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Steven David Justin Sills

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CORPUS OF A SIAM
MOSQUITO ***

Corpus of a Siam Mosquito

by Steven Sills

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“So he spoke, and the bright-eyed goddess, Athene, was pleased that she was the god he prayed to before all the others. She put strength in his shoulders and knees, and set in his heart the daring of a mosquito, which, though constantly brushed away from a man’s skin, still insists on biting him for the pleasure of human blood.”

—The Iliad
Homer

Book I: Palaver

Chapter 1

They, with their driver, went down Ramkhamhaeng Road singularly in the scope of their thoughts but conditioned into repudiating their aloneness. It was an early Bangkok morning with a new day tripping over the corpse of the earlier one the way dogs on the Bangkok sidewalks were walked on. It was early in the relationship of the two passengers and this nascent association contained the complex and awkward ambiguity of not being clearly professional or personal and he and his prostitute-model were tripping into each other. When she put her hand on his leg he would stiffen and both his legs would slightly slant away from her but when she removed her hand and kept it away from him for some minutes he would put it back there closer than ever to his thighs. Even he had to admit his actions made no sense given the fact that he flaunted her, and others like her, wherever he went; but it was part of the game of being desired. Although he wasn't even conscious that such a game was being played, she was fully cognizant of these subliminal calculative moves and how a woman was played. She knew that she was desiring him more as a consequence. She also knew that being desired required adhering to the rules of withdrawing from the neediness of wanting to be linked to a man and of transforming herself into the metamorphoses of self-contained fantasies that he would desire.

Despite Thai's reverence for royalty, the three of them went down Ramkhamhaeng Road without even thinking about the king behind the name. He, his whore, and perhaps the faceless one at the steering wheel as well, thought of themselves as a unit albeit an insignificant one. They had that sociable tendency to chat at each other to reduce the drone of one's solitary and melancholic thoughts but it was less the case with the pensive passenger, Nawin (formerly Jatupon) who, Aristotelian and poised as a Garuda, was a surly contemplative despite lordly debauchery. Through being whirled in vicissitudes he felt that he could withstand anything fate had to offer. Unlike the others, he did not need to escape his thoughts as much as a bull from a corral. Instead, he befriended his morose tendencies.

Basking in the grandeur of his new stature, the back seat Nawin was dwelling on himself continually in the concern that his fame, isolated as it was, had not happened totally from the merit of his work. He wondered how much the licentiousness of his life and the salaciousness of the subject matter were the real color of what could be marginal talents. He wondered if he should change his subject matter proving himself as an artist even if it reduced the virility he felt as a type of swarthy Thai sex symbol. How strange it was, he thought to himself, that despite the fact that being dark was never an attractive trait in Thailand where the lighter, Chinese skinned Thais were thought to have more material success, sensuality, and beauty, he who was not particularly handsome from being dark as a shoe's heel should be sexy from his wanton disposition. Likewise, his thoughts were dark in a land of frivolous irresponsibility. To Thai's the word "serious" had a negative connotation and he was that. Unless one was a monk, being contemplative was a tacit violation of laws in the Land of Smiles. He had become the rescuer of whores humanizing their sorry plight. Their only sins were to be born poor and to be loyal enough to not pull out of the loose fetters of family obligations. They continued to remember shadowy figments of obscure rural relatives whom they needed to feed. Still being a hero was burdening him with a singular motif and he continually shot this thought through his neurological circuitry until the taxi driver spoke, parting his thoughts like Moses and the Red Sea or Buddha sabotaging a bit of the recycle factory of the human soul.

"My son flew into Chaing Mai recently. I've been wondering about airplanes ever since-just thinking about how things get off the ground.

Have you ever wondered that?"

"Ka," meaning yes, the woman in the backseat croaked like a crow. "I'm trying not to question it. Wondering such things would make me scared that they don't stay up in the sky," she laughed. Her name was Jarunee but her nickname was Porn. "This will be my first plane ride soaring off with the birds."

"Thais don't often fly," he said. His idea was tinged with a bitter undertone as if poverty turned one's bones to lead and he found that his idea put him back in the solitude of his thoughts for only silence ensued. He decided to sound happier. "You sound excited."

"It has been my dream." She leaned her head against Nawin's shoulder.

"Flew off to Chaing Mai. He lost his job during the financial meltdown of 96. 3000 baht. That's what the family lived on each month for a good many years. Then she was pregnant and laid off from the restaurant and they stayed with us for five or six months. Of course they could have stayed longer. After all, they are family."

"Yes, of course. You sound like a good father. I'm sure it will get better for everyone soon," responded Porn as she looked up at the old face in the mirror hoping with softness to make the tenor of the conversation gayer.

"Krap," he said meaning yes although he wasn't in agreement. "No, he continually got more depressed and then no matter how many job interviews he went on, he came up empty handed. Then she took their children to her parents. He came up there a bit later. The in-laws had him but didn't want him. He hadn't been trained at anything but working in the factory. He didn't know how to plant rice or maybe he was too depressed to learn. It wouldn't seem there would be much to learn. You just put them into the ground. Anyhow, he was walking around in a daze all that time. That's what she claimed they said about him. Soon he returned with us but before we knew it off he went to Chaing Mai. I don't know why. I got a post card from there. It didn't say much other than he had taken his first flight. Can you imagine just buying a ticket, leaving, and not saying a word."

"Ka, not really. I can't imagine anybody doing that...unless he just didn't want to worry you. Maybe he didn't want to worry you about if the idea was right or wrong financially. I bet he has friends there and they'll help him to locate work."

"Yes, it is the best thing. I've been going to the temple to give food to the monks and blessings will follow. I'm sure of that. I've never gone on a flight. Where are the two of you going?"

"To Montreal."

"Where's that?"

"To Canada." She smiled but the word, favorable as it was, didn't have the flavor of Paris or cities in America.

"What will you do there?"

Nawin wondered what she would be doing there. She had escorted him around galleries, parties, and auditoriums where he gave speeches. Bangkok gossip columnists had sometimes even mentioned her presence with him. What would she be doing in Montreal while he attended post-graduate classes? That was a fundamental question he had no answer for. He had granted unto her a new profession where she didn't have to spread her legs to anyone but him. He had rescued her from stripping and whoring in a bar in Patpong but perhaps that would not be enough. Nobody was content. Like any animal, a human always yearned for more. They were trying to build up on themselves so that they were free of all discomfort. A woman was more that way than even a man based on his judgments and to be left alone in an apartment in a foreign country would be one major discomfort she would not tolerate. He began to miss his wife: she didn't need anything—not even sex with him. She was free to love other things than him—higher things and he was free to love higher things than her as well as the lower things like Porn. It was for this reason that he loved her but he didn't desire her so much except as an intellectual companion. This one he desired and that love certainly had more thrust than the former one. At least it appeared to be stronger.

The sky had tubes of light paint oozing out into the darkness and the sky could not ascertain if it wanted a moon or a sun in its presence. The ride was just beginning and yet it was monotonous in the darkness and the light of the street lamps that refracted glaringly. The three of them still remained as little conscious of the moon or, dependent on the limitation of their eyes, the corona of the moon, that they happened to glimpse as accompanying them on their early morning departure as they were of the monarch, Ramkhamhaeng, that was the source of the road's name. The taxi driver was near-sighted so to him, as most things at a distance, the reality of it all was begotten as a blur.

The back-seated Nawin with the cigarette fuming and the legs sprawled out and thumping to his portable CD player and his model or whore with her hand again on one of his legs had their thoughts parted once more in the kinetic movements of linguistic moans.

"What airline will you be flying out of?" asked the taxi driver. Following patriarchal social etiquette he was addressing the man instead of the girlfriend despite not liking the smoke. The man was more than a customer but a member of the more affluent class and this by Thai, although not Buddhist standards, was well revered. How swift one's

encroaching aloneness was purged and thwarted in the retreat engineered by the batons and water cannons of one's linguistic moans. The whore, whose self-image had been disparaged by the unconventional positive endorsement of her activities by the wife, was grateful to gain the parting of her thoughts from the driver's voice. She was pleased to be once again hearing anything—even the least little unenlightening fact-about their trip. She smiled. After all, it was the land of smiles.

"Thai" mumbled Nawin's voice from the back seat.

"Domestic or international?" asked the taxi driver as if amnesia had wiped away a whole section of memory. Porn released an alien chortle that made Nawin think that he was sitting on the back seat with some type of mythological, hybrid animal he was in the process of taking on an overseas journey. How quickly she had gone from seductress to a callow calf and kid. He smiled at the man's ignorance without laughing. He felt that his girlfriend was ugly and noticed how mutable the sight of anyone was: at one-time ugly and at another time beautiful, at one-time virtuous and another point wicked, and at one point victim and another time slut. It was not only the physical dimensions that could vary from moment to moment. The perception of a whole being could change. He moved himself to the window to get away from her hand and feigned a curiosity with the world outside. He rolled down the window. At that moment they both had a similar jejune feeling of the repetition of old things and new things not fully connecting. It was indescribable to them both. Porn kept asking herself if she was doing the right thing in forsaking her responsibilities with her clients for the unknown of traveling with him.

"You look like you are car sick," said the driver. "My son always got that way even a kilometer down the road when he was a boy. Matter of fact that happens to him now—not quite as bad, though. I can't think how he survived the flight to Chaing Mai. That I'll never know." Nawin, to show proper deference to an older man and to prove to himself that he wasn't churlish, looked toward the mirror and front windshield and gave the whole frontal world a nod. The boy born of the name Jatupon was bleeding inside him. His brain waves wiggled around like noodles. He was no better than this man. They both had been born poor with limited opportunities. He couldn't laugh at him for any reason.

"Are you going international or domestic," asked the driver of the twenty-five year old. Again there was a chortle. "Why does that question seem to make her laugh," asked the taxi driver. "That is very strange. That is a strange young lady."

"Krap," said Nawin gruffly, "I don't know why she is laughing." "We are going international. Eva Airlines. Eva Airlines, an international flight to Japan," reiterated Nawin. He kept it simple. He didn't even want to think about Montreal. The thought of accompanying an animal, of sorts, to the other side of the world was too much. No sooner had he said it than she reminded them both of the fact that she would be going to her home first. Nawin had fallen into his own pensive inclinations but unlike them he wanted the completion of his thoughts. He was scanning his mutating neurological circuitry for a possible answer to the enigma whom he called his wife. Noppawan's flippant comment that the stoplight wouldn't get any greener as she smiled and shut the door on him and his whore troubled or inveigled him. One's driveway wasn't exactly equipped with a stoplight so that one sentence bordered on sarcasm. Her placid demeanor was like plastic and how she behaved belied everything so how was he to know if she was discontent with this arrangement if not jealous of it.

It was the first time that he would be leaving her to travel abroad. He had offered to delay the trip by a week or two until she had submitted her grades at Assumption University, which Thais called A-back. Maybe having his Porn stay over at their house the previous night was disrespectful to his wife but nice or offensive behavior was based upon one's guesswork on how society would interpret such situations and unique situations like this were all the more impossible to judge. His wife was definitely different. That was for sure; but she was still a woman down deep even if she denied it just as his American passport and name-change made him abstain from bits of himself. A woman had instincts at suspecting a man's activities. A woman had jealous rages and seductive lures that had a chance of keeping a man with her: genetic programming from hundreds or thousands of female ancestors who had experienced the promiscuity of husbands and were afraid that they and their children would not be properly taken care of. But there was certainly no chance of children. She slept with him a few times as husband and wife in a motion of fulfilled and completed consummation never to be repeated. Then she went in to get herself sterilized. Why she needed to do both

was unclear. She was a mystery and steadfast in committing herself to that vow they had made to each other when they were 14 or 15 years old to not live petty lives. Such was the gray in the gray matter that enveloped them. Life with Noppawan had the insatiability of an itch to a mosquito's bite and contained the same pleasurable discomfort.

"Taking a trip to Japan" thought the taxi driver sarcastically. He wasn't certain how anyone could afford to go there. He was stuck to the boundaries of the car and he resented it; although from it, despite its limitations, he was always introduced to people so different than he was. They were the favored ones whose ideas were not curtailed to traffic jams exacerbated by infuriatingly influential traffic lights and accidents. Traffic accidents were such chaos because smashed cars could not be moved until insurance agents came to the scene to make their reports. Traffic policemen, who could easily be bribed, were never to be trusted. The favored people did not have everyday to roam the streets like homeless but highly mobile mendicants, their every movement enslaved and dictated by the pronouncement of street names called out from the back seat. "Do young people like you have money to go off wherever you wish?" The words pierced out of one who was pierced. The ache tore open like a tenuous newly heeled scar with the blade coming up to slit others. He knew that he had behaved contrary to social instinct but he hadn't been able to stop himself.

"Don't you know who this is?" asked the whore with arrogant vehemence.

The taxi driver looked in the rear view mirror at the brown-faced Nawin or Jatupon and asked, "No, should I know you?"

"No you shouldn't. Neither one of us should know the other one. Just drive!" said Nawin although again he winced from his darker alter ego that only became him when he uttered its thoughts. He wasn't totally devoid of societal programming of right and wrong no matter what he claimed to Noppawan. Being respectful to one's elders and giving the prayerful gesture of the "wei" (pronounced as "why") to one's superiors did exist in him at certain times. He would always stand up for the tribute paid to the king prior to a movie although that was more from the idea of not offending the sensibilities of others around him or, less altruistically, getting himself possibly thrown out of the movie theatre. Furthermore, the Jatupon who had brought cups of ice to customers when he was a boy, the uneducated slave who had found himself spun up in noodles of sidewalk restaurants until he was 15, often began to stretch like a 26 year old fetus locked up in a heavily fortified placenta. He would feel how disparaged Jatupon often felt. He would feel guilt when he disparaged others that seeped into his veins while ghosts of yesteryear suddenly vexed him making him feel numb and cold inside.

He too wanted to stop thinking and he wished that his thoughts could be intruded with conversation. "I just mean that I'm nobody important. I paint a little. I'm going to Montreal for that reason." The taxi driver was reticent. "Do you have many hours left driving today?" Nawin asked him. Still there was no answer. He threw the cigarette out of the opened window. "Do you want a stick of gum," he asked the girl.

"I have a tick tack in my mouth now but I'll take your gum and save it for later. You might not offer it again." She giggled and he smiled at her with the tightness of his closed lips. She had lost her animal, and there she was as his seductress. He kissed her and returned the headphones over his ears. The savory taste of her mouth was in him.

Chapter 2

The acceleration that took them out of Huamark and through other adjacent sections of the city eventually led them to her area. He did not remember the name of it: Bangkae, Bangplad, Bang-something. He paid little attention to what his mistress said. Her voice often seemed the strident spluttering of burning fuel in an engine that couldn't produce motion. King Ramkhamhaeng was a bygone entity. As soon as his model picked up some of her things that she had forgotten to bring with her the previous day and they had some breakfast, then Thailand would be a thing of the past too. For how long he didn't know. He was married but it was one signature on many sheets of paper. The significance of spilled ink could not be read unless, like many superstitious Thais, he were to seek a fortuneteller-mendicant sitting on a sheet or straw mat on a sidewalk or in a park.

Noppawan had her chance to go with him. He had asked repeatedly. He had tacitly exhorted (mostly with his eyes) but she had refused him. Maybe she needed him to command her presence. Maybe in this nebulosity of strong selfishness and altruism called a personal relationship, so immediate and personal like finding oneself enveloped in smoking and fiery dust, she needed constant reminders that he cared about her more than any other entity selfishly and altruistically. That would be the woman in her if there were such a woman.

He tried to contemplate what love was like for normal people. It was surely a dust storm one invented in one's mind to escape loneliness but then it became intertwined in more neediness and consciousness of the other's feelings and thoughts so as not to be vanquished to aloneness. An individual who was able to overcome the grief of the loss of dopamine in the ephemeral and moribund high of being in love would cling to his former pleasure-inducer as a source of meaning in life's vicissitudes. He and Noppawan had done the same but they were less like individuals finding themselves separately cast onto lifeboats in an ocean of random waves for they found oceans of thoughts within themselves that seemed more navigable to solid chunks of reality. They needed each other less; or so he thought.

