated, muddled, and ineffable articulations in brawn. Yes, he reiterated, in that respect the howling was figuratively no different than the aspersions and diatribe of human speech. By that, although perhaps not consciously thinking it, he was nonetheless meaning that war called family which happened so briefly in the history of a life as if it had never been, though undoubtedly had occurred for, he assessed, there was an expanse or large swath of charred, fallow, and contaminated brain therein where, to the present day, little grew but a sense of desertification. Living in the centripetal domain of a myopic existence as everyone did he supposed that his hapless childhood would always be his point of reference, his vantage point, and also the multi-pointed obstacle of his life. Generalizations, skewed and concocted from the sordid past that were their antecedent, extruded from

his fissures in an incessant cursive lava flow of amicable contempt. The howling was as undecipherable as the cries of a forlorn child. It was eerie as though a million such children with their muffled cries were being slammed into the windows with each new gust.

Lying there, a cohabitant of the darkness of this relatively unfamiliar room, the howling then seemed more fierce than before. It literally was brawn and breath. As such it was worse than the acerbity of humans (not that his father excoriating him for retreating to his "cage," that cage he willingly absconded to as a casualty of a sadistic sport in which he needed to shoot and denigrate before being shot and denigrated himself, and once hit to seek the prey more aggressively in the hope of being seen as the master of disparaging wit, or the father being as rustic and ungrammatical as a wild boar, did not howl yet in memory) and made the evening seem all the more surreal and peculiar if such a thing were possible.

"Where am I?" he asked himself absurdly, as if it could be anything other than that same room at the guest house in Nongkhai. "What happened to me?" he asked with feigned innocence which caused him to chortle and spray saliva that was like the froth of a wave upon a breaker, the cluster of rocks that was his smile. He had to admit, despite himself, that this being violated, by his own volition, had been quite a ride. It had been an internal roller coaster physically; but more it had been a ride into an abyss within, not merely from the physical sensation of this odd womanly role he found himself in or the pleasure of being free of aberration as creatures of variation loved aberration if social constraints were slackened (and slackened they were not only in Bang-cock but to some degree in the whole of Thailand as the Lord Buddha did not envisage gods, rules, and the dogma of coercion), but most saliently in these years as a womanizer overturned with this stranger's slight push of his body toward the bed.

Even with eyes closed and sedulous efforts made to concentrate on the wind to avoid thinking of the raw, anal soreness and all that transpired which was as confusing for the libertine as it was liberating, he knew. He listened intently. He listened scrupulously. How superstitious he was to equate the wind with a specter and yet he did it nonetheless. The smells of the room did not seem as acrid as a fully evaporated area over a recent urine-saturated pavement near a park or stadium in Bangkok or as repugnant as a room littered with his brothers fetid socks and other equally if not more reprehensible articles of attire peeled off the bodies of these anathemas but still, as small as the room was, nothing was impervious to it. If the curtains and the carpet were all permeated by a redoubling of these male odors, he would not have been surprised—not that surprise, or any other human emotion could have been registered all that readily in his impassive state. His was a naked mind, like that of his body, except that his body was wrapped loosely in a used mildewed towel and his mind in a bawdy numbness which he labeled the void.

He sneezed and opened his eyes. He rubbed his nose against his shoulder, careful not to make any more precipitous movements against the broken arm in the sling, since it was hurting worse than before, as of course it would from the earlier sport. There was no point in closing his eyes again. He would not be able to rest any more than before. With a mind needing debouchment more than his body needed to relieve itself in the toilet he stayed where he was, which was where there were windows. The circumfluence of the fetid, enervated air beneath the incessant creaking of the ceiling fan; creaking as if it were not only grating against the torpor and stagnancy of the air itself but against the melee of all, for all was restrained in the time and space of what now was and in a circulation and deciduous draping of those same odors caught to which the windows were permanently sealed to keep out the rain.

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Gained as an unintentional wooer of women by dint of an opalesque smile, a mellifluous voice, a successful name, and a handsome albeit swarthy and sodden appearance which made him, for them at least, a semi-deluctable presence, and years of venial sensual licentiousness, a recompense for empathic suffering in his thoughtful studies of prostitutes and injustices of the world at large, it was his inveterate perspective of himself as delusionary as it may have been. It was disconcerting to think of it as gone; and yet, he told himself, as emasculated and denuded as he now felt, were he to continue to mature this way, to climb the precipice of old age, while still acting callow enough to be obsessed by the exquisite release of his body (love making out of the tension of repressed urges towards the many and, as a cumulative exhortation of fantasies vented on a specific one, an act of adultery when making love to her, as it was love of himself, his own gratification), partaking of blithe experiences with female strangers under societal approbation and with youthful lewdness, needing to restrain his behavior very little, scrutinizing it no more than this, and having nothing to show for his life other than wanton appetites dragging him into every damp and unseemly hole open to him would he not eventually become more obscene than the hole he was at this moment in time? Would it not be worse than now to end his life no more master of the self than that and to have made sexuality the sole subject of study and preoccupation as he had done for decades? He was not sure, although to feel better about himself

he averred it silently as if he were so. He told himself that there was nothing to feel guilty about. It was the clay of life. Human will might choose to misrepresent it as ethereal as a cloud but it was not so. From the first regenerative microbe it was an experiment, and so of course there would be experimentation now. If obscene, was it not even more obscene that this, which was an inception of all, was all there was?

The carnal scholar that he was, did he not seek to understand life pedantically, partaking of it mostly with prostitute models instead of those of affluent means? Whatever small, favorable outcome it did for them financially he knew all too clearly that it was exploiting the exploited whatever august and sententious aim he might entertain. By seeking the omniscience of a god and showing the injustices of life as they really were (or as accurate an account as one could do within his tiny scope of experience and knowledge) his was to know both the parts of the exploiter and the exploited. What other reason did he have to enjoy them than to enlarge his study to the perpetrators of exploitation themselves when there was such a smorgasbord for free, or at least as free as women got? So many years of praised debauchery had embedded that self perspective of himself as a wooer of women ("Naughty Nawin" as articles often called him); and it had seemed as impregnable as granite when really it was a thin outline of a self that could easily be smudged and erased.

Lying on his half of the bed, the thunder, lightning, and wind from outside seemed to diffuse into that porous and amorphous outline of a defunct self. For half an hour he was cognizant of nothing but the storm and the faint, subdued murmurs and indistinct featureless shapes of early, distant memories set in a rather subconscious mental fog, scampering away at a distance as though seeking to allude him. Without thinking so, he felt that large amalgamations of his character, the daily sensory input of a constant, non-threatening environment, and his fond attachments to others gained from shared pleasant experiences together, which together he called himself fell from him annually. He was deciduous, but unlike a tree, he suffered a loss of most of the trunk of his entire being: the full love of a child for his mother that would never come again; the family that damaged and then vanished almost as quickly as one was conceived, gestated, and delivered as a member into its cell of sordid and clandestine activities; an infatuation with a girl that once seemed garish, all-consuming, and eternal as the sun; and the full pleasure of feeling those awesome gusts of wind hit against his face as a boy would, smelling the pile of winter leaves that he once jumped into as they began to suffocate him, and appreciating the significance of the simple delights of the ordinary as a child's mind did, and to which no vacation to Vientiane as an adult had the hope of restoring. He was merely what he sensed from the storm and for some time he stayed this way souging skidding around with it in his mind like a severed and desiccated old leaf.

Manhood, this summation of himself as masculine force and presence, had nothing tangible in it and could vanish quicker than the toppling of a house of cards. With so many years of incessant layers of thought it had seemed ossified so how could he have known that this perspective—one that was endemic to such a profession of contemplative decadence and decadent contemplation and had seemed myriad as the shore's self-flagellation of waves—would be so evanescent? As his nose was beginning to itch he rubbed it with the back of his hand. From the gesture he found himself returning to a self which, regrettably, could not be discarded entirely. How strange, he thought, to be washed up on new shores. He thought this as if there were something so new in it, and as if sodomy, and in his case fraternal incest at that, were totally unknown to him. It was not so strange a shore as he wanted to believe, he had to admit, and he would only be alone and marooned there if he saw himself as such. The fecund, dark soil of a less familiar shore could only be foreign, ominous, and grave if he stated to himself that it was such.

"So, I am with a man! What of it!" he thought; but guilt continued to reverberate, as those eerie lamenting calls to worship that, from a nearby mosque, thrice a day rolled off of the black sheen of the waters of the canal and trespassed into his Bangkok estate bypassing a wall and gate meant to fortify him from possible theft, and more generally to barricade him from the ignorance and poverty that were his past. If this perspective of himself as an inadvertent wooer of women and debonair presence, were a wall to memory meant to keep himself from considering the peculiarity of his perverted and twisted past and the walls of his estate were meant to fortify himself from poverty and misery both of them failed unequivocally.

Guilt, like the wind that he was now listening to, wailed on. Self flagellation like thunder and lightning piercing the room, did so under the aegis of his closed eyes. And there, correcting examinations in her favorite seat in the living room with eyes perusing paper behind thick glasses, and fighting back parts of the disheveled hair that obstructed the process, was a spectral and indistinct image of his wife. He judged that she was no different from the rest, already well into diminishing to the state of former friends and family like his deceased girlfriend, his infant son, and his paternal obligations.

There they would become part of a blotch of nebulous memory that might have its pull like a poltergeist against the organization of his thoughts but would nonetheless seem to have never been.

If he were to accept the defining components of marriage as the masses defined it, he was never married at all. The signing of a marriage certificate long ago had been done as a lifelong pledge to prioritize one individual and one bond above others and not as a renunciation of social interaction or forfeiting the ownership of his genitalia; and what was true throughout the marriage was surely no less true now. Noppawan, the anthropologist and professor whom he gained such delight in, which was love, once said that there had to be a reason that jealousy was such an embedded instinct. She said that it no doubt had its origin in primordial man. Perhaps, she said, female *Australopithecus africanus* needed to ensure that the providers did not abandon them and their prodigy and their primordial male counterparts wanted to ensure that those offspring whom they were providing for were really their own.

Did ideas and attitudes of cognizant beings ever evolve at all? he wondered, for sexual fidelity was still thought of as such an important factor to marriage when really it should be a contract of a union of best friends. Facile measurements of this nature would legitimize the most indifferent partners as well as relationships where obtaining monetary or social status was the objective. Contracts of faithfulness and appeasing a partner's jealous propensities by suffocating the self unlovingly could exist just as the facile measurements of what a marriage really was could materialize (all had the right to measure, define, and live as they judged apposite in obtaining some degree of happiness) but, he thought, that surely did not mean that he had to subscribe to it himself. All who signed marriage certificates did not have to do so with the same motivation and none ever signed documents to which there was a likelihood of their present state remaining as it was or worsening. As an aberration of a liberal man who from being fragmented by pain was able to design himself anew, why should it matter what the masses believed? By the momentum of one free to be dissolute he, a libertine, had a short time earlier worn away one more restriction; but as it was one of consenting adults; was it all that necessary to build dams and reroute the currents of a river that ran both ways? He thought not, when the damn was such an unnatural barrier.

He wondered what Noppawan was doing at this moment. Awakened by the baby, was she warming the bottle of milk and combing that thicket of long hair as he had seen her do before. Was she even able to sleep very well nowadays with the infant's hourly crying? Was she able to sleep at all with Kimberly's passing? Did she think of him at all? Did she feel regret over breaking his arm with the frying pan, changing the locks, tossing his clothes onto the drive, and refusing to answer the telephone? Despite making him culpable she had in fact arranged it all. Kimberly's post-partum depression was no doubt exacerbated by those two months of shared motherhood and espousal husbandry that barren Noppawan had conceived, but none could have foreseen the denouement. The world abounded in spills and mess and yet it was miraculous that, at least for many, it came together so well before finally going awry, dissipating as dew, life, the decent and debauched of it.

He opened his eyes. Everything was there as before including that body. He sat up; embraced the mesa of his legs within the multifarious sands of the desert of his mind; admired those various shades of color in the sand, perspectives made so by the variations of mood; and looked down. Consternated, he stared at a mattress cover dappled like a constellation from his soiling, and he laughed nervously. "But then why should it not be so with the extent of it," he thought. He was meaning the twenty minutes or longer of being sodomized, that roller coaster within which eventually prompted bowel movements in a futile attempt to excrete the intruder. Not knowing what he could do as he could hardly remove the mattress cover then and there, he pulled down a package of cigarettes from the mantle of the bed. He put a cigarette into his mouth but not able to find the lighter from the groping of his hand on the mantle, and seeing that it was not on the bed stand, he just let the fireless cigarette dangle in his mouth.

Experience (he smiled again, for as much as this ceaseless analysis of the intricacies of his life might seem morbid to others were they to have them their head, he found postulating potential reasons for his actions beyond the superficial an amusement park where the variation and length of the rides was infinite—it had always amused him to do so; and prior to this whole Kimberly affair he was in action if not thought as shallow and concave as the next person, and more hedonistic than most), there was nothing ugly or disdainful in a given experience but what the mind associated as positive or negative from social conditioning or from paranoid fears of possible ramifications from a little pain. Did some anal pain presage that he would ineluctably contract a disease from this man? No, it did not, nor had each of his myriad raptures of vaginal penetration in his sordid past indicated that the ecstasy he was experiencing in his groins would transcend into a meaningful companionship beyond sexual gymnastics.

Having forgotten to close the curtains there was a warped, oblong silver bar of refracted light on the

floor in front of the bed. It was light from an adjacent street lamp that was molded and cast down onto the darkness of the floor. There was a slight sway of a mirror hanging on the wall with reflections of blurred and severed shapes seeming to appear, disappear, and reappear within its sway. What they were he did not know for sure. One was possibly a part of a corner of a wall and a bit of a footstool; another was possibly matte flanks of bed and flesh; less dubiously it seemed that there was a partial foot or severing of that foot, but whatever was being reflected was done so as a rearranging *mélange*. A cactus, a telephone, and a postcard in which he had only written, "Dear Noppadon, I am here in Nongkai thinking of you and everything. I want—" were yoked together on the bed stand. With every reopening of his eyes they seemed to command the turning of his face toward them not so much from the fact that his wallet was there in one of its drawers but more to suggest that his life was barren and he needed to contact someone. The inanimate which could not copy and transmit impressions of the world or one's relation to it, were to him, at that moment, capable of an empathy and directive that bypassed words. At least it seemed to be so of the items on the bed-stand, and he waited for them to mandate who he was to contact (the beautiful nurse at Siriaj Hospital, his swarthy wife with intellect as thick as the lenses of her glasses, or the sodomy division of the local police office—"hello Mr. Policeman. I would like to report the fact that a stray dog is stuck in my crevasse. You will sir. Thank you, sir. You are such a nice man. I will prepare a nice treat for you and your partner when you come"). He gasped in a muted chuckle.

"What are you doing?" asked a gecko that was crawling on the wall near the bedstand.

"Sitting here. Fornicating. Experimenting."

It engulfed him with glassy eyes that were unmoving oceans, even stagnant universes, and he knew that everything lacked purpose beyond being an object tossed out for pure animation. To not go forward was completely meaningless.

"Huh? What are you doing?" asked the man.

"Wanting to smoke but I can't find my lighter," said Nawin.

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There were consecutive sneezes to which a forth was as incomplete as muffled sound. Then there was the wiping of his nose on his arm, a few seconds of an intolerable facial itch, which he scratched incessantly (such a plethora of pleasures there were in discomfort, or acclimating to this life as one was compelled to do, just an adequate amount concocted within an entity to keep it, in most circumstances, from cutting its throat or kimberlying downward) and his cigarette, still dangling loosely in his mouth, lit and allowed to disperse death unto him inexplicably. "Are you happy?" the intimate stranger asked him, but before any potential response could be uttered Nawin sensed his cigarette being extracted from him and, a second later, saw it wedged in the other's mouth for his long inhalation.

Nawin laughed at the filching during his elongated interjection of reproach. As he was most often his own adventitious source positing potential truths to the intense contemplative domain of his multi-tiered mind, which, at top levels, sought life's riddled viands voraciously; at first he did not register the question as coming from any interlocutor other than himself. He was preoccupied with trying to find an exact correlation between burning cigarette phalluses and the afterglow of sexual relations, conceptualizing it the way he would were he to transpose it to canvas with traditional gender substitutes, wondering if the masses of men really felt that pleasurable corporeal sensation + union with another was happiness, and if it really was so why he did not ever feel it.

Why, he asked himself in a bout of hubris, had this insolent creature, who a couple minutes earlier had been buried in sleep, reassembled his parts and spoken to him? He had not granted him permission to do so. It was merely this one's part to transport him home to the abuse that was the foundation of childhood. This he had done fully; and as it was concluded action subsequent cohabitation, to his mind, would be superfluous. By those painful, pleasurable thrusts of intimacy edifices, property, prosperity, verility, invincibility, relationships and stature, all that one made of a life by repudiating everything that one once was, were now seen as the sandcastles that they were and he himself as the ravaged spoils of dirt there to be bulldozed by others' wills as before, to sense the suppressed cries of childhood as before. He did not know how, after these ravaging trespasses of bodily entanglement he could maintain an amicable conversation with the invited violator and yet he did not know how he could avoid an attempt? He could not ask him to leave when he had, by desire if not volition, asked him to come here.

Was it not a standard belief, and a rational one at that, that conversation was the means to further intimacies, that sexual relations with strangers were inverted intimacy and sexual relations with men were perverted or at least distorted, inverted intimacy?; and yet even in heterosexual relationships, he

said to himself, the normal sequence of mental divulging leading to the ribald, the carnal, and the bestial seemed its own desultory and discomfiting mess. Was it really unnatural for men to be together in this way? More than he might fear that it was, he feared that it was not. What could be more natural than competitive fencing and impaling another man with one's vibrating, titillating sword with a vibrant force far greater than women could take? Was it not vile for a married man to profane his relationship with his wife in such a way? Yes, he conceded, it was. Did he have compunction about his action? For what good it did anyone, yes he did; and yet this action was as natural as condoning or sanctioning killing itself; it was natural for the immune system to kill microorganisms, for a child, despite sentimental attachments, to grow up and out of all which he once thought of as dear, and for family to evaporate like morning dew.

Talk of love belied the innate desire to experience a workout, to at last turn off thought and respond as an animal should by instinct, to be released from desire tickling incessantly like the crawl of a line of ants on one's skin, and to release a surfeit into a hole with the instrument of urination, an intimate and exquisite release. Likewise, thoughts repudiating the naked truth that killing was as ineluctable and natural in a being as its own breath, contravened any degree of understanding of the life that the fates circumscribed man to have.

And as for being with a woman and begetting children with her, whether it be action that was virtuous or not, it was natural without equivocation; and yet when a marriage certificate, an artificial piece of paper, was signed, it became an instrument for self-deceit by fostering an illusion of permanence while a means to sanctify what was natural by saying that without legitimacy in ink and paper this carnal and emotional bond was debauchery. Thus by refining nature it contravened it. In his case, he only had nominal passion for Noppawan. To him they were two intellects clinging to each other, after family had dissipated from their lives like dispersing smoke from a conflagration. What could be more of an unnatural contrivance than this? And if not only the sport of man on man, but all unions of naked intimacy were illicit and vulgar without paper and ink contrived unions of prehistory predating and leading to both, the present generation would make vile bastards of all. At least that was what he thought or was thinking at the time. He might have thought of himself as self-contained despite at times feeling distraught over this incessant reign of impermanence deluging him; he might have thought of love as neediness and that, personally, it was emotional bonding that, like teddy bears, he himself was beyond as he was beyond Buddhist statuettes, jasmine rosaries, and the intervention of a Buddha god theistically; and yet he loved Noppawan nonetheless. What else could it be but love?

Unable to share experiences that he found himself in, even when certain that they would be pleasurable to a given person now lost to him the mind conjured its ersatz. On the train ride here she, of course, was not with him and yet, hauntingly, she was; and if he had gone in a second or third class carriage she would have particularly enjoyed this train ride with him more than she had: windows down, redolent smells grafted in the hard breeze and wafting the aisle of the car. When he was glancing at post cards so that he could send one to her, oddly in an eerie way, she was there with him urging him to find one for herself that more accurately depicted the history of Nongkai. Every time he thought of going straight into Vientiane she expostulated that it would be better to bypass the city as much as possible so that they might spend more time in the Plain of Jars. She was the plausible what might have been. and as he could not give to reality he would give to the hollow mirages that replicated therein. This, if not the entirety of the neediness called love, epitomized the good that was there.

He continued to think: ...and with solidity breaking into smaller and smaller pieces like bits and sub-bits of glaciers and then rearranging, the conclusiveness of conclusions controverted, and impermanence rife in all, was it not natural to need someone—even that he should be here—

"So, what is it?"

"Huh?"

"Yes or no?"

"Yes or no what? Am I happy? Is that what you asked?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry. I'm okay," responded Nawin indifferently.

"You didn't enjoy it?" asked the stranger. His voice was groggy in partial sleep.

"I guess I did," admitted Nawin "—as much as one can in that position. It was different."

"Different good, or different bad?"

"Different. I don't know. Why do you ask?" There was silence in which both men did not know what to say, and in it Nawin reproached himself for making the situation more awkward than it had to be, and then reproached himself for finding anything awkward in it at all. As though it were justified to be cautious upon finishing intimacies with a stranger he did not approve of or to be apathetic with an undertone of supercilious, sneering antipathy, any more than to partake of the carnal episode itself. Still he could not conceptualize anything innately wrong in activity with another man. Beings were attracted elements, compounds that enjoyed times of coupling as double compound entities; and cathartic releases of physical desire toward one or the other gender, like medicine to illness, restored one toward a more logical inquiry of thought. But, he told himself, he had gained no such release. His paramour had him spellbound and made him no more than a galley slave rowing the master's carnal euphoria. Perhaps, he thought, moral dilemmas were not on moral grounds at all. Perhaps they could be reduced to such basic factors as sexual frustration. He forced himself to reciprocate a feigned interest in enjoyment although he was not able to extricate himself from the phlegmatic tone that spewed from his mouth bearing his thoughts. "What about you?" he asked.

"I love you. Do you love me too?" Nawin looked away and did not say anything. Whether this question was an artifice contrived for monetary gain or a real neediness he did not know. It did occur to him that having this man really interested in him (a suitor of sorts) might be more disadvantageous for him economically than a brief tryst—not that the prodigal son needed to retrench his life with fewer mistresses and zero misters, and he was still contemplating the addition of a nurse at Siriaj Hospital to his intimate menagerie. Worse, he thought, if the neediness of this other party was one of emotional rather than financial deficiencies, he himself, a married man, might be dogged if not stalked by this undesirable, desired being, this being who might desperately need to register himself into a companion's brain. What was worse than to be with someone who needed to be needed, who needed another person to be wistful and yearn for him, and who needed to etch himself personally and as indelibly as one could onto the adventitious, impermanent putty of the human mind? It was not easy to be compassionate and extract oneself from such parasites. He could not believe anything that was linked to such an amorphous word as love, which only had one consistent thread within it and that was what all love was, a neediness within projected onto that which was without.

"Are you in pain? Did I tear you up?"

"Did you what? Did you tear me up?...Well...since you ask sitting is a bit painful but as much as I can tell, I guess that I am not torn up, as you call it. By the way, I am not used to this sort of thing and...to tell the truth...it is rather embarrassing to say this...with the action and all I think...I think I soiled the bed sheet."

"Soiled?"

"Soiled. What other word do you want me to use?"

The paramour laughed mildly. At first Nawin appreciated that the dry laughter was so terse and restrained. Then the fact that he had laughed at all seemed as inordinate insolence. "Maybe you should get up and I'll remove the sheet," he said irascibly.

"No, I'm going back to sleep. If it didn't bother me the first time I can sleep on it again. Leave it for the maids. It makes something new in their days."

"You're going to go back to sleep?"

"Soon. I did you long and hard but if there's no blood you aren't torn up."

"Okay, good; now can we talk about something else?"

"If you want. What were you staring at when I woke up?"

"I don't know—a post card I didn't finish writing; the telephone; a gecko crawling above the bed stand; the corners of the room which are filthy—the room must be infested with insects." Nawin smiled abashedly, chuckled, and then stared directly into the face of the paramour with a baffled expression. "You keep grinning. Why?"

"I'm happy."

"Happy?"

"The happiest. The happiest I've ever been."

"Well, good for you...I mean if you were happy before you've got more of it. If you weren't I guess you have less of it...unhappiness that is, negated negatives."

The paramour laughed. "You're a comedian. I love that; I love you," he said as his fingers slid into the elastic of Nawin's underwear. Nawin laughed incredulously careful not to release a cynical laugh out of fear that, although unlikely, the paramour could possibly mean that which he said.

"Don't you think it is a bit early to feel that way. It's certainly too early in the morning to say a lot of nothing."

"It's not nothing," he said, snapping the elastic—he himself wearing nothing but his grin. "No, that's not how I think. You just have to do things. If there is a good feeling ride it fully, you just have to throw yourself into it and live it. If you stand back and pick things apart because you don't know 100 percent you might as well be dead because what you're living isn't life."

"Is that so?" Nawin said. It was cogent enough to him who would have had the need and thus the gullibility to believe such things were it not for the countenance, the melodramatic tone of he who promulgated this holy maxim, and the circumstances that went contrary to the putative sentiments.

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Sensing that a bit of enlightenment could accompany a binge of debauchery and provide him with not only wind but ablution into the cellar of his musty mind, he was given a reason for intimacy, not that this reason or any other would have to prevail in creatures so prone to irrational caprices as he now concluded that he was. So a man would seek less alien companionship with another man after a girlfriend had jumped from the eleventh story of a university building and a wife who had subsequently broken his arm with an iron frying pan now kept him locked out of their home—this attributing of men as less illogical and more steady presences, rightly or wrongly, and identifying solely with them was reasonable enough; but to succumb spellbound to the brevity of frenzy, knowing well such intimacies to be spectacles as brief and garish as the puffs of aerosol he and a college roommate used to spray and light so that they might experience an inferno of the air, to know and yet to do it nonetheless, was inane.

Now seated and stationary on this bed in this room and in this mind, groping for contours of objects in dark and curtailed space among antithetical thoughts and caprices, putative reality seemed nothing but the most tangible of the intangibles. As a result he became even more reticent, pondering what the right combinations were to live life fully: inward versus outward explorations; feeling versus logic; work versus leisure; silent reverie versus boisterous revelry; digressions into the future and the past; savoring the present moment as in lying on a bench at Wat Arun watching clouds overhead, sensing the breath enter and leave his frame, and feeling a sense of awe that he was even cognizant of all this; conversely, doing and having agenda and purpose about the affairs of man, interaction which allowed one to avoid the intrusiveness of too many unwanted, distracting thoughts, all of which confirmed his inconsequence even in the here and now. There had to be a harmony of these incongruous elements but he did not know how or to what degree.

"And I suppose you will always be there for me," Nawin asked with a sardonic smile on his face. He now wanted levity and the substance of sound, even his own, to dispel, or at least obfuscate the longevity that was in each and every minute to distract him from the realization of the hours until sunrise, and to preoccupy him during the time, still unknown, until departure of this intimate stranger.

He, the womanizer he once was, reproached himself for being here with this man in a chagrin of manhood, a mortification and yet a mortification of what he could not say. Perhaps there was no reason for mortification at all, he countered in a retort of thought. Perhaps this was a cleansing and a freeing of himself from a false sense of what manhood should be. Still, he had all these explosions of intimacy in the knowledge he would feel this vacuity afterwards, and that upon feeling it any moment could make him a perpetrator of indifference who rudely discarded this delusion rather than built a multi-story make-believe castle upon it; intimacy bedazzled him for a time before his return to a more subdued and substantive state; this time in an effeminate role of mute intercourse not to his liking but which he needed nonetheless; exacerbated sexual tension abated but not entirely extinguished in post-sexual melancholy. To know such matters and yet to interact this way regardless like any biologically programmed automaton thwarted by early childhood experience was an inane life.

So he concluded and re-concluded, with his thoughts becoming increasingly redundant, twisted, and plaited. To gain some solace and respite he hummed the melody of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Thinking as he did so that the whirlwind he would create by repeating it thrice therein should clear away all dross he instead found that the debris remained even as it dragged circuitously although less tediously in music.

"And I know that you will always be there for me," Nawin remembered himself saying facetiously. It

occurred to him that this lover, this sprawled figure so near to him, was like a dog he had seen recently near Gaysorn Department Store lying on its back at the base of a Brahma statue, its genitalia an oblation to that deity. At that time, while he was chuckling at a deity aptly profaned and pondering how our pantheistic awe of nature had been overtaken by these artificial weeds of dogma, false stories and tradition, as with the alleged bones of the Buddha that were enshrined in a temple near the Silpakorn University branch in Nakhon Pathom, he was re-entering Gaysorn intent on purchasing a 38,000 baht watch so as to have it shine opulently upon his handsome albeit dark dirt-brown skin.

Shopping was only adjunct to the instinct that prompted the switching on of one's breath. Of course he would do it naturally for man's energy was not to be self-contained, but instead was continually changing in changeable containers, and in desperate moments he would barter what he had for intimacy—barter with what he had. And if he knew not what he hoped to gain from a spiritual journey already thwarted in activity similar to the perversity of his youth, all he needed to do was to look at the obvious. From it, there could be no other interpretation but that he wanted to be taken back to a feeling of ravaged youth when he had perverse hopes that the physical penetration would stop while at the same time he would be recognized as permanently married to his brother. Being taken back home to a foundation of dilapidated innocence, but an ingenuous foundation nonetheless, he sought a return to himself that was the ends and not the means.

In this guest house in the city of Nongkhai, this was what he had to have, and it was now his. Whether he would have to pay for it with money or time remained to be seen. It seemed to him that there were just these two payments, each a type of direct or indirect pleasure. If the stranger asked for money, then it would be proof that a contract of brief employment had taken place in which he was hiring him not to be his master but a slave. If this were true, the nature of the relationship would be unambiguous enough: it would be that of hiring someone to do a bit of drudgery which they would not want to do or would not think pleasurable enough to do if the pecuniary rewards were not there, and after receiving the sum, departing from his life like a pizza delivery boy. This, Nawin thought, would be best for his own purposes. However, if no money was transferred he might be thought of by this one as a female surrogate who by one intimacy made an implied contract of continual intimacies as the sole favored supplier of pleasure.

The intimate stranger looked irritated. Then he smiled bitterly. "Sure, something like that. I like being kind to the elderly." It was a delayed response to Nawin's flippant comment of "I'm sure you will always be there for me."

"Elderly?"

"Khrap" he said with a wai. "Can you tell me your age. I mean how old are you honestly?"

"Thirty something." Honesty did not always come out despite being summoned.

"Elderly, as I said. How old do you think I am?"

"I'd hate to know."

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen, really? Hmm." He pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Single, and barefoot free. I am married, you know."

"Married? Well, married men have to get it too."

"I suppose so." Nawin sniggered mutedly while feeling both amusement and aversion at being in this guest house and in this company, this effeminate role to which he found himself in, and of becoming so old despite feeling youthful physically even with all this distorted emotional stretching over the past month. He sensed that the stranger knew that he was trying to sabotage the possibility of their intimacy becoming a relationship and he felt compunction over it. Still, to sabotage and extricate himself from debauchery thick, viscous, and onerous to his spiritual pursuit (although he did not believe in the spirit) seemed the wisest course of action, and so he could hardly disabuse himself of such an idea.

At first the word "elderly" seemed, if not ludicrous, exaggerated and distorted, an irascible utterance of the intimate stranger that a playmate twice his age would not be a more gullible victim of scheme and schemer. But then he questioned his judgment on this matter as well for as he could not think of

anything that he knew absolutely, how could he trust his own conjecture about one whom he was not familiar with beyond some scant words and vacuous physical intimacies and had no intention to try to know by speech or the intercourse of minds, beyond that which was thrust upon him? Considering the fact that every morning when a man slipped on his pants, usually after one sordid nocturnal adventure or another, he also put on a belief that he really did exist and was himself and not someone else (in his case that which he called Nawin, this free and thus debauched libertine-artist, not that he was so hard-pressed for entertainment that this issue of absolute knowledge that he existed, this epistemological speculation more comfortably set in humor than horror and resembling a confounded baby playing with his fingers, should be much of a subject of speculation) he then thought how little he knew with absolute certainty and how frightening this really was. He smiled at his friend with that strange, contemplative longing that introverts projected to belie their disdain for the outside world, withdrew, and looked away.

Then that which was thought to be mendacious and absurd seemed to be true in the perennial mutating, albeit perhaps, in terms of truth, non-evolving thoughts of the mind. Even if the exaggerations of the youth were noted and culled from memory and perception one truth would be irrefutable: Nawin was undoubtedly forty which made him marginally but undeniably a middle aged man; and if not old now he soon would be, just as he already was within the perception of his definition of youth. Loss of what he once was, just as loss of who he once was when with others who once were, was the inexorable forward movement of it all, toward what aim no intellect could even begin to guess and to which, apart from death, he knew of no escape. Nine seemed an insurmountable age to one who was five, and of a forty year old boy an inordinate amount of humanity would think of as near the precipice of old age and death; but, he told himself, he did not live by others perception of him, or if he did, he did unwittingly and it was as ineluctable as day meets night, there was surely solace to be found in not having one strand of grey hair on his head or elsewhere and in being without a single wrinkle. In the judgment of the mirror skewed by that which he wanted to see there was a collaborative work of biographical fiction not so far from reality and given credibility from the obvious fact of feeling physically no different than he ever had. According to this collaborative fiction, little had changed over the past twenty years except the increasing amount of people who came and went from his life so vertiginously.

Body conceived and mounted on the barren rock of the planet; mind peopled like speckled icing on a rich boy's birthday cake so as to have meaning; meaning that was stripped and denuded in change; and for all his consternation in this dizzy state it did nothing to redeem or resurrect them to his life once again. All came and went leaving only diminished, diminutive copies of themselves clustered there in the brain as furtive shadows digressing the reality of the present into that which once was. And even if Kimberly were to de-decompose with cremated remains reassembling to allow her to rise from the dead with all continuing as before there would be the knowledge that she had chosen death to separate herself from him ineluctably, and this alone would thwart what they had into perfunctory roles of financial provider and taker. How she could jump like that as if he had never been there for her or any of his entourage of women, he did not know. He may have wanted to be thought of as a nonchalant playboy to the outside world, as newspaper articles smudged him as being, but if one were to examine the portraits of those women whom he both played and portrayed it would be clear that solemn grey empathy, the only real love there was, sullied the reds and oranges of his passions into the pain of empathy—not that with each day of adulthood he did not find bits of his sensitivity chafed and weathered away in time like an image of a face sculpted in a mountain.

Despite both women having concocted the plan and being signatories to this document agreeing to surrogate motherhood, he was an adulterer according to both, not so much for the other women that he had been with, but by being the natural father and husband of one and the legal husband of the other. Thus they provided him with evidence that "adultery" was just a perception like everything else and from it that a homosexual encounter was, as his brother had called their activity together, cheap dates more aligned to sport. Relationships of this nature were not acts of adultery any more than masturbation in the shower was adultery with water. At least, he told himself so to feel less guilty and the words were a successful analgesic. And as for Kimberly and his wife whom he as philanderer nonetheless had many years of shared friendship, how could he be domesticated and exclusive to either one when exploration of the study of the sadness and rapture of human existence still beckoned him? These were tenable arguments that passed successfully through the scrutiny of his mind permeating all regions and though he had not isolated it completely his beliefs were: 1. that he was born the sole owner of his penis and twenty years after his birth, when he signed a marriage certificate that was deliberately spilled ink on paper meant, as strange as it was that spilled ink meant anything, to show enduring friendship toward Noppawan and a wish to have a shared life together, he had not sold his anatomy to her; 2. that conversation with a female friend at a coffee shop (in the past this usually being a student or colleague at Silpakorn University on those rare semesters when he was not on a sabbatical) could be much more intimate than half hours of ecstasy which were not intimacy but a

delusion of intimacy in which, when innate hungers were subdued, the man would at least in thought return to his wife and then the following day be able to pursue real intimacy with her; 3. that sex was exercise and just as he did not need permission from his wife to exercise at a fitness center he could think of no reason he would need permission to exercise his penis and be exorcized of his primitive hungers that would take over his higher thoughts and agenda if not released; 4. that a man was programmed to, as the Bible declared, "be fruitful and multiply" and so one could not oppose his basic biological urges; 5. as it would take so much energy to restrain instinct, this coerced restraint was a wasted resource that might be used more constructively, and 6. that the only reason a woman got angry at a man for his nocturnal adventures was because in antediluvian times a woman was scared that she would lose her hunter, for clearly back then women were not physically capable of hunting, nor were they able to even gather fruit from trees or berries from vines if they had to take care of their babies, and thus they became angry and jealous of a man's other sexual encounters because they were threats of losing their economic provider. Humans in these 30,000 years did not change so if it was true in earlier times, it would have to be true now no matter what memory-bugaboos of the past spooked him to cling to another by a more common and domesticated lifestyle—bugaboos that made him now see outlines of ominous forms in the corners of both the room of the guest house and in its amorphous darkness.

He might question whether the mirrored image of himself that he saw daily was real or refracted light made into a roseate image of the mind, but at the very least his face, unlike many middle aged men he knew, did not look like a squished shammy that he used to burnish the shine of his Mercedes Benz GL sports utility vehicle, that same vehicle which he had abandoned in the drive a few weeks ago for that emergency taxi ride to the hospital.

He thought of how he had importuned her, this stoic wife of his, to drive him to the hospital, of her obdurate refusals even when she had been the perpetrator of his broken arm and splintered clavical, and how it was from guilt his silent recriminations had mutated to hate in that taxi ride to Siriaj Hospital, that hospital that in youth they had gone to be with the abused dead of the anatomical museum.

Then he tried to channel his thoughts from hate filled digressions to how in the vicissitudes of life among so many shammy faced people a face like his maintained a fairly stable look. He smiled, amused by himself and the peculiarity of being here within this sordid black adventure in a guest house in Nongkhai. Then he sank himself in the depths of sullen night and sullied denouement.

He wanted to sleep off whatever time lapsed until the stranger left. His wallet was in a drawer of a night table near his side of the bed. He was a light sleeper when circumstances dictated, so any noise would awaken him unless it were that accompanying a fatal blow, but this was not America. The opulence of Bangkok might entice poor school girls in uniform to become whores of old Chinese-Thais and straight men to be serpentine prostitutes, but few were the Buddhists who would kill their servants of their pleasures. Still, even with the probability of being snug and secure in his den of decadence, the croaking of those incessant frogs outside ensured that no sleep was possible for a city dweller who deemed traffic to be a purr when hearing the harangue of the jungles.

At one moment, he wanted the creaking ceiling fan that was turning incessantly to peel with the plaster so that the metallic arms might fall and embrace them both mincing them and this scene into pulp. At another moment, however, he thought about how good it was to be here with the distraction of another being on such a day as Father's Day, a day that diced people like him in the wistful sentiment of early family. That family had never been more than bits of stinking scraps of sweetness tossed out to his scoffed, kicked, and abused existence; but starved, emaciated dog that he at that time was, he had been given enough that was kind to keep the hateful experiences of childhood embedded in his head while reminding him that he was born one of a countless litter of dogs trashing the sidewalks of time. Dysfunctional families might be more prevalent in Thailand than most people believed but their members could ignore this fact unless they belonged to extreme cases, and under the "good deeds beget good deeds" philosophy of the Buddhists a wretch like him must have done something monstrous indeed to know nothing but the breaking of family. With virtually everyone paying homage to fathers and all genuflecting to majesty there was such loneliness for members of extreme cases on such a day.

Telling himself that he should not treat the intimate stranger with indifference, he half-slapped, half-clasped, the foot of his companion as though shaking hands with him. It was a gesture no less awkward than any of his other tepid nonsexual attempts to relate to him and came from a nervousness at parting from his masculine ways and returning to effeminate ones, and from thrusting his will to allowing himself to be a pawn to the will of another. Then he returned to the freedom of darkness and silence.

If by this encounter he profaned his wife, if she were still anything other than proscribed by legal document alone, so be it. If his actions were adulterous, it seemed to him that, as they were undertaken

in sport, they were mildly so (his brain, being a large circular mass had thoughts that went around in circuitous orbits as if nothing were ever resolved) and thus his private parts were not to be circumscribed to pacify the jealous instincts of women who long ago in antediluvian pre-history feared the loss of a provider. If ethical, he told himself, a man should be mildly self-restrained allowing some movement of the libertine, without allowing all actions and thought to degenerate to appetite alone. This was logical restraint.

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To be male: to have this perennial sexual appetite and its feasting for pleasure, dominance, and self-preservation; and the release of such the surfeit of tension through the explosion of liquid shrapnel; a discharge all the stronger and more accurate for the apparatus not having been used for some time; potent and inimical fertilizing springs like long suppressed geysers shot out potential life through nature's hand and bidding but as such arsenal all the same; live weaponry shot from a missile launcher that could not be said to be possessed or manipulated by any other force than that of the given man himself, a being who with enough experimentation was eventually cognizant of sexual relations as an illusion of intimacy and yet was pressured beyond restraint nonetheless by urges and promptings of appetite and titillation and for personal sensation that might awaken a sense that he could be more than the tedium of whatever redundant tasks he was assigned as work that provided him with sustenance, or free of monetary bondage altogether, to break from the vacuity of his shell (earlier, both of them had stepped into the room only to sit down on edges of the bed in an awkward state where words were nascent, catatonic wisps of air, stillborn fetuses of pneumatic thought, decomposing on lips; and at this time, before a removal of articles of clothing in which all was removed except the fear of the unknown euphemized as moral conscience, he would have been disingenuous had he told him to leave... now, however even with not having had any sexual satisfaction of his own from this encounter he could tell him to go and mean it as with him gone he would be free to go himself and how difficult could it be just to state what was really in the foremost part of one's mind, to unfold and spread out one's will upon the second of its mental conception as one would in deliberately casting his reflection onto waters and with the sincerity and tackless artlessness of a child?... and if this potential utterance of candor were done, articulate albeit lacking an adult's sophistication for subtle and separate, antithetical layers of that which was said, logically meant, and yearned for, this triple entendre of politeness and deceit, he would find it liberating to be such a simpleton but he was unable to say that which he meant so all that he could do was to lie and prevaricate...he could attest that as it was Father's Day he needed to leave and see his own family (who would believe that someone of forty would not have one), that shortly there would be a reunion in which he and his wife would surprise his father, (dead as he was) by showing him their infant grandson... but then for such words to be plausible, he would have to be here in Nongkhai with a wife instead of as a single, solitary traveler; he would have to be in a more domestic setting than a guest house for foreigners and their whores; and in a coupling other than wet, fetid nakedness with another male...to be hypocritical enough to even say such a thing, how could he be thought of as anything but a middle aged man who did not know whether to fire or be fired upon, or if an experience was to be enjoyed or feared, a child ignorant and uncomfortable in self and the world at large, which, questioning everything as he did, he supposed that in actuality he was); attractions made all the more so by the magnetic pull of some vague feeling that was a composite of odors, sights, voices, attention, and interaction which seemed to emit and reek of the diminished, mostly forgotten blur of early family; to be so possessed by that which was long ago that it should be the conduit and thrust of succulent sexual truculence, and yet not know the specific memories that were behind it all.

In this present circumstance of not only failing to satisfy himself but existing as an obsequious and passive body there to be manipulated by another what he had done, this effeminate role that he had engaged in, was of this male instinct and yet a clear aberration of it. Only months earlier he had been a sequacious adherent of it as an incorrigible womanizer, and yet now his actions were more impotent than a misfiring and his manhood was debunked by being sodomized.

Still, by becoming something less than a man did it not allow him to reemerge as a human being? Such was to be hoped for when witnessing that the limited self in art and in life could not change the world for the better and that, in the race to make a success of himself before his short time on the planet expired (money and fame sought and pursued relentlessly after a youth debased in poverty and abuse), his sensitivities hardened so that now he could bypass a beggar on an overpass without giving a baht or feeling much more than an instant of empathy or compunction.

It was his hope with this sojourn to the sister cities of Nongkai and Vientiane to resurrect himself. He thought about how different he was from the boy who would extricate trapped insects from a window sill. He was losing bits of his humanity all the time with every assertive darting walk through the crowded sidewalks of Bangkok.

In certain ways it seemed that in the deviation from normal instinctual male drives he was becoming free of pretensions of being anything more masculine than a mere man, a vulnerable, needy creature who often articulated a wish for an extension of manhood and an introvert's desperate need for at least a minimal physical connection to fellow man, although in his case now it was an encounter with a male who looked like his brother, Kazem at 18 when he was 14. Just as that which was past was ineluctable memory and stored in him still, and this storage of the replicas to the incidents of his life could never be made right as it was all distant and unalterable and as feral as brothers running along the banks and sand bars of the Chao Phraya River, he would always be under impulses to avoid the painful past by clogging his mind in amusements or urgencies of interaction with other beings. And for whatever activities he might devise as distractions from his thoughts, fears of the vacuous nature of existence would always be man's ineluctable truth, and without agenda vacuous truth was his in excess.

If his thoughts were a quagmire what else would they be especially in this room and in this uncomfortable company whom he would not part with so easily?.. could not part, or part assertively, as doing so would be rude not only to the stranger but to himself as well since, like it or not, this surrogate brother, this lover, was a distraction from being without family on Father's Day and to some degree he needed him or he would not have had him here.

He existed in memories as all of his experiences in the days of his life were nothing other than past incidents; and so for those who reproached a man for living in the past (as that beautiful nurse at Siriraj Hospital had done after overhearing him talk in his sleep—a woman who despite this scolding might heal his brokenness yet were her number saved on a sheet of paper instead of into a telephone that did not have the possibility of being retrieved from the trash receptacle at the train station) they at least meant well by their errant intrusions on such bitter sweet memories. If only mandates to turn off memory like tap water were so simple then he would not be seeking to rehabilitate recalcitrant corpses that refused to decompose.

Here confined to this room as long as the intimate stranger remained on the bed, there was at least thick textured darkness and silence that for him provided an inscrutable sense of comfort, a vast open sky and sea where a solitary man could find some liberty in his ruminations like a child enamored by the flexible manipulations of his body while at the same time obscuring how constricted he was within both the room and the company. Thus it was the only blanket that he had. Still he knew that he could not stay despondent forever and judged that it was time to once again speak. He asked, "What is your name again?"

"Boi."

"Boi?"

"It's a nickname."

"Yes, of course it's a nickname. It's just that when I was coming here I met someone on the train who was also calling himself that. I guess it is often used around here."

"Maybe."

"You're from here?"

"Where else would I be from?"

"Couldn't you be from somewhere else?" Nawin chuckled more warmly than a snicker but what came out was still a fusion of both.

"Poor people don't change to better locations. They remain trapped where they are. What is Bangkok like?"

"You've never seen it?"

"No except clips from television news."

"Polluted, congested, opulent and slummy; a mess [thinking but not saying, "all making it rife for nights not unlike this one"] but mess with promise."