Thai women generally had obsequious crying bouts in their rafts, but Noppawan, he argued, was not a woman. She was female without womanity. She was a female who advocated overcoming petty human existence for a love of ideals, compassion, and the attempts at understanding the human predicament. He couldn't see into the future to know if he would be returning to Thailand anytime soon to be peered at through his wife's thick dark framed glasses. At present there were only the wills of three individuals cowardly seeking meaning for themselves in a unit. There were only these socialized wills rolling along on a road in marginal darkness under the specious assumption that there really was a destination. The sensory input of traditional Thai music was coming to them from the front and back speakers of the car that was their confinement. The radio music, no matter if interpreted as harmonious or strident by the three individuals, was a levee helping to block their pervasive inundation of self-absorbing, mordant thoughts and reminded them (the patriot and the pending expatriates) of their commonality as Thais.

They passed a mall where he and Porn had gone shopping a month earlier. That day they had spent together there was the levity of the stroll and the shiny flash of credit cards in this Thai way of forgetting one's impoverished roots. Feeling on top of the world, he comported the male gesture of having one arm clutching the other one behind his back. It was a gesture of affluence in the stroll of the shopper's quest. At least twice when he encountered friends of his from Silpakorn Art University with bags in their hands he would talk to them for a half hour and somewhere into the talk he used another male gesture of affluence. He would slip a foot from a sandal and then slap it onto the floor loud as a firecracker. The sandal would hit the floor like a hand slapping against an impoverished peasant.

They stopped in an alley smaller than a side street called a "soi." It was in between many Mom and Pop businesses and there, crowded within, was her apartment. He knew rooms like this well. They were rented out for fifteen or twenty dollars a month (600 or 700 baht), barren, hot, and unventilated as an attic. When she had gone in to get her bags he felt less lonely to be momentarily rid of her. Even now at age 26 but with thoughts at certain moments suffering and dragging like a man of 50, there was just himself, the real unit of one, and delude himself all he pleased he knew that he could not find anyone more significant than

that. The only thing next to his heart, in the pocket of his shirt, were the slides of his art depicting the naked and dejected whores of Patpong that had ejaculated him into fame and puffed up a latent ego in himself that thought that he was a higher being than other Thais. He was keeping them there that day because he wanted to momentarily hand them over to airport authorities so they would not be harmed in airport security. When she returned with an added bag that the taxi driver plunked into the trunk the two men smiled at her and she smiled back. After all, Thailand was the land of smiles and every infant understood the advantages of smiling. To bypass his surly temperament and increase friendly relations, Nawin offered more breath fresheners or chewing gum for everyone. No Thai would refuse such friendly gestures and the two of them took from his hand greedily like tamed birds. Then he began his old contemplation of why 2 was greater than 1 or why 3 was greater than 2. It was an old argument of his wife. The first time she posed it to him they both were 16 years old. He had made the mistake of asking her to a dance. "Why do two things coming in close proximity to each other have greater value?" she asked. His only response had been "A le nah?" meaning "What did you say?" Neither one of them went to the dance but straight to their bedrooms and their sullen thoughts.

Porn was, according to his thinking, an "all right whore." She didn't cause him any problems at all and it was for this reason that he carried her along with him as a personification of his intellectual decadence thereby increasing public intrigue with him. She was the pretty doll he could swing about as a reminder of his one-man school of art. He, Nawin Biadklang, could flaunt her around as the premier example of the dark vision in his mind and the sexual slavery of his nation all meshed together. He would have to draw a lot in Montreal and sell everything he painted to pay for any expenses the scholarship would not cover. She preferred her title of model. He was not so heartless to deny her this euphemism. She successfully relieved him of the tension of his body and to be emitted of it like a squeezed tangerine in such a good rhythmic fingering would well compensate for the stress level of having to spend so much time with her. He desired her a lot of the time so by most accounts of love he did truly love her. Foremost, Noppawan did not object to her. Matter of fact, she wanted Porn to relieve him. She wanted him squeezed. She wanted the pus squished from his brain without having to get dirty. She wanted to continuously wear the glasses that caged her tepid orbs and to not succumb them to rapturous non-Buddhist primal yearnings. She did not care to dodge the aloneness of her thoughts through a rapturous delusion that she was one partial being made whole in sex and love. And yet by her account she did not want to mandate his awareness. It was only by tripping on shadows and feeling vapid equanimity that came after having absurdly given oneself over so entirely to the sensation of pulling on one's genitalia that a man actually knew anything.

This whore was and was not his typical whorehouse girl. On the day of their first meeting he had been sketching runners and trees at a stadium near Assumption University where his wife taught. His head was resting in a fog until she materialized. There she was casting a shadow onto the sun that was sedating him and wrapping him into himself in sleep. There she was questioning him on his art and pointing out her mommy, a skinny and frail thing, sitting on the other set of bleachers.

He found out that she was a dancer. There was no surprise there. Her flirtatious gestures and the presence of her frail mommy looking over at them and hoping the purchase would take place were tacit but undeniable clues that she was poor and wanted a male companion. That was no surprise either. Yet beyond this calculated small talk or artifice was an ingenuous mouth that glistened in guileless desire. She was a money girl. That was obvious, and yet there was more. There was infatuation and an accompanying mommy who was like an SOS. Porn was a whore, but if he hadn't been married, she could have been more. Except for Noppawan, who was a flagrant novelty, he couldn't quite decipher how whores and wives were all that different. Both baited the man for the fecundity of prosperity and progeny. It was a survival response that was selfish in base primeval instincts. It was human and beautiful. It was filled with womanity.

She turned up the volume on her tape recorder and repeated, "Excusez-moi; au revoir; oui; toilettes; papier hygienique."

"Was that the main reason for coming to your apartment: for the tape recorder?" he asked.

She turned off the machine without the least concern about a distraction deferring her scholarship. "Oui," she said, "but also my

favorite blouse, jeans, a necklace-see, isn't it beautiful—lots of things. A tape recorder is rather important, I think. You don't want me to be unable to talk." He nodded his head as he frowned wishing that she couldn't speak at all. She would have been all the more beautiful mute and deaf. He had proposed getting up early initially to compensate for his slow, pokey movements but not as early as this and he resented having lost sleep for such knickknacks. He didn't feel that he should be subject to listening to her palaver in Canada. His nod was that of acquiescence the way the King Ramas had agreed with planned activities of the imperialists to divert their attention. He, however, was trying to divert a headache. He looked at the booklet that was on her lap. She was unsuccessfully trying to imitate a product published in Thailand as he had guessed a minute earlier from the fact that the speaker on the tape sounded Thai. It was the blind leading the blind, he thought.

"You do know some English, don't you?" he asked.

"No," she said. He could imagine the palaver she would be saying on the streets of Montreal and he yearned for his wife, Noppawan. He got the taxi driver to turn right and park on the side of a street. His eyes were fixed on a barren serenity of gravel and weeds that was in the vicinity of a pier. The sun was now rising fully and aided by a golden roofed temple on the other side of the river, there was a silvery and golden glaze in the waters camouflaging the sooty sediments that were diluted within. He wanted to go to the gravel and eat along the side of begging dogs of which the bodies were deflating like tires. He wanted to sit at one of the red metallic tables on a plastic stool among a group of saffron robed monks, with the scents of rice or noodles penetrating his nostrils. He had to smile that such an aversion as twenty baht meals still called to him pleasantly because they were the foundation of memories that constituted his verdant youth.

"What are we doing?" she asked

"We're eating," he said. "Come on, it will be fun to act like common people," he chuckled.

"Common. I know common. Common is having a treat of eating fried insects on the dirt road, Nawin. Common is sleeping on a rug because you don't have a bed. Common is praying for the opportunity of having one's sandals fall apart or getting them trapped deep into the soil of the rice field so as to have an excuse to get out of the hamlet. Occasionally we paid an arm and a leg to the owner of a truck who came once a day ten miles down a muddy road to pick people up. Common, Nawin, is collecting rain water in those big ceramic tubs that sit in front of the house, being stingy with every drop of water when you wash your body, and then go to bed exhausted without even eating dinner. Common is getting up at 5 a.m. to feed the water buffalo so that at 6 a.m. your father can use it to plow the field. You don't know anything about the word."

He did know. He bled from knowledge but he frowned and for a moment he was taciturn fighting back anger and memories. "Well, do whatever you damn well please. I need out of this car and that is what I'm doing. You can feast on what remains of the breath fresheners. I for one am dining out. I'll be back in ten minutes."

"When do we need to get on the plane?"

"There's plenty of time," he said. "Plenty of time to eat another meal in the airport before departing. You'll get a high price western meal at the airport. I guarantee it." He left the taxi and sat down meditating on the river flowing at a distance. Soon the anger dissolved and his memories were imprisoned.

The idea of paying on a taxi where the meter continued to rise without his presence enthralled him. Having lots of money was a novelty and flaunting this novelty to patrician and plebian, proletariat and CEO alike still engrossed him. Thais were culturally programmed to give the "wei" to the Buddha and the monk but in their hearts that steamed with greed as they cooked their food on the streets, sold their trinkets from their sheets, worked in office jobs, were government officers, part of an educated middle class, and a million other activities, classifications, and identities, this traditional greeting with the folded hands in front of the face was deeply given in the secret regions of subconscious ideas for those whom they thought of as rich. And as he ate his pork laden noodle soup while the meter ticked on he picked out the pork to feed the dogs; but in so doing he glimpsed someone. Past the gravel were sidewalks and stores and further was a department store. Next to it, beyond the gaunt old woman on the sheet selling and squeezing rubber duckies in the hope of selling a few and having money to eat, a man clanging bells with handless hooks above his cup, shoe repairmen fixing soles, a kiosk

of a key maker, and a blind mendicant with a speaker and a microphone singing a strident folk tune, was someone. It was a person who turned him to stone, froze him like an iceberg, mortified him, and pulled out his wounded child. It was a strange composite: at one moment appearing a bit like his brother, Kazem, and at one moment like the youngest of his elder brothers, Suthep. For a second or two as he saw this cook at a distance, he couldn't remember the name of Suthep-he who had been so innocuous but in his apathy had harmed him the most. Ten or eleven years had gone by. He wondered how he was supposed to know anymore: was this man one or the other or neither of them. Another blind beggar began to sing a song in a microphone linked to a portable speaker. He was being led by his wife. They came to his table singing a louder song more stridently than the one he heard at a distance. The sun was feeling hot and it made him dizzy and mad as Akhenaten in Ancient Egypt. Nawin, the legal alias of Jatupon, was feeling a weight death. His whole ideas and feelings were discombobulated. He took out twenty baht wedging it under the canister containing vinegar and peppers. He walked quickly to the car and cowered himself in the back seat in movement toward the airport.

Book II: Many Lifetimes Ago

Chapter 3

Their parents were dead; the cremation ceremony was over, and life went on: he internally recited, swallowed his whispered whit of air, and regurgitated the aphorism. Its cold, laconic and impersonal meaning was assumed an efficacy to change on this propelling Earth like the odious taste of medicine and so he could not fail to believe that it was true since there was nothing to his knowledge to replace it with. The present moment ravished and trashed all former beings and, like a mountebank, sold its new products as the true goods. To Jatupon, the youngest, there was a vermilion color to the day. It was no wonder. The present had come upon him as inconspicuously as the gait of the monk's orange robe in the subtle movements that philosopher made during their time of mourning.

Carrying suitcases and bags with his brothers and a woman of Chinese complexion, he sensed the rapacious discord of Bangkok—virulent and paralyzing as ennui for the rich and servitude for the poor—and so he lagged behind them. There had been a time that he would have sniffed at this new city like one of the myriad crazed but gently starving dogs (after all, in certain areas of the streets, pheromones and urinary molecules dominated over the odors of car exhausts) but, as he guessed, Bangkok was always more tempting from afar. Even though he had repined for a more promised land he did not expect that even if he were to live somewhere in “Euro-American Bangkok” (Banglampool, Silom, and Sukumvit roads with their seven day a week travelers check cashing windows) his life would be any different than his situation at present; nor would it be any worse than his life in Ayutthaya unless he were to starve.

Still, he felt apprehension; and like a restive boy he slowly dragged his suitcases. He imagined remote Hill Tribe villages on the sidewalks and himself taking his suitcases through the bedrooms of naked girls as if, like one of the kings of the Chakri dynasty with his many wives, he were to declare to them “Honeys, I'm home.” The dreaminess belied a gloom. If Jatupon were to think of one positive trait about himself that late afternoon he might have thought that the ejaculation of his semen, which he conducted alone, disgorged extremely far—so far he had sunk into a shaky gray within himself that he couldn't see outside of any void unless it had a rope attached to it. Even the fetid air intimidated him. He felt intellectually obtuse. He was like a dog carried by an owner (a woman in a skirt, riding side saddle on a motorcycle) that squealed its head off when the motorcycle skid and floundered onto one side.

Staring down as his brothers, his owners, pulled the invisible leash, he knew that they condemned him, the laggard; and nominally, that condemnation made him feel compelled to look down more often than he would have done otherwise. Still, when they crossed over to another sidewalk bustling with pedestrians he was forced to look up since he was inadvertently bowling his suitcases against the pins of strangers. In so doing, he noticed a store windowsill besieged by an orderly society of ants. He was beginning to acknowledge that Buddhist principles were curtailed by reality: a few ants allowed to live with a human became a hundred easily; multiplying mosquitoes brought disease and pain, and one's immune system killed bacteria, viruses, and protozoa because murder was stamped into the natural order that no human will could bypass. And yet this demonstrated that the Earth, herself, was alive and full of creative potential. It was this mesmerizing dynamism that most lured his eyes.

The city was fetid as his older brother's shoes in the back of his girl friend's car (the car that had brought them here); and yet its billboards and tall buildings were opulent. He imagined them glazed in morbidly saffron or vermilion dust the color of a monk's robe and the color of blood and death. All the pedestrians were individually and rapaciously galvanized but banging against each other less systematically than the ants. They were ebullient like the bouncing of hair on a schoolgirl's back since most of them were shoppers.

The brothers and the Chinese Thai woman passed another street. Near it was the edge of a small park with one blended shadow of the fronds of palm trees spread out among a patch of grass and providing a visual respite from traffic exhaust and pavement that seemed to define the city. Here he was slithering about like a snake acclimating to both a foreign environment and the alien skin that he was now wearing. These three weeks had made him unreal. His parents had ridden in the car alone; there was the car accident; then a cremation and the selling of property; the drive from Ayutthaya; the night at someone's house in some type of a fever or hallucination; mosquito bites under a net; and himself turning

into some type of caricature in a comic book or cartoon.

Whereas many other boys had books and knowledge he had his comics. He didn't know anything about the techniques of art although he had thumbed through some pictures from a book at a library in Ayutthaya. He had never even been exposed to algebra or other intellectual exercises that brought one in touch (so to speak) with abstract realities. He had heard of the Internet and assumed it was the brand name of a certain computer but wished to know for sure. He knew that his poverty created his ignorance and felt his ignorance made him stupid. For him there was nothing but day to day living twisting about like a noodle fried in the juice of itself under the hot Thailand sun.

There was a secondary trait about him that despite his bleakly gray and vermilion self-deprecation he was pleased that he possessed. His 14 years of life had provided him with at least enough acclimating instinct or reflexes that, as they crossed the road, zigzagging through stalled traffic, his feet and ears performed a specific cautionary duality of quickness in speed and breaks. This allowed him to retreat from motorcycles without headlights that were swerving around multiple lanes of cars. Even within Ayutthaya, which was conspicuously absent of operable traffic lights, he had never had an accident. There was that time that he had flown off of a motorcycle taxi and over a vendor who had been wheeling his cart when the motorcycle had run into his toasted buns glazed in feces-tinted Ovaltine, but that was a different type of incident altogether.

Across the street culinary workers of the sidewalk poured soup and scooped rice dishes into plastic bags sealed with rubber bands or put the plates of food on metallic tables. So many city residents (all of whom lived in apartments) did not possess kitchens from some law or another. This, he supposed, was good. It had provided he and his family with an existence. It did the same for them. One worker who rested on a red stool enthralled him. Without any specific gestures or words sent to him, he nonetheless felt her listlessness and knew her anguish. He knew the 4000 baht that many indigent souls received. It was their permit to live; and to get this permit to ride in life they had to harness and ensnare the creative force that had conceived them and were them, and then allow themselves to be subservient seven days a week in their robotic roles of reflexes. He saw another one wring out a washcloth and clean another table. He could imagine her travail just as he understood the travail of those around him on overpasses: the emaciated elderly with cups in their hands seemed to cluster on and under every pedestrian overpass. To be homeless, he thought, would be more horrific than the moments at one's death: a travail of being worthless and lost, where dangling blue from a rope inveigled the imagination that could not fathom a means to get 6000 baht and pull oneself off of a park bench. He felt: "I have been where you are with a hair net on my head, many late nights splintered on a wooden stool, or placid on a red plastic stool, strength thwarted, and with angular crowds stumbling over me." Almost without thinking it, he felt the horror as he struggled for words; and since he did not have his journal with him, he tried to memorize the feeling.