"You don't like it there?"

"It has its moments. You surely know someone besides me who lives there."

"Why would I?"

"Okay, why would you?"

"What do you do there?"

"Nothing really...live, be."

"You dress fancy, live in a city and you don't do anything."

"Hard to explain, but essentially that's right."

"You a rich businessman?"

"Artist."

"Artist?"

Nawin laughed and gesticulated an artist drawing something.

"From a background of rich businessmen. Noodle workers. Dirt poverty. But if you work hard, have talents, use them commercially and invest wisely Bangkok or any other large city can liberate a man." He resented even having to divulge this and kept asking himself why the man did not leave and why when the communication of bodies, the illusion of intimacy, had passed, he and this man or any two people were compelled to forage for scraps of words to assemble a bridge of ideas that would link them, two distant and alien islands. Words merely verified the fact that their intimacy was a mirage.

The activity had ceased, the pleasure had been brought to him and had been his alone. All that there now was, was anti-climactic small talk. He told himself that a good guest would show his gratitude by getting dressed quickly and making a swift departure so as to not inconvenience him. He told himself that all he needed to release from his lips were two basic words: please go.

He thought of the pejorative word, 'elderly,' that the intimate stranger had used against him and resented his presence even more. As bantering as the intent of this word might have been it seemed particularly offensive on a day after his own birthday and a Father's Day at that. True, he was much older than the teenager (he glanced at the face; it was a perfect fusion of boy and man; smoking its cigarette and creating a synthetic fog of smoke onto his life). Only by contrast to the other one's youth would he think of himself as old and then he was not merely old but old as the hills and with so many memories to be excavated therein. It was merely feeling and perception and it meant nothing. It was a mere feeling like all feelings, mirages really. Even family could seem for a time like "solid ground" until one witnessed it become a series of vapors. It was he who had chosen to be with someone so young so if he felt old to be near him. It was a problem of his own making and he told himself that he could not blame anyone other than himself for the boy had not materialized in this dark room on his own.

And of this being used for his sperm and disposed of, he had unwittingly bastardized his own offspring unto the world, one more illusionary human form, a piece of himself, which he might never see again. But as Buddhists say the world is an impermanent place.

After Kimberly's suicide, and the loss of "stable" human presences he judged that being reminded of his age was particularly impudent and ruthless. At worst, he was middle aged and even that should never have occurred nor should it ever occur to anyone of such a youthful profession. A person like him, a womanizer and painter of uniformed school girl prostitutes and pathetic tramps, an artist with conscience about the exploitation of those he was exploiting, should stay young forever. How flawed nature was in this and every other respect.

"Still you can't exactly be rich, I guess, to stay in places like this."

"I suppose not," he said while thinking a contrary idea altogether. One could, for behind fenced areas of expensive Malaysian beach resorts, on lounge chairs of grassy acreage, in the shade of palm trees, there with waiters beckoning him with cocktails, parachute rides at various intervals in the day from fast moving boats as exhilarating as being born, luxurious rooms and ensuing business class flights back home with champagne on his tray, he, the retired artist, had tried affluent ways before and they were all stale to him. A guest house or even a night under the stars with the base of a stupa as his pillow would be preferable.

"Maybe you just like guest houses in foreign areas or something." Nawin did not say anything so the youth continued. "If you are trying to hook up with a foreigner why did you choose me?"

"Why you? I don't know—to see what it would be like not that I care to...what did you say?.. hook up with someone?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't. Besides, it is really best to give oneself to a discipline of study, the sciences or the arts, which will always be there—smart men give themselves to knowledge at least in some small way—building stability around ideas instead of changing people. People can just twirl around their feet like empty bags blowing in the breeze, amusing for some minutes, gone, and forgotten."

"So, for you I am an empty bag blowing in the breeze?" the boy asked and laughed. Nawin did not say anything and then they fell into silence as thick as the lifeless darkness which governed them.

"Someday I'll go there."

"Huh?"

"To Bangkok."

"Then go," said Nawin indifferently. He was meaning more the boy exiting to his home than a departure from Nongkhai that could link the youth to him as inextricably as blood sucking ticks or bacteria and the ensuing infection gained from a water monitor's mouth (these crocodilian reptiles, frequent inhabitants at the Nakhon Pathom campus at Silpakorn University).

"Who would I stay with. I don't know anyone there except you."

"Do you live with your parents?"

"Yeah."

"What do they do?"

"Mother's a nurse, father's paralyzed. The story goes that soldier's thought he was one of a group of drug smugglers coming across the boarder and shot. He's been that way since I was young."

"You don't like it—staying with them?"

"Working part time at the Seven [Thai for 7-11] and then taking care of him so that she can go to work? Hardly."

"You won't stay there forever. Everything passes." He was half thinking about the strawberry and jasmine garden at his mother and father's home that he loved so much in his boyhood, of hawking jasmine rosaries in streets within stalled traffic and strawberry drinks in transparent plastic cups from sidewalks. He was thinking of the words mother and home that a child thinks of as permanent as the sun.

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Despite, if not because of, the wind and rain and this room being on the third floor of the guest house, he could nonetheless hear, he supposed, the growls, vicious howling, and snarling with hissing rolls of saliva (perhaps imagined; after all, his aim had initially been to drive to the sea, to see and hear the harmonic continuum of wave upon wave slamming its froth against the shore, and yet it had been an aim that could not be achieved with one arm in both cast and sling nor even facilitated via train or bus to Phuket, Pattaya, or Cha-am with all tickets sold out for the holiday) of two dogs in the parking lot: noise that they directed at each other or perhaps really toward darkness itself. Novel and urgent utterances to them, it was part of myriad redundant and inconsequential skirmishes in the existence of canines that would continue perennially to the specie's extinction. Malnourished strays with furless spots that they probably were, they, for being in ineluctable misery and unable to understand the fates that they were subjected to, could merely rail against shadowy form and the paucity of distinguishable matter in darkness and project their antipathy against members of their kind that were most vulnerable to the insulting tones of their wordless vitriol, soft targets from which to measure having an impact of their latent screams. These other animals were microcosms that were composed of the same appetites and temperaments as man whose larger but negligible intelligence was scarcely able to break the force of most waves that inundated the tenuous levee of rationality which was supposed to deliver one from innate, instinctual chaos.

The paramour blew his clouds of smoke into the darkness like mist floating above a noxious lake and this lethal haze hid the nocturnal snake that was attached to his form, making obscure all that Nawin had been able to see in the darkness. And yet if nothing really existed more than mere supposition that it was so, surely emotions should not even be accredited with the supposition of reality. If he had more will, he told himself, it would not seem so disconcerting that he, injured and aloof in tragedy, had chosen this ersatz of taking a man over a woman to this particular venue. Was it really an ersatz at all? In terms of intimacy and reproduction, it was; and yet in terms of this bit of wrestling, this sport, it was

pleasure and pain that was distinct from all others to which he might as well ride or be ridden and learn to enjoy its inconsequential levity the way one preferred male rivals in matches without scrutinizing whether or not it was fair to exclude women from such sport. It was pleasure and pain which made him feel more alive in his numbness.

And if from this manhood he was so easily toppled so be it. Who was to say that such a tenuous, artificial structure of shoddy construction was worthy of being had if it continually needed to be propped up with extra 2x4s of heterosexual experiences as reinforcement, and that one would not become more of a human being to be less of a man? This, he told himself, this was merely a borrowing of youth and beauty to compensate for the years of a slight diminishing of both, and this wearing it for a time, was not homosexual overall, any more than, from time to time, wearing a costume in bed to accentuate an aspect of the self heretofore surreptitious was complete madness (how august he was in the pointed crown; how apposite it was by the catalyst of obdurate orbs of arrogance and a slight pushing of a given woman's head downward that she should fall to his feet before subtly raising from the kow-towing gesture to become his subject in an osculating worship of his body).

Then there was the sudden screeching of one of those animals in pain; and although its movements were neither seen nor heard, from its receding and diminishing cries, its scampering could be perceived through the imaginative compensations of the mind which concocted the plausible the best that it could when lacking sensory indicators to address the uncertainties of reality by prompting understanding and action, if not verisimilitude, that had a higher probability of being right. On the bed he was experiencing a slight bout of melancholy as though reproaching himself for his infidelity, not that his adulterous adventures had bothered him all that much in times past. And while recognizing the absurdity of a belated attempt to be circumspect now when this untoward, alien exchange had come and gone with whatever fodder and fuel had been essential in the incendiary night he still felt a wariness that dark instinctual craving should pull him toward an insidious happening. In ways it was to him as though this sexual encounter had not yet occurred and were it to happen would be of importance to the world at large, so he inanely felt, concerning an interaction that had already taken place.

He listened but did not hear anything outside but the occasional howling of traffic and wind. He concluded that this particular union in another species of animal had been cleft into fractious bits. To him it was another reminder of the passing away of life's myriad social interactions and the respective parties so engaged. Salient and engrossing society of the moment would always be replaced with the eternal purity of silence were it not for the desperate need to seek meaning and ascribe significance to the interactions of man. When existing on a cold planet in the grandeur of the black but light-speckled universe with its surfeit of random stars and a plethora of void, what could humans do but cling to each other for warmth and attribute, meaning and merit in this desperate coagulation? Thus there was the noise of clanging men, boisterous merry making, and adhesion of like to like not that he, an artist, or he, a man in grief, saw himself cognate with anyone or anything.

For a loner, interruptions of the human mind, noisy as it was, were less of harangue than all the interaction exuded in doing a job and fulfilling one's minor role in society (in his case that of a prurient artist or an artist of prurience and when not on sabbatical, an overburdened Silpakorn University art survey lecturer at that, roles which had surely been replaced by younger and less effete male artists than himself) were only bearable in short durations. As the shallow and gregarious needed a similar extension of themselves and could only stay inward briefly, so rich inward men and they who were plagued by grief could only make outward connections briefly especially when needing to be left alone to pick up the pieces of their lives. But he too was a being of his species and needed humans especially now. So he thought, for the man who had leisure and money to experience it all including the sense of ennui that was its corollary thought inordinately.

He was just thinking that despite the incessant competition for resources and self-worth within the societies of man and dog, a being needed to interact with its kind more than just for the snippets of time that were the totality of his particular interactions. How strange, he thought, that in tragic loss of significant others and an inveterate routine of pleasant association that such a person needed to interact more and yet interacted less. He told himself that after he completed his spiritual retreat (a retreat that would begin once the licentious one had ended) he would work part-time as it was dangerous not to do so with the identity, purpose, and sanity of man as tenuous as it was; that his actions here had no moral value, positive or negative, beyond any which he by his own volition, ascribed to them; and that it was no "sicker" being engaged in this liaison than choosing to sit next to the beautiful and thin rather than the fat and ugly on a BTS sky- train—one reminding him of vigor and the other weakness and infirmity. Physical intercourse when the mental bridges between the distant islands of man had all collapsed was best allotted to one in this imperfect world.

"If a man isn't functioning as one he shouldn't live. He shouldn't make anyone else live that way," said

the youth.

Nawin coughed. "That's not a cigarette is it?"

The young man passed it over to his senior who smoked the cannabis, inhaling it fully. "Maybe that was what I needed too. Shouldn't live? Isn't that a bit harsh."

"I'm bad, aren't I."

"No. I think that anyone would feel that way; and if you tell yourself you are bad you will be finding yourself in a deeper fog. You'll be lost in guilt wrestling with yourself. Far better to feel hateful sometimes, appropriate times, and then refine the feeling into thought and understanding."

"What thought?"

"I don't know. It will come. Just accept your feelings as natural, not good but natural, and you'll see things clearer. He passed the joint to his friend."

"One day I'll go there."

"Where?"

"Bangkok. Will you take me?"

"No," said Nawin and the two resumed their silence. To really learn of a being instead of using one to smother the void in amusing noise was an edifying and exhausting endeavor of pure sadness not to be pursued by a man in grief, and he just wanted the intimate stranger to leave.

"She is unhappy—my mother. Lives dazed in a television when she isn't working or taking care of him" said the boy. It was superfluous knowledge that sprayed out with his spit into the cloud with no reaction. "I need to go," the intimate stranger said, and the words, cold as a BTS sky-train, traveled up the rails of his spinal cord in unexpected alarm. Reverberating hollow, the words almost seemed to ache as they battered the inner layers of the walls of his brain. Dogs with furless sores littering the sidewalks now did the same to his thoughts, deformed children begging in the streets pressed against his mind with weighty themes of injustice as had happened in the early days of arriving in Bangkok with his brothers, and he could imagine fruit, meat, and noodle workers at their carts disassembling their concocted makeshift restaurants and returning home weary and with stiff, aching limbs. He had yearned for these words so many times during and immediately after the pain ridden intercourse which had been a violation he had invited upon himself as a solitary old man might invite a society of gangsters and thieves into his home so as to hear human voices reminding him of family—voices other than his own.

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The unseasonable thunder and lightning continued relentlessly. For a few minutes the paramour's naked physique, as his own, kept rematerializing more and more saliently before reverting subdued into passive darkness.

"You've never been there before, Really?"

"No, just seen glimpses of it from TV news. I want to go. Someday. Someday I will, someone will take me. Tell me what it is like."

"Hard to say. Each has his own reaction to it I suppose. I can't explain myself let alone ten million others. And when you live somewhere your habits are embedded in it There is nothing romantic or visceral: just day to day life."

"Don't you like it?"

"It has its moments, I guess."

It was a snippet of conversation copied and recopied and from it blurred in inaccuracies. It played repeatedly like a redundant song to a mind in or moving toward the void. It was a void created from fear of the loss of physical contact with this nameless intimacy whom he could barely speak with unless in semi-imagined, quasi-remembered dialogues of the mind.

"And you don't have an opinion?"

"Well, for me it's like walking through noxious clouds of car and bus exhausts and the more you walk

through it the dirtier you become in everything and although you know it is not good, or know that it doesn't feel particularly good, externally, at least, it seems real and you find yourself doing more and more filthy acts to be in the heart of understanding life, becoming a true libertine. And even though enlightenment is found to be mostly endarkenment you know that you aren't pretending to live ideals taught to you out of bias and fear but the good and bad of what it really is, and appreciating it the best you can despite its imperfections. You feel the pulse of life and that from touching it, it has extended and altered you and, again, even though it isn't what you want from yourself—not idyllic or pure and it isn't what you really want to be—you know that you are not cowering within, making moral judgments on what you fear and don't understand.

Forgotten lines were filled in by imagination, the script amended for the insertion of earlier stifled thought, and there was true communion in place of circumspect utterances called conversation. It is that which is good for the fecundity of an artist's oeuvre, not nature and beauty. What else should he say: a modern world capital with the same poverty as its surrounding area and yet, condensed, it looks like it is more impoverished. When you can see them, I suppose, it would seem that on every block there are skyscrapers, malls, and dogs to the left and temples, dogs, and ghettos to the right, sidewalk restaurants and hawkers everywhere, but with world commerce and movement of a lot of people... fashion with smelly socks, so to speak... it is opulent and slummy... and if you don't harm anyone it is morally uninhibited and free...all making it rife for nights not unlike this one.

"Rife for nights not unlike this one? I don't know what you mean."

"I don't either, nothing, mai pen rai."

It reeled once again across his mind at the instant of watching the intimate stranger pick up his scattered clothes and go into the toilet.

"Go?," he asked loudly toward the closed door. "So soon? It won't be light for another two hours."

"Before she comes back," rejoined a somewhat muffled voice.

"Your mother?"

"My mother."

"And if you do not return right away."

"Then she'd pay for someone to take care of him until she returns from work."

"I see. You should not let that happen."

Then there he was again: fourteen or fifteen years old, holding hands with Noppawan in the anatomical museum. It was a day like many of that first summer together in which, extant among preserved, contorted bodies, the two oddities procured a brief but diurnal retreat away from the war of family and the indentured servitude that for him was inlaid and inextricable in the design allotted to impoverished sons and orphans. And there she was disappearing behind shelves of canisters containing fetal abnormalities and bloated testicles as though sickened by it all and yet returning to him from the toilet nonetheless with a ring braided in strands of her hair. On his finger as material branding in her being and then in gold her rings wedded him in empathy and friendship which they believed would last with the longevity of their symbolic tokens.

They had cared about each other so fully then: a strong feeling of euphoria beat and saturated them like a hard rain and a singular perception of the other as the extension, the heretofore missing half of the whole, possessed them. Was it love? He hesitated to use this word for to him it was delight in another and, for a while, even his mother found delight in her ambulatory dolls. Had they just given themselves over to the curator, stepped into a joint formalin filled glass casket, and drowned themselves there; wouldn't they have thought this engrossing form of felicity in another as perennial as eternity? Had they died together, neither of them would have known the dissolution of second families or the temporary nature of all human actions.

He returned from the bathroom fully clothed.

"Your belt is over here," Nawin said, pointing to the shelf."

"Okay," the intimate stranger said while taking it and sliding it around his waist like the way he might a girl's arm. To go, to leave, to not come again; could his sanity tolerate any more ruptures and departures? Still, wasn't it this which he wanted? It was and it wasn't.

Earlier he had thought about saying, "I'm not used to this sort of thing. I'm married so maybe we

should just be together this one time" which might have caused him to say, "So I'm the bad one. You brought me up here mister." And paradoxically, as much as he feared losing him at this moment in time, he wanted to say it now but it was impossible to say such a thing with him so eager to go. As unperceivable as it was from his stolid, phlegmatic expressions, his thoughts were in a panic. He told himself that life was ever emerging stories on the skyscraper of man in a downtown that was modernizing and changing faces; he told himself that to feel so disconcerted by a being whose proper name he had not even cared to learn was absurd. He said these things to himself but he felt he was rolling toward the precipice of disconnectedness. He told himself that as taxing as it was in his state of mourning to converse with another being he could have tolerated conversation and interlocutor for a time and that had he made him feel less like an imposter, perhaps he could have had a cherished companion from which to ride out some delicate hours. It seemed to him that other people did not think so much. They socialized and made friends without noticing it as clinging to others for meaning that it was. They obeyed feelings and socialized naturally but for him he analyzed it and such unsavory behavior filled him with repugnance. It was far worse than his effeminate role in this intercourse of bodies which was pursued to gain intimacy when the intercourse of minds seemed so futile and perilous.

"I'll need money for taxi and everything."

"A taxi shouldn't be more than a hundred baht. However I've never seen a charge for everything."

"Well it isn't free."

"As it's everything, I wouldn't think it would be. How much?"

"Three thousand."

"You're out of your mind."

Nawin's eyes hardened against all screams of dogs and men, hustlers who sold their youth for as long as it lasted no different than any other marketable product, and against all life forms floundering helplessly like fish in nets.

"Don't look at me that way. Its for my father. Of anything I get, half will go to him and half so that I can leave. If you have it why shouldn't you give it to me. I let you escape your pathetic middle aged life for a while. Now you can help me."

"Well consumer beware, but it's certainly cheaper than being a benefactor providing college education to every creature who needs it."

"You didn't mean it."

Nawin heard him. He was silent for he did not know.

"See. And yet I am bad for needing."

"And I for having and not giving it away. Here." He pulled out his wallet from the drawer."

"Here's five thousand, ten times the going rate and my business card. Maybe my earlier offer lasted as long as my sympathy; maybe this time it is done so that I won't feel insincere in my earlier offer; maybe I will want to forget you as soon as you leave here; who wants to pay for sex or even give large quantities of money to a needy stranger when coerced to do so? Still, take the card. It has my address on it. Send me a detailed letter explaining logically where you want to study and why it is important for me to help you and maybe I will see the fairness in doing so. Besides it is more sincere than doing it out of feeling sad for you."

The intimate stranger flicked the card as though he were a primitive sensing music in the mundane but not knowing what to do with it.

"No, I won't contact you for that but I'll keep the card" which was short for "...because you're a good fuck and pay for it." Nawin then read his thoughts and the intimate stranger saw that he understood: he could set him up in Bangkok. It was the least he could do. He understood and said nothing for the boy reminded him of his brother and it was for this reason that he brought him here.

Nawin pulled out a hand full of raisins from a bag, slowly chewed each, and waited for belated exuberance and thanks until it occurred to him a minute later that it would not be forthcoming. "Want some," he asked but it did not garner a response. The youth picked up his bag and left as though he had never been, a testament to the insignificance of interaction.

As Nawin continued to eat the raisins, one at a time, it occurred to him that the real reason eating animals was wrong had nothing to do with maintaining the sanctity of life. The society of dogs was to them reality, and the world in an environment of oblique human presences. And as all creatures were myopic with similar perceptions and concluding sentiments their reality and world was in the social interaction of their species. As he would not wish to be the protein fueling their hegemony, why should it be thought that the innate value of pigs, cows, and chickens was to be domesticated so as to be easy viands of human consumption.

The society of man was no more real than that of dogs, he told himself. Society was a delusion of respective animals needing a greater external meaning for their lives; and yet, the Buddhist introvert that he was, he yearned for the return of this human presence until his head ached, he wished for the viand of his phallus, and he wanted the pain of being sodomized.

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When perceived in terms of his proclivity for avoiding social interaction and for his loss, negligence, and failure at roles which he had once ascribed to himself—artist, womanizer, lecturer and that most ephemeral role of paternal ersatz who sometimes changed diapers so Noppawan could sleep—he, a god was relegated to an irrelevance equivalent to nothing. He knew this for it could not be otherwise with the world valuing action as much as it did, action which apposite, was too finite and inadequate a means for appraising an individual of his scope. And their interaction, he thought to himself in another strange supercilious thrust of validation beyond his grief, was pursued so fervently to evade an alarming and discombobulating sense of their own irrelevance for human creatures would have no sense of being alive at all were it not for witnessing the mobility of their shadows intermingling with other moving adumbrations. But cremated, the deceased did not cast shadows; and as exempt of people and roles as he was, his was definitely a figurative extinction. A retiree from the art of doing, a demigod who chose the reality of being marooned in his own thoughts, he stayed steadfast in the immobility of his empty shell, a state dearth of role and impetus. He, who was nonetheless human in his godhood, remained intrepid in trudging into this rather unbearable and disconcerting sense of the inconsequence of being. To look at nature, to melt into true being under a cloud by relinquishing one's grandiose claim as an integral being in the temporary and changeable interactions of man, to be exempt of role and its alleged significance on a small corner of contemporary society at best, and as a divine particle revere life as opposed to absconding from it through interaction, only a god would tolerate such torturous but exquisite enlightenment. His mission, the purpose of His trip, was to further Himself as deity by no longer needing to be confirmed by others as a presence on the planet, to no longer need to gain approbation through social interaction, and to find himself fully able to separate from craven mortals whose only sense of being came from doing and whose viscous neediness precipitated even more interactive clinging and all the concocted meaning therein. Deemed by serendipity and evolvment gained from his education to the status of demigod and no further than this, he could never succeed completely in self contained intellectual asceticism, for how could he retreat into the thickets of fecund solitude without becoming more and more desperate to rest his head on the pillow case of human flesh as he ran around in sinuous stretches circuitously lost in reason and emotion. Still, he would travel inward and explore what was there for as long as it was bearable. At least so he said in silent thought, with only partial belief.

The gecko, barely visible in the smoky fog of marijuana, reaffixed itself on a portion of wall above the night stand. It remained there above the clutter of archaic connections: a telephone that kept ringing—at least inside his head—and a post card on which he had merely written "Dear Noppawan, I hope that you've been well despite everything that happened" before striking two lines through the sentiment and tossing it back onto the night stand. And this diminutive animal deemed him to fall into the doom of those opaque, glassy domed eyes and he did fall as Kimberly had fallen through the metal and plastic awning of the swimming pool to be an eyeless corpse; he fell as any man would through tenuous self image at the loss of women of the present to the molestation of the past. Truth, if it existed, was a state that was sedentary; but movement was meaning and this man sought it. It was his emulation of the universe and it went straight forward even if sentiment caused it to bend and deviate slightly toward that which was past. So, he thought, avowing a new position entirely.

"No, that's not entirely true," said the gecko.

"No?" asked Nawin as he once more inhaled the smoke of his marijuana.

The gecko shook his head plaintively. Nawin understood: he had done fellatio, he had swallowed, and had subsequently allowed himself to be sodomized so that he might feign belief that, without anything to grasp in his empty hands, there was a permanent entity in the impermanence permeating his life and yet if humans did not have the delusion of sexual intimacies there would be no contemplation at all for an understanding of true being was brought forth in copulative intermingling. Despite the revelation,

he felt rather lithe in his fog until the gecko metamorphosed into a man pointing at his genitalia. "You smoke me here. Me don't want smoke. You do. Foreign smoke, Foreign pays. Foreign give more money. Me seventeen. Me tell. You go to police."

He collected his thoughts the best that he could in his state of dreaminess and brief hallucinations in the dark, blowing mustiness of the confines of the empty room. He considered how quickly odd, erratic ideas could spill out onto all regions of the brain like paint from leaking tubes, mix grotesquely, amalgamate in beings, and spread their diminutive warped presence in insurrections begetting hegemonies of the mind. With this recent association and its disconnection pressing so fully onto his mind he could not stay here, the venue and embodiment of their activity together. It made his head ache worse than his buttocks, arm, and clavicle. The fact that one's DNA, one's sacrosanct blueprint, was disseminated randomly in ejaculations seemed to him inordinately peculiar; that it was emitted from an instrument of urination which when erect was a pistol of a sadist forcing his pleasure and will onto others a sickening but laughable peculiarity; still it made him so amorous that he could not restrain himself any longer and thus he masturbated and then took a shower.

Considering that if he were to check out formally he would have to confront smirking faces and laughter at the front desk once one of the housekeeping crew reported the soiled disarray of his sheets, he decided that he would not check out at all. He had paid for three days, so it was of no consequence. Abandoning the key on the bed, he left through the fire exit to avoid speaking to night attendants and all things human, and went out into the dark streets of Nongkai. Telephone booths seemed to call her name out to him and to a limited degree he wanted to enter one to converse with her, and would have done so (momentarily if she were to hang up on him or if for longer, it would be to engage with her with, hostilely or civilly, with the neediness of love or the indifference of a stranger, he could not predict) but for the aching reminder of the multiple bone fractures she had rendered unto him. With enough vibrations the china cabinet of a woman's heart would break and its varied fragments could not be organized let alone mended into some whole, such was the integrity of a man when ripped apart beyond suture.

It was later than he thought and for a few moments the emerging bristle of morning light was fused into a dark mound of cloud before attempting to surmount it in the struggle of a morning freeing itself to be born. The view was a layered mélange of golden crème and whisked effervescent void that was as succulent as taffy. He wanted to loiter in time and stare at it without blinking in the hope that constancy would keep it there unchanged. It was the same type of thought that had prompted him to stop painting altogether a few years ago, and now he could hardly remember the feel of a paint brush in his hand.

He got into a tuk-tuk and asked the driver to take him to the Buddhist Sculpture Garden. The first movements of the three wheeled vehicle made him shudder and utter equivalent interjections.

"Yes, it's cold!" said the driver who was wearing a jacket and shorts, "That odd rain in winter! I met you before, didn't I?" yelled the mirrored mouth through wind and the roar of the motor.

"I'm from Bangkok. I wouldn't think so," yelled Nawin even louder.

"Sure I have. At the train station. The train officer had me give you a message."

"Oh that's right. The telephone number."

"Did you make the call?"

"No. I'm an artist, so people always give me their numbers hoping I'll pay them to model. I guess that's what it's about. I don't know. Anyhow, thanks again." It was close enough to the truth without the tedium of details for one who was a stranger to him and needed no more than a stranger's cordial trifle.

"No problem," said the driver. "You looked sick when I saw you there squatting on the ground."

"Train sickness I guess. Sickness of everything generally" offered Nawin with a feigned chuckle.

Near the sculpture garden was a 7-11 and he bought some coffee, milk, and a box of corn flakes, sat down amidst purposeful and less temporary form, and ate the cereal from the box as he had when he was five years old in America. To be here in so much empty space among stone carvings and to be the only one around appealed to him. If nothing else having been abused gave him this: the desire to pour color on paper and entertain himself alone, self-contained, in any empty space he could find. However, this solitary behavior was only pleasant for a few hours and then self-containment seemed particularly vacuous and the blessing a curse. He read a book on Etruscan art for a few hours before his already aching buttocks began to hurt from the position on the ground. He got up, swallowed some pain killers for his arm with no assistance but his saliva, and waited for a bus to take him back to Nongkhai. A kiosk

selling soft drinks, Buddha statuettes, and cotton candy was already open. In front of it at one table was a typical jasmine rosary salesman who also sold balloons, some of which he blew up and shaped into replicas of Hindu and Buddha emblems, and others he inflated with helium.

"How many helium balloons would it take to float a lightweight piece of metal into a different country or country for that matter?"

"I don't understand you. Do you want some balloons?"

"Yes. I would think six should suffice."

Nawin bought them, removed the stifling wedding ring from his hand, tied it with the six strings, and released the gestalt of colored rubber, metal, and diamonds into the airy realms of the unfettered and the lost.

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Within this ambivalence how was he to know that his obdurate stance would not crack and that he would not relent, allowing neediness to surge over him like lava, incinerate him and heave residuals homeward? If he relented by calling her at a pay telephone booth and by a miracle fortuitous, dull, or moribund, he was made to believe that some type of reconciliation was possible as economic provider or more, it would be better that it were done there where he could buy a ticket immediately than to experience a breakdown of His integrity while stuck uncomfortably in Vientiane. Thus, as the sun pulled ever tighter over the hand of the world, memory seemed to encompass him tighter than the burdensome wedding band ever had, and having played in the wounds of old intimacies it now seemed like the desperation of an old man opening his door to strangers. Preferring to allow the possibility of being murdered than to continue in the meaningless domicile of his empty shell, he told the tuk-tuk driver to take him to the train station instead of the border.

It was a cold ride to this area where a day earlier his debased posture had no doubt alarmed train officials that here was someone, who if not a southern terrorist, was suffering from a nervous breakdown on government premises (and yet were it not so, and to most Euro-American foreigners it would not be with the day's temperature for them equivalent to a balmy spring day, still by Thai accounts as well as his own, it was a frigid morning with moments of impaling breeze that made the dogs in the corners of parapets surrounding temples shiver and his blood run cold; but then, as he had already ventured out without anywhere in particular to return to, the peripatetic libertine continued with the journey, tolerating the blowing inundation of wind like one holding his breath until arriving at the train station.)

There was only one course, the forward course in which a supernova would eventually devour the Earth like a piece of kindling wood, and so he walked to the junction that was on the border—the right side of the road an entry point to Thailand, the left, eventually, to Laos (specifically, he kicked a rock repeatedly for several hundred yards until losing it, skidded and etched lines into the mud with his feet, eventually moving west to the intersection that was the border—the right an entry into a land not of his birth and inhabited predominately by philistines who suffered from a lethargy no different from other denizens of warm societies under the mesmerizing intensity of the sun—the left an entry into an altogether insular and comatose nation). Obtaining a Laotian visa for a thousand baht; another payment albeit a nominal one, he stood on a small bus like a Siamese twin conjoined to eighty or more bodies, all going in the same direction, each having his or her own objective as he did albeit the others surely with more clarity than he had. He took a bus ride with myriad others across the Friendship Bridge of the Mekong river, filled out his entry card at this extended checkpoint, his passport eventually being stamped in a line of waiting and moving but seemingly going nowhere, he paid a new monetary charge, the cryptic exit fee then shared a tuk-tuk for a forty minute ride to the city, sometimes witnessing exaggerated gestures and hearing jocular comments about how cold it was from Laotians and Thais, some in both shorts and hooded jackets, though not from westerners who didn't seem to suffer any distress outside of blowing strands of disheveled hair. He bypassed fields and water buffalo, feeling the exhilaration of the wind, cold as it was, and suffuse with a sense of regeneration he sensed the present immerse him whole into its prodigious depths and believed he was traversing into something new which would whitewash his negative memories in amnesia. Arriving in the city of Vientiane, that little bit of Paris with a lot of dirt that wind occasionally scraped and twirled as if it were a field, he observed a department store (arguably more than a hybrid of store and barn with its outlying outdoor market), morning monks with emaciated frail bodies seeking alms in tawny saffron robes soiled in Laotian dust, businessmen receiving the laying on of hands and the wai in the hope of making their lives propitious, two school girls in blue uniforms on a bicycle, more motorcycles than cars but more of both with each moment of the waking morning, and a man pulling a food cart on the side of the street. Nawin looked directly into the man's incarnadined, sun burnt face and his furrows of coarse wrinkling skin, and the

old man, though abashed, grinned and nodded once as if grateful that the younger man not only acknowledged his existence but saw his worth in it. Neither sunrise nor sunset was as beautiful as this.

It had been a similar acknowledgement three years ago that had been the catalyst of his self declared quasi-retirement. He had gone on sabbatical from Silpakorn University to get a doctoral degree before realizing that scholarly pursuits were inimical to creativity (not that he was attempting to create anything at that time) and that these simultaneous states of mind if not joint ventures would be deleterious to each other. They were wasted years if measured in action and accomplishment but constructive in terms of disassembling pretensions and so it did not matter.

Now he was able to repudiate the grandeur of self unflinchingly. Extirpating himself of those institutions and beings that facilitated the feeding of his instinctual neediness, departing from his nation and the circumscribed roles which he had there, and having relieved himself of hungers for food and sex earlier this morning, he was now able to appreciate of the sfumato of society and nature and could just be...Just be! What a romantic he was: at least so he chided himself. Unfathomable suffering existed under the most lush of lives. It was beneath every superficial, jovial exterior, and to think that in a land probably without much of that exterior layer he would experience any enlightenment beyond encounters with deeper veins of suffering than any he had experienced heretofore seemed preposterous. Just this morning after the prostitute had given Nawin an indignant look and then had gone away leaving him there alone in his pile of clothes, he could not, for some minutes, even fasten the buttons on his shirt so overcome was he with suffering. It had seemed so acute and pervasive in all beings and all matters that he, a forty year old man, did not know what to do other than murmur ever so quietly, "meh" (mother). He had wanted the resurrection of that woman who had not only looked away as the abusers did their dastardly deeds but made him out to be the culprit who had instigated it all. He had called out for her like a child hoping that she would lead him back to beginnings of chasing balls and butterflies. He had yearned for a state of innocence in which he would be ignorant of sexual jostling from instinctual hungers and but not of the love that was the conception of all animal life. He had wanted this resurrected "meh" to end the suffering which permeated the lives of all things and to make knowledge and understanding more than vicarious suffering. Perhaps he was too sensitive for this world but here he was and so, to use an Americanism, he needed to see things through "rose colored filters." Thus his first impression of Vientiane Laos was that of an intricate tapestry of life. All he had to do to appreciate it was to simply open his eyes by abjuring agenda and accomplishment and melting into true being.

31

Everywhere he went there seemed to be metallic signs on poles to power lines. Each sign was in the international language of pictorial symbols and each illustration the same: a sinuous electrical current striking a stick figure that fell back as though electrocuted. He could have detoured to an area along a different stretch of road and walked elsewhere where there were not these signs of warning were it not for his proclivity to continue walking on such a narrow sidewalk in which a stumbling foot could cost him his life. There was a definite morbid curiosity and courting of death in his actions, his feelings elated by travel to someplace new, but his thoughts were macabre and fixated on the vicissitudes and impermanence of one's life, the attempts to belie those with money, property, family, and notoriety as if one could solidify one's effluvial existence to a statue's, despite the permanent inevitability of one's demise. Knowing this, and rich enough that he did not need to work another day in his life, nor as corollary become obtuse to this truth by engagements in mundane routine, he was not sure what to do with himself. Other men were also used for sperm and as economic providers to family but they saw their sons who grew with the years and whose growth would measure how far they had degenerated into the years, mirrors to see aging, ghastly, and lackluster reflections of themselves (for him, he would never see his son again, or at least that was Noppawan claimed on that day she battered him with an iron frying pan, not that he necessarily wanted to see his time on the planet in the hour glass of a changing boy). Likewise, they had their roles as procurers of meat so that their women might enjoy playing with live dolls (for him whose investments made money unto themselves he could be of no personal use to family even if allowed back into it, and when was a man included in the joys of child rearing anyway?).

His cheek inadvertently brushed against an extended vine of green bananas dangling above the sidewalk near a French colonial building used by a Laotian government ministry. Although a normal, reflexive reaction would have been to feel startled especially after having noticed the signs and fearing the next touch of the unknown to be his ineluctable death, he just smiled. If fate, the God of all Atheists, had deemed it a pole of a power line instead of bananas that his cheek had touched, him electrocuted, stricken down to sear the ground with his incinerating fall it would be of no major significance to anyone but himself if even that; furthermore, he thought, continuing to synthesize more ideas to remain stimulated and happily self-contained in his own company, this second of consciousness being

irrevocably extinguished might be a rather pleasant experience despite its brevity. In it he would be on an enlightened transit before the void swallowed him entirely, an omniscient second of wisdom in which egregious Buddha-gods and heaven-and-hell aberrations of the ideas of the Buddha, who surely was not a buddhist, would be known to not exist. To know something with absolute certainty beyond the realm of supposition (like the amount of love a bludgeoning spouse once had toward him, the degree of selfishness and altruism that constituted emotion and cognition, and so much else unknown to him) would be particularly refreshing after a lifetime spent in the glimmers of truth. It would be as refreshing as those times that as children, he and his pauper brothers stripped to their underwear and from piers dove into the Chao Phraya River to escape the blistering heat of April.

The surprise of bananas brushing against his cheek made him smile wryly—smile at witnessing a banana tree in the heart of a city, smile wryly as the surprised encounter was imbued in the rustic as well as the bucolic, and thus was both repulsive and quaint. Understanding it to be both made him postulate that in a broader sense every given entity or event was rarely one attribute exclusively but the polarity of two antithetical thoughts. Even the calcifying antipathy and repugnance toward sex, which were now steadily building up inside his mind were at times stymied in ethereal fantasies of burnishing the silky leather of human flesh and a hunger for beauty that suddenly came over him like a consuming and growing flame before being subdued and partially extinguished in the gravity of his all-too-human thought, which wanted reality even more than fantasy the best it could find it. Glancing at clothed buttocks, covered thighs, and other appendages of a female here and a male there, it was as though his constitution could mutate from solid to vapor at random despite human will. This was what he gleaned from his cheek brushing against a bunch of unripe bananas while journeying onward with sights and sounds satiating consciousness, sketching impressions of the mind that one could only appreciate in foreign travel.

Closer to the market there were numerous people in a row like sequacious ants, all seeking bits of a distant morsel, but unlike ants these people sought for themselves and, even here, with their wallets as feelers. A few minutes later he was among them, eventually buying a dangling earring for a left lobe, a solid gold necklace to adorn his swarthy complexion so that the deep dirt and poverty that he once was remained hidden from himself and from anyone whom he encountered, and a pocket pc/cellular telephone, which he needed but had no occasion to use. In the outdoor market he watched someone seated on a small couch at a kiosk under a huge umbrella, get a tattoo. He wanted an eagle tattooed on his biceps and to other regions as well to demonstrate that he was as an apostate, Nawin of Thais, but the conditions here did not look urbane or sterile, and he backed away until he was in a parking lot filled with tuk-tuks.

A conventional two seater took him to a temple with his traveler's guide gospel in one hand and suitcase in the other. It was a temple, outside of which a sign informed readers that the building, which appeared more like an attic and junkyard than a museum and temple, once housed the Emerald Buddha. He stayed inside wandering around various sized wooden and stone buddhas dating back to early periods in history and as such often having parts of arms and faces missing from their dilapidated forms. There, relaxed, he melted into true being.

It was good to be there unfettered of obligations to others, and with no whore to distract him from keeping the deeper self company of his ruminations. He was synthesizing some peculiar notion he only half grasped (something to the effect of "a person comes into the world for no apparent reason; perspectives mutate in changeable physical existence; a person's ideas change due to the changes around him, changing so as to withhold some level of verisimilitude to which sanity is entirely dependent...") when the women of his life suddenly came upon him unexpectedly. Others might have thought exhibitions of buddhas would be of interest to all foreigners and especially to someone like Kimberly who was an accomplished amateur sculptor herself, and yet he knew that Noppawan would have enjoyed it more. Unable to share the experience with her, what could the mind do other than impose a facimile? Many times he almost believed that he was really pointing out smaller statuettes hidden behind the larger and more salient ones and that she was going to them, thoroughly examining each one that he pointed out to her like a collector of religious antiquities. How odd that he was so close to releasing words from his lips as if she were really there. No, neither homosexual encounter nor this sending of a wedding ring into oblivion had freed him from memories.

Another tuk-tuk outside the gate of the museum; another blue cockroach driver eager for twenty baht (this one specified that he wanted Thai baht and not Laotian kip)—and, once agreed upon, a quick trip to the communist history museum. Inside there was an archaeological exhibit which he skimmed briefly. Noppawan knew so many inordinate details for it to be of interest to her, and for Kimberly it had always been amusement parks, French wine, and Debussy and Ravel performances at the Thai Cultural Center. But in one corner on the second floor, near the staircase, there was an assortment of traditional clothing that he knew she would have enjoyed seeing and he wanted to take her in his arms, behind that particular exhibit, and impart a visceral kiss, which if unable to pump the air of life back

into her would at least convey how dear she was to him before the return to the great beyond which was in fact cessation and vacuity. She was not alive so what could the mind do but resurrect her or something like her briefly? It could do nothing else. Traditional instruments were in one far corner but most of the museum seemed to be a diatribe without words, a deprecatory pronouncement against Siam, French, and American imperialists in photographic images, uniforms, and guns. The museum was more of an anti-imperialist manifesto than a communist one and partitioned walls made court rooms for evidence and indictment. Being a Thai-American with a girlfriend who had been French, his was a triple indictment—at least so he postulated to himself humorously.

He could have gone to the States, the land of his birth. Not knowing anyone there would not have deterred him. In boyhood, each day before fulfilling his indenture as a poor son he would wake up early and leave the house so that for a half an hour, diluted under a cloud in some empty area along the river, he could become little more than the nonstop movements of serving food. Loneliness was not something that he was so desperate to lose. He could have gone there and procured a second set of x-rays and a second opinion from an orthopedic surgeon in Los Angeles or elsewhere. A second set of x-rays was rarely taken in Thailand, and so if he had to have a practical reason for returning to the United States this could be one. He had plenty of accessible money for his travels. Not all of his money was in joint accounts for he was too knowledgeable of the changeable tectonics of family to believe that joint ventures of any kind were lifelong. He might have gone there to travel for a period of months without having to work at all. To melt into the prodigious Grand Canyon, and to have it melt into him would be well worth any expense he incurred and it had always seemed to him that if he went far enough and long enough he would be out of the pale of memory. That too would be a practical benefit. However, it was a haughty land of religious zealots who believed its hegemony was a mandate to dictate world affairs, its growing military bases police boxes, its wars an extension of democracy and human rights, and its intolerance morality itself. It was foundering in its debt as a dying empire and the entire country sickened him.

But then, he thought, he himself was a reprobate and any moral pronouncements that he made would be hypocritical and ridiculous. Was he not living the disreputable life of the great Artist, Caravaggio? Maybe he just wished to be compared and contrasted to the man so that his work would seem to have some international and everlasting significance. Still, compare he would! As Nawin he was poor no longer, although under his former name, Jatupon, he had been that and more. He had not killed anyone—at least not deliberately; and it did not seem particularly Caravaggio-like to not have the intention. He was not a homosexual fleeing murder but a bisexual fleeing interconnectedness. These were mere incidentals that could be argued in various ways and they did not delineate a man. Both men had given beauty to the world and this alone surely disproved them as having disreputable natures, but then, how was he to know?

32

The drab stones of the stupa were probably erected in the nineteenth century and through the prodigious span of years, he thought, the unadorned city surrounded it in languid increments like the moss that had annexed its crevices. The encroachment no doubt diminished the distinct identity of the monument, making it less remote and secluded, like human life. That was what he thought, and it was a more concrete and definitive explanation than any other he could provide himself with. Of his own life, he did not know why he wanted to slip away unto himself as he did, to be forgotten personally as well as publicly, to be altogether expunged like the public persona of artistic decadence which he once maintained, and to be further ensconced under the blanket of himself if that were possible without suffocating to annihilation and oblivion. It was as mysterious as the primordial desire of sex, communion, and connection which had driven him spellbound into contact with the flesh of the paramour hours ago.

A block away, a part of the main street abutted this once silent area, fomenting it with traffic along a stretch of businesses catering to foreigners. There were guest houses and Internet cafes. Men were unloading a shipment of supplies to one of the closed bars. There were foreigners on bicycles, or coming in and out of souvenir shops, baguette restaurants, hotel rooms, and apparently Vientiane's only convenience store, or worse its only supermarket. A couple held hands whistling as they passed the monument for a side street in which, according to a sign, a guest house was located. It was noise which he disliked, as distant and muted as it was, but as inclined as he was to romanticize the quaint rusticity around him, he did not yet despise it. In the new environment, positive but neither overly elated or ebullient, he felt that the energy exuded around him belied the gravity of the consequences of action, as if the strutting movements of youth were not dances in a graveyard, when in fact the whole Earth was nothing but a necropolis, and any laughter which he heard seemed to scoff at his new disfigurement. Often tourists would come to the stupa posing for pictures at its base. They seemed to come only in pairs to compound the quasi-reality of the experience of foreign travel into something

more solid, for as pairs the dopamine was doubled for these mundane presences, leaving him alone in deprivation within the capsule of the rocket of the mind. They came to this nameless rock, but as it was less of an attraction than That Louang; the few who came did not stay for long. The stupa was the same one pictured in his guide book, the same one he had thought of wistfully when he was on the train, and sexual inclinations had not been the entirety of his yearnings there—at least so he wanted to believe. In leaning against this particular stone relic towering above him, it was not that he was seeking to be a non-worldly aspirant feigning ignorance of a world of suffering masses kimberlying downward from one type of post-partum depression or another to which the gods were of complete indifference, or admitting as much, but that this deity or deities designated greater plans that entailed human suffering and tragedy. He did not want false repudiations of the human condition of suffering but acceptance of it so as to be transmuted into it so deeply that he could imagine the experiences of others more richly and would cease to take his allocation of suffering personally.

He was seated in the bit of grass that was there, his head leaning against this towering icon more uncomfortably than he thought it would, head remaining against hard stone, neck aching, and having to slap and decimate a second set of fire ants that got onto his book and into his sandals stinging his feet. He did not like this flawed design of species competing to sustain themselves and using him as the ammunition available to them so he scattered a piece of bread for some pigeons at his feet to perform an expiation. Thinking about this world of species, each trying to exist comfortably at the expense of others, he knew that there was no spirit in a being and nothing spiritual—just recognition of contentment in simple pleasures, the foundation for all tenuous others, which were not subject to life's vicissitudes. This was the only spiritual journey that a realist and atheist might undertake.