He remembered those years of nights in Ayutthaya when his work had ended and he was free of the vending cart, and embraced within the black smog of busses. Then there was a reprieve from the gaseous smoke of cooked food (grilled pork and chicken) trapped between canopy roofs and sidewalk. His reprieve and liberation was only in comics borrowed from a newsstand. It was a personal life—a bit of himself in a vicarious existence. The words under the pictures would often zoom across the interior of his skull in his drowsiness like cars on a speedway and he would not comprehend anything much before falling asleep at one of the tables. In sleep he would not exist. Cartoon images would run amuck. His pent up needs would flow in action and adventure although his likeness would not be in the dreams.

If thought were a product made from the raw material of feeling, he felt more than thought: "Your reflexive and monotonous perfunctory days and nights are gloomy in starlessness. Face draped on the backs of your hands folded on the table, you almost look as if you are making the gesture of 'wei' or praying to Buddha." He remembered that seconds before he was in those minutes of sleep, at the end of the work nights, he prayed for a way out or that community and connectedness could be gained within his limited life. He walked by the stranger. He walked past twenty others. With his eyes he bestowed onto them blessings.

He continued to follow his brothers through perennial steps and time and swayed alone as lifeless as wet laundry hanging on balconies during the dry season. The fetid one slammed him with poignant expletives to

which the second eldest smiled and nodded his head. Suthep, however, had childish sensitivities of his own that life had not yet hacked from him but when Jatupon quickened his pace to walk near him Suthep looked over toward him with silent rage. Jatupon just turned away and sucked in his bottom lip. It was true that weeks had passed since the death of their parents and it was so that life went on—that it was quickly manufactured and quickly hit the dust bin like any worn out or broken commodity; but, he argued to himself, an admission of their own pain and a kind smile would have helped to keep his boyhood suppressed and his manhood poised.

Jatupon was still nonplused. The present was an undercurrent in his inundating thoughts. His vision was often cracked and misted in suppressed tears and his eyes burned from his sweat seeping into them. He felt disoriented and although it was apparent, it didn't seem to evoke sympathy. In virtually his first words that day he hoarsely spoke incommunicably, cleared his throat, and then yelled over to Kazem, the second eldest, that he needed to go to the bathroom. Kazem stopped walking and told the youngest, Jatupon (to whom he nicknamed "Jatuporn"), to hold his water until they were "home." The word "home" did not make any impression on the youngest who was now wondering if they would be spending the rest of their lives walking in this fashion.

He felt that they were sinking in an abyss of negative probabilities. Concerning the pejorative comment about holding his water, it was no worse than being called "Jatuporn." He was used to it.

A facial muscle below Kazem's left eye began to twitch immediately before they again started walking. Conscious of Kazem's disposition, Jatupon became less disconcerted and more guarded, hurrying but maintaining a consistent space between himself and his brothers. How strange, Jatupon thought, that the fetid one did not have the same physical antagonism: it was strictly mental as if the thought of the youngest was so repugnant as to be beyond a physical response. He began to stumble with the bags until Kumpee's girlfriend stopped their advancement to help him carry some of his load. Her smile was wide against her pale pigment; and her Chinese complexion looked at odds to Kumpee, the oldest and darkest of the fraternal misadventurers. Jatupon was jealous of her relationship with the fetid one but this gesture of pulling away from his brothers to take one of his bags ameliorated any negativity that the appearance had not counteracted.

The journey from the parking garage and down through the hectic whims of Bangkok traffic seemed inordinately long to him and silently he objected to being led this way forfeiting friends and consistency he had always known in Ayuttaya. The sidewalk and road went over a canal. A woman with baskets of fruit dangling from the ends of a bamboo pole that was on her shoulders must have made Kumpee's girlfriend hungry since no sooner was she back with her beau than the exigency of eating had driven the herd to seek a bowl of tom yam soup with noodles. Under the canvas, eating and sinking morbidly into himself as he looked out over the cabin-shacks that were along the canal, he listened to Kumpee and Kazem.

"You're the one who wanted to move here and so I said, 'Yes, little brother. Let me fulfill your wishes and needs. It is my duty as an elder brother.'"

"I never said that."

"You were always saying that."

"Back up. That was before the accident and it was just talk."

"Man, you did not make any objections. We sold off their things and there wasn't one objection from any of you."

"I didn't know then that you would be pocketing the money."

"In other words, you wanted to move over here and now that we are over here you are raising objections as if now we should just get back into the car and go back. That is crazy."

"I was in a daze. I admit it. I let you lead us around. We don't even know anyone here."

"That isn't entirely true; but even if it turns out that he doesn't help us any at least we are in a large city where there are more opportunities than working in restaurants like this one."

"I want that money-or a share of it at anyway."

"For what?"

"So that I won't have to beg for a bowl of soup in places like this-so that if you and Natenapa take off somewhere" (Kumpee's girlfriend, who was listening to them, now looked away and reached for the pitcher of

water that was at the table) “that the money doesn’t go with you.” She poured water into her glass, sipped it once, and reached into her purse for her makeup.

“It is Thai tradition that the eldest brother is supposed to keep the inheritance for the younger ones. If you question that you don’t have any sense of right and wrong. If you have a problem with that you have a problem with the way things are and have always been. But even if I were to run away tomorrow you wouldn’t have lost much. None of it was worth anything. Look at these jeans with the holes in the knees and the pockets. If I want to start spending everything for myself I would have started with some new clothes and instead of dragging you to Bangkok with me I would have left all of you in Ayutthaya, wouldn’t I?”

“You buy jeans and cut out the areas around the knees so that doesn’t prove much. Just see to it that the money doesn’t fall from the holes and that you keep remembering the duties of an elder brother to the younger ones.”

On foot again with his brothers and the China woman, he kept wishing to be a boy that year that his parents opened what they referred to as a real restaurant. He wished for the strange faces in the familiar space: an area no different than a garage with some metallic tables and chairs in the center and woks, burners, a refrigerator, and Coke machine in the front. It had taken the family so many years of working on the street to be able to afford this space. This restaurant was more legitimate and less beggarly in appearance although not exempt from taxes. His parents were exhilarated for a while until they discovered that the added customers only compensated for rent and taxation and the same subsistence level prevailed. Soon the mundane set in and the discomfort of working on the streets was forgotten. Then he thought of a better time: that sweet time that very young children have in harmony with the parents’ wishes and the fruition of love. He could see himself pouring ice and water into small metallic cups and bringing them to the customers on the sidewalk or making his foray into salesmanship by draping from his arms the jasmine rosaries that his mother linked together from a long needle.

One day, as that boy, had he not just looked down briefly to zip his pants and found that they did not fit all that well; and that, no longer a cute or special one, he wasn’t the same (or wasn’t perceived the same) being within his new clothes? A metamorphosis had altered him to a taller and more aggravating expense and only by working hard could he avert the faces of scorn. In those years in some bedroom or another he found some peace. The plastic blinds had the same sounds of fingers wedged between them as they bounced around in the December breeze or in a June storm; and the piecemeal environment seen in the crevices of those blinds were of the same trash cans on the same pavement near some gravel. That had been reassuring to him. Now, he had been extracted from that environment.

Walking on, morose as the abyss of his subconscious disgorged like a geyser, he thought of his boyhood in school satiated in learning. There had indeed been such a boyhood in such a time brief as a few days of Bangkok winter that makes homeless dogs and cats shiver before temple walls when fortunate enough to wander into such an animal sanctuary. Learning had been a series of refreshing stimuli slapping up against him like a cool breeze. It had stimulated him and had planted in him an appetite. It was then taken away from him leaving only the wistfulness and the barren days squirming around like noodles in pork soup. At the aunt’s insistence his mother and father had paid for him to go to a poor Buddhist school run by the monks. The monks had been impressed by his academic cleverness, and soon, at their persuasion, his parents had paid for him to attend special classes as well. During those three years he had only worked in the summers; and the last of those summers was the end to a consistent time of academic learning. They rented him off to pick coconuts from a woman’s orchard and didn’t see much point in dismissing the added revenue. The aunt, with her excess of money, intervened with special tutors and home-school teachers. It lasted for a time until she became bored with overseeing it.

During the trip here an accident had occurred on the highway from Ayuttaya to Bangkok and the congestion made irascible beings used to the quick weltering motion of freedom trapped in their own thoughts. Horns, at that time sounded from all directions and Kumpee, the fetid one, at times irascibly chewed the fetid fruit called durian or slowly slurped from the beer can in his hands allowing the liquid in his mouth to spread and re-spread before swallowing. He wanted to step out of the car and punch someone but instead he bit into the heart of the durian.

When the girlfriend's car gained enough freedom to interweave within the slowness (a slowness that caused their minds to be more lamenting), Kumpee, at that time, made their way out of the last lanes and pulled into a town to get another beer. He had hardly entered the town when he fell asleep for a second and swerving to escape hitting a *tuc tuc* upon awakening (a *tuc tuc* being a big golf-cart taxi) or a bicycle rickshaw, the car nearly hit a truck and then nicked a fruit cart that was being pushed along the side of the road. Kumpee, burdened and desiring for speed and escape, drove on. During that second of the near miss with the truck, Jatupon felt that it was their destiny—their karma—to have the same fate that their parents had experienced weeks earlier. He found himself disappointed to be alive but sensed that he was alone in this. Even if such a thought flashed before his brothers, they were older and quickly regained that cold detachment as if their psyches were fully evolved as separate entities. They portrayed, in legitimate or feigned smiles, that they no longer felt that the fate of the parents was interlinked to that of the sons. Suthep, who was just a year and a half older than Jatupon, had not been so convincing. When he felt that he was unobserved he seemed troubled and twice looked out the back window.

Kumpee, deciding to sleep, drove a little further in the same direction to his friend's house. He was apologetic. After all, Bangkok (or Krung Thep Maha Nakhon) was only 45 miles from Nakhon Si Ayutthaya but to experience traffic problems in Thailand was like no other, and to have sold the parents' possessions after burning the bodies of the mother and father before the inevitable rot (a ubiquitous ordeal so individually personal) was like no other. They were exhausted and needed someplace to stay. The friend welcomed them in without the least reservation. Kumpee and Kazem put rice mats on the floor. Then they began to tie up the tent of the mosquito net by stringing it up against light fixtures and unused nails that stuck out of walls. Suthep and Jatupon became aware that their masculine images of themselves were dependent on being a builder of the house, and so they quickly secured two sagging corners so that they would not be badgered for feminine subservience.

That night, under the net, Jatupon considered the mosquito stealth: that it waited for the concluding restless mumbling of his two eldest brothers who were rehashing where they would go long-term and what they would do. The mosquito waited; and the minute that they fell asleep its wings cut through the black air and time with the buzz of a monotonous chant. The mosquito carried a wicker fan called a "balabot" that monks used to hide their faces as they gave the air their morbid and sonorous drones. He heard the mosquito shuffling around the room under the net. There were times, throughout the night, that he questioned if some less supernatural version of a mosquito had bitten him and had given him dengue fever which might have brought on these hallucinations, or if he was experiencing withdrawal from not having used drugs or sniffed glue for a while. It did not occur to him that a third possibility might have been the variety of chemical substances already in his body mixed with the new amphetamines that he had popped into his mouth an hour earlier while in the bathroom of Kumpee's friend. It was a well-known fact that metropolitan bus drivers in every city popped amphetamines; and so to him it had been vitamins fortifying him against depression and lethargy.

As he walked with his brothers and the "Chinawoman" through the heat and smoke of the sidewalk restaurants, he remembered having been very hot the previous night and how he had felt so miserably trapped under the mosquito net like a fish in the web and snare of its net. He was sick but it did not last for very long. According to his memory this strange entity as large as himself shuffled under the net from one corner to the next and the sickness of his stomach was replaced by a queasy and tightening horror while he cowered in the embrace of his legs. Thinking himself in a net where there was no extrication he experienced the adrenalin of bravado. He wanted to confront his fears. Trying to reach for a religion to formulate a rational perspective in the irrational, he argued that the snare outside had to be less poignant than the snare of gluttonous appetites that were the cell, the bunk, and the chained wall within the underground prison that was he. This mosquito evoked in him, or he invoked in himself, such trepidation that he imagined an equal: prehistoric peoples of Thailand watching their halcyon harmony with nature execrably disparaged in the vehement winds of a hurricane—the trees along the river, which had offered protection now torn and lethally slapped at them.

The mosquito landed, crawled, and looked at the bodies on the floor. "Everyone is separated out into little forts. The others are under two different nets," it flared its voice in a quasi-question without looking at

Jatupon's face. "Who are these creatures?" it asked.

"My brothers"

"There's one woman," it said pugnaciously. "They can't all be your brothers. Let's have an inventory. Be specific!"

"My eldest brother's friend and my brother, Kazem, are under one tent. My brother, Kumpee, and his girlfriend are in a second tent. My brother, Suthep, is here with me."

"And you I know. Don't you think this is a bit overdone: three forts around a few microscopic insects?"

Jatupon opened his mouth but failed to say anything. Then he closed his mouth in fear of an insect flying into it.

"At any rate, why isn't one tent used throughout the room."

"I don't know. I didn't ask."

"Aren't you a little dummy," it said. "Considering the fact that one large tent spread throughout the room would be a more economical investment than three smaller ones, one would think that you would care to inquire about it logically."

"We aren't renting them. They are the host's and it would be impolite to ask such questions."

"They are the host's and it wouldn't be polite to ask those questions," it mocked. "You are so Thai through and through: one dummy in a nation of dummies. Here, let me look at this dummy."

After a thorough examination of Suthep's body like a doctor or a depraved sexual stalker, it turned away from the one sleeping and spoke Jatupon's disparaging nickname of "Jatuporn" disdainfully. Then it told him that he and it would be playing cards. It shuffled its body from corner to corner and then shuffled the cards. One card became thwarted and dislodged from the uniform movement. It flipped face up and showed a still life of his parents who were expressionless as mannequins. They were a couple of a dark pigment (he from birth and she with her Chinese skin all burnt and wrinkled brown). She was naked but wearing a hair net and he was without his usual cap but was wearing a loincloth that had been soiled by his weekend work in the rice fields in the rural outskirts of the city. The mosquito quickly buried the card into the others face down.

"Let's talk of them, the ashes that they be. They make up one of two groups of people in your life and these categories of individuals need to be discussed."

"Why are you crying?"

"Seeing them makes me miss them. They died in a horrible accident."

"Accidents abound."

"We had to burn their bodies."

"That's done. You don't want them rotting in the streets. From what I heard, they made excellent firewood in the incinerator. What is there to cry about? They fulfilled the quest of their lives. It was the only decent thing they ever did: becoming a fireball. What is there to cry about?"

"They are gone. They were my parents and I loved them."

"You are sorry for the pain they experienced. I suppose that is decent of you; but most of that love is just like not questioning why there are three nets in this room instead of one. You, Thais, are so subservient to your cultural definitions of right and wrong. What silly things you all are. You are specifically foolish having the loyalty of a dog that is kicked, fed, and comes back for more. You are too Thai. It is absolutely sickening." It again glanced at Suthep. "Tell me about this one on the mat with you. Is he as stupid?"

"Are you going to hurt him and me?"

"Possibly; or just allow you to hurt yourselves."

"Tell me about him."

"He is the third eldest brother. He is a litter older than me. He likes Thai boxing and snookers. I don't know what to say. I don't know what you want. He is my brother. I love him."

"There you go with that word. Do you think that they, your parents, loved you?"

"Of course."

"That's what you think but that isn't what you know. I want what you know from what you have repressed. I want the truth. I want to enlighten you, or for you to enlighten yourself. It's a misnomer, you know. It isn't really light at all in either color or weight. Enlightenment is hard and dark. Don't you think so?"

"I've never considered it."

"I know you haven't." It paused. "You know, I can read your thoughts. Why are you trying to memorize everything I'm saying. You flatter me so."

"I want to put it in my journal but it is buried in one of my bags."

"I see. I'm glad you write. I think you should write or draw."

"Why?"

"Why not? As an indictment of love if nothing else. I'm wondering what you think about your mother having four sons. Really five including the miscarriage."

"I wouldn't know. I suppose she loved Children. She loved raising them."

"She needed children. Not only did her body push her to make copies of herself to preserve her DNA but also she needed the distractions from her own thinking—from love gone awry. She had married a tyrant. The only thing they shared was the scheming of easily cobbled projects to make a tiny bit of money they always hoped would make them filthy rich. The rebellion against her family and sexual felicity with his large genitalia had been eroded in time. She became conscious of his piggish habits. She was always thinking about being alienated from her former family, which, if she had stayed with them, would have allowed her to live a comfortable life. Children were her distraction but when they were older she resented their independence. As far as your father is concerned, he loved you even more: he loved chasing after you as if you were a cockroach that he wanted to smash. He got your brothers to help him stomp on you."

"How do you know that the need to preserve DNA makes a mother love?" Jatupon whined sullenly.

"I read it in a comic book."

Jatupon became taciturn. His head hurt and he wanted to vomit. He couldn't get up. He tried to stand up but couldn't do so. He tried to vomit in a cup but nothing came up."

"You might as well stay where you are at. If you go into the bathroom for more pills or slip into your bag for some glue you might be able to discombobulate my voice like a child spinning around in the grass but ultimately you'll fall into me and the mordant words will be all the more deleterious. Besides, it is still my hand and there are more cards to play. It tossed another card from the deck his way. It was Kumpee's girl friend. It was her face and shape.

"Yes, Jatupon said, "She's a lovely card" and the mosquito nodded his head disdainfully. Then it clapped its feet and said, "One baht for the human's ability to at least recognize physical beauty." Jatupon looked on the table and there appeared a one baht coin with a naked China woman engraved on it. He picked it up. It's weight, which was always equal to that of play money, had become less; and there was a continual sensation that even though it rested in his finger tips it was being pulled lightlessly away from him to fall endlessly into an inconvertible currency. He watched it vaporize into a gas.

"She is one of the second group who has no special significance to you at all and yet from her your life has been changed. People like this might be helpful and even compassionate but at the end of the day they won't stay with you. They are evanescent nectar in the dissolution of events and time."

"Only two groups?"

"Only two unless you make up a third. All I know of the future is from the perspective of today."

Catered to the limitations of Jatupon's entomological knowledge, this gigantic mosquito was male and a bloodsucker nonetheless. It looked into his intimate space with such a bold stare that he felt that it could easily seduce him in as its prey—that the survival of the fittest reigned with the hegemony of its kind just as micro-organisms always get the last meal. As he saw its eyes he suddenly knew the sadistic fun it was having with its mind games, and the cruel hunting games of cats and their dead mice. Deeper into its eyes he saw a starving child and a vulture awaiting on a rock, the fight for dominion of species and nations, and the sexual aggression of making love among mankind. He felt like walking meat; and he knew that all animals felt the same of their own lives ceaselessly. He grieved for them. The mosquito knew this intuitively and began to laugh at him for his sensitivity and his naive animistic thinking, which like a child, made animals conscious and sagacious.

"You aren't real, you know, but the fever of my own brain," said

Jatupon to curtail his vision.

"Oh, let's not start the reality game. I'll make this simple so that even you can understand it. It foils others I enlighten who give me the same argument. I say to them that they, who create ideas, will die in a hundred years but an idea that they might have has the possibility of living on. To the idea, I say, the man would not seem real." Then he obfuscated. "Didn't you read in an encyclopedia one time that the American president, Abraham Lincoln, said, 'In the civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect his purpose.'"

"I don't understand what you are meaning by that. I didn't understand that long sentence when I read it anyhow."

"You don't understand subtle and abstract meanings because you are uneducated. You sometimes dabble here and there with an encyclopedia in the library and then you forget everything you've read when you understand it at all," said the mosquito in a contumelious air. "Only the dreamer is the illusion. Not the dream. The dreamer sinks back with the dirt."

It tossed that card like a coin from its gangling talon tips. The card enlarged to a life-sized form and moved toward Jatupon. He almost felt seduced by it as it moved around him in its mating dance. The mosquito laughed harder and then said that not only had he and his brothers relinquished their homeland in Ayutthaya on account of her but that she was a trap or a symbol of a trap. It was not just she, he explained. It was all of them. Love and marriage was a specie ** specie ? or species ? ** preserving drug induced into a man to keep him bound and limited through passion, fear of loneliness, and obligation."

"Then I should feel sorry for my elder brother if it is a sickness like how I'm feeling now. I mean I was feeling really sick but now I must still be sick if I'm imagining you. I wish I were able to tell what is happening to me now. It is like suffering the withdrawals or dengue fever." Slowly forcing himself beyond his cowardly pose, Jatupon got up and opened his suitcase. He took out two warm cans of Coca Cola. He opened the tabs and slid one to the mosquito that drank up.

"It isn't quite the nectar of blood but it is okay when one is thirsty," it commented.

He was like a wounded soldier who perceived that the enemy was another victim in the war and so he wanted to sit down near this opposing peer. Jatupon crept near it and gradually sat on a mat. A minute later, after not being eaten, his confidence grew and he felt like confessing his soul to the insect as if the mosquito's appearance were only that mask Thai monks hid behind when they said their chants. "Kumpee said he would live with us but I guess he might mean that now. After all, his girlfriend is with him. He only talked to her on our way here." He paused and thought deeply once again. "I don't like what you say but it's honest. I have no one to talk with, you know." He thought of this mosquito as a spirit who came through the burning of incense placed at a stupa. "I don't have anyone to be honest with me and all of the friends I once had I've had to leave. Would you visit me in Bangkok?" He spoke with such innocence that the mosquito had to smile bashfully and look away from the awkwardness of knowing that only a child believes that mother and father are extensions of his own body; only a child walks into the forest with a kind stranger where he is bound to a tree, raped and murdered; and only one warped in the wisdom gained in tragedy finds himself inseparably bound by every stern, euphonious truth uttered by a monster.

"Would I accept the invitation to come to Bangkok to bite you and inject you with malaria? No, I'm afraid I would not be able to accept such an invitation at this time and you shouldn't be extending it. Always remember that truth is lethal. To know and to be aware of many things is like a man too fat for his house and this obese pig of a man is forced onto the streets where he can't tolerate the heat and cold because of his flab; and then I come along and suck through his baboonish skin before he knocks off. I certainly would accompany you if it were not for there being truth in the adage that a mosquito could never live in Bangkok because the pollution would kill him off."

Then the mosquito's eyes were those of the second eldest brother, Kazem, and Jatupon was with him in the bathroom where he had taken the pills. Kazem lifted up "Jatuporn's" bare legs onto his shoulders; inserted himself; and rode. Jatupon realized that he was hallucinating this because there was the mosquito before him. He felt ill. He just wanted to get out of the confines of the mosquito net. He just wanted to

brush his teeth.

The next thing Jatupon dreamt or knew the third eldest one, Suthep, put a cold washcloth on his forehead and then had him take some aspirin. As Jatupon gluttonously swallowed the pills down his gullet he kept wondering if it were cocaine. Suthep vanished and then there was the mosquito again. In a transformed madness, the mosquito became Kazem; and this brother kept riding him painfully while Jatupon wondered if Kumpee, the fetid one, had run off permanently with his "Chinawoman."

Somewhere into the night—had it been in the bathroom when he was vomiting or when he was back under the net with a washcloth on his head?—he could not place where he was at; and then odd thoughts came into his mind. "If love oils are a way to make the anus and the vagina something that they aren't designed for maybe I'm pregnant with my brother's child? Does he love me? What is love? My bottom has spread out like a damp shirt when stretched"

Then it was the mosquito again. He asked what were Jatupon's job aspirations in Bangkok. "Oh, I don't know," the boy responded. "I have thought many things."

"Such as..." it asked.

"At times I have thought that I could become a monk—one of those real monks that live in the cave, eat only vegetables, and have no needs or wants."

The mosquito scoffed. "What a bloody idealist. Deny your hungers and you deny the animal that comprises so much of the human being—the animal that developed a high degree of consciousness to fight his way up as the dominant species, the animal that nonetheless behaves according to instinct. If you deny the human you will have wasted your life not living it at all. That is what will happen if you are lucky. If unlucky, I suppose you will eventually snap like a crazed immigration officer who begins to shoot tourists. You are an animal not that you have to be swallowed up whole into your hungers. The illusions of being in love, the ambitions that have allowed you to subdue the Earth under the illusion of gaining some happy plateau after making your conquests, are hardly instincts one can extract. One shouldn't extract them. These instincts have filled your kind with purpose thereby making brief existences on a meaningless planet bearable. Most importantly sexual desire keeps your race proliferating. Tell me something a bit more practical."

"Well...sometimes I have thought I could become a money collector in a city bus. I would be a Bangkok Metropolitan Transportation employee—BMT."

"Well, being prime minister would never suit you. I must say that this is certainly less extreme and easily in your reach. What attracts you to the profession of ticket tearing?"

Jatupon imagined the money collector clicking the lid of his metallic cylinder while shoving through the people. At times he would sit on the monkey bar near the open door feeling the artificial winds created by this fast moving green tube full of standing contortionists. When new customers came in he would put their money into the tube and extract tickets, weightless as stamps, from the same container. He would click and click to get their attention. When the bus was inordinately full, barefoot or in sandals, he would stand on the last step an inch from death like a parachutist without a parachute.

"I just think that I could do it," he told the mosquito.

"Yes," said the mosquito, "but could you count change to the satisfaction of the mass transit department of Bangkok?"

"I'm not hardly a dummy," Jatupon said angrily.

"Let's not go into that," the mosquito said. "I know you can count. I'm just not sure if it goes beyond ten. That's all. What other fun things could you become if needed—any type of job that can at least grant you eighty dollars worth of free falling baht each month?"

"I don't know. I'm tired of thinking about it. It is such an anguish to worry about surviving continually."

"Indeed. Just like you were thinking before: animals that have insight into the fact that they are nothing but ambulatory meat; only you are the meat of the richer classes. Your life will be consumed at work for their pleasure."

The girl friend handed her sun burnt Siamese a key to the room and excoriated him for not believing her about the distance of the apartment building from the department store. She snubbed encountering extensive numbers of the underclass even though her father owned the building.

She stood aloof and contracted the muscles of her face even before the evaporation of urinary molecules from the façade of the building attacked her nostrils. She disheveled Jatupon's hair and then maternally combed it back again with her fingers. She told Kumpee that she would take a taxi back to the department store and wait for him at McDonald's. Then she left them in repugnance.

Within a glance each of them saw all there was of their apartment burrowed under the building and became sullen. Kumpee lied that he would leave his bag in the apartment and then see his girlfriend back to her home. Jatupon lay on the floor. Suthep unpacked and put the headphones of a Walkman around his ears. Kazem took a shower. The subject of his departure was forgotten. Kumpee sat on his case for a half hour eating his durian. Then when there seemed an inconspicuous exit he picked up his bag and went away. They felt his missing presence prod the vacuous air an hour later when they noticed that the suitcase was gone.

Chapter 4

It was 2 a.m. and the mosquito came into the scenes of his REM with wings piercing through and dominating over every brief episodic nightmare. It was wearing an orange monk's robe and superciliously imposed its own presence on all scenes that Jatupon alone was supposed to rehearse. It altered a script that Jatupon's brain had conjured in the hope of figuring out how to interact with his environment and live with himself harmoniously. Initially his sleep consisted of nascent dream-roles to find out if feigning a serious illness would have altered his parents' journey of early demise. Later there were others such as trying to persuade the fetid one's Chinese girlfriend to buy him a white shirt and necktie so that he could apply at the Bangkok Metropolitan Transportation Department and thereby resurrect himself as an economic deliverer and a masculine force to be admired instead of dog excrement on his brothers' heels that he perceived them as perceiving him to be. There were also briefer skits in the random feelings, thoughts, and perceptions he was trying to categorize. One was of trying to successfully bite his shirt to stop himself from crying out when Kazem's riveting night sports were too painful and another one was of attempting to remember the few neighborhoods and streets of Bangkok that he had learnt in past visits and perhaps link them to various names that only sleep could recall. Throughout it all was the buzz of the mosquito. This insect-monk buzzed no differently than a bee.

"And where were you today and yesterday?" it asked.

"I didn't get out the glue and there were no pills to pop."

"Why didn't you get out the glue?"

"I want to do this for fun. I want these trips to stay what they call "recreational." I'll take them only when I need out. I don't want to be an addict."

"You aren't an addict. If your body really wanted it, you wouldn't have been able to resist it for over 24 hours. Still, even though this is noble and good, you don't want to walk away from your friends."

"I know."

"What did you do this afternoon?"

"I went to fly a kite near Wat Phra Kaeo."

"Do you mean you masturbated in the temple housing the Emerald Buddha? I mean that's fine if it is true. Surely another person or two over the past two or three centuries has done that also. All the same, please refrain from using Thai slang. You don't want to sound like a dummy when you talk to me."

"No, I mean it literally, Ajarn," said Jatupon. Ajarn meant "respected teacher." "I went to the area outside of the Grand Palace in Sanam Luang. In front of the golden and pointed domes of the entrance there is an oval football field of dirt. The radio mentioned that hundreds of boys and girls were flying kites there. I was planning to buy a kite and fly mine with the hundreds that were soaring next to each other but there was no one my age doing that."

"Neither a boy nor a man: what an awkward state to be in. Anyhow, so you wanted to fly a kite near the golden pagodas and cupolas of the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaeo but you didn't do so. I assume it was more for lack of money. Is that right? Is that all? I can't imagine why you would think that you could use money for such extravagances considering your present predicament."

"I had some. I always get some."

"How?"

"I go through Kazem's pockets when he is asleep."

"Do you mean you steal it?"

"Not really. He knows I do it. It is kind of like a little game...sort of."

"Oh, I can pick it from your simple mind so easily. The rule being that after you provide your sexual services to him he allows you to pickpocket from the pants that he drapes on a chair. If he awakens he beats you or disparages your existence in front of the family but if you are quiet you can take most of what he has in his pockets and run away throughout the day."

"When I'm not working. That is kind of how it has gone. He has always been kind enough to see that I get a vacation every week. He was always telling Mother that I needed to be something other than an illiterate slob and the least they could do was allow me to go to the library once a week. I would usually go there...sometimes a movie or standing at a

newsstand reading the comics. That is sort of how it was. Now we aren't working so I didn't take very much yesterday. Hey, if you can read my simple little mind so easily, why do you bother to ask things?"

"To amuse myself a little. Did this pickpocket game occur when your parents were alive?"

"Yes, it began when I was eleven. What could I have said to anyone? I was hated. You said so yourself. I wasn't going to make it worse by humiliating myself that way. They wouldn't have believed me; and they wouldn't have wanted to think about something so disgusting. Anyhow, Kazem always had me swear that I'd keep it secret and he is the only one who has really cared about me-as much as people care about others. Maybe not so much." He became taciturn.

"Quiet!" said the mosquito belatedly. "I hear something." It paused and looked through the small window of the basement apartment. "Oh, it is your mother driving up now."

"She doesn't drive. She doesn't own a car."

"She does now." Jatupon remembered that she always did buy lottery tickets that mendicants sold from wooden attaché cases hung around their chests. "I thought she didn't have the chance of a snowball in hell of winning" commented the mosquito. "Anyhow, here she is and it is grocery day. You need to help her bring in the bags."

It was raining but he nonetheless heard the car. He sauntered out of the kitchen of the river cabin as the screen door sprang back behind him.

"Mother," he yelled in a surprised tone. "You're back." The engine stopped.

"Of course I'm here. You knew I'd be back in an hour. Where else would I be?" Her voice screamed out belligerently but it was hollow and virtually inaudible in the container of the car. The Mercedes Benz was flaxen and waxed and the woman inside was a bit of the same self in an idealized way. She was even more young, beautiful and poised than Kumpee's girlfriend. Her skin was also whiter than the fetid one's infatuation and instead of being dark, thick, and puffy like a durable and well tread tire she was a thin sheath, almost like a transparent condom, and perfectly unblemished.

"Did you go to Ayutthaya?"