There was a puddle of water from the previous night's inundation of rain at one of his feet. He was inclined to seek his reflection a second time within it, and would have done so (especially since he had not even bothered to go into the bathroom to shave in front of a mirror, or take a shower, in his need to make a swift exit from the guest house) were it not so turbid, with a dark taffeta sheen no more able to reflect a gray hair, a wrinkle, or the doleful intensity of a sagging, aged countenance any more than seeing his diaphanous reflection in car windows. Whether or not he had gotten visibly older over these past twenty four hours, which had entailed a fortieth birthday on the train and a half catharsis/half reopening of the wounds of his abused youth by the intimate encounter with the paramour—a paramour who looked like his brother Kazem, or at least how he remembered Kazem so many years ago—was wasted speculation. One would not have aged significantly in such a brief time unless the paramour were God and he Moses. Still, he wanted a mirror nonetheless, for he knew that tragedy and grief had maimed and distorted him over the past few weeks. Obviously he was now taciturn, and disliked the cloying exuberance of youth that clawed against the concentrated walls of his deliberation, although deliberating what he could not say, as he sat there leaning his head against the stupa with eyes resting on the clouds, if indeed he was in a state of rest. And if he were so prison pent, he thought, a touch of those electrical poles would open up whatever portal Kimberly had gone into with him, with her disappearing into it and it disappearing into the oblivion of itself.

He was ruminating that love was not an actuality, but merely humans finding no exterior meaning and seeking solace and artificial meaning in each others company, when he was suddenly accosted by a Caucasian woman. She was middle aged, had sinuous black hair, and seemed attractive as best he could tell, as she was wearing a round brimmed white hat and dark sunglasses that covered some of her face.

"Pardonnez moi pour vous faire savent le Francais?" she asked.

"J'ai étudié là pendant un certain temps. C'a été il y a des années," he said, "but you are safer in the international language. I was only in Paris for six months."

"Oh, then you are fluent, as French is the international language," she said with a laugh.

"No, the language of fucking is," he thought, startled by how close the words were to his lips. Had he spoken them he would have been truthful. His brief time under a scholarship grant had been more of sexual rendezvous than anything more substantive. It had been his language of choice as no one there seemed to want to speak in English. And had he spoken those words he would have released a belligerent inner burst of misogyny from a long dormant maternal source aggravated nowadays by his wife having beaten him with a skillet.

"What did you study there? French?"

"No, fucking," he thought but he held tightly to the reins of the tongue, his restive beast. He did not want to disparage another person for his own proclivities toward freeing himself of any female captors. He vented a sigh of relief for having managed to stay quiet and thought how close the words were to his lips before dissipating like everything else, and in this case leaving him defenseless against his good

looks.

"Painting."

"Painting?"

"A grant.... It was a grant from your country—a cultural exchange with accomplished artists... I was one of the applicants who won." His words were slow and laborious as he wished not to divulge anything.

"How wonderful! A famous artist of this area. Are you Laotian?"

"I'm American," he said. It was the second most offensive word that he could think of.

"Are you here on vacation?"

"Yes," he said curtly, not bothering to reciprocate, and the two strangers fell into silence.

"I'm here with my sister," she spoke at last with less certainty than before." We were trying to find a royal palace. We saw a sign but got lost in some backstreets and did not know where we were going."

"Oh," he said. "Well, did you ask around?"

"Yes, but I guess Thai would be better than English."

"Yes, I suppose it would, but you don't speak it do you?"

"No but you do, don't you? It certainly would be great to go with someone who knows his way around, or even if you don't; two women traveling together begin to argue if they are alone too much."

"You argue?" he tried to restrain his smile. He knew how his gentle and probing eyes of sustained interest and a luminous smile made women love him, and so he looked away.

"How old is your sister?"

"Forty. She's older."

"No sisters sixteen years old or younger?" It was the vilest set of words beyond 'fuck' and 'American' that could be spoken to a French damsel, and he was startled to hear them spill out of his mouth. It was a slap against women for losing their beauty with increasing years, and a shallow and blatant disregard of the inner worth of a being. It was chauvinistic and repugnant, and it got him what he wanted.

"No, no younger sister. I've got to go!" As she was leaving him, she suddenly stopped and turned toward him abruptly. "You are ugly and pathetic. You know why? You went to America and America took over your thoughts. You are Asian and yet just like those war criminals. Why don't you just leave here and go back to America or better just go to hell." Then there was perennial solitude once again.

Irritated by the stings of the ants that had crawled up his legs, and feeling a sense of compunction for having been so rude, he felt that he was now lost and wandering through the miasma and malaise of himself. It was so unbearable that he wanted to move away from the stupa and out of his inner self. If he made a left to Main Street and then another left, he would be on the road that went near the Morning Market and toward the Arco de Triumph replica, Patuxay. To the right, he would be where he was—that plaintive temple museum that seemed to still be in mourning over the loss of the Emerald Buddha. Eventually, further in that direction would lead to government buildings, which were in the French colonial architecture, and then to the river; at least that was what the map indicated.

By the time the time the Patuxay monument was clearly visible, it had begun to rain heavily and he dashed toward it for shelter. Once there, he shook the water from his hair and clothes, and stared down at some flowers growing in a square pot at his feet. Feeling less fettered by the dampness, he then looked up at the deviant kinnari and Ramakien giants that were shaped intricately into the arched doorway, and scraped the mud off of his sandals. He remembered when he was five years old in America the faux pas of wiping his feet on a neighbor's doormat that had gotten him into trouble. He had believed then that that was what doormats were for. He again postulated that perhaps there really was no love—just people who having no extrinsic value in the universe at large clung to each other for meaning. Then he suddenly heard in a Thai-Laotian dialect, "It's the Thai artist. Do you remember me."

The Laotian made the prayerful gesture of the wai which Nawin reciprocated. Then he said, "In the train, man. Remember?" He was trying to pierce through the fixed, glazed expression to pry into another mind and loosen the memories therein. His words could only be insolent if they were contemptuous, which they were not, and flagrant if he considered the age of the interlocutor, which he may not have done, and overall, the informality of it made Nawin feel equal instead of superior which was equivalent to a sense of being young once again. He remembered and smiled at his acquaintance and found himself amused at the fluctuation of demeanor in a given moment of time.

"Yes."

"I gave you a beer."

"Gave?" Nawin sneered playfully before a more cordial tone replaced it to patch over a stretch of silence. "I suppose you did in a way."

"Did or didn't?"

"Okay, you did."

"So here you are."

"Yes."

"You're a bit wet."

"Yes, I am."

"Are you cold?"

"No."

"You look tired. Are you tired?"

"Not really."

Boi guffawed at the lucid and hesitant utterances of the withdrawn, distrustful being and looked amused as though it were a game to him. "Well, I suppose you'll dry quickly enough when you're back inside. Do you have a hotel room?"

"Not yet."

He was ambivalent whether or not the Laotian meant to say, "Dee" [good] in response. As the Laotian scrutinized the Thai, so Nawin did him. It seemed to him that a word had percolated from the Laotian's thoughts and yet the mouth bore nothing. The pursed lips seemed to incarcerate sound and the only thing to materialize was an imagined utterance and his own irritation at not even knowing such an insignificant item in the social sphere of man with absolute certainty. It was odd but useful, he thought, that the mind was able to distinguish that which was and was not real, especially when both were unreal in the objective measurement of passing time, and that the mind noticed distinct positive attributes in each, rarely confusing the two. In this case, however, he hardly knew whether it was a twitch of lips or a suppressed word. If the latter, he did not really know the word that it would have been but he still strongly believed the unspoken word if it were such to be "dee".

"My sister mentioned you many times. I said that you would probably never call and might not even cross the border." Nawin wondered if certain words were being withheld while others selectively released, but if so he could not see that this was different from anyone else, man or woman. And of a woman, her love might be proclaimed but never the whore within her that yearned to improve her situation in life as the most virtuous married status and money in one sense or another. Was he not missing life by analyzing everything, or was he giving weight and meaning to fleeting experience by the anchor of his ruminations? To live life fully, how much should be spent in the inward exploration of thought and outward action without being macabre or flippant and in both cases superfluous? This he hardly knew and also pondered.

"I almost returned to Bangkok this morning." He did not know why he was saying this. Like a model who would soon allow herself to be denuded there was something inside him wishing to strip off inner layers and be known to others as though knowledge of himself was not enough—as though even the palpable sense of himself in movement and thought was diminished and not reaffirmed by human interaction. Rocks moldered away and would do so all the more quickly if not reinforced by sediment; so, he said to himself, he could not be exempt of the same fate.

"You only arrived in Nongkai a day ago. Why were you thinking of returning?"

"I don't know" he said, and from the prevarication seconds of silence ensued with the discomfort of it, like the sweat, humidity, and filth of the open air clinging to his skin. As discourse was the only tangible means to gain an outline of another and the projected intertwined adumbration, the thick shadow of relationship that was the two, it was impossible to stay silent, refusing to disclose bits of himself; and as the present was at times a prototype for what would follow, an extension of the present that could be the pattern of his whole life. Needing to part the silence he said, "To see my wife if you must know."

"I must. The one who broke your arm?"

"And clavigal. The same." The emphatic must enticed him and he smiled begrudgingly.

"You know what I think?"

"No, why would I?"

"That she doesn't exist."

"A le nah [huh]?"

"She doesn't exist."

His smile dissipated. Then he tilted his head down and his taut countenance became empty like the void in his head. "That's more or less what I decided and so I wandered here," he said dolefully.

For, oddly enough, he, as rich as he was, had come to this place of all places like an impecunious, malnourished refugee seeking any parlous state that might save him from starvation. Since Kimberly's death he could not find even scant viands or morsels of hope anywhere; and as all humanity competed for this resource, a prodigious amount was needed to feed their ambulatory corpses for the continuation of their hauntings, which would end in final stumbles. If there were a search light piercing a sliver of darkness for his sake in the solidity of his grief, the one hard substance in the random and furious changes of his life, how would he who was buried alive inside himself see it? And why would anyone else, busy in his or her solipsistic role, find enough humanity to save him?

If any light came to him now or had emanated heretofore, he was not aware of it. The border leading back to Thailand seemed a dark and opaque one-way journey sealed off to retrospective deviants. Thus, he was stranded in this swamp of Vientiane, Laos, without any chance of return. He was here in front of the Patuxay monument, this Archo de Triomphe created from money that the Americans had allotted for an airport.

"Lost?" There was only one object, himself, that was the meaning of this word, for the Laotian's eyes seemed to be peering into him with murky beams of light.

"Not entirely lost, no. Detached, I think, which makes me less lost really. Who knows? It feels different though—different from how I see it... not that you need to know that," he said condescendingly with a chuckle, believing that his ideas would not readily permeate into the obtuse mind of the laborer. Then he countered this claim by doubting if intelligence was innate. It was in part the result of human will for transcendence, and in part provided by education fueled by money like everything else. The Laotian seemed to be sagacious enough to know his situation or perhaps this loneliness was so inordinate that he wanted to believe him as such. To be known was a vulnerability to be exploited especially when man's feelings wanted to avow friendship with he who saw him denuded, but to shy away from people was rather weak and craven.

"You should express yourself freely to your friends."

"Friends?" Nawin laughed. The laugh was mild with mild sarcasm, but it shook his body, reawakening the dull pain of his broken limb and this acute sense of falling from a precipice into an all engulfing abyss.

"What?" retorted the Laotian irascibly. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Well, yes, I'm sorry, but we don't hardly know each other."

"That could change."

"Why should it?" He was critical and cautious, but then he did not know what else he could be. There were less mendacious illusions like a marriage that lasted for some years and deliberate fraudulent ploys by calculating self-centered beings wanting to improve the circumstances of their lives more expeditiously. Both, with any real touch, would fall like a wall of sand so one had to be careful of what he leaned on, who he associated with, and what he believed if he believed in anything at all. It was a

world of impermanence, a world where men married women for solidity and a sense of completion as an adult, and women had their babies (or in the case of Noppawan, a friend's baby) as though grounding oneself in the mundane would make the continual shifting of the ground stable and themselves as everlasting monuments. But, he countered, what did he know? Artists might be introverted and anti-social by nature or just inclined to justify their enmity towards the world at large.

"Why shouldn't it?" said the Laotian [meaning why shouldn't their acquaintance become closer]. Nawin could not think of any reason to oppose this particular friendliness any more than to favor it, and so he stood there neutral to the dictates of fate. If he had been more of a non-anthropomorphic deist or anthropomorphic atheist, he would have believed in the significance of this coincidence of finding him here and it would have pressed into his mind with as much religious fervor as the secular could hold. Still as lonely as he was, although adverse to admit it, he just felt its significance without giving it credence.

"Do you still have my number in case you need it? You might when traveling in Laos."

"I Threw it away," Nawin admitted regretfully. And as he said this, ashamed of his own conduct, compunction bit into him like a rabid dog, and he felt friendlier towards the Laotian for accrediting him with a liberty that would not entail obligations to paint him or his family. Such moral obligations done to feel the injustice of the world and to allot money (in his case to pay them to model for a painting he did not care to draw out of a sense of pity).

"And yet we are here together. How strange. Sit down. Neither of us will be going anywhere in the rain." Nawin sat down on the wet bench next to the Laotian who wrote his telephone number out for him once again. Around them both was the mesmerizing sound of rain, now a more steady, less vehement pounding in the muddied inundation that surrounded Patuxay. With each new minute it was more like a lake instead of the elongated puddles he had seen minutes earlier.

There in the arch of the monument to the French replica, within the overarching sounds of the falling rain, he heard the sotto voce of a rotating squeak of a bicycle, the swishing of a boy's saturated sandals, and the solitary howl of a roaming stray dog. He watched the oval ripples reverberating around patches of random grass, the bathing of pigeons, the crawling of a worm at his feet, and that dog reaching out with two stretched paws to the solid overflow in the trash bin. It all seemed to him quite beautiful, sad, and fleeting.

Aimless as a transient, his was a melting of self into life and a conscious recording of that which imbued his senses. At this moment his life felt more replete in purpose since he was in the present moment, casting away the hopes and anxieties of the self entirely. Nawin breathed out, smiled and stretched as much as he could without touching the Laotian, content and relaxed in the inconsequence of existence. If there was meaning, he thought, it lay in the montage of what fell into one's senses and it did not need to be any more profound than this. He was thankful for money which was needed to provide for him in this transmutation as a homeless transient and observer of life but without stigma and free of onerous thoughts of what was needed for survival.

"It's me. In the train? Remember? I sat next to you I was—"

Nawin smiled warmly. "You were on the floor at my feet."

"That is not the best way of being remembered but yes, it was me. Please sit down." Nawin sat down on the damp bench.

"It is hard to find a comfortable position on a train, isn't it?"

"I didn't sleep well the night before."

"Why?"

"Financial worries, change, the thought of returning here. The two of you had a good time of it the night before. Sleepers and my brother's beer from what I heard."

"His beer? I wouldn't call it a gift. I gave him money afterwards."

"It didn't hurt you, did it?—I mean giving him something."

"No, I guess it didn't."

"It helped him. It helped us both to get back. What was left he gave to our parents. He would not have felt good about coming back if he had nothing to give."

"I understand. I didn't mind, really. It was a wonder that you slept at all."

"Why?"

"I think my feet were stinking. I even wanted to walk away from me." He lifted the pants legs on the foot that rested on his left leg and sniffed his sock. "Better now." She laughed and then he continued more somberly to reduce the chance of awkward silence. "Is there anything to see in this monument?"

"You can go to the top and look out over the city."

"Is it a nice view?"

"I don't know. I've never gone in. It would have to be better than from the ground. The stairs go to different levels outside but they might be rather slippery in the rain."

"Maybe not then." He had enough broken bones without taking on more risks. If only she had flaxen hair like Kimberly's, he thought, then he would not hesitate a moment. He would swoop her up in one hand and carry her up to the highest cloud.

"Will you go north to Luang Prabong?"

"I don't know. I am not really here to sightsee. Just here to simplify existence, relax—"

"Drink beer?"

"Wine preferably." Peace of mind was often facilitated this way. A Singha, a Leo, a Budweiser, a Heineken, and especially that most odious Beer Laos which he had drunk the other night which reminded him of his Barbarous brothers and father. He imagined them with cans in hands as they tried to stomp on his diminutive being while that which was maternal and good pretended it was not happening to him. Thus, in most situations, he eschewed the elixir of farmers and laborers.

"So, why are you sitting here?"

She tossed him an apple from the bag and bit into one herself. Then she smiled. "The Morning Market."

Maybe she had gone there but that did not explain why she was here. Maybe she was soliciting but then, he thought, in one way or another we all were. To do anything was to seek something from it discontentedly unless one lost himself in the present moment. She was a whore. They all were. But then when did he object to whores. They had been the holy light in his paintings, the instruments of his success. As the male beast was not any better than the female there was nothing for him to say. He just silently bit into her apple as though it were her nipple.

"Don't your parents grow any apples?"

"No, it's a rice farm. Only that."

"Are you staying with them now?"

"Yes, I didn't feel like I should continue to work in the factory when my brother lost his job."

"What will you do back here?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe we should go someplace else to talk. There must be a coffee shop around here."

"There isn't."

"Anywhere?"

"None that I have seen. This is Laos. But we can sit over there."

"There? You will get wet."

"I want to get wet."

They sat down at a bench in the rain away from the crowd that was cuddled in the arch.

"I've been thinking about hiring a personal secretary."

"Really?"

"What would you want one to do?"

"Right now not so much," he said as he bit into the stiff and the sweet, "as I haven't been doing anything really. But I'll paint again. There will be phone calls from galleries, bids that need to be recorded, negotiating prices so everyone makes some profit, messages from students if I give classes—but the only thing is that getting a visa for that might be difficult." An umbrella salesman came by. "Yes, two," said Nawin.

"One is enough."

"What is your name?"

"Porn."

"You have a beautiful smile," he said right before feeling his pockets in a rather desparate floundering. "Oh no," he said, "I think I left my wallet in the hotel. I need to go back."

"I'll go with you."

"Okay," he said and they ran hand in hand in the downpour. And when they were in the room at the Paris-Laotian Hotel they removed each other's wet clothes, he kissing those lips that had fostered such smiles and their bodies coupled in comfort and unified motion—

The daydream had come over him like the flash of Garuda passing, leaving him here with this Laotian male. Overall he did not want to speak with him. He did not want to be sociable for the sake of being nice with those who were envisaging some use for him. Human entities by their own solipsistic notions, tried to come in, take up root, to fill the space within others brains and grow within the fertile soil of money; and yet they existed in the world too, they were sentenced to this earthly prison the same as he, they too sought meaning and hope in others when there was nothing else to gain personal meaning from, and it was not as if he were pressed for time and was unable to socialize because of some great task that awaited his attention. Was it such an imposition to provide a bit solace to others ever so minutely in human discourse even though the need for money drooled out of their eyes more than even their mouths as was the case with this one?

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The gods had been misers and humidity like an over-packed storehouse continued to overflow onto the mortals of the deep— at least so the atheistic artist envisaged it for his own amusement while wondering why one had to personify abstraction to be amused. He ignored the answer seated next to him, the answer that this was all there was, that no idea could be personable, that being smiled upon incredulously was better than being banished in his brain. He looked up at a few dark clouds that seemed to shove out of the amalgamated unit to hover as separate entities beneath the mass. There was for him amity to be found in the effectual independence of this part of the sky that sought its own distinction. Within it there was a reflection of his own earlier struggles to extricate himself from poverty, conformity, and obscurity as if the cessation of all three would bring unto him happiness, whatever that was. Colors as vivid as those of the first crayon marks in boyhood had transmuted his black and white existence by allowing his transcendence into imagination; happiness was merely a contrast to the misery that preceded it. It was the type of pleasure gained at being saved from a near drowning, and in his case it was, in his ineffable sense of loss while wandering like a mute in foreign lands, a respite, which would make drifting, befriending clouds, and the wordless discourse of being raped in male sport, the only bearable intimacies.

At the jerk of his arm to avoid a persistent fly that seemed to want to go into a crevice of his cast sharp pain flared through his arm, and the whole of his right torso. He tried to suppress the pain to retain a phlegmatic countenance before the Laotian and he tried to suppress too, the misogynist thoughts that came upon him when reminded that his brokenness had come about because of women. In trying to separate himself from the brute impulses which were his protective aversion to pain, he realized that logic alone could not cull such feelings completely for despite his intention, women were already becoming for him an equal source of derision as men and, as they were women, surpassing them.

"What are the chances of meeting like this?" asked the Laotian as smoke propelled by a gust of wind came upon them in a gaseous fog. It was smoke from chicken and pork grilled at the hands of a sidewalk restaurant worker who, stiff and decrepit as the monument itself and a reminder, prescient and otherwise, of the type of man Nawin might have been had opportunity and success not come upon him (and the Jatupon he would one day be if only in thought within the last moments of his life), stood at the other side of the arched entry. It was smoke that he imagined to one day be his own cremated

smell as if living in a city, the most advanced odorless furnaces in a temple would not be available at his expiration—smoke that should have been of Kimberly's cremation according to her wishes had her parents not ordered the encoffining and refrigeration of her remains on a flight to Orleans—smoke of his mind.

The whole insoluble subject of human relations was baffling to him. Pursued as extensive involvements, these joint, often waning shadows of mutable beings mystified and overwhelmed him. Pursued as shallow engagements in small talk with strangers, concepts, at least for now, eluded him as he tried unsuccessfully to exhume words from his mind to talk with someone whom he had no inclination to know. Nawin shrugged his shoulders.

"One in a billion," said the Laotian answering his own question.

"Is that a fact?" asked Nawin diffidently for even those limited words had to be found and forcefully eduved from him and as such they fell upon each other in a stutter.

"Yes, one in a billion."

"One in a billion, okay," said Nawin and the Laotian laughed.

"You act like you've just seen light after being pulled out of a box."

"I've been alone a lot in recent days."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I need to get away from people."

"Maybe you just need to get away from the old people."

"Maybe. Anyhow..."

"Anyhow, one in a billion."

Nawin laughed. "If you want to see it that way: manipulation of all natural forces to ensure our reunion." He spoke flippantly with a smile. Arrogant and jocular, his was more than contempt of the concept of pre-destiny in relationships, it was also derision for the human vulnerabilities of needing companionship altogether as though he were beyond it. But he too was born of the herd. He, even more than most, had to climb onto the backs of laborers to get his physical needs taken care of so as to have the leisure to see ethereal beauty. Why, he chastised himself, was he trying to repel human contact? Such behavior, he thought, was as unnatural as was the proclamation of a self-declared retirement in a still robust and virile being.

Society equated the worth of a man with doing and most specifically involvement in the generation of a commercial product for what other purpose did man have on the planet than to work toward making the world a more comfortable place? He remembered Noppawan's initial reaction to his retirement. It had been favorable enough for to her. It meant a cessation of these perennial sessions with nude models. And yet with the days, weeks, months, and years of Buddhist melting in which he wandered back from a park or stadium for dinner or more frequently walked around his acreage and sat in lawn chairs to dispense with the hours, often without a book in his hands, what could be said to him? He was reticent for not having any terrestrial concerns to impart and so he was a cockroach on her plate, an ant in her salt shaker. He remained such except in fulfilling what she importuned from him most: studding her friend, Kimberly, so that the three might have a baby.

Surely his success had not been her only motivation for marrying him. When in adolescence that which was barely alive in him fell into her life, onto her shoulders, she closed him in her arms at that freakish friendship hall, the anatomical museum at Siriaj Hospital, and years later at their marriage, the girlish pathos for a troubled friend was within her still. However, as even more time went by so her life became inextricable with her sense of his success and it could not be any more comfortably extracted than that of her teeth.

"Are you waiting here for someone?"

"If someone comes, yes."

"And if no one does?"