"Have you really forgotten where I've been. Even you can't be that stupid. I told you before I left. I went to Thee Nai." Thee nai was the word "Where" in Thai; but she spoke it with such certainty that he believed in its legitimacy as a city name like Chaing Mai. She spoke even more loudly from her encasement inside the car but was still barely audible.

"To see Grandmother?"

"And grocery shopping. After all, it is grocery day. " She stopped frowning and slowly made a partial smile. "I have something for you." He felt surprised. He wondered why he would be given something. He couldn't remember having ever been given a gift. In Thailand (the real Thailand as lived by the poor masses) children were instruments: tools to ease the task of making a living, and later they were sustenance and emotional pampering for the aging parents. Above the steering wheel she showed to him a small rectangular box that she opened like a coffin. In it was a large golden pen that gleamed like the roofs of a Buddhist temple. Minutes passed. She continued to exhibit the pen and her half-smile while staying encased. All of the car windows were rolled up. He kept wondering what good the pen would do him if it were just a visual appearance seen through the glass of a car. He forgot the pen and concentrated on his mother who was as intangible. He heard the sound of her calmly wrestling unsuccessfully with a door handle that would not unlock.

He or it—this mordant mosquito—came with wings piercing through sleep. He again spoke of her, the girlfriend, as "Chinatown skin" and drawing her from a deck of cards, the mosquito threw her. The card, animated like an email greeting, clicked around as if on high heels. The woman's form, detaching itself from the shell of the card, sang and danced her dance. Jatupon and the mosquito both lusted for her. Jatupon wanted to rush into the toilet the way he had seen a man in his early twenties rush into the public restroom at the movie theatre, Major Ciniplex in Ayuttaya, a week before his parents died. On that occasion, or misadventure, Jatupon, who a minute later went to relieve himself in an adjacent cubicle before going back to his cart of noodles, heard pumping noises. Then on his side of the crack he faintly saw a shadow of a hand stroking a penis on the tiles to the left of his feet. That man had sought pleasure in marginal solitude; but for him, with a mosquito

staring him down with emotionless black eyes, there was no privacy. His masturbatory time was limited by his hallucinations.

He tried to suffocate the thought of the Chinese Thai woman in an imaginary pillowcase. He tried to extinguish the sparks of his own desires by deluging them with more abstract and tenuous thoughts. He wondered what would be some other choices of jobs he could pursue to break away from what was left of this fraternity and become an independent being. The idea hurt him. He then told himself that he never wanted to leave his brothers. He told himself that he would go out to find Kumpee, the fetid one, if he only knew where in the big city to search.

Jatupon saw his own pimpled face staring at him; his childhood friends who moved or became people he could not relate to; and his parents that no human sense of bonding, volition, or imagination could bring back. Orphic memories gleamed and sparkled opaquely like the moving shadows of leaves on the pavement. "So, I can not see my own reflection without cringing. So, I felt that sense of fear that came from thinking that my classmates might not want me to play takraw with them and that feeling has not left me entirely. So, I'm scared of losing people, like fumbling with the bamboo ball, as if their departure would be the end of my own personal essence! So, in the end, we all come down in a cruel fate." He could not formulate these abstract thoughts. It all was a base and indistinct feeling. He was attempting to channel the fears that constituted so much of his being so that they would not burst into his consciousness.

"So, have you finished falling so fully and foolishly into yourself," asked the mosquito. It paused and looked back at the girl. "She is Chinatown skin, the kind every man pants for: all beautifully white, each aesthetic non-deformity ranking her in the realm of desirability in every Thai man's mind. 'Won't she, in this quintessence of beauty, have virtually no chance of making a deformed baby,' screams the man's ingrained DNA programming that composes each and every cell. 'Won't she, in this quintessence of beauty, have virtually no chance of making a deformed baby,' scream's the psychological programming created by the influence of his peers who think that her money and education have made her as valuable as white ivory -the type often used in Buddhist statuettes. Hormonal discriminatory passions ensue, dopamine hits the pleasure receptors of the brain, and make him an addict for a hormonal pleasure with her."

"Is this love? Is this all that we are? Love is the best part of us and yet it is as this? I can't believe that," retorted Jatupon.

The mosquito, the big "it," guffawed. "You are truly ingenuous. You are contrary to the natural world around you-a true babe focusing your trusting round eyes so eagerly on the savage world around you. Personally it is a novelty to me and I don't mind it at all. Do you remember how you felt when you were young?"

He remembered the warmth he felt toward his mother even though she did not like him. He remembered how she cared for him despite thinking him a burden. She was the good birdie feeding his mouth. Had he not believed all love to be something like a mother's love and that this mother's love was pure? Had he as little as a few days earlier been inveigled in the optimism of being free from the consideration of how instinct is passed down in genetic transfer from generation to generation? Had he not imagined a desire for a woman and being "in love" as something more spectacular than bottle rockets and Roman candles lit from the bridges over the Chao Phraya River in the Loi krathong celebration?

There were times he had even considered love to be a preordained gift bestowed onto each being in subtle and illuminating graces. It was a bit like a lit candle on a krathong, a hand length banana-leaf boat sent out onto waters during the Loi krathong holiday. A given krathong would perhaps sail a hundred meters on a river before being tipped over in waves and winds along with one's negativity and culpability; and for this exorcism the river goddess would bestow onto such an individual a new year of blessings. As a boy he had thought that this universal love was so pure that it was colorless and translucent. He believed that it was so ubiquitous and protecting like a mosquito net around the world, but alive, sensitive, and full of feeling; and that from it came the babies...the babies. Certainly as the years were placed on the tables like plates of rice and bowls of noodle soup it was harder to believe that brotherly love was equally dispersed among mankind. It seemed that the darker the pigment of a Thai, the more likely he was to do his menial tasks and the whiter he was, the more such Thais seemed to own the enterprises of the country. To his brother, Kumpee, like the father, he had existed as a

verbal punching bag to relieve stress. "Night sports" was the term that Kazem called his form of brotherly love.

"Now..." scoffed the mosquito as it smiled maliciously, "Now, you know the truth. The truth shall set you free. Babies come from the desire to both eat healthy human flesh and crawl and slither around in its beautiful skin."

He woke up startled to a void and a room that was at first unfamiliar in the darkness until memory seeped in and he knew where he was at. As he was feeling depressed looking at this basement room where they were caged and smelling the stagnancy of air stinking of mens' bodies more eclectically than just their armpits, he fought with the rectangular window to which leaned weeds and grass. He barely budged it open. The patch of greenery flushed its grassy smells as well as the urinary ones with a gust of wind. Even decay was in the grass and such smells were beautiful. He watched the blades moving. They whispered of impermanence. They reminded him that as dictators die, civilizations ultimately become nothing but a few buried artifacts and bones, and palaces crumble, he would not stay in this cell forever. Everything would change; and change at times had its advantage.

And yet the child in him resisted change. It yearned to declare every dust particle that had been trodden on its friend. It did not like parting and it, in him, hated the idea of Kumpee gone. He felt jealous that this woman had taken him. He hated her despite her earlier friendliness to him. He hated her white skin and hated Kumpee for his ugly dark skin, his abandonment, and his fetid ways. Mostly he hated his contemptuously tinged use of the nickname, "Jatuporn," showing that he knew everything about this relationship with Kazem. The apathy in the pronouncement would have been bearable. The contempt would have at least shown concern. But that particular mix spelled out that he, Jatupon, was really the fetid one and he hated the fetid one for it.

Stagnant and morose in feelings and thoughts, he dripped in the sauna of his own sweat; and, careful not to stumble over his brothers in the night, he opened the door for more breezes, for a passing mosquito, for voices, and the dispersing of crowded thoughts. He recalled untainted and simple memories of Kazem telling Suthep a joke a customer had relayed to him making all four of them laugh until they turned red; the shapes and slight variations of the colors of clouds; and lying on his bed in their parents home hearing the sounds of locusts somewhere in the swaying tree limbs cradled in the wind's caresses. He knew that such trivial and yet poetical experiences were what constituted human happiness.

He stepped outside and then walked a couple of blocks in a still relatively unfamiliar terrain. To him, the surveyor of the night, the city spilled out in the oozing newness of black and yellow tubes of paint. There was a larger road and across the street was a Seven-Eleven convenience store. He stood there and his eyes followed the traffic that went directly in front of it. He rummaged through one of his bags until he found his glue. He inhaled its fumes and popped some amphetamines he had purchased at the drugstore with Kazem's pocket money.

He remembered that Suthep and Kazem, like curious beasts, had occasionally looked in on him during that time, a year ago, when his body had its opiate force (really a mixed drug combination adversely affected by beer he drank during the Songkran New Year's water fight) poured from it like water from a colander. How sick he had been. From Kazem's suggestion, it had been a monk—a former teacher of his boyhood—whom he had stayed with while he was stiff and shaking. The periodic vomiting and shaking had seemed so incessant although it, like all, was fleeting. It had been too intolerable for his parents and yet for all the talk of the father getting rid of him completely by shoving him into a monastery, they had been happy to again gain their worker.

Lost in the myriad dimly lit trails of his own thoughts, he at last returned and went back to his bed of clothes. He smoothed them out. He made them even. He thought that he might be reprimanded about leaving the door open for insects to fly in. It was to his satisfaction but it probably wouldn't be to theirs and these brothers might easily awaken from the dogs that could be heard a block away. He got up and shut both the door and the window. Then, for a few minutes, he listened to the howling of dogs muffled through the closed door. For a half hour his positions changed restlessly on the wad of clothes. He thought of the postcard pictures of temples and palaces; of possibly being a money collector on the city busses, standing on a step and hanging out of the continually opened door of a green bus; of—

"What a pathetic existence. You haven't even paid any rent on this

room. Gifts can be taken back, you know. You could be thrown out at any whim: Kazem's, the girlfriend's, her father who might hate him enough to kick you out. You have no money or jobs. What will you do?"

"I thought that you weren't coming here."

"Here?"

"To Bangkok."

"Did I say that?" it asked for the first time in a tone that was introspective and self-conscious.

"You said it. If you make yourself out to be this monster of truths I can't see how you can lie like this."

"I was with you earlier in a less bright, more murky form of a dream when you were anxious that you hadn't gotten any privacy to fly your kite. You didn't seem to remember quoting me then."

It did not like the merit of its own veracity scrutinized. It turned away and paused. It scratched one leg against another thoughtfully the way one might a scalp. Jatupon wondered for a moment if the insect would disappear wordlessly from the weight of its own waning confidence but there was no chance of that. It reasserted itself, attempting to discard its solemn self-interrogations for a more august posture and attitude.

"You would be the aimless kinetic movements of other dust just like your kind if it wasn't for me giving you consciousness and a soul. You impudent little dummy, you should not speak to your ajarn this way. Your blood only has worth as the nutrients of my posterity. That is its purpose. If you become so calculating and crafty with me I'll reevaluate our relationship." One of its arms reached over and caressed his skin. "At a distance," it said, "the brownness makes it look as solid as a rock. I forget that it is so tender. Your naivete also seems so obdurate that I often forget the self-serving and disingenuous muck underneath it all." It brought back its arm, opened its mouth widely, and spat at the boy. "Here have an early Songkran," it said. Songkran was the New Year's water festival in the hottest month of April. The month was really March of the year 2445 according to the Thai Buddhist calendar. "I come and go by the dictates of my own intelligent, restless brooding. I move from one rock to another hoping to get satisfaction or at least a reprieve from dissatisfaction. I, an intelligent being, must delude myself that the composite of rocks that make up this planet are something other than hardened shells of dirt and that I, wandering from one rock to another, am really living experiences instead of hallucinating pleasurable sensations for my self to stay sane. Only seeing other life forms scrambling around the rocks to be my appetizers engender me with purpose. It paused. "There is nothing too peculiar in me wandering around in contradictory paths. All intelligent creatures are the same. Boredom drives them to reshape their environment to serve their petty and selfish goals. This might be entertaining for higher creatures but it's an absolute curse for the highest." It wiggled its face and then pointed with an arm. "I must relieve your mind of worry. As they say, ignorance is bliss. You have little risk of finding boredom so insanely strong even if you stay bound to noodles all your life. Boredom makes me curious. I want to know many things. I want to know about you boys."

"You are a bit like our guardian, aren't you.."

"Yes, if that is what you need—a surrogate uncle: that is what I'll be."

His vision, his mosquito-uncle and deus ex machina, smashed like a fly against a car window. Jatupon was exhausted and his mental alertness relaxed in preparation for sleep. In a REM more troubled, incoherent, and weltering, there were flies seemingly caught between a window and a screen. The screen was opened a crack and yet the crack only demarcated freedom and the self-imprisonment of the mind for they climbed around the screen and yet never found that opening that had allowed them to enter. Then there were rocks with a bit of honey and flies swarming in it; and himself echoing the mosquito's question on how the three of them would be making a living. He disparaged himself by casting that self as a cartoon of a motorcycle taxi driver sitting sidesaddle with a group waiting patiently in a queue for customers to arrive. Stationary with time passing amuck, and content with empty and drowsy space and flies buzzing about his face, his life defied money and motion. "Get out of the way. If you can't fasten a doorknob take a broom and sweep up that mess in the back of the restaurant. I don't know what you are going to do when you get older. You can't even cook. You can't do anything and even walking you trip over your own shadow," said his father. "You should see his cartoons," said Kazem. "The boy can draw." The cartoon of himself had signed the wedding papers and he and his cartoon wife were standing near a monk as relatives came by with bowls

of water rinsing their hands. Flies buzzed around their faces. A worker, selling Buddhist statuettes, necklaces, and rosaries, picked her child up, pulled down his pants, and let him urinate in the parking lot.

“Love,” said the cartoon of the mosquito, “makes up the vernacular of pop culture. It is innate as a quest. It lances life’s old festers granting a mood of the new. For the male it is a consistent alternative on nights when the hunt for new females becomes unsuccessful. Both sexes need to believe that their own physical attributes will be passed on to posterity. For sociable creatures the illusion of having a permanent foundation for their lives in marriage and family is indispensable. So much goes into this ineluctable lure called love and marriage: most of all a void so enormous that we chip through other skulls to record the memory of ourselves in that watery mass called a brain. On overpasses and sidewalks you’ve noticed those weak starving dogs with patches of fur missing from their bodies. They too sniff around other dogs in the hope of confirming and making some permanent documentation of themselves on those brains. Even if they don’t have energy for sex they still document themselves. Men are programmed to deliver the raw material of themselves in any dark alley. A woman’s love, once devoted to he who has pierced into her—he who has engendered in her that overpowering feeling of one inside her—now devotes herself to motherhood and seeing that the child is...

His ideas were erratic. They hopped and skipped over each other and he held tightly onto parts of the clothing he lay on. Then with photographic images, he dreamed of trees, waterfalls, and Thai islands he had never seen before and his hands relaxed their grip on the clothes. There was a panoramic view of Thailand-rural, Khmer and Burmese individuals smiling in the northern regions and stolid Moslem and Indians in the south. The rural views in sunrise and sunset were more real than reality and then the aerial focus went down and down and veered back up to the center. It was Bangkok again and there was Lumpini Park.

An unknown girl was sitting on a mat in the gravel in a far corner of the entrance to the park. Immediately behind her was the gate and in front of her was a large statue of King Rama V. A car entered the circular drive that went around the statue. She got up to guide its driver where to park. She hoped that by helping to ensure that he didn’t crash into parked cars that he would pay her a few baht as others had. She did not beg. She did not prostitute herself. She only did that.

“I could do something like that. It’s honest,” thought Jatupon. She continued to use hand gestures as the driver backed up according to her directions. “This is a good girl. I want someone like that to become my wife,” he thought. No sooner had this idea come to him than the car sped up and ran over her. Then it stopped and the driver hurried out. The driver held her in his hands and Jatupon felt her pulse. There was none and he dropped the arm. He walked through the gate to a woman sitting within the park on a sheet on top of a grassy knoll. He sat on the sheet in front of her and before the spread of fortune telling cards.

“I don’t see much future in it” she said. “Being in love with an elder brother. There is no future in it from what I see.”

“Those are just cards. How would you know?” he whined

“Yes, those are just cards but you don’t even need to look into the cards to see something like that.”

“How should I live? He’s had sex in me. I should kill myself. A boy fucked in the ass can not be a man.”

“No, probably not; but you must continue to be the best of what you are. Man, yes, some-a few—might say. Some would say something less than that. Whatever you are, maimed or full, you have to continue to continue. We all should go through the whole show until the winds carry away our ashes and the soul returns for more learning, more suffering.”

Chapter 5

Bound for his uncle's home in the far north of the city, Kazem was forced to reposition himself in the back of the bus next to a bucket of swishing water and rags. He swatted the mosquito that was hovering over its sodden progeny. He beat it towards the baldheads of a couple of monks in front of him who had usurped his seat impudently. From his new and more uncomfortable seat, which often lost its cushion as he sat there, he looked out of the window and tried to beat back the inferno of hate for Kumpee that flared in the nerves throughout his body. He stared down at what appeared as the moving edge of the road from which businesses and pedestrians, from the corner of his left eye, ricocheted. He fingered a slit of the vinyl blue upholstery of his cushion in a vaginal preoccupation passed onto males through the inheritance of this cellular knowledge called sexual instinct. Low levels of guilt oozed from him more subtly than foaming breakers of beer in a mug and yet he didn't feel that he had done anything wrong.

This moment was no different than other times of malaise in the past. He wasn't specifically troubled about the fruition of his wanton fantasies to meet his uncle in the hope of using him for some money. Money should never rest. It should be spent or invested. If it were invested it would be used to make more wealth or for philanthropy that ameliorated thievery. He agreed in a vague way with Kumpee who vaguely inveighed something to the effect that a bit of money from a more affluent pocket into a poorer one helped the economy and was a just act. Likewise, he was not bothered by the release he had gained earlier in a bit of sex with his youngest sibling. This activity was to him just an extension of a back rub in a good massage compounded in a bit of sportive wrestling. It was a due owed to him for undergoing the stress of looking after the younger brothers and keeping the principle of family alive. He was acting his part of the big brother no different than he always had since Kumpee was continually negligent in performing the role. There were no specifics to this malaise he felt. The malaise was brought on by the wistful craving to go beyond the confines of his containment and yet reality, petty and limited, told him to use what was there under his feet, in his sight, and what he could touch. A man in the confines of his life used what was under him.

What being did not use the Earth?

He continued to finger the slit of the vinyl blue upholstery in a vaginal preoccupation. He wanted to feel beyond the hole of malaise that was as empty as the hollow whistling of a wind through a cracked door or that numb sensation of lying alone, the fantasy of his masturbation eluding him, and his semen flowing on his skin in a last vestige of a river. Using others was as unconscious as a reflex but the malaise came into the equation when he saw what he had to use. Why didn't he have money to wine and dine a female in the mating protocol like any male black-tipped hang fly? Why did he have to cajole, beg, or charm an avuncular affection from this remote individual who wasn't related to them by blood?

He began to stare at the driver and a boy who sat near the front window in a padded hump that went over the gearshift. It was just like seeing a self in miniature that had gotten lost and ensnared in the thickets of time: father driving the bus and this boy seated on a padded metal covering that went over the transmission. At times the boy touched the clutch hoping to one day guide the mammoth beast like his father (the boy believing that his father was the perfection of all things possible). A plastic red container of ice and water was on this pedestal where the boy sat and from it a straw stuck out of the lid and he drank and ate fish chips that were in a plastic sack. He just ate and drank as the bus circled around its route of the city. How drab it all was but for a boy and yet believing his father to be the perfection of all things, such self-restraint was possible. Their father had had such a job when Kumpee was a young boy. For a year or two of such journeys, sitting there with the highest admiration for a father, he was filled with the highest love that was initiating him into the positive dimensions of manhood and responsibility. When his father lost his job and worked on the street alongside of their mother, he launched his tirades against the younger brothers who were "suck-calves" on his wife. He hated their neediness and as the spankings continued, Kumpee began to oppose these gestures. Such self-abnegation caused him to become the full brunt of the beatings.

Having been given time alone, Jatupon scraped up his stolen collection of loose change and ran off hand in hand with his freedom. Having no

responsibilities for the first time in his life apart from the night sports that usually happened in the mornings, his life was becoming a purposeless abyss. He personified his freedom and together they broke beyond small basement windows and imagined portals to real places. Together, they went to see the life that fulminated within the streets of the city of Bangkok. Kazem was gone so they did not have to be there to hear his expletives about the older brother's thievery and the younger brother's disappearances. The disappearances were ones Kazem attributed to Suthep chumming up with Kumpee to have a bit of money to play snookers. For hours and hours they were lost in the movements of traffic, the brown and Chinese faces, movements of strangers on the sidewalks, and the swirl of infinite numbers on the quest for money, happiness, and adventure. He read faces and movements from his spreading feelers. They too wanted money bestowed onto them to squander at will in all forms of self-indulgence. They too wanted to squelch their routines to live their dishonorable lives in the quest of sensuality. To have resources and freedom to run around loose as a goose in a department store was something they all yearned for and seeing these pedestrian shoppers of the sidewalk, with more money than he, made the boy hunger for better things.

Freedom was becoming old as he continued to walk with her into the crowds but she rejuvenated lasciviously when his eye spotted someone not in the shopper's swirl. The cravings so attractive to Jatupon were missing in those deadened eyes and passing from him he fell into the others. Membership was free. It was lack of hope that was given so generously to the majority of the world's populace that was indispensable to them. Lurid as family, fetid as Kumpee's shoes, here they were and here he was with them; and yet they were his own or what he assumed was his own—the little that he knew of himself.

It was a family of addicts, addicted to family or even a concoction of family, cobbled together within the affinity of pain and the tangles of neurons like brambles pricking their consciousness with old travail at every turn: memories that they couldn't free themselves from. Within this desert of cacti and brambles they poured destructive chemicals and suicidal inclinations to kill and enlarge their brambly world. They were landscape artists of their personal deserts: hating, destroying, and replanting their cacti and brambles with each new whim. Here he was with a new family—a mosaic of complete strangers who were not related to him nor were they relating to him or much to each other. Still, it was a surrogate family nonetheless succumbing to an infinite current of darkness to which they all had understanding. In many ways they were wiser: they knew that the insatiability of desire that made one propelled to breed, work, and buy was not going to stop. They knew that no one in such circles was going to find contentment. They were all going to fail miserably. They knew that there was a deep discontent in the human psyche that yearned for destruction and death. In the course of being degraded by significant others they had somehow gotten excluded from the participation of such narcissistic, consumeristic appetites and that the salvation of compassion would not be forthcoming. This benign pastel family sat together on the slab of cement under the overpass while over them, on the overpass itself, were the trinkets sold by salesmen, homeless elderly women, mothers, those who stunk from being unable to bathe off their rotting surface of scaling skin, and deformed slabs of flesh spread out on parts of the overpass with fidgeting partial limbs. They all had nearly empty cups of one baht coins and the most unfortunate of them could testify of dark currents deeper than regular people could imagine for one moment. They, his surrogate family, knew that there was not just one blackness but despair had myriad blacker and bleaker hues.

Under the steps of the overpass sniffing his glue while these transients already riddled in amphetamines and alcohol (at times borrowing his glue) smoked cigarettes incessantly, his mind swept away from him like a butterfly fluttering by. When he first met them in this spot their first words were to offer to him cigarettes but he told them that if he were to put one in his mouth it would remind him of the fetid one with his fetid shoes and socks littered everywhere, the one who had stolen his parents property upon their deaths and had abandoned them to starvation in the great city of Bangkok. These transients had the understanding and listening skills of trained psychologists and offered unto him a piece of bubble gum instead which he gratefully accepted.

Still, a thought preoccupied him off and on. He wondered why they were all seated there in such a confined space; but within a few hours the storm clouds moved overhead and the rain deluged the streets making him forget about one man complaining of his jock itch and scratching himself, another that cried and looked up into the clouds, and

a third that kept wanting to barter off his torn sandals for Jatupon's sneakers and kept calling him "uncle" even though he was ten or fifteen years the older brother. Across the road he occasionally saw umbrellas sail out to the gray of the clouds. One of the other five transients was repulsed by a spider that crept onto him in its effort to escape the rain, cursed at a rock in his shoe that would not leave the obscure crevice of the sole, and then in one of his shifting moods made a declaration of happiness that they had found such an inconspicuous spot where the police rarely harassed them. The woman transient gave herself to her man so completely that when he was angry, happy, or sad, she was more this way—so little did she understand her own mind, having become nothing but an extension of his pleasure and pain.

Sometimes silent and tacit, these transients who were continually judged by others, judged the sincerity of his callow rebellion with their stares. A few times they went beyond that to a more pronounced judgment. "Don't you have a mamma to go to? Your mamma's calling for you to come to lunch," said the one with the woman. That time the shoe barterer laughed so hard it churned up mucus into his mouth, which he spit into a crack in the sidewalk that already had its share of gum and cigarette buds. "Mamma's calling," said the woman. "Lunch is ready, honey. Mamma's calling," she repeated or at least he thought she repeated. Maybe none of them had said anything. He wasn't quite sure.

Jatupon turned away from them and slipped off his tennis shoes, smelling their soles to make sure that they weren't overly fetid. He looked at one of his bare feet composed of roadways of veins and early wrinkles of epidermis. He thought to himself that an unrecognized universe had existed right there in his shoes. He sniffed his armpits. They were fetid as glue but he liked the transmission of the sweat molecules up his nostrils.

He deeply inhaled the glue and then held his breath allowing the fumes to permeate within. He repeated the process four or five times and for the most part he, they, and all went away in a haze. It was like being blindfolded but instead of darkness there was a soft patch of white haze. At first it startled him and he wondered if this ethereal gaseous mist was Saddam Hussein's lethal spray upon the world and yet he felt giddy in this laughing gas. When his mind was able to register the fact that they were seated next to him, the haze made the man and his woman, the shoe barterer, the sky crier, and all (transient and non-transient, imagined and remembered) such special creatures. These transients were sordid and brainless but, especially in the intense inundation of fumes they were the most extraordinary of life forms. He was almost moved to kiss each of them on their foreheads. From this pillar of light the mosquito, dressed in Buddhist attire and carrying its mask, came with the force of God. Its feelers were like acid and when they touched Jatupon his clothes seemed to sizzle and burn away. He was naked with a smashed ant sandwiched between a fingernail and skin. He remembered that a minute earlier he had been trying to direct it away from his leg and in his clumsy misdirection at the appearance of the pillar of light there it was under the nail curled up in fetal agony.

As the mosquito slowly descended he could see tragedy more clearly than he ever did when not snorting the fumes, and yet it rolled off his mind weightlessly. He was giddy in brotherly love and yet naked, he wanted to copulate with the world. Even more, he wanted to reproduce his ideas with her. He sensed that all humans fell victim to this substance: they got giddy in love and reproduced, they gained meaning in their lives from this feeling, and then after nature got them to beget children, she plugged up the dopamine somewhat like the waning high he felt with his brother. He felt the insect monster inject him with the malaria of tragedy: random images were kicked about in his mind like starving dogs allowed to propagate on the streets incessantly from the non-interference of Buddhist principles. He saw all the suffering species from an aerial perspective for he was being carried around on the wings of the mordant mosquito that had scooped him up on its back. Buddha knew that tragedy abounded in recycled life but Jatupon could not figure out if Buddha tried to break the recycling of life like a coward who couldn't endure pain or if he left his protective palace to understand the magnitude of human suffering for the masses. The story was full of contradictions. He thought, "Where are you taking me...straight...now spinning...now plunging...more G-force than I think I can stand."

"Into yourself," it shouted.

"That's a cruel place to be," Jatupon said.

"Yes, it is," admitted the mordant entity. From their distance distinct forms were difficult to ascertain but he knew that he was far outside

himself and to be outside of it into a world of motion and forms made him feel relieved. But from a couple of indecipherable forms in movement he halfway made out and half way imagined a half-naked baby crying on the outskirts of a park. It crawled alone at a distance from a cook. The cook halted her work to get him. He cried loudly at each initiative at trying to appease him. He didn't like being held. He didn't like the banana put in his hands. Finally, she placed him in the bucket of water that contained her dirty plates.

"So innocent and yet calculating," said the mosquito. "It was wanting in that tub of water all along."

"Oh, do you see them too?"

"No, not really. Anyhow, based on what you see, wouldn't you agree?"

"Agree that he crawled away so as to cause his mother to put him in the water?" He laughed. "No, he is just a baby. I don't think he is that developed. I don't think he is that self serving."

"Are these two forms you are now seeing outside of yourself too?" asked the mosquito.

"Of course," he scoffed but he did not know.

Then he was descending or falling —falling in a diagonal descent on the mosquito's back, falling onto its feelers, and falling from it entirely. There he was a brown boy in the pool on the roof of The Mall Ayuttaya with goggles on his face and wearing spandex swimming trunks. He looked so fashionable despite his poverty but the poor and discontent always found their stealth means to master petty thievery and a sullied self-image was easily forgotten. There were imitation mountains and waterfalls all around. He swam to the opposite side of the pool and said hello to a foreigner who sat on a rock letting the force of the fall hit his feet. The foreigner ignored him and again started swimming his laps. Then, feeling that he had been rude, he returned to the boy and asked him his name. The boy smiled and said an easy two-syllable name, Nawin. It seemed like an easy name for a foreigner to remember. After an uneventful attempt at conversations in two different languages to which neither party could understand the other one, the foreigner swam off. Still the boy was persistent, swimming over to the foreigner when he rested. This prompted the foreigner to go to the locker room to change sooner than what he would have done otherwise. The boy followed him. He accosted him while he was at the urinal and looked down onto him. He tried to come in when the foreigner was in his cubicle taking a shower. His motives for doing so were ambiguous ones: he wanted a foreigner friend even if this man was so much older than he was, he wanted to really learn the international language, and although he did not really have sexual feelings he would have done anything for a bit of money. As the man dressed on the bench Jatupon, the boy, put his hands together in a mendicant grasshopper pose with palms sandwiched together and held before his face in the "wei." He opened his hands with the opening of the wallet.

A door of a shower booth opened. It was the mosquito drying himself with a towel.

"Nothing like a good swim followed by a warm shower. You got to meet an old friend today. That's nice. Earlier you never mentioned this memory. I guess it wouldn't have been a particularly flattering portrait to share with anyone. It borders on prostitution. Just when I was feeling sorry for you as the abused brother I learned of this. It adds a more complex intellectual dimension to your character, don't you think? It makes you less moronic somehow." Jatupon felt a metamorphosis and returned to his 14 year old body. Again he was riding on the mosquito's back naked as a blue jay and his hair dripped water. He couldn't confirm or negate the previous memory. It was vaguely familiar.

"Don't you believe that was you?"

"It doesn't matter," Jatupon said indifferently.

"You don't think so?"

"No it's not, is it?" He began to choke on his saliva. He coughed. "Why?"

"Oh, dear. Are you okay?"

"Yes. Why?"

Why what?"

"Why is the self such a fearful place?"

"Why not?" said the mosquito. "Alone, shut up in one's own hardened shell there is no logic—just passions running amuck."

Tragedy and suicidal wishes clogged up his head. He did not like seeing bits of himself crawling around naked as a baby's ass. He hated

wondering if any of his brothers would come back to the apartment or fearing having to beg alone. He got up.

“Did you decide to finally go back to your mamma?” asked the man who had the woman resting her face in his lap. The woman picked a wild dandelion from the crack in the sidewalk and then reached her hand up to Jatupon’s shirt. She put it in his pocket. “Here is a flower for Mommy. You can give it to her when she fixes you supper.”

“My mother’s dead” yelled Jatupon with vehement hate and repugnance as he wadded up the flower in a fist and threw it onto the sidewalk. Then he walked away.

A tuc tuc driver, slowing down in passing, beeped the horn at him. The taxi looked like the distorted shape of a fly. He wished that he had just a chunk of the money Kumpee had plundered. With it, he told himself, he would buy his own motorcycle and become a self-employed taxi driver for his age surely restricted him from getting a job with the Bangkok Metropolitan Authorities. This, he told himself, would be far better than sitting on the monkey bars near the door of a bus clanging the tube of money upon one’s knee. Besides, he didn’t especially want to be one of the many nameless beggars applying for jobs with the Metropolitan Transportation Authorities.

He veered somehow from the sidewalk into a labyrinth of outdoor hallways that ran between stands and quasi-stores, under canvas canopies and through the smell of incense that came from a table that contained a 2-foot Buddhist statue. Upon finding his way out by charging through crowds and hangers of clothes, he heard the blaring of pi phat music, saw a vegetable market, and smelled redolent papayas, durians, watermelons, pineapples, guavas, and tangerines. Further along he smelled tom yam soup, grilled squid, goo-ey tia nam (rice noodle soup), khaw laad nhaa gai (rice with chicken and bamboo), and other dishes in an outdoor restaurant. He passed silk stores, jewelry stores that catered toward ruby and sapphire-loving foreigners, and fast food restaurants. Then he went into Robinson Department Store.