Boi smiled. "Then I would eventually leave, wouldn't I?"

"I suppose so."

A couple of workers began to sweep water out of both sides of the arched entry. As Nawin watched these automatons and their redundant strokes he remembered one time when he went into the stadium to jog and dabble in studies toward a Ph.D. which he had no real interest to complete. There he saw a group of workers cutting down a small tree, sawing large portions into more manageable pieces, and carrying those pieces to a pile. The workers looked like an entire family with the variety of their ages and sexes. Two of the adults who were moving the pieces cajoled a small boy into believing that he was instrumental in removing the branches for as each was being lifted he would hold onto a bit of the center and they would praise his efforts. They were determining his fate by brainwashing him with positive reinforcement but at least, Nawin thought then, he would be content with his station in life. Who was to say that the boy when grown would not feel sorry for people like himself who did not know what to do with all the days of their lives.

A sales mendicant came by with a dozen or more umbrellas in his hand. "Do you want one?" Nawin asked.

"All of them. Then I can stand out here all day and have something to sell." The voice was not earnest and it engendered no sympathy.

"Two umbrellas please—any color, I don't care."

"100 baht," said the salesman. Nawin paid the money and handed one to the Laotian.

"I think you are selling something already."

The Laotian grinned. "Really? Are you wanting to buy?" He was. Ashamed of himself, Nawin looked down at the green sheen of water that now surrounded the monument. Its reflection seemed to sway and careen in the harmonious bombardment of the pellets of rain. More fluid than reality itself, the reflection would for a time seem permanently unsteady before evaporating entirely.

"No, maybe not," he said vaguely.

The Laotian chuckled. "No, Man, I'm here just because I got caught in the rain like you did."

Maybe it was true. Maybe the perverse fabrications of the mind when imparted by speech altered the intentions of the other party, distorting the fabric of probable outcome.

"Where is your sister?"

"On the farm planting, cleaning, cooking, getting water from the well, I don't know, I don't care, but she's probably thinking of you. Do you like her?"

"I don't know her. I don't think I have any real opinion." He paused thoughtfully and then said, "How do you mean?"

"I mean for a painting—of a country girl, rural life."

"I'm not sure."

"What about me?"

"For what?"

"For whatever."

"Whatever?"

"Whatever. A friend, maybe if you need one. I think that you do. You seem lonely."

"Who isn't? I'm okay with it."

"For a painting then. Will you draw me?"

"Okay, but remember commissioning a painting takes large sums of money. I don't think that's what you want. You just model and I'll get a gallery in Nongkhai to buy it when its done if art supplies can be bought here."

"It's the capitol. We have. Now tell me how."

"How what?"

"How would you paint me?"

"How do you want to be painted?"

"If you were to choose."

"Nude?" He phrased it as a question for had it been a statement it would have shown him as possessor of perverse inclinations he did not want him to know. It would have compelled him to be perceived as having the interests of an artist and natural proclivities of a man but with one or the other designated as the main ingredient. Judged favorably or otherwise, it would have been a predominant issue, altering roles and distorting the potential outcome of the interaction.

"I'm okay with it," he said. He was mocking Nawin's circumspect neutrality with a smile.

"I'm just kidding. What about your sister? I mean would she care to pose nude if you and your family don't have any objections to it?"

"Try. My sister, me, the water buffalo, and the chickens: you can draw us all nude if you like as long as my parents see something else instead. You don't need to pay us anything. Just come and stay for a while. Laotian hospitality."

"I don't know."

"Is traveling alone so much fun?"

"No, maybe not."

"There's so much road construction when it doesn't rain, dust in the air instead of smog, a small capitol instead of a very large one, but still a city. You've probably never even visited rural areas in Thailand, have you?"

"Not much."

"What happened to your wedding ring?"

"It was raptured from my finger, so to speak."

"Did you lose it?"

"It lost me."

"I think that you need company right now."

"Sure, what the hell," said Nawin. "Maybe I'd like to see you nude."

"I know you do," retorted the Laotian.

His discombobulated and desultory mind made his eyes alternate in momentary gazes between the rain and the flooded land beneath until, for variety, he looked at those who were within the arched entry of the monument as he was. He supposed that he should begin to see more of a commonality with those in his proximity than he did for he was feeling loneliness impale him albeit the loneliness of being in communion with another when not wishing to be so rather than that of a lone traveler to Laos, needing the company of others. It was the only salient loneliness that he knew, and the sudden recognition of this oddity or perhaps the coldness of being so wet made him shudder and want to believe in them as cognate beings which they undoubtedly were in the strict physical sense. But demigods and men all had heads and faces, torsos and limbs. Regular men even had feelings and thoughts in some proportional quantity even if it were a degraded quality that was at the dictates of their myopic needs and agenda at the time. So, although similar in that sense, he thought scornfully, there was little that was so remarkable in it.

List written for him; 5000 baht relinquished to him (2000 would not be enough, at least so the Laotian had claimed, as though he would know something about this matter; and the equivalent in kip, he said, would be confusing, which was undoubtedly true); the departure executed with the figure of the Laotian at a vanishing point around the Morning Market where supposedly he would obtain paint, brushes, canvasses, a sketch pad, charcoal pencils, an easel, and other material items so vital for painters obsessed in depicting the inner world that was demotically and mistakingly referred to as the "soul" and was inconsequential to the world at large. As body, the material produced inner

consciousness, "soul," perceived in the glint of the human eye, so base materials like those that the Laotian claimed that he would obtain produced "art" of an equally perishable substance, art of a relative, dubious quality that should not come from him, no not him, and especially now.

A man penetrating the virulence in the licentious might be thought of as sagacious when young but for an older man as he, to continue to draw these incessant, dirty pictures with their redundant themes, was foolish in its like of discernment even if, and by his painting he proved, that this was all there was. And yet he had agreed to paint him but the reason for doing so no facade of innocence could belie. He should be sitting next to that famous Phra Thuat Luang Stupa constructed in the year 1565 for the wisdom that might emanate from its gold and simplicity instead of hoping for—did he dare to admit it himself?—a *ménage à trois*.

But what was there to be wise about? That even a homeless dog needed recognition and extension, that ants summoned each other to carry a moth carcass up a tree, that creative inspiration was sexual, and philosophical ruminations were the morbid ponderings of the inconsequential and the brief, and that one wanted to live life fully and yet if rides, interaction (professional and personal), and reflections were the only ingredients he was not sure of the appropriate mixture.

If the unlikely happened as it sometimes did, and the Laotian were to return to this monument there would be the logistical problem of them getting the material to his parent's home; but no, there would be no chance of him buying the material and returning with it. He was no doubt running off with the money. Why wouldn't he be especially when it was so obvious that he wanted him to do so for otherwise he would have gone with him to obtain the supplies or would have obtained them by himself had he known where to go. By saying, "Well, if you want it that bad you can get it and I'll go up here" (meaning inside the copied French monument) both had made a contract that the fraud or casual, personal, embezzlement was permissible and that the Laotian could take the gratuity and do what he wanted with it.

If nothing else, giving this tiny bit of money had been a nominal act of redistribution for a principle of equity, and the Laotian merely an initial vehicle for transport. The money would be injected into their economy and so if the Laotian were to spend it on booze and women or seeds for the next crop it would be of no concern for him—at least so he told himself.

With all the whores he had drawn and played with by going into with a mental microscope and a condom a bit like a marine biologist scuba diving with an underwater camera in his hand he knew the ocean of human suffering inside and out, and drawing it he fed off of it symbiotically. If those around the monument now had jobs in 7-11 stores like those in Thailand (almost no convenience stores here, no nothing for sure) wouldn't they be happy? To forfeit 4000 baht, a hundred dollars, borrowed from various sources to pay the owner in the event of stealing something, an impossibility with video monitored stores, breaking something, as though a carton of milk had such a price, or running away, which of course they could do as modern day slaves with the power to walk away but no predominant will to do so, to work 14 hours a day for a mere five dollars, 170 baht; to be paid only if the acting manager liked his or her job performance and signed a document in Thai attesting this fact, they would be elated to gain such an opportunity.

Still seated on the now half-vacant bench of the monument, he was foundering inside himself in a melancholy that contaminated his bounty as an oil spill a lagoon. He loathed the inner vulnerabilities of the human creature that needed the ersatz of others for companionship (or at least confirmation when beyond the need of extension, and when thinking himself beyond confirmation still needing sexual contact to feel grounded in reality especially when spending so much time in his own head), and yet was amused by it all the same.

The relative silence was interrupted by plaintive, orphic sounds of a flute played by a uniformed high school student who sat stiffly on the steps leading into the monument. Sometimes stridently off key the music was made all the more euphonious for the errors. Truer than inadequate words at reflecting thought, the tune was pure feeling like a Moslem call to worship and it seemed to slither onto the athiest's soul comfortably enough as though that which was desolate and discordant in mortal man who lost everything and everyone Heraculutusly including innocence and the various stages of development that trod upon it was a ubiquitous leitmotiff, a black light one had to bask in for his own good, human bondage not executed onto him alone but done uniformly and impersonally to all.

It seemed to him odd that unlike Bangkok, this Communist bastion seemed to be conspicuously absent of overt beggars. He had expected the same maimed, exploited mendicants whom gangsters, eager for profit that could be coerced by sympathy, mutilated by cutting off limbs and tortured by subjecting these dysfunctional amputees of body and mind to the hopelessness of begging on the streets. Still in smaller quantities there was no paucity of human misery here: separately older men without vocation and with glazed eyes gazed onto rain that, for the most part, they probably did not

consciously register; salesmen stood aimlessly behind fruit and noodle carts that were instruments of servitude and sustenance they were invisibly chained to; and hack tradesmen from shoe repairmen to homemade broom salesmen sought refuge from the rain not only for themselves but for that which they were peddling. It occurred to him that in some ways he had wanted to see unprecedented misery and that this was why he had come here instead of picking up his airline ticket and flying into San Francisco as he had planned. Perhaps this was why he had forfeited a return to a country of which he entertained a vague childish memory not of love in family but of hope that there was such a thing. The early times of stripping to his underwear and diving off piers into the Chao Phraya river with his brothers had proven the concept of family to be ever so brief.

Friendship—an act to seek out one like himself for confirmation of his ideas and behavior as correct or having some consistency in the world at large—this was that which he had hoped for when he bought the ticket to Nongkhai. He believed that here he would witness unprecedented suffering and in that sponge of his heart he would absorb it and burst like the clouds above. It was his belief that it would be better to die of a heart attack with eyes wide open instead of bit by bit by withdrawing into his shell of pachydermatous affluence and indifference as he moved about in this world of suffering. He watched the dark billowing clouds not from above but below reflected in the turgid green sheen of the expanding puddles that in this perennial rain formed of the ground a lake. He listened for reflections in the deluge and the inundation of water he stared into. It croaked surreally with no visible evidence of that which produced the sound, as if the water itself were transforming into toads—but then this was a reflection too, another distortion of the mind.

No, he did not expect him to return nor did he want him to but that was from wanting him to so badly. If he did not return there would be but the self, he and his thoughts droning on unnoticed to others like scrapings on the wall of a cell of solitary confinement, graffiti under a rock, thought under the rock of the skull that closed him off like the tomb did Christ. No, there was not a chance in the world of seeing him again and it was as he wished it to be—at least that which was rational in him wished it to be.

And again, if instead of using the money for more constructive purposes the Laotian were to buy beers and whores with it, the money would be in circulation in this communist bastion of basic sustenance and mild deprivation instead of being an inconsequential part of an astronomical sum in his savings back home, a vehicle for some degree of equity in this world where one would be better off to pluck out his eyes to stay ignorant about such matters. Loss of this money would be an invisible extraction from his savings, an easy riddance.

This rational element schemed was as pretentious an affectation as the clothes he wore—or any clothes for that matter. This boy, the Laotian, whom he mentally labeled as Boi 1 (to make a distinction with the other) was another self delusion, another lie. Both were bodies and he had an inexorable yearning to see this Boi 1 naked, to devour and be devoured in wetness, unity, and sensation with him.

He could say all he wanted as justification for giving him that money. He could claim the pretension that from giving it he hoped it would expiate him of the gross insensitivity of being affluent in this world of suffering and doing nothing about it, but really he wanted him to return, he wanted the paint ordered and delivered, he wanted an excuse to draw him and record his beauty and his nakedness, to shut out the world in bliss with him, to be in a ménage a trois with him and his sister in a euphoria of gluttonous devouring.

If the Laotian were to return with the supplies or a receipt for them, a scenario he could hardly imagine, it would further solidify a contract begotten of seemingly inconsequential words and bits of paper currency, the substance of contracts; they would be in this union and its ensuing obligation of him to paint one or another of the members of this rural Lao family even though the subjects and themes this would pertain to were yet unknown to him. He would stay with them until he completed his task, rural, sodden and destitute as they were, no doubt sleeping on the planks of a wooden shack if not on a dirt floor once again, drinking boiled tea colored tap water or worse mixed with lemon juice, eating once a day as they did, consuming rice with fish sauce or salt sometimes mixed with an ant egg curry and a few boiled vegetables purchased cheaply as they were on the verge of rotting, somtam, chicken, noodles, boiled eggs, sticky rice and mangos of the more wealthy almost as exotic as French cuisine, and out of respect to them ostentatious, flickering gold would no longer adorn his brown skin to replace his slave collar of plaited noodles and in lieu of the yellow plastic wrist band of mindless King Rama myrmidons who also wore yellow T-shirts with royal insignias on Mondays and Fridays the thousand dollar wrist watch would have to be deposited obscurely into his luggage. But were this stranger to desert him, should he in his loneliness be desperate enough to conceptualize it as such, there would be the continuation of this freedom from others, expectations of him just as he wanted,

despite any neediness to the contrary, an uncompromised, unadulterated self in surfeit, in which even the painting of internal and external worlds was perceived not as expression but as a blurring or smudging of the true self by form and colors; and there would be more of the same unbearable loneliness, and emptiness. He thought this as he heard thunder in the distance of the passing storm and in an undercurrent of thought recalled explanations of thunder and lightning posed by adults, those pleasant lies of childhood that after all this time he had for the most part forgotten, memories unused that without imagining the way they once were, fell apart with pieces scattered in disarray and sometimes lost entirely, unable to be found again, void recollections of the mind.

If left alone he would be a cactus flowering obscurely touched by nothing except the ravaging sandstorms within, an ascetic monk whose insights would languish within the intact internal life of a temporary being, a fetus barely alive in a dead woman's body—if this were really what he wanted. If the Laotian did not return he might continue to have the pleasant company of his thoughts provided he held reign over their restive movements and they were directed mostly toward some external aim instead of a constant churning of old redundant ideas and ghosts of memory haunting him with their illusionary palpability as though that which had been could be grasped still. Alone here in Laos, a foreign land, there was plenty that was novel to explore and by being a sole traveler, his will, his uncompromised agenda, would be exactly as he wished it to be. And if in this solitary journey he were to become unbearably lonely, wishing to do god knows what with this family and unable to do so, his consolation would be that he had given money to those who no doubt needed it. But apart from putting into practice an egalitarian principal which gave him some satisfaction (pleasure always being the positive reinforcement of an action never to be pursued unto itself but giving personal meaning to virtuous action) there was nothing so personal in it.

No, he sought only to draw his base nakedness and feel that erect body against his own. He wanted to be intoxicated by the molecular exchange of kissing a man like yearning for a bite from a water monitor, an animal that was rife at the Silpakorn University campus in Nakkon Pathom, and to ride and be ridden to launch his sensations out of his mundane, incarcerating, gravity-bound subjugation.

There was more of the distant thunder. It was like a homeless bottle collector pushing an unwieldy cart away from him or, if it could be transmuted to sound, that of a man repudiating his own impecunious past. Hadn't that faded memory of a mother once told him that thunder was a diamond falling from some goddess when struggling in the heavens against a diminutive monster?—he could not remember any of the specifics; hadn't some uncle in the United States of America, the country of his birth, once told him that thunder was the sound of Thai monkeys angrily tossing coconuts from coconut trees in the hope of getting to the bananas? He remembered that in his naivety and love of his nativity he had fused the two stories together. He smiled ruefully as all variety of family was now gone from him, its ephemeral nature expedited by circumstance and choice. It occurred to him how quickly the child within could penetrate the veneer of a man, and by resurfacing, claim hegemony over adult thoughts. It might give way to them altogether were it not for the need to make a living in a role that in some minute way was a propulsion of human existence—not that seated on park benches or the equivalent for the past three or more years of his self-proclaimed retirement, tolerating his wife's looks of disrespect and thus bonding all the more with Kimberly in due course, he had performed many roles over the past few years...he had merely fathered a son. But of 6 billion people on the planet, how would he know that his assumptions of self were applicable to them? He could not even prove the dominant child trapped in the veneer of manhood for himself, let alone others, when from one minute to the next he was a different being entirely thinking different thoughts or seemed so as any object in variant angles of light. Maybe this assumption just related to those whose childhood, despite some sublime moments, was overall harrowing, or maybe it was merely his own idiosyncrasies.

Nawin was gazing out to a sidewalk that was across the bifurcated street that veered into many directions around the Arc de Triomphe replica, and he was ready to move toward it. He was just about ready to stand up and walk away. As the Laotian would not be returning there was no need to sit here further. Furthermore, he was hungry and wanted the steam of coffee to make him into a new man. Then he suddenly felt a tap on his shoulder, human warmth, the sense of belonging to this sorry specie. The Laotian handed him a receipt. "It should be delivered by tomorrow afternoon."

"All of it?"

"I think so."

"To your home?"

"Yes unless you want me to have him deliver it to a hotel room.
You don't have one?"

"No. I was thinking about checking into the Paris Laos Hotel. I saw it earlier in passing. Any change?"

"No."

"It came to 5000 even?"

"Its on the receipt."

"That doesn't mean much."

The Laotian smiled. "I didn't write the receipt. Did you go up into the monument."

"No, just stayed here. What's up there?"

"I don't know. What's up there? Poor people trying to sell their trinkets, souvenirs if you want to call it that. Junk for westerners to remember their trip to Laos. All of it is the same as in Thailand. Nothing that would interest you unless you want a little better view of the city."

"I see. Then I guess not."

"You don't want to be a spectator of poverty?"

"No, I've seen plenty of that and I guess I'll be seeing more if I stay with you."

"Of course. Let's do it."

37

A third person, an older man with a handkerchief on his head, trudged hurriedly by. Had it been Bangkok, this individual would have needed to shove through umbrellad cell phone using laggards jamming pedestrian movements, but here in this village of the national capital there was nothing to curtail his movements so, even as decrepit as he was, he disappeared as dirt down the makeshift gutter that was the declivity of the entirety of road. Then there was a forth, a monstrosity of four animated legs walking toward them, a bodiless unit of Siamese twins under a sole umbrella that in passing was shown to be of separate beings, male and female counterparts, much younger than he was, and, in a state of subdued happiness, much more naïve than he could ever recall being.

Even happiness like this will not last, he thought solemnly with a sense of sympathy for these distinct individuals beginning to prevail over a bit of jealousy at the innocence of youth which had glimpsed him with his cynical countenance and he them before receding behind him, the memory relegated to the region of the brain where all inconsequential sensory input was assigned. Then despite his intention he vaguely recalled that ingenuous sense of a belief in euphoric, all-pervasive love emanating from the attraction of two beings, that feeling he could not entirely repudiate, a feeling he once had toward his brother. After this particular perversion (all sexual acts a perverse blend of imagination and the tactile and so the more usual of them also perverse but not a perversion in the usual meaning of the word, or so he justified it to himself), he had not felt it since. But then as one who had perpetual notoriety as a womanizer, a provocative offense and humiliation to any wife, he had to admit that he did not know of the longevity that might be maintained in a relationship—he who thought that marriage to an anthropologist whose features were buried under thick glasses would be beyond the atavistic jealousy of troglodytic females waiting anxiously for the hunter to arrive with his meat, baby's bone marrow, and bananas, and his penis that should only be hers, he who did not know that every woman was also a woman in instinct and reaction.

Then, again, there was just the two of them continuing to walk silently on a stretch of vacant sidewalk cleansed of the litter of dogs, each under separate umbrella aegis, each in his own direct or askance manner watching the energy of the pellets of rain reverberate in oblique and diminished circular ripples in puddles near their feet. Still independent, he had ample opportunities to say that he had changed his mind and that upon consideration he had decided that he should not forfeit his travels for the laborious task of painting rural life, which had not been part of his agenda but that which he, the Laotian, had imposed upon him and he himself had accepted to seem amiable to him and less anti-social to himself. That was a cluster of words that if spoken would have made the contract of earlier utterances void, allowing immediate freedom from obligation. The words came to his mouth and languished there until death. He could not open the prison gates and release them. No, he yearned for him too much.

He was not part of the four legged monstrosity under a sole umbrella, nor hand in hand at this early stage of their acquaintance (not that with a male he would have found that acceptable at any stage, for to be seen to be free to be queer would allow the public to pigeonhole him, exacerbating that which was in him as it had before to the painter of prostitute studies) and yet he was wishing for the

implausible nonetheless. If holding hands belied the existence of two separate entities, belief in such a fusion, a more plausible delusion in heterosexual relationships where one might have proof of a merger on a sheet of paper and a baby byproduct as the burden of bouncing on bedroom mattresses, was vastly less credible than one of naked sportsmen at a bit of wrestling.

For in this plain of existence where all was an illusion, one could only use logic to maneuver himself into the most plausible of situations. He did not know what he was thinking as he walked beside him past the morning market and the Paris Laos hotel which he had passed before. They would not become nude sportsman at a bit of wrestling for the victory of pleasure rather than the pleasure of victory, which was the norm for the clothed players. As far as he knew, this was a brother and sister whom he met on a train and whose only interest in him was platonic. They just wanted to earn a little money by becoming models. That was a rather innocuous wish, which he was in part fulfilling because he was not absolutely sure that doing nothing all the years of his life was any more constructive than the motions of birds in flight, tires of vehicles rolling, and sorry herds (even outdoor custodian sweepers pulling plastic trash barrels on wheels toward a destination) consumed in roles and agenda which gave artificial meaning to their lives.

No, he wanted him. He wanted to be in the Laos Paris hotel with him. There were so many irrepressible whims that came over a man blinding him within a blizzard of heat and titillation. Overhead the sky seemed to be clearing. Various lower clouds which seemed to have the outline of vultures within them were eager to move ahead of the dissipating mass. Like individuals shoving through the crowds to swoop in the descent of agenda, so were the lower clouds and so it seemed to him now was the Laotian. He seemed eager to take him someplace.

"Is your home very far out there?"

"Rather. No. I don't know. It depends on what you mean. We'll try to get there before darkness overtakes us." But what if darkness and rusticity was what he wanted. Surely murders happened in communist countries, and if so, it seemed to him that they would occur most frequently in rural desolation when military police or some such comrades were not watching. His gold should have come off neck and wrist before he crossed the border. It should have come off his earlobe before he got on the train. For a man to turn forty and yet to continue to try to appear half that age was absurd. An earring in a young man was a symbol of rebellion against the world, and an expression of latent homosexual impulses yearning for an opportunity to exude; it was somewhat acceptable in one who was experimental and lacking self-knowledge yet bold in his attempts to gain it—one who, dissatisfied with the world, had not yet made his own world.

"And what would you get from it: a painting or money?"

"Why not both?"

"Why not the moon. Life doesn't work that way."

"If you think the painting is good and you can sell it, pay the models. If not, don't. Draw a little something for my mother to make her happy—it being her birthday and all. Besides, for cooking and washing your dirty underwear that seems like the decent thing to do."

Nawin smiled. To merge into a family, to have a home when he except in extraneous matters of documents averring him as proprietor, was homeless, was that which he sought and wanted to hear. But then there were the bodies and the odors that exuded from them, questions as to whether one loved the bodies or the molecules that they emitted, quandries and riddles for a man, that like it or not, stank in multiple forms of neediness fetid as his brothers strewn socks, the scent of monsters that fluttered all about in his brain.

Friend, acquaintance: he was not quite sure which word he should categorize him under, or if the relationship were more than superficially amiable. For what he knew, walking as he did beside him when less flooded pavement permitted, and behind him when situations warranted, he was being led into outlying areas for ostensible reasons that belied the plan of shooting, stabbing, or bludgeoning him to death, which he would have invited upon himself. As touching poles warning of imminent electrocution had been a temptation earlier, so now, he concluded, he was stroking death from a more gregarious angle and no one would be to blame but himself if his early demise were to occur because of it. A gilded collar on a dog of burnt umber was still a dog and a collar. Absurdly in coming here, gold still hung from his neck, dangled from a right earlobe and as the thousand dollar Swiss watch that adorned his wrist. Like a billboard flaunting opulence and reminding others of inequalities the culprit would be the billboard itself rather than the man who brought it down. And all to undo the dog by

flaunting a glittering symbol of *savoir-vivre*. Now that he considered it, it was a wonder that he had gotten through the previous night intact only having to pay a thousand baht salary, penitence for his soiree with an underage male who had been the stranger of his strange, intimate encounter. He did not know this individual whom he was walking with, but then he obviously did not know the childhood friend whom he had married and who had bludgeoned him with an iron skillet. People were such amorphous blobs that changed shape with the years and when confronted with the brevity of their own lives. That did not totally displease him. It made them more the pitiful mysteries that were the subject of his art and empathy. From humanism to materialism, their digressions and mutations were simply a need for permanence and significance. His wife, a scholar, had maternal instinct as her quest for permanence, her art and if for years now she had been building her empty nest, he had never blamed her but handed over money for these perennial renovations that gave her happiness in the midst of her sadness.

Friend or acquaintance, potential lover or murderer, it did not matter as the situation of enjoying the company of another was pleasant and merely being with someone irrepressible to one in such a somber state of mind. If crimes did occur in this communist country it seemed to him that they would happen in bucolic surroundings far from the scrutiny of the officers sitting in tiny police boxes on every corner of this village capital, and that if his demise were to occur at human hands it would be no different from the Pyrrhic viruses and cancer that killed incidentally, or even the immune system which was a killer in its own right. It seemed to him that there was little point in concerning oneself with the inevitable and the ineluctable; and it was indeed ineluctable for a man continually slipping and falling under the weight of retrogressive memories to seek companionship at some stage of despair within his self containment rather than to tolerate one more minute in solitude and thought. It occurred to him that he was in a state of needing to be befriended by a serial killer and he laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing." He smiled.

"What?"

"Just the crazy thoughts in one's head. That's all," he responded evasively.

The two men closed their umbrellas, and each jumped respectively onto a large rock that nudged out of a turbid, fetid pool on a sunken area of sidewalk, and then made a second and broader leap to drier pavement. Straws in small bags of coca cola that each had in his right hand jiggled with phallic looseness as did their singular and murky reflections in passing over the inundated sidewalk. He could now see at a distance the bald muddied area of the bus terminal with its dilapidated secondhand buses that, according to the travel guide, had been given by the Japanese government to the retarded capital as a gesture of friendship, buses that would take them outside Vientiane albeit for him without any good reason for except for this sharp prodding feeling of needing to be with someone. It seemed that he was receding into an earlier Thailand and an earlier self, and that after so many weeks of travail (so many years really), that he was now happy that he was dirty, poor, and free as a seven year old boy in the company of brothers at a pier.

Then they saw two dogs and themselves. Two dogs dogged by cravings and two men suddenly in rapt attention around the copulating beasts. It was the mating of common four legged creatures and yet they did not seem to mind: sexuality was the mounting of another form for pure pleasure (conquest of pleasure and the pleasure of conquest) that would be exempt of suffering and thought, the forced intimate exchange with a female, the forced intrusion and annexation of a cave, a feminine domain by which in sexual contact, the male animal, having nothing and bereft of all, asserted a declaration of ownership against a weaker mortal, a fertile being of obdurate will from which there was an exciting possibility of fertilized union and untoward pregnancy; and even from outside in witnessing another species and the action performed by it, it was a ubiquitous reminder of real life denuded of brand name pretense and mesmerizing for this fact alone. This bitch was still alarmed by the swelling and gyrating of the body part still extended into and locked within her, and she continued to jerk in various futile positions in the hope of extricating herself from this peculiar alien fusion, which before ejaculation, insemination, and probable gestation—with a new alien hijacking her body—was impossible. It reminded him of those that he had seen in a more willing communion a few weeks earlier on Pinklao Street. Cars and motorcycles had swerved around them, those varmints that had been using their instruments of vile urination for pleasure, and in so doing inadvertently achieving for themselves nominal immortality amongst tortuous shoppers like him who had come out of Central Department store off an opulent cloud of various exits to the bathos of the gritty and the pornographic. For him it had been amusing and, while going to the parking garage, there had been a sheepish grin on his face. Like any male he had gazed at the exhibitionists and the duality of rapture beyond that of any female counterpart leaving the mall; like any artistic mutant of a man who from his own abused childhood

pursued brothel studies as though he were an astrophysicist on the verge of a singular theory. He had gazed at the varmints and their apotheosized obscenity, vile and natural, until its completion, far longer than other men exiting the mall.

And yes, he who had an affinity for dogs left to reproduce in Bangkok streets and obviously elsewhere in Southeast Asia so gratuitously, an affinity for them that perished with the overseers' knowledge and without the least compunction, would wish to see them in drooling rapture rather than in grueling rupture. Both scenes, then and now, reminded him that instinctual cravings were such a compulsion in man and dog that for it, this frenzy, this euphoric escape, they would risk death. Such was the insanity of it all—all this programming to replicate beings with no purpose beyond replication itself, unless it were the animation of inanimate elements that they neither saw nor wanted to see, as they each, in separate moments, lowered their umbrellas to jump onto a rock when the rain was a mere sprinkle and continued their destined walk, this movement toward open body bags, coffins, and urns that waited patiently for them in their myopic and only half-believed sense of immortality.

"Nice, isn't it?—one of the best sites that we in Laos pride ourselves on, and show to all our rich travelers—dogs doing it."

"Well, its rife in life. I couldn't expect anything better—here or elsewhere."

"Good, then its impossible to disappoint you. There's not much here, I must admit. La Prabang is better. Maybe I'll take you to a few temples and stupas in Vientiane—La Prabang even—before you return to Bangkok."

"It's okay, I don't mind. Seeing sites—it's not what I'm after."

"What are you after if you don't mind telling me? Why did you want to come Vientiane, anyway?"

"That's Complicated," he said ineffably for how could the wish to escape inordinate grief be expressed? He merely stood there not from bravery but from the confusion of a mute animal, numbly feeling this hot iron branding of the forehead, this incommunicable set of feelings, and these memories fading to abstractions with every new day, but there at this distance beckoning him nonetheless. The number he was, the more he could function, not that bereft of agenda, he needed to do anything apart from engaging in a departure that he hoped would bring him peace of mind.

The Laotian kissed him on the cheek taking in the sides of the lips and transferring his molecules therein.

"My new brother," he said ironically. "He keeps wanting to sweep up a pile of dirt that blew away long ago. Forget your past. You are a guest in my home and I usher new beginnings for you."

He tried to thank him but the words would not come out. How could he thank someone for this betrayal of his intention. Although an invitation to the possibility of fraternity, family, and a consistency of human presence which for sanity he was deemed to need, his body yearned not for true intimacy but true illusion. He wanted him as his lover, the lever for the fuel of his testosterone, dopamine, adrenalin, and serotonin which would be extinguished at ejaculation like the falling of a bottle rocket. Thus he stayed silent.

He sensed that this imparted kiss was deliberate in its ambiguity; that his stare was a spotlight; and that his grin was one of gaining satisfaction from not disclosing all that he knew. He sensed, although he was not quite sure how, that his thoughts were being discerned: that this friend knew of his womanly sensitivity, knew of the desperate scraping on the walls of the cells of his brain, of the outlines of faces of family and friends lost to him—an action like art to compensate for diminishing memories, of his unsteady scaffolding on the verge of imploding from the loss of entire foundations of youth, of this resistance of selfish impulses that compelled lesser men to father child laborers and others sons that would be extensions of themselves at their demise, of the perception he had of women as obsessed to have a nest in which to breed birdies that once grown would in the best of circumstances cause the second dissolution of family, of this conviction that the male entity was always being used by women, and even more, of nature itself, which coerced a man in the lure of replete pleasure and the barely manageable impulses that were its precursor. Just as on the train he believed that the Laotian and his sister knew of his attraction toward him, so now he was reading his deeper thoughts. Maybe it was the sagacity to notice the slightest expressions in a countenance that was under the influence of mood. Maybe when a man was not given an opportunity to learn from books, his scholarly pursuits were merely to gain the skill to accurately judge the essence of a man for his own use. Nawin on impulse, wanting to do rather than think, and yearning for a contract with another being rather than the circumspect reticence and insular freedom of being alone was willing to risk opprobrium rather than having to play more of this game of the straight and narrow, opened and tilted his umbrella over the

Laotian and kissed him fervently. He was not sure after these brief seconds were complete if the lips of the other party had at any point pressed into his own reciprocally or were just that of a victimized passive agent compelled into action by the rape forced upon them. Aloof and disconcerted, amused and perplexed, the Laotian smiled at him wryly. In so doing it made this fraternal role seem feigned.

"You don't mind?" he asked him.

"I don't mind anything," the Laotian said

"Here's a hotel room. We could stay together until morning."

"You and I together?"

"If you want?"

"I want. I really want. But another day. I want to get you home."

39

Except for brief durations, he had not slept much the previous night. He had been preoccupied by belated concerns over his actions with the intimate stranger and an obsession to purge the travail of abused childhood by placing himself in similar scenarios so as to anoint the visceral wounds with seething pleasure. He had been besieged with worries about the possible theft of his wallet from the drawer of the night stand in the room of the guest house, and yet now he would willingly give away the money he had and the bands of gold that he wore which separated him from others of the swarthy, befouled herd, for an opportunity to sleep. He had this strange, recurrent idea that everything he had with him and all of his material possessions, assets, and estates in Bangkok were irrelevant. The idea resonated with a drowsy philosophical truthfulness that belied an organism's necessity to thrive at the expense of common laborers. It seemed to him (not that as tired as he was he could trust his ideas) as though, in a world of poverty where the true crime lay in the paucity of theft, such possessions were not his to begin with. If in being taken into the country he ended up murdered, his throat slit and that which he had taken from him, in some ways it would be a justified hypercorrection.

His sensory impressions did not seem to be fully registered, making every few minutes of "reality" shift around on their own Teutonic plates. The sensory input which made its way to the printmaker of the mind to be copied and filed in memory for future reference (ideas and situations unclear to be sketched in artfully, deceitfully, self-delusively, and credulously with his own fabrications) were, in this state, the faintest of reproductions and made him have difficulty seeing and understanding let alone embellishing, believing, and categorizing content. His consciousness awry, at certain seconds the world seemed to have become an ethereal haze and he sensed himself on a slippery precipice of the declension of the foundation of self, which one only feels in the asphyxiation of loneliness. Twice he stumbled as he walked. The second time he did so the Laotian laughed.

"You all right, old man?" he asked.

"Yeah I'm fine. Tired but okay—except for that comment."

"You don't like it?"

"No, not particularly. I mean for my taste its all right—unique (of course, when reconsidered and taken less personally he who mentally referred to King Bhumibol in English as "King Booby"— he who has become affluent by exploiting the inner worlds, the souls, of prostitutes in his nude "studies"— would hardly be one to espouse etiquette).

"But not respectful?"

"No, not respectful." East Asian society, in public so deferential of age, in private hearts expressed a more human reaction. It was the same repulsion for mental and physical deterioration, lack of stamina, and loss of beauty, essences of life that vanished with the years.

"Not a thing to do to a guy who is still sensitive about having turned forty, of having experienced his birthday all alone on a train."

"A birthday boy? Why didn't you tell us?"

"I don't know. Didn't I?" he spoke indifferently. "I don't remember. At any rate you gave me a beer on the train. That was like a gift I suppose. I could go for some coffee now. They have that here?"

"Where?"

"Laos. Vientiane."

"We're not jungle monkeys," said the Laotian. Nawin smiled warmly. Of course they were but how pleasant that they were endeavoring to be more.

"Forty, are you? So young," continued the Laotian. "And if we had known we would have made you a cake. We would have, you know?"

"Would you have? And how would you have made one in a train?"

"I don't know. There were stops. I could have scraped together something. Kemiga and I used to make mud pies when we did the baby thing together."

"Your sister's name?"

"Yes. You liked her, didn't you?"

"She's pretty. Do you do the baby thing with her now?"

"The baby thing?" he scoffed, turned red in embarrassment, and became reticent with face looking downward as if the breeding dogs that they had seen in passing were still before them.

"Playing around upon occasion, sure, but no baby things. We've outgrown that. Anyhow we better hurry. Its getting late."

At first the conversation brought Nawin reassurance. The relationship was amicable enough and he was content to be in company that kept him sheltered from being denigrated and reviled in his own thoughts, which rained down upon him. Then he thought of the abrupt petulant shift of the conversation to a tacit moodiness and the Laotian suddenly seemed grotesque and alien to him; the scenario of leaving the city limits with him vastly peculiar; that peculiarity seeming as if it were happening to someone else or viewed from a static television broadcast; and although acknowledging that all strangers remained such, unless communicated with and entrusted to be more, he wanted to flee the unknown cravenly and return home on that train which had taken him here.

It was the obdurate will of man that feigned reality to begin with and the weathering forces of drowsiness that loosened the elements allowing their essence to scatter like an empty shell smashed and falling through a fist. This was the quintessential truth of or lack of reality. And yet as he was beckoned to return home by ghosts of the past, corpses now resuscitated and moving to the foreground of his brain as if alive and relevant after so much time and so many changes, he was still gravitating forward toward the Laotian.

Conclusions about the world had subtly assembled in the back of his brain in the course of his life, conclusions repudiated at other times for the need to think positively and to make the world his home for lack of a choice of another, slipped through barriers of his mind to the forefront of his brain. His thoughts were in anarchy; and if drowsiness allowed tiny viral thoughts to enlarge and escape the subconscious, the weary consciousness of the mind exaggerated the extent of the mutation, the brain looking at individual thoughts as mirrors from an amusement park. He saw sparse motorcyclists, drivers, and pedestrians as their true figurative form of human vultures, and yet he did not mind for, as insular as he now was, to have his corpse clawed, scraped off, and devoured by beasts would be a most welcome act of intimacy.

He did not understand the reasons why he continued on this journey with the Laotian (this train stranger's lure of him, or the vulnerability that made him succumb to his will and agenda as if social contracts were always done in weakness and human relationships always pursued with the objective of attainment in mind), and yet he walked with him all the same. Was it simply for cock sweet on the sweetened cock vine? he posited derisively. Maybe there was the hunger for the sensual and the molecular in the attraction but for it to be only this would be a vast oversimplification. In part he was invigorated as much as a sleep deprived man could be by having crossed over the border, with his life just hours earlier seeming closed off to him now; in part it was to be with someone who could look beyond the playboy contrivances of art and life to see the soul of the atheist, the abused child beneath the man—yes, that was the lure over him but as with all things, such firey hungers came from within and were not ignited by extraneous forces without. Early childhood experiences were the arsonist, and the tower of his manhood would burn to a final implosion hoping for one who could fan ebullient flames or put him out entirely.

And of this second Boi, the Thai from Nongkai who claimed that he had come into the restaurant of the guesthouse because of the heavy rain, this unknown boy who already seemed as a passing dream, a wet dream, an evaporated being or residual abstraction oozing out of the furthest corners of memory,

would he, Nawin, really have paid for his education? Overall he believed that if a letter, an email, or a phone call were to come to him resurrecting the abstraction into a living being once more, he would help him. But without sleep he hardly knew anything about himself for sure—he was like some piece of discarded trash bobbing superficially on weltering waves. He surely would help him as he had done for ladies of the night and other women whom he drew, rode, and drew once more but that fact alone did not speak well of him. Doing something pleasant for that which brought him pleasure seemed only a means to keep the pleasure coming. No, he retracted, his motives were not as bad as this. He might not be the greatest altruist or philanthropist in the world but as a man who knew it all, had suffered it all, and could easily imagine the travails of the inner lives of others, it was his obligation to correct injustices where and when he saw them. Only a lunatic sought injustices to paint or rectify, but if one alleviated the suffering that came before him and his adumbration, his life would have true worth. But what phone calls would he receive? He had thrown his telephone into the large trash can at the Hualamphong train station, so it was not as if he would get any telephone calls. Address? He was homeless. Deeds that he owned were merely paper, joint property due to his marriage license, or so he assumed, not that attempting the eviction of wife and son had ever entered his mind. To think of them ensconced eased his mind. Email? As an artist and lecturer, he had allowed one of his students to maintain these secretarial duties. Now his account at Silpakorn University, home of the Silpakorn University Swamp Monster, the roving land and water monitor, had email galore to which he would never be able to get through all alone even if he cared to try.

What did he know? He hardly knew anything—just that he was walking with the Laotian, that a bus depot of some sort was before them, that the possibility of an amorous interlude had fallen behind some moments earlier like a handkerchief from his back pocket, and that from night to day that which could be dissolved into location had become nothing. As all things in the course of time weakened, diffused, and were absorbed by the next behemoth event, so was rapacious emotion, more illusory and immaterial than anything else, and instinctual hungers that were corporeal delusions of intimacy to, more times than not, foster pregnancy, would be all the more fleeting. Now the nearest hotel was blocks behind them, and here they were.

It was like a fallow pasture for the grazing of these mountable but crippled mammoths. They were used busses that were supercilious hand-me-downs from Japan to a world capital bereft of so much. Often there needed to be multiple attempts at the ignition key to get them started, but once revived, these monsters constantly exuded and spewed their noxious and intoxicating flatulence.

He entered deep into the underbelly of one that would take him to the poverty and destitution of the masses out of city limits and illusions. If Bangkok was an opulent deception of rural life he hardly knew what would lie before him away from the antiquated, rustic capital of Vientiane; but he knew that it would be rife in life, and something far truer and more pervasive than his impoverished existence as the son of a sidewalk restaurant proprietor in Ayutthaya. He did not know of any reason for what he was doing; but at least he was living life by actually doing something. And whether or not he would find it more of a positive experience than a negative one, as encounters with women opening up their reeking legs for him, was yet unknown.

It was an adventure to which the outcome was uncertain; but as it was an adventure; at least it had the pleasantries of this component, which was sought most ardently by those who could not rest in their own company, if nothing more substantial. But then with so much that was deceased around him, meaningful relationships decomposing on the mound of earlier rot, he would have to be truly pachydermatous to not feel an impact from that which might seem extraneous. And when the inside was shaken with all in rubble, of course he would have to leave his domicile. He had mistakenly believed that during most of his time in Laos he would be sitting in some park or another reading a volume of essays on Buddhism or art, and when glancing up at the sky he would hear nothing within and without but the gentle rustling of pages turned by the fingers of the wind. Instead he heard evacuation sirens within the city of the mind.

And here he was exiting Vientiane. It was hard to believe that he had actually been in the capital. The city had monuments and a few signs in English elucidating Laotian history, but signs of international commerce or even signs in Laotian prompting capitalism on a local level, seemed scarce. These people were not competing but sustaining themselves and thus there was little thriving on the backs of others. There were no elite artists—no arts at all outside that which impoverished students sold along the river to French tourists.

Standing in this crowded bus of upright mangled bodies twisted around each other, he tried to free his mind as best he could. He contorted his head toward a window and angled it diagonally to look up at the gargantuan sky clogged in floating masses of clouds. It seemed to him that all futile prayers ended in the ethereal bellies of these livid beasts. Still, they looked thick and real whereas he and those around him seemed, in his sleep deprived state, to be disappearing like vapor.

Why not one more stifled yearning? If he got what he instinctually craved, he would be but inflamed instinct with all the days of his life subject to hedonistic impulses, continually needing others, he would be forever incomplete. It was good that the hotels were behind him and that that inexplicable feeling for the desideratum had died down to a few burning cinders.

"He's bound to stop for a beer somewhere between two bus routes, slit your throat as a fruit vendor would a watermelon from his chilled glass cart, mince you into pieces, dump you from the Friendship bridge, and watch you, in pieces, float down the Mekong river," said a gecko. The reptile was hanging from a rail on the bus, its form grotesquely large for a gecko and resembling a Silpakorn swamp monster in miniature, with a head like a four legged dinosaur, a tongue like a snake, and a body like an alligator, but a gecko it was nonetheless. "It's your destiny and you cannot escape it. Why look so frightened? Don't you like that which circumvents etiquette?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? Exploiter of whores, splattering their filth on canvas in your colors, your rebellion against this land where naïve belief in the goodness of the Chakri dynasty is supreme, belief that Taksin the Great after his wars with the Burmese had suddenly gone mad, that the bludgeoning of his body and the execution of his son in Cambodia had been done at orders other than that first Chakri, Rama I and that Rama IX did not arise by the assassination of his brother, the Eighth, belief that father, the abuser, knows best. You are drawn to those who do something avante garde. Why be afraid. It's ineluctable?"

"Ineluctable?"

"Ineluctable as day meets night. And you want it to happen—this ruining of you at other hands. Admit it."

"I do; but I don't know why."

"The smearing of paint, the smearing of blood, there's no difference. The murder of a rich man to get his gold, the impaling of a whore with your cock, its all mixing to get the most poignant colors on the palette. He will get you drunk. People of that type always like to drink and to do so at their friend's expense. He will notice your gold and stay silent about it as though it does not interest him at all. People of that type always do."

"And the means of doing it?"

"A rusty pocket knife with a dull edge but with enough muscle and unflinching will even the dullest object can puncture another. But I wouldn't give it any concern; it's no different than the wallowing explorations of the pig-like whores you are so fond of, all for the thrill of exploitation and impaling. He will be intimate with your blood and as he does so he will never forget you."

"Sit down. Over there," said this Boi. A woman had just left the back row of seats. Feeling enervated, Nawin obeyed.

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They had gotten off one bus to wait along the road for another which, he assumed, would take them to other hamlets or rural scatterings possibly more remote than this—assumed, for what did he know waiting perennially, or seemingly so as he was, and shaking his head from time to time to keep himself on top of the internal waves and not be overtaken, not be absorbed by them—waves which came upon him voraciously like inundating tongues, polysemous tsunamis of a muted, mutating language cryptic to him, not of volition and thus adventitious in a sense, but still of his own making. The gecko/water monitor-hybrid was still whispering from the tips of the tallest of weeds, "He's brought you out here to kill you," even though it seemed to him that if the Laotian were to do this he would have done it by now; that, barely glancing at him, as preoccupied as the younger man now was with this new pastime of murmuring into his telephone while scratching and pinching his crotch, activities pursued almost as fervently as playing with his blades, that his intent was innocuous, or as innocuous as it could be for one more of the naked and purposeless human animals for which manipulating the environment to serve one's sense of pleasure and to repudiate by acquisition that which he was, was always a salient motive. So he thought, and wearing a gold chain and a thousand dollar watch as he was, so he needed to believe; and thus he justified his actions to his nebulous and somewhat effervescent self that was surreally disconnected like a half severed limb.