In the restroom he relieved himself at a urinal that was furthest from the cleaning lady since her mopping presence there made him nervous and had the possibility of clogging him up. Then he sat down in the food court. His head was in vertigo like small children turning themselves around in the grass or the routine of one’s petty kinetic life. He often noticed affluent men walking around with girlfriends or wives in that male gesture of the hand of one arm clasping the other arm behind the back. The gesture conveyed that they were beyond the third world now. They had money, Bangkok had everything, and they would shop as befitting their status. He wanted to be them. He wanted out of his own skin to be a different person entirely but there was no exit for him in fast motion. The only consolation was in always evolving beyond that one seed, that one dividing cell that had started his life. There was still hope.

He saw a father and two girls with their many bags. He wanted a father like that instead of the one who had made him afraid to stand up, sit down, comb his hair, put on his pants, talk, or be silent without being excoriated. Only arduous work had offered him a respite from that man’s criticism. Only work had offered him that escape from being the cockroach running from his heels. Family wasn’t so ideal. At least his wasn’t. He was always cravenly scurrying away from one or more of them and vibrations they made. His mind spun around more wildly. He kept wishing that it would stay stolid and poised as statues of the Garuda and Kinnara, mythological creatures that permeated Thai art, literature, and dance.

He tried to focus in on beautiful ideas of family. He tried to breathe them in like the smell of drying clothes in the breeze or the smells of life replicating itself eternally in the verdant greenery on the outskirts of the city. All he could do was summon memories of Kumpee and their parents incessantly driven toward chasing any scheme that would put a few extra coins in their hands; Kazem’s secondhand treatment of his destitute brown Burmese woman a couple years earlier; Suthep whom he shared certain childish sympathies; and Kazem who was his protector. His head hurt and span: in school, out of school, struggling for subsistence as a group, the heads of the group dying, the move to Bangkok, and a thousand phantom faces that plagued his mind, exacerbating the throbbing. He tried to think of monks in their saffron robes with strapped metallic bowls dangling from their shoulders in which shopkeepers requiring blessings placed rice; the sweet taste of rambutans when the spiky core was broken and the transparent succulent egg was overtaken; and motorcycle taxi drivers with cardboard and pop bottle games that, with the tap of the nails of their

fingers, kept their time of waiting from overwhelming them in boredom. A persistent fly over the table made him nervous and he thought that perhaps to counter the truths his subconscious spewed out in the form of the insect and his own need for stability (not just his environment changing but he, himself, was continually changing) he needed to invent a god for himself if nothing other than the God of Dirty Underwear. The persistent fly continued to besiege him so he left the department store and returned to his friends.

The “friends”—he did not know their names—seemed content with their circumstances. They, like he, were cuddled together under the overpass consuming and inhaling their amphetamine and glue molecule treats, which inadvertently gave them ice cream headaches. This intake delivered them from bleak realities to that of twirling and dizzy children while fantasies stepped forward as emperors of the spinning domain. At times when they were more conscious of their existence and surroundings (especially when feeling intensely hungry) these transients would beg. They had a method. If someone in a suit carrying a cellular telephone were standing in front of the cash register at a nearby convenience store with a long serpentine tail of customers waiting behind him, one of them would enter the store. Shocked by such a lugubrious display and needing to quickly expedite his exit with his bags, such an individual would give generously so as to not be perceived as parsimonious or niggard in the reaction.

It occurred to him that this word, “friend,” was not really what it at first seemed. If indeed people were all users attracted to others who gave them fresh insight into life or a respite for escaping it, these people were dismissed when that resource was exhausted. Still he wasn’t all that fond of them so the issue did not really matter all that much. He tried to smile at them but he could not. He was feeling sick to his stomach and their faces sometimes spun around in an erratic orbit.

It was like feeling the rush of air and dizzying changes of streets and buildings from the open portals of an old doorless bus that cast its shadow onto a bridge connecting Pinklao street to the area around the Grand Palace—how palpating was this glue and amphetamine trip. At times it was a stronger feeling of thrust and omnipotent dominion like a surfer who could easily be plummeted by the waves he was riding. The waves, however, were verdant and edible. It was verdant the way nature at times looked like a green-berry cheesecake, and bovine, he wanted to eat it.

Seated under the stairwell of steps doing nothing in particular, he at times took out his pocket knife and engraved a puppet man driven on forcefully by its master to the pleasure and frenzy of rape, depositing its seeds in every possible hole (fertile or fallow). This alone was his only conscious achievement that day in a drug induced but sobering mind where subconscious images usurped their rational rulers. Careful not to look threatening with a knife in his hands, he timidly scraped out a master controlling the puppet man depositing himself in that meek lowly being.

Chapter 6

"Nawin!" Porn whiningly bantered as she confiscated his headphones that were plugged into the arm of his seat and punched him in his chest. "Why aren't you talking to me?"

"Rachmaninoff," he said. She did not understand. What did she know beyond the kinetic rhythms of pop culture? It was in her blank stare. The word had not penetrated. He wanted to tell her. He wanted to introduce if not explain something so ineffable and orphic to which a mortal could only awkwardly utter that inadequate word, "beautiful." He wanted to see the countenance of one being extended. He wanted to change her and take her far beyond the limits she had placed upon herself. It was the best of him that wanted to bring the love of great things to others. It was one altruistic motive in his many selfish motivations for inviting her here. But he knew that like earlier, when they were waiting in the airport, she would continue to bury herself in comic books and the latest American sounds when not engrossed in her French palaver with the cassette recorder. She would continue to disconnect the ideals and harmonies from the plug in the arm of his chair.

"I want to know what you are thinking," she said. Her countenance was puzzled and remained so for a couple seconds. He loved her so much then. He breathed in deeply and wished outside himself to the cosmic forces that she could stay with those features forever: puzzled, probing, and beautiful!

"Why?"

"Sometimes you leave me, Nawin, and I want to know where you go in those thoughts of yours. Were you thinking of her—Noppawan?"

"I'm always thinking of her. I'm married to her." He reached for her hand but she rejected it and so he smiled brightly, kissed her on the cheek, and gave her a hug. "No, I was probably riding in my artsy whims."

"Not a woman."

"No, actually not a woman."

"That's not natural."

He chuckled. "There are other things than loving people."

"You are an unnatural person, Nawin."

He smiled and thought. Maybe dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin, the components of love, were at work whenever one cared about something. Maybe being troubled by Palestinians blowing themselves up was love. Certainly Rachmaninoff was love.

"Her glasses are ugly, you know. They have thick frames and what really makes them ugly is that they are dark against her dark skin. No, what really makes her ugly when she wears them is that the lenses are thick like binoculars. I bet that even when she removes them every night before she goes to bed she probably looks as plain as burnt toast. Your wife isn't pretty, Nawin."

He chortled. "You're right," he said as his eyes looked down shamefully. He thought about telling Porn that Noppawan never removed her glasses when she went to bed. It was partly true. He had even had sex with her once or twice that way. Then he had second thoughts and decided that some things were better left alone in the dark. "Can I go back to Rachmaninoff?" he asked while mildly shaking his headphones in the air.

"No you can't. Thanks for asking. When are we going to New York City, Nawin?"

"We haven't arrived in Canada yet."

She stood up, stretched, and then crawled over his lap lasciviously as she looked out of the window. "This flight is too long," she said.

"Maybe the pilot, co-pilot, hijacker, or whoever is driving can park for a few minutes on a cloud and you can get out," he said.

She sat back in her seat. "I think you are angry at me for saying that about Noppawan."

"No," he said indifferently. He liked hearing truth but he felt guilty being amused by some of it. He changed the subject. "Do you want to change to my seat so that you can look out?"

"I'd get sick looking out onto that sea of clouds for long."

"Why do you want to go to New York City?"

"What's in Canada, Nawin? It's got a few walking snowmen but what else? Snowy landscapes and cold temperatures good for penguins. When

someone thinks of Thailand it is always Thai silk, temples, Buddhist statues, nightlife, and beautiful girls like me. What is the symbol of Canada?"

"Snowmen," said Nawin as he chuckled, "and Canadian dollars." He was enjoying the conversation.

"What are they: these snowmen? Are they just Englishmen?"

"That but also Americans who didn't want to fight against King George... Frenchmen, of course in Montreal."

"Why don't they have kings now?"

"Well, Canadians do have the British monarchy. Canada is a commonwealth."

He didn't go further because she sighed from intellectual strain.

"Didn't you like Noppawan at all?" he asked with childish vulnerability.

"No," she replied thoughtfully. "I liked all things about her. I liked her completely. It is hard to believe that anyone should be so wonderfully odd."

He liked that response exponentially. He knew that she would never say anything so true. "Montreal will be fun. A little bit of Paris and a little bit of New York City."

"Laos, Nawin, is a little bit of Paris with a lot of dirt poor Thailand."

"It will be like going to the Thao Suranari fair in Nakhon Ratchasima." That was one of the largest fairs in Thailand. This thought triggered his memory of a smaller fair in Bangkok.

This avuncular stranger, a member of the parliament and the former governor of Pattaya, had informed Kumpee that the fair held in March was coming to a close this year. This fair, run by government ministries to raise funds for the Red Cross, was near the Parliament in the area called Dusit. Tickets to enter were sold at 200 baht each. The two other brothers—all, like him, boys with layers of manhood like aluminum foil wrapped over the small crumbling pieces of cake that were themselves—did not utter questions. Had Kazem robbed Thai Farmers Bank, Siam Commercial, and Bangkok Bank entirely it wouldn't have made any difference. The psyche needed a degree of ebullience. This was their respite from worries about survival to which drugs or snookers had been ineffective distractions. A bit of it insulated them from the attitude of doom that would eagerly zip them up into its body bags.

A woman wearing a pointed straw hat, who had a 2-year-old baby cuddled around her neck, thrust herself before them. She solicited them to her table of snake blood refreshments seasoned with dried monkey brain. She was one well-seasoned in salesmanship. She knew the cajolery to lure daredevils who would come to such a fair as she knew the approach to children whom she would sell her krathongs, banana boats of flowers and candles attached to banana leaves and Styrofoam sailed onto the river for good fortune during each Loi krathong festival, or Buddhist rosaries and necklaces to old women during religious holidays.

"Please come over to my table, boys." They smiled and came. "I know you. You think I don't but I do. I can see into hearts-hearts wanting to be men, wanting to end boyhood. You've heard those stories about men who became more than that from drinking a bit of this. The stories aren't true. They are stupid. Nobody has ever done anything like that; but the real parts of the stories are gaining courage and strength. My husband was in his teens when I saw him for the first time doing what you are about to do. I watched him the way those girls over there are watching you now. Anybody would have second thoughts about this. Anybody would. It tastes horrible because it is strong in courage and strength for those with the courage to drink it. If you can do this you will never run away from anything again. Instead, you will have it on the run. This is your only time to conquer your fears and do something naughty while the police are sleeping. Whatever you do, make sure that you put a few coins in the box to help the Red Cross." She pointed at the plastic box at a distant corner of the table. While Suthep inserted a few baht into the hole she directed herself to Kazem. "Are those two your brothers?"

"Yes," he said.

"I know you won't make them ashamed of you. It's just fifty baht each. Look. People are staring at you. You've got to do it. Drink!"

"Drink, money man," reiterated Suthep.

He glared at Suthep. "Hey, I'm not paying for me alone. I'll do it for the pure pleasure of seeing you stand there all night looking into your cup." Kazem paid for three cups. Jatupon stood there stiff and frightened. Starting from the oldest to the youngest they drank down their beverages. The liquid molecules of hell were a hundred times that

of the airborne ones from Kumpee's socks and shoes. All of them choked and coughed. All of them swallowed some of the blood heathenishly but spit out most. It was followed by a sip of watery and caffeinated whiskey that had been diluted and adulterated in cola. Normally such open liquor drinking would have gotten everyone arrested especially when it involved selling to minors but since some of the proceeds were going into the public fund on this day it was overlooked. While the brothers were given a second shot of whiskey again diluted in cola, new customers came to the woman anxiously. She led them to her table and sat there with the squalling, squalid child. The baby was restless on the apron that she wore. Conscious of how a repetition of her spiel could spell out insincerity and a customer's aversion, she attempted to wait silently as they debated doing this. She muted the child with a firm hand pressed against its mouth. Before she could make the sell she reflexively responded to the smallest degree of wetness on the apron and let her child urinate away from the sidewalk and her virility stand. The ground did not eagerly swallow the fetid and sweet liquid and his recidivist urine came back to the sidewalk with the insistence of a foul stream. Past shoe salesmen on a sheet, shoe repairmen, comb and battery salesmen, noodle workers, and lottery representatives—unlicensed businesses that abounded everywhere— they entered the gates of the fair. At kiosks, the three of them threw darts, shot basketballs in moving hoops, and bounced balls against walls to knock over bottles for prizes. They continued doing this until the infancy of night murdered the sun allowing it to slowly die, languishingly sliding off golden rooftops of temples. When darkness unfolded around them, they paid to see a woman put her face in a plastic box of scorpions, elephant trainers whose elephants walked over them to enter into the crowds where they picked up humans with their trunks, and oarsmen in the facsimiles of royal barges competing against each other. The boats had the same body and countenance of dragons just like the television shows they had seen of the kings' ancient boats that were housed in the Royal Barge Museum.

The night and its dark appetites were mature in full insurrection. They had eaten their share of rice and chicken topped with cotton candy, and yet not cowering, their stomachs craved for beer so they headed to a nearby bar. Before them a child was walking slowly on the steps that rose up to the bridge that went over a canal. He slammed his fire-snappers against the cement watching the air burst before his feet. They passed him to quickly fulfill the surfeit of beer that was part of their general yearnings. They yearned for so much—these three young men. They yearned for relaxation with beer; they yearned for friends and places away from this fraternal group that they had been conceived into and forced to work with; and, except for Jatupon, they each yearned for a love to come their way so that they would not be lost in themselves. Jatupon yearned most to be naively complete like that boy they had passed. Jatupon had once been like him: fascinated by his own thoughts and sensations and self-contained. In late boyhood a boy mastered independence that in infancy and early boyhood he struggled to achieve. It was all thwarted, however, by the upsurge of sexual feelings which made a young man want to bond cohesively and addictively to others. The progress of late boyhood was razed in a brief year or two.

Strangely, the world was a dreamy place and from the modest display of fireworks being shot over the canal there was a dreamy idea of connectedness and fraternity in the psyches of these young men although such ideals varied from moment to moment based upon their interpretations of the environment. Lagging behind in serpentine movements of dreaminess but eager for connectedness, Jatupon hurriedly caught up to his brothers only to lag behind them again. It was time for Heineken, Singh, or Bush (not those two presidents). It was a time to celebrate and dunk the self in artificial dreaminess like one bobbing for apples. Jatupon looked up at the sky when he and his brothers reached the other side of the bridge. Then he looked down at his chest. A sweat bee hovered over the glands in his opened shirt like an oil worker ciphering the ground. He shoved the industrial exploiter away. He felt awe in how complex it all was: one thing feeding on another. He wondered if, after the immune system conquered a virus, it consumed it. He wondered how much of his parents' bodies would have been consumed by bacteria in decomposition if they had not been cremated. He wondered if things were so clearly defined. Maybe a part of his parents was alive in ways that could be sensed but never understood or explained.

It was no wonder, as they sat there drinking beer in a pub on the other side of the canal (remarkably able to afford drinking beer at all) that Kazem was happy: after all, the uncle's gate had opened up to him when

he talked into a speaker. It was also not so strange that his mood of elation had for a short while, when viewing the scorpion lady, gone awry. Seeing the son of the Ayutthaya landlord who had rented his family that small space for their restaurant was depressing. There he was in his fine clothes with his wife and two small children. Kazem had thought to himself that as a rich man poverty had not ruined his inclinations-this man, not much older than himself, copulated in the right hole.