Looking at him from the dense, weeded patch where he stood a couple yards behind—it was, surely, this first Boi, the one in the train, and not the other; or maybe they were manifestations of the same: the wounded and the wounding—he sought an objective appraisal of him, this migrant laborer who skid

around like a leaf; this individual who had given him a beer in the train but now often wielded a knife, this peculiar man whom he had seen touching his sister's feet and from a mere glance had interpreted or misinterpreted a look of lust toward her, a desperate and impoverished predilection that he knew too well, this intimate stranger of his mind whom he believed (but did not know) to have noted his own homosexual proclivity, which he had mentioned in oblique jocular sagacity, an individual with an appearance like his brother of long ago, or what he remembered of him, who could well have been soliciting himself at the Patuxai or just sitting there insouciantly as though accepting his and humanity's own naked, futile state, which acquisitive attempts even by the most affluent ultimately belied, this male who perhaps had little or no sexual interest in him (a fact which would have negated his own feelings quickly had the teasing not exacerbated them), and was using him somehow although he did not know exactly how or care all that much for he wanted to be of use so as to discover something useful in himself.

No, the Laotian was not one whom he could objectively surmise when yearning for intimacy with and salvation for him. Already there was a taste of loose molecules of him in his mouth and the smell of him, or an emission of him, which was not him really, rolling in his nose—or more logically, he contravened, the memory of the smell and taste of others mixed with his smell which by his imaginative reveries he ascribed to him; and he wanted to deliver him the way he did of 7-11 clerks and food cart restaurateurs in his worthless good wishes but with slightly more personal emphasis and effort. It was no major hardship to forsake his retirement for a brief time, to paint the family not in time-consuming and arduous "art," if his could be called such, but as quick smears that magically conveyed a superficial essence, and to pay them a few thousand baht for sitting still and posing before him—creatures of movement expanding with time but made silent and inert deserved compensation, although what he would do with the final products, he did not know. Dragged to Bangkok to be stuffed in a closet of a home he had yet to possess in his new life as a sole bachelor, they would never see the light of day (they could not be known for it would depreciate his own commercial worth). Still, it was irrelevant.

A bus came...a seat where he could be sleeping and from a nap recovering, understanding what he was doing more rationally; but then it went by and they continued to wait as though it had not come at all. The telephone was now folded and put into a pocket and the Laotian was once again opening and closing the blades of his knife as before without even looking at the bus that was now disappearing into the distance.

He could jump the blade wielder if he so pleased, take away the knife under the impulse of the moment (maybe escalating or degenerating into making love to him in the sodden grasses like a pleasure-seeking wild boar if attitude could be wrenched from him with no more difficulty than the knife), and demand an answer for this long wait. But then he would have to be rather certain that his own thinking was clear, and he knew that it was not; that the wait was inordinate instead of seeming such—he was not sure exactly how long they had been waiting; or if he was in fact being threatened in some way instead of entertaining the possibility of being threatened (anything was possible). To jump him aggressively or to even outwardly accuse him of something only to find his own reasoning egregiously and mortifyingly false would make him the miscreant. It was his judgment that there was more of a probability that his own need for sleep was making him suspicious, if not paranoid. He decided the Laotian's behavior was not indicative that he himself was the desideratum, the target of execution—but, even of this, what did he know with the reasoning ability he had sloshing around in drowsiness and drowsiness speaking so incessantly with its reptilian voice murmuring that he, Nawin, would be stabbed (to use the exact word in Reptilian, impaled) and that he wanted it that way; and perhaps he did want it that way, he speculated about his wish to be impaled intimately, his natural death wish that would be unnatural if not opposed strongly by a zeal to live. The extent of his zeal to live (surely the more pervasive and predominate it was the more healthy the human psyche) he was uncertain of in such an exhausted state with inordinate muck, the black dust and fabric of the brain, in all sectors animated and taking on primitive life like a mass of prions rising from nothing recalcitrantly, clogging his mind with their movements, his will, his sensibility lost to them that were no more than adumbrations of forgotten aspects of his life...lost.

Lost...how much more, especially when in this sleep deprived state, could he tolerate this standing idly at the edge of the highway and, in each sound of an emerging truck, anticipating, or coercing a feigned anticipation of, the emergence of a bus futilely, but in thought expecting that it would never come most perspicaciously? How much more could he tolerate all this: these prodigious moments of fighting the pull of sleep; people rift from him; increasing age transporting him further and further from the sensitive child whom he once was, a sheen of innocence that he once had and could have maintained to some degree had there not been a need to survive on the streets and to rise above them economically; his naïve wish to be loved; and his hunger to use others for sexual gratification, all of which compelled him to mutate—a groping primate of sorts dangling on a limb to avoid putting his feet directly on the sordid ground, as if that which he garnered from the earth, his money, were clean. Lost,

it was a part of him that he could not keep, a ragamuffin whom he wanted to reject and reclaim simultaneously and yet could do neither one well.

But, in accepting the mutation—there was little choice but to accept it and as he had always flaunted himself in the livery of his manhood there was no point in reversing the trend now—how was he to know that the man he now was was the man he was meant to be? Who was to say that one was meant to be anything at all but atoms attracted to each other loosely and reverberating off each other in temporary mass, an agglomeration less solid, less real, than a rock, and more equivalent to a gas? Who was to say that man evolved personally let alone socially? He just let the old foundation crumble and sordid experiences caulk into and harden over the holes stinking like excrement.

Perhaps one did not evolve any more than the word "love" had substance beyond its four letter content and the amount of time and energy expended to gain this concocted abstraction which by being believed, managed, as a corollary, to patch the void and perpetuate the species—a species of monetary, intellectual, and physical disparity whose only ablution would come in a rain of nuclear bombs.

The postcard which he had picked up for her in Nongkhai he had forgotten in his room at the guesthouse. A maid had no doubt thrown it into the trash by now; but then it matched the telephone and life which he had thrown, as well, into the trash receptacle at the train station—yes, two negatives were better than one because the odd was never harmonious and even. What did he want of that telephone anyhow, as possessing it would not bring women back, not even the cute nurse at Siriaj Hospital, for the wound had been reopened and a reopening a vile hole he must fall through.

At this time she, Noppawan, was no doubt there in their home with his child, and so he could return to Vientiane, find a decent hotel—the few that there were—and give her a call. Better, he could boldly return to her who had been the salvation of his youth; but now they were not the same as before—their relations would be like returning to an empty house after it had been repossessed by the bank. He, the Nawin of ten years hence, would just be another variation of this thing that he called self, constructed substantially of recent memories, and erected broadly on distant general impressions of largely diminished and forgotten accounts. His true self was the self of the moment and it would only be real for a time if his colors did not blur into the colors of everything else—but then one did not live without interacting and diluting. Was not his sojourn here, this atheist's retreat, futile if he did not interact with others and mix himself in them, hoping to learn and be enhanced beyond his musty, circumscribed domain?

Why, he asked himself, was he here? If he had gone to Chiangmai, he could have been hang-gliding, or Pattaya, para-skiing, action where, for a time, being isolated, diluted, vanishing, not even a professional selfless entity, a cog in the social-economic apparatus, ceased to matter. Who could blame those who dissolved themselves fully into the mindless purity of action, the substance of the expanding universe? In the brevity of motorcycle rides and the attendance of football games he did it on a regular basis himself...but then he would always return to that unfathomable, pensive self that others muffled gregariously with the noise of companions—a pensive, mellifluous dirge sought after and found most fully, for him, in broad empty spaces.

Now, to not be all alone, separated from this mad world he meant to separate himself from, to not hear so clearly the inner voice which, in a change of attitude, he now did not want to hear fully, to not think of himself as an affluent but still aimless drifter or a delinquent parent in a fatherhood that had come about from this game of massage and ejaculation concocted by two women yearning for a child, to not be a broken aching man with a broken throbbing arm and clavicle, the gifts of a wife who despised him, to be free of that recurrent guilt-ridden memory of a girlfriend suffering from postpartum depression who leaped from a balcony to elude him, that nightmare of a mutilated corpse always fresh in his thoughts, and to stand in the eternal compass of love without a diminutive man-made version that was broken fragments in his hands, would be his ultimate rapture.

Nawin—of course the word was a name change, a mere alteration of a label from that hapless creature, "Jatupon," fleeing the past of noodle servitude to his brothers and whoredom to one of them—no, not a sex slave per se, as he had been with him from volition with all that serotonin, adrenalin, testosterone, dopamine, naivety, inexperience, youthful trust of feelings, and all the rest making him madly in love (mandates and mastery by chemistry, so hardly slavery in the traditional sense of the word which would imply an external factor); and it was done because a Buddhist monk had advised it to be done. So why, with women let alone anyone else, should he want to feel this spurious emotion of "love" once again? A time and a half had been more than enough.

"So you're not groveling back to your wife, wounded and wanting her tender mercies. I had you all wrong—good for you," he daydreamed the Laotian as saying and himself providing the response of, "No, with any violent altercation or, at least a conclusion in my mind that neither party is any good to the other—the wife to the husband and the husband to the wife, my allegiance changes."

"To a different sex than what you are involved in?"

"Why would you think that?"

"I have my reasons. Come on, all pent up in your head with no one to talk to, wouldn't you like to confess to one person?"

"Not really."

"All right. So be it; if you want to stagnate that way. It's entirely up to you."

"Well, if you have to know, it can change or be for none at all. I'm not afraid."

"Of what? Me?"

"Of disengagement. Of saying my goodbyes."

"But you followed me here" he laughed incredulously. "Why's that Pree [older brother] Nawin?"

"Yes."

And he remembered that in the last year or two she, Noppawan, would mutely convey that most indifferent of yeses to him, her retired, worthless husband who no longer had the stamina to pussy-hunt beyond the domain of his two women, and did not even have the virility to raise a paintbrush as, he concluded, his paintings did not have either enlightened vision or the titian colors of the Greats, and that he was a commercial whore more than an artist—wives of course always wanting money and possessions, always buying and making plans for the renovations of their nests (empty with infertility as they might be), and the buyers of his canvases whom he catered to needing their luscious prostitutes to exude testosterone throughout their stiff cadaverous bodies to transport them from the mundane. And when he tried to share the poignancy of the seemingly blasé and inconsequential of a given day of his leisure and meditation at the zoo, various parks, and at park benches (the patterns of clouds, the black diamond sparkle of shadows of leaves on the ground, the lofty fan of bold pigeons perching on his table to steal his Styrofoam container of rice, wind carrying the smell of rejuvenating blades of grass—that same perennial and eternal smell he remembered from 35 years ago) often she, Noppawan, would continue to make dinner in silence, mutely conveying that most indifferent of yeses to him, pony tail nodding indifferently against the nape of her neck in affirmation of nothing.

He needed to urinate and obviously so did the younger man who was no longer looking at the road but toward the land with forest behind them, and a pasture with free roaming emaciated water buffalo at a distance. Unzipping his pants, the Laotian aimed the release of the arch of his liquids to nature and to the exhibition of all passing cars.

"How long are we going to wait out here?" complained Nawin in his somniloquy. That which he was hearing did not seem to come from himself at all but an invisible presence with the utterances of his own voice projected like an actor off screen, and the Laotian an alien performance put in front of his face, so as to be more real than any real being, a surreal and magnificent presence, magni-real in a sense. To be able to stare at him justifiably, words had to supply a pretext, and so the complaint spilled out of a mouth of a man who wanted to see another male's nakedness.

"Until it comes. Glad to know that you aren't dumb and mute after all," he said—he who went under the nickname of Boi. Whether this one was really Boi 1 or Boi 2 would depend on perspective; but, in either case, he judged that it did not matter. If there was something that mattered it was that these traumas he had experienced in Bangkok were making him transfixed by boys.

"I speak occasionally; but there isn't much sense in rattling nonsense so that everything seems less empty, is there? Besides, I like to think and be quiet."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It makes me feel alive."

"To not say anything to anyone?"

"Yes. To not be in the commotion of others too much. It's a trade off—which voice seems most important at a given time. But I know that it comes from affliction, early pain and reticence I never overcame. Seeking color in darkness. What are you doing?" Nawin smirked.

"What it looks like."

"Yeah, well I mean, out here?"

"Looks like I'm shutting it down with some wanks. Do you need to piss?"

"Yes."

"Then pull it out. Who's stopping you? There's no five star hotel around the corner where you can do your nasty business. Look around you. What you see is the entire country—nothing."

Nawin smiled painfully. Space and nature and Jatupon whose only essence could be found here and, in part, within this impecunious stranger, were the only allure. .

As the two men admitted by action that they were no different than beasts of early man urinating freely without repressions, restraints, and repercussions, neither of them feeling that they had been a detriment to environment and morality, each regained manhood. It was restored unto them in the flooding of their small respective areas to the demise of a few insects and vegetation. As they did this Nawin wondered how it came to be that a shirt removed in casual situations meant nothing while two penises dangling out in the open were such an ignominy and he felt a further sense of exhilaration as though in this petty, untoward action he were being launched to a different side of the galaxy. Superfluously, the Laotian multi-jerked himself once more. Was it to interrupt the last trickle? Was it to interrupt this spiritual retreat of him who did not believe in a spirit?

"I wish one of those straw hat milk maidens from one of the dairy farms would come by for a bit of my wet sausage," he said.

Nawin smiled awkwardly at the words that gave proof to an impalpable conjecture and made him assess how trite human interaction was. Unworthy of the god of the human animal, still it was exhilarating. Relinquishing the mind and plunging into human interactions, it was as if he were at last experiencing a bit of life, here across the boarder, and no longer needing to atone for his sexual liaison in Nongkhai and elsewhere. Caught in the predicament of opposing thoughts and emotions, he said nothing. Perhaps, he thought, this was the real source of his reticence.

"Do you hear me, Mute?"

"Yeah man, I hear you. You want a milk maiden to milk you. What do you want me to do about it?"

"That's right. What do I want you to do about it?" he chuckled.

Nawin waited in brief silence for an answer that was not immediately forthcoming. How titillated he was by so little; and for a moment he dwelt on the fact that such petty and banal interactions brought ribald pleasure, and the ambiguity of motives a sense of suspense to life's limited beings.

Now he was yearning for permission to become the animal that he was—permission to follow the mandates of initial impulses which were essential to salubrious man free of the conflicting venues of attempts at self restraint. As coupling had to be done as that, a couple, he needed him to pointedly say that he wanted sexual relations with him, although mentally he hoped to have nothing of the sort. His feelings and refined feelings, thought, were moving around each other in contrary motions, pulling him tautly while twisting him into knots that he recognized as the essence of civilized man, and this too he wanted no part of.

"I'm not all that particular—A police woman in her communist uniform making rural rounds; a coca cola driver pulling off the edge of the road, coming to stretch his legs and finding himself hungry before he remounts his beast and drives away. That would be fine. Then I can't think of anything more that would be needed and so wouldn't have to do a thing—just watch it go down. You think you can do that?"

Nawin wondered of the ambiguity of language. Was it such because it was inadequate in conveying intentions, that the motivations of a man were multifaceted theses and antitheses, or that to keep motivation and the inner workings of the mind safe, replies were obfuscated? In any case it seemed dubious that the grunts of language were really the best attribute of man.

And he imagined, daydreamed, or dreamed that a man shaped like a zero was being sodomized in the weeds by the stiff broad boned four of a female; that on this most garish of days, Father's Day, King Booby's birthday, when all were supposed to dress in yellow attire to commemorate him (dare he mock the kingly puppet god of the military who nodded silently in the earliest of days when they knocked off his brother, and from it was deified on the condition of staying perennially silent? It was the first time he had done so even in his thoughts, but recent tragedies and experiences had unctioed his mind and under garish cynosure made all normal ways of behaving known as the artificiality of man-made-rules

that they were), he and this second stranger were interlocked in a naked embrace on sodden Laotian earth bereft of yellow flags, were coupled together fetid and wild as stray dogs—a product of nature and uninhibited will denuded of pretense. And he dreamed that he was in communion with a reptile ("Listen," he imagined himself saying to the indeterminate specie, "If one doesn't hold onto his own breath why should he hold onto people? Why should he be afraid that more will not flow in? No specific one is needed, although it might seem as though he were; interaction is needed (be it with a person or dog), an outside stimulus to dilute the intensity of one single group of accumulating thoughts foundering one to extremes, but this is all. And if I can dismiss a wife after she broke a clavicle and an arm with a frying pan, I can do it of a stranger—this stranger." "No you can't," said the creature, "for she was the stitching of the wound that could be undone in time. But the train acquaintance is a resemblance of the wound itself, the wounder, and wounding, the trinity, and it possesses you—the erect cock, the blade that will pierce your death intimately." "He's not even playing with his knife any longer. He's no danger to me. He knows me now." "When your guard is down he will strike, and then you will have your intimacy.").

Then a second bus passed them by but the Laotian seemed as wholly impervious to the sensation as before. It was a bus (the right one?—that he did not know—but a bus nonetheless) so raised head and attention askance would only have been natural.

"Why didn't we get on that one?"

"It's not the right one," he said.

Nawin finally admitted to himself that there might not be a right one, and suddenly, at least in feelings, he ceased caring all that much. All that he wanted was to lie in the stink of the earth. Now there was a butterfly fluttering about his feet. If he were to lie down it would fan away the sweat that was collecting at his brow, there would be beauty in the sordid, and there, without compunction he would plunge into dreams thumping as the voices of frogs at a distance.

"Come here," he told the Laotian. Boi came over to him. "So young," he said as he touched a wisp of hair that stuck out over the boy's ear and was salient in his sense of beauty. "You remind me of someone I once knew. It's like the world recycles the same stuff. What do you want from life? I mean not what is real and before you but what you really want."

"What point is there in that? I'm here. My sister's here. When the crops are bad we get jobs elsewhere for as long as we can and then we return. I guess when I was younger I wanted to be a pilot for what it's worth now."

"A pilot?"

"Once upon a time."

"Once upon a time," repeated Nawin thinking of a time when family was an eternal concept in a young boy's mind and one's life was rife in possibilities. He felt sadness, the eternal sadness, reflected in this one who called himself Boi and he knew that he loved him. He tried to kiss him but the Laotian feigned a laugh and pulled away.

"Quit that, you joker. Save your kisses for beautiful Laotian women. I know what you want. You wouldn't be much of a man if you didn't. Thais with money are no different than other sex tourists that come to this country for a piece of Laotian pussy. All those paintings—you must be a real ladies man. Well, it looks like we will be here for a while. We might as well be comfortable as we wait. Let's cross over there and sit down." He pointed to a small shack and an awning at a distance. "You buy the drinks and we'll motion for the bus to stop when it gets here."

"You mean we have been waiting on the wrong side?"

The Laotian laughed. "Well, not exactly. There's a different way. There always is. It's sort of like a bus." Nawin felt ill at ease but did not say anything as the two crossed this infrequently traversed highway where a dead possum lay before them on the edge of the road.

"People deny that they are going to die by looking forward to a new day that brings them closer to death. It's most ironic," said the gecko-monitor as it rode on one of his pant legs. It was a non-sequitur that he could not place in the context of what was happening but then, as such, it seemed no different from anything else. And although he was not terribly alarmed, he questioned whether or not the man crossing the road with him was in fact the Laotian, but as everything changed anyway he could not see that being accompanied by someone else really mattered.

They sat at a second table behind two middle aged men. "Sabaidee mai?" he heard the acquaintance

say to them and they reciprocated with the same greeting. If sabaidee was their sawadee he was not sure how he would understand these Laotians in all this shifting of semantics. He understood the acquaintance to say, "He's the Thai I told you about" to which one of the strangers said a word like benefactor in something to the effect of, "Does she like your benefactor." "I'm her brother," the Laotian responded. "She'll do as she is told." Then, as though conscious of him, there was a lot of small talk in which the acquaintance asked about where they worked and lived. Then the conversation changed to that of a football game at the university and, to him, it all seemed staged on his behalf. The acquaintance said, "Drink, you are on vacation. Loosen up" and so he drank two shots of whiskey that appeared in tandem before him. As both head and body heated up, and the stationary environment began to wobble, he tried to reassure himself that although everything changed it did so one moment at a time. He then noticed a bald spot on his acquaintance's scalp. It seemed to be floating hurriedly in the ethereal like a satellite and the biological structure of Nawin cringed at this defective counterpart. The train acquaintance, if he were such, now seemed older than before, and the liquid blueprint, which he was subconsciously yearning for, a less viably transferable product. This Boi asked them other questions in the Laotian tongue that he could not comprehend at all on the fourth shot of whiskey and their furrowed faces answered him although the substance of this he could not determine firmly.

And as they imbibed beer ever more gluttonously and he quaffed more shots of whiskey, becoming the sensation of an entity aflame, the substance of fire, he became conscious that he would be the one who would pay for all these drinks. Thus his hand began to flounder into various pockets for his wallet until finding it in his shirt pocket but with nothing inside its dark brown lining.

"My money—there's nothing there," said Nawin.

"Is that a fact?" said the Laotian.

"All of my money is gone."

"You are my friend. I am concerned for you and I am keeping your wallet so that you don't lose it. Also we have to pay these guys to take us to the farm. No more busses going that way this late." Then to the owner who was now attempting to refill the glass from a whiskey bottle he said, "No, enough. Nothing more for him." The gecko, sitting on his shoulder, imparted a long melodramatic look of consternation and worried skepticism which also seemed staged. The reptile was stirring the puddle of his eyes, watching the ripples and it continued to do this until they were outside and the truck was turned on. Bored, it too needed to make more from the rock of the planet.

One of these drunk companions deliberately skidding the vehicle on dirt roads to provoke reactions within the clouds of dust; wet patches where the pickup labored more than once to get itself out of a rut; then, after this long journey of front seat revelry, back seat asphyxiation, the arrival at a shack stilted like a cabin; and inside an extended family eating som tam, mangos, and sticky rice on a barren floor. Was it merely this he had unwittingly yearned for all this time—a gift of a surprised and welcoming smile from her whom he had met once before on the train? Through all the expended energy of his own version of spirituality and standard decadence it was just this expression that he had wanted all along—an expression which could make and remake a diminutive man. Alacritous, she served to him his share placed on a banana leaf that was on a bamboo placemat. The rest of the family was nice enough. Why wouldn't they be with a rich man of humble sensitivities there to be exploited, a man who was spinning out of his mind while the food was making him sick. Boi put him on a scattered blanket inside a dark bedroom. There he heard the continual barking of dogs through the window. Here in this cockroach infested room, to think of something not so painful, not so dreadful, he imagined the women cooking insect curry and roasted frog and the males smoking in the main room. The barking of dogs was mordant to his thumping head, and it took a half hour before he was asleep—the cascading of sleep only interrupted when the pallid sister poured him tea, squeezing a lemon exclusively into his glass, serving unto him while he was lying there.

"You don't have to do that," he said.

"I want to," she said as she tilted a glass toward him.

"You've come here to see us and now you are sick because of us."

"Not so sick. And certainly not because of you. It's my own foolishness in drinking."

"I think this will help. Mother's remedy."

"Thank you. I shouldn't be taking someone's room. Whose is it?"

"It's mine. It does not matter."

"Where will you sleep?"

"I'll find a place?"

"Where?"

"Where you want me to."

"Where I want you to?"

"Yes."

Helping him off with his clothes after the tea was drunk there was a kiss and a reciprocal denuding—he was being set up as nothing was this easy, but he did not care. "All for you," he imagined the Laotian saying to him as he noticed her lower body slightly distended. Still, he did not care for he needed a release. Feeling the body, entering it, ravaging it, he groped for the end of impermanence and acquisition of human flesh, and for family to cover his nakedness.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AN APOSTATE: NAWIN OF THAIS ***

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