Suthep, sandwiched between his two brothers, drank voraciously without any strong inclination to run away. He preferred being elsewhere but elsewhere without money was nowhere. He preferred playing snookers and trying to woo a young girl to be somewhat interested in him while playing against his buddies. Here, however, he had no friends. The city was entirely new and he didn't know anyone. Once, in Ayutthaya, he had gone with a herd of those wolves to capture a park whore. He and his buddies took her to a cheap guesthouse where foreigners often went and had their spasms within her. It had been his first time. He would prefer to be with his friends but this wasn't so bad. Drinking with his brothers was like playing football with them once again or fishing with them at the edge of the river.

Somewhere into things the beer changed to whiskey and it was from that bottle of whiskey that the mosquito and his female counterpart climbed out and shook off their wetness. When this canine shaking of the wetness was not enough, they used the paper towels as bath towels. They were less grotesquely large at this point but returning to their monstrous shapes by the moment.

—What was the dinner like that Kazem attended?

—It was not a dinner, but the sip of the man's coffee in the den. It consequently led to the proposal of a dinner.

—And did he accept the proposal?

—He did.

—On behalf of the family of brothers?

—That would seem to be a correct assessment although the eldest was not expected to attend. No definitive date was scheduled because the senator hesitated about this issue. It was a tacit declaration that could only be read in a scarce trace of caution on his countenance. It indicated that he was reluctant to be associated with these thugs. This irritated Kazem and yet he pretended as if he wasn't bothered by it. He probably told himself that he needed the time to rehearse his lines.

—What would he need to rehearse?

—His part as the benevolent older brother. He thought he was that but he had trouble convincing others of its veracity.

—I don't understand.

—A typical female reaction. Let me be more lucid. It is my impression that he intended to use this first meeting for future ones where he could use sympathy as a way of extorting money from the aging man for this group of leeches and quasi-pariahs.

—As Kazem and the senator/former governor of Pattaya/former uncle-in-law drank coffee together, what was the lure that kept him interested in these boys? After all, he knew them only by name apart from that time or two of being irritated by their noise when the two families came together. That was over a decade ago. Isn't that right?

—Yes, you are not ignorant. It was 11 years ago. I believe his new founded interest in them was what they call empathy?

—Empathy? I know about that. It is a rather rare and abnormal form of behavior sometimes seen in those evolving beyond their species. From the research I've done on such aliens empathy and compassion seem to be the only emotions that aren't destructive and hedonistic. In small quantities all emotions aid judgment calls in social situations but unfortunately they are produced and expended in bulk. Unlike other emotions that are rampant, empathy and compassion tend to be quite rare. Could you elaborate on his nascent burgeoning of empathy for them and the disingenuousness that prompted it?

—It was no different than their aunt who hustled a marriage out of him years ago. Kindliness and loneliness, from what I can tell, have always been his weakness. It was a simple calculating maneuver on Kazem's part, really. Kazem affected being uncomfortable and shy. He waited until this uncle asked directly about his circumstances and then he gave a modest biographical summary of their move to Bangkok after selling their parents assets. He was careful not to mention Kumpee, the need for money, or any real description of how they were living. The uncle's attempts at finding out information on those putrescent issues were only

marginally successful. As a result, it seemed to the senator that Kazem was earnest and unassuming. He became more curious and anxious to help these pariahs as a result.

—And can you be more specific on how this was done?

—It's rather mundane. I don't wish to really.

—Human studies and our intellectual copulation require more information. One would have to be ignorant to not know that or male.

—He chitchatted, my dear, in a logical sequence that was a bit desultory at times. Humans call such an inexact order "variation." After he told the location of where they were living and that the move had taken place because of Kumpee's desire to be near his girlfriend, he answered the senator's question on what his brothers were doing in their state of unemployment (Jatupon with his comic books and Suthep with his snookers). Then he moved to large ideas outside of his personal life: the upcoming elections for prime minister, the question of the government's role for the flood victims in Hattayai, and if the senator would run for re-election in a couple years. It was done to create a mystique about he and his brothers as well as to elicit the approval of the senator who preferred people who could break out of their own skins. It was deferential. It was noble. It was all of those things that were manipulation in a consummate performance. Kazem played the part so well that he even began to think that he was this shy, vulnerable, unpretentious, and caring person despite trying circumstances.

—Did he directly attempt to exploit the man's feelings of sympathy for their plight or the senator's loneliness?

—In some respects he did. He reminisced about his mother whom this high governing uncle had sympathy. The senator of course entertained this sympathy because his wife (their mother's sister) had always carped, disparaged, and vilified her for such a marriage to an illiterate street person. The senator never forgot his sister-in-law's birthday even after his divorce. To be specific, Kazem was seated before the senator drinking coffee and eating doughnuts when he ironically spoke of how he missed the scents of flowers his mother would bring into the home or the smell of a freshly cleaned floor. It belied the truth of this porcine creature whose domestic tendencies had surrendered to male nastiness early into marriage and motherhood. The sad lonely tone resonated with the senator. It strummed the harp of his heart.

—What are these three brothers doing at present?

—At present they are drinking beer and celebrating with some of the money that the senator gave to them.

—Did the senator give money that quickly?

—No, he dismissed Kazem after tiring of him. He said that he needed to return to his work. And then as the teenage boy was leaving a servant told him to return the next day. It was then that a sizable amount of money, by the standards of regular Thai people, was given to him.

—Suthep doesn't seem as happy as the other two.

—He is happy with the money and the beer but his happiness sinks down with the dying fizz of the beer but it rejuvenates again with the fizz of the next beer. His behavior can be attributed to a bit of repugnance toward the two companions at his table and a bit of general moodiness aggravated with alcohol consumption. He really has been so moody ever since becoming a teenager. He was so nice to Jatupon as a child. Oh well, the world is continually in flux.

—The youngest brother whom they sometimes maliciously nickname Jatu-PORN now seems to be sad. What could he be thinking at this most auspicious evening?

—He is thinking of Suthep thinking that these lovers are repugnant.

—And I assume that Suthep is now thinking that he is thinking this.

—Now you understand why these creatures never go anywhere.

—How alone these fickle creatures must be never sure of the acumen of their own ideas. These ideas seem to change from minute to minute based upon the chemistry of the food they put into their bodies, their perceptions of their own failures, the limitations of work and routine, their hormones, the firing of neurotransmitters left and right, the pleasures gained in social interaction, memories from the past, the mood generated from the environment, and the well-being of the body. How lost they must feel wincing from their forlorn inner selves by clinging to others around them. Is not one of them self-contained?

—No, my dear, I'm afraid not.

—Your summary is very orgasmic, my husband.

Mosquitoes 1 and 2 changed angles, this time looking into each other's left eyes. They were mesmerized in each other's beings and their wings flickered from the internal fire of passively intellectualizing life's energetic insignificance. Then they looked away from each other and breathed deeply before once again looking at each other face to face with less intensity.

—Wouldn't you say that the older brother, Kazem, possessed a lot of effrontery to go to the speaker on the brick wall connecting to a gate, push the button, and talk so glibly? Could a clarification be gained on how it is that he could have acquired that entrance?

—It could. Such an individual gained entrance by stating that his mother, prior to her death, had prepared a gift for her brother-in-law in celebration of the Songkran Thai New Year's festival

—And what gift did he present to the man as they drank tea and coffee?

—He presented to the man a Buddhist necklace his mother had given to his father.

—And the politician took it?

—Not immediately. He of course resisted; but Kazem argued persuasively that it had been intended for him. It looked new, although the politician wasn't under much of an illusion that it was. Still, in case it was a gift from the dead, he couldn't really refuse it. That would have hurt the brothers and the memory of the woman.

—And as the brothers drink beer together, do the younger ones notice that this somewhat expensive trinket that Kazem had heretofore claimed as his own and had worn around his neck is now missing.

—The more perceptive one called Jatupon notices this and infers that he really did give a gift to the senator and it was probably the necklace.

—They do play their games of trying to affect future outcomes. They'd be better being as insentient as cows. The youngest should drink his beer and be happy to be with the big boys engaging in the naughtiness of illegal alcohol consumption. Instead he seems worried.

—He'll be returning like a bound slave. The noodles will bind him once again when the equipment needed for the sidewalk restaurant is purchased. He feels that he did not take advantage of the brevity of freedom.

—To do what?

—He doesn't know either. Even more troubling, he is also assessing that his brothers are growing up. He wonders if they will soon desert this first family. He wonders if for the pleasure of women they'll jettison the earlier notion of family as insignificant, weighty, and likely to cause them to sink. He wonders if they will cast it out like a bad dream that they want to forget. He knows that they are biologically driven by hungers like a mouse cognizant of the trap but eating the cheese anyway.

—What would he do as a cast away?

—Well, there are ways of survival. One can be out there selling his body one moment and then find his head shaved and a robe on what had been out there as a marketable commodity.

—Such a transformation from prostitute to a monk really occurs?

—Indeed, it does. When the goals of money don't arise well from prostitution, being a monk is a position that commands respect and an escape from destitution. It has a morose facade but in such a somber demeanor like that of Jatupon it has its own splendor

—What splendor can be had in such a pointless and austere profession?

—Well for one, a given monk might put on some military clothes and go off to the local masseuse for a Thai massage of the most dissolute dimensions. It is an easy thing for a young monk to do: just take the expense for the whore out of the monastery coffer

—When Buddha was born in Lumpini Park in Nepal was it so that men might engage in the recidivism of their animalistic natures?

—All you need to do to answer that question is see the types of whores parading themselves in Lumpini Park in Bangkok, Thailand not to mention the male prostitutes waiting for money and sexual experiences in the shadows of the trees. Everything changes. Good men are distorted into Gods, and philosophy is made into a sordid religion. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism—it is all a perversion of the founder's ideas.

—How do you know these things?

—What things?

—About the meeting with the senator

—How do I know about the meeting with the senator?

—Yes, how do you know this?

—How do I know this? mumbled the mosquito confoundedly.-They are in Jatupon's head.

—And how does he know them?

—How does he know them? Because of the night when they were drinking together...the night of the fair...were you sleeping when I was talking to you?

—No, I heard you earlier. So it came from Kazem's mouth and Jatupon's conjectures. Those doesn't seem like reliable sources.

—What?

—Those don't seem like reliable sources. The two mosquitoes stared at each other nihilistically. There was silence.

Chapter 7

Childlike, Jatupon had assumed that togetherness, firecrackers, celebration, and the proud moment of that manly initiation of cold beer (not that it was his first) to be the ending of negative events. The day had resurrected him the way Kazem had once pulled him out of the lake on the outskirts of the city, Kanjanaburi. He was wading then in gradually deepening waters when the sludge beneath his feet suddenly dipped and he was thrust off the precipice into a watery abyss. He was just a boy then but one who owed his life to his brother. When he was older and they had returned to Kanjanaburi on a two-hour train ride, Kazem refused to allow him in stagnant waters. This was fortunate since a few days later two people died from a protozoan infection. Kazem had saved his life in both occasions and delivered his spirit on this one. He had never deserted him. Unlike Kumpee who despised work, Kazem could have gotten a slave labor position by signing an employment contract for construction work where he would have found himself assigned to one of such places as Taipei or Abu Dhabi. A few years there would have added a solid savings that he could have used for vocational training that would have broadened his opportunities. Broadened opportunities and a bit of a savings beneath him would have provided a chance of luring a woman who wasn't a noodle worker. Instead, while knowing escape was an option, he fulfilled his high shepherdly calling.

As he entered the basement cell that they lived in, Jatupon couldn't remember a time more linked in fraternity than this one except for the memories of early boyhood. Boyhood was summarized in that one photograph Kazem had salvaged out of a box of pictures that were thrown out with so much from the move. It was a photograph that prompted a solid memory (imagined or real). It was of the four boys. Jatupon, three years old and fully nude, trailed behind. Kumpee led the way. Kumpee had on a cap with the visor inverted to the back of his head. The four of them were walking down a sidewalk that went along the canal. Immediately to their left and across the canal were row houses of tiny wooden cabin shacks with metal roofs that housed residents and their scavenging businesses. The four of them were going to purchase some candy.

—They are copulating?

—Yes, and he has just awakened from the brother's penetration of him on the basement floor. The belief that the world has been resurrected in pure and gentle intentions has been thwarted. His brain waves are still discombobulated from the liquor and none of what he is presently experiencing seems real. It is though. Innocence has been disgorged like a squeezed tube of love oil in a ride more painfully and physically intimate than any intimacy he has yet experienced.

His head was spinning and he couldn't grab himself in all of the spinning images: sounds, smells, and visions all spun randomly. Finally there was a bit of a shape and texture to his thinking and he dressed himself. He wanted to use the wave of consciousness to exit.

—My dear, pain and pleasure have become inseparable in his young mind. In this act a few minutes ago—maybe a few hours ago—there was a yearning for this violation. The abuse was aggravated by too much alcohol consumption but it wasn't entirely unwanted. Being a creature of habit and addiction, Jatupon yearned for his brother—only his brother—since he vaguely felt that sexual experiences with two people are totally unique and the physiological and emotional feelings his brother induced could not be duplicated by any other person. The madness of wishing to be overtaken, however, was confuted by painful sodomized lances and an ejaculation of the one who did his stress workout within him. In other experiences like this one Jatuporn, as they call him, always masturbated to allow the desire to peel back like a tide but this time his highest hopes were limp like a noodle. He is opening the door. He is glancing at himself to make sure that he isn't wearing his underwear outside of his pants. Now he is outside as insentient as a fleeing animal after it has been attacked. Here he is feeling better in the open air. He is returning.

Jatupon reentered the room. For the first time, since awakening, he noticed that Suthep had not returned. He had not come "home"—whatever that word meant. Jatupon scavenged the pockets of his brother's pants that were wadded in the corner near Kazem's sleeping head. In it was money and a sheet of paper. He put it all in his pockets. He got on the first bus he could and paid the ticket salesman. The idea crossed his mind that being a coin collector on a city bus was not anyone's best choice. It would be much better to be one of the few men who jumped onto the piers or docks to tie the city boats. Such a Bangkok

Metropolitan Authority would give three brief whistles so the boat driver would give a backward thrust as he tied it down for the customers to enter or depart. He could picture himself whistling once, untying the boat he was assigned to, and jumping onboard at the last possible second. The second mosquito spread out its wings and copiously fluttered them about femininely. Jatupon began to be a little conscious of himself as a man coming out of anesthesia.

—But the instinct of a man is to fight off predators. Is Jatupon never tempted to take a knife and slit his brother's throat?

—No, not for the most part, my dear. He loves his brother; and in some ways there is intense intimacy and pleasure involved in the novel act that he would hardly rid himself of despite the pain and humiliation that is involved. I explained that earlier. Were you sleeping when we discussed this issue?

There was nothing. There was movement while he sat in a city bus.

All elements had burst out of the Big bang. All things (even ideas) were conceived violently in movement. And so he moved, switching to busses only when the former ones parked and all passengers had to leave. He did not know where he was. He didn't care. In one bus ride he suddenly became sentient to the feel of stiff paper in one of his pockets. He pulled it out and looked. It was his uncle's name and address. That was no surprise. The bus was stalled in traffic. Riders of busses who were near their destination began oozing out of them like leaking oil. He realized that he was on a bus going on a street that he had traveled on earlier in the day.

"Ajarn, Do you know what street this is?" he asked a monk.

"Sukumvit" the monk said.

"Which soi are we passing?" asked Jatupon.

"Forties or fifties" said the monk. "I really don't know."

Jatupon looked at the sheet of paper. It read, soi 51 Sukumvit Road. He got out and ten minutes later he was standing at the wall of the opulent mansion that Kazem had stood at. He didn't stay long. He needed to go to the bathroom. He didn't want to wet his pants and he didn't think that being a distant relative with a hangover and urine splattered pants would be very impressive to the senator. In a bathroom at a KFC he looked at his face. It was of a dark Laotian or Khmer. He was from a family with the last name of Biadklang from the North. His face was as dark as the soil. He looked into the mirror. Just with the amount of light, darkness, or expression one appeared like a totally different person from one moment to the next.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked the reflection in the mirror.

"To Sanam Luang to see more of the kites" the reflection said.

On the bus ride to Sanam Luang he had to stand. He noticed the other people. They were also wistfully discontent for their own personal reasons. They wished to sit down when the space was congested and there was nowhere to sit; and in times of sitting they yearned to have vacant seats next to their own so that they would be free from having to sit next to strangers and could have a little area of their own to monopolize. They were all so petty and he told himself that he did not want to be like that.

At Sanam Luang he bought a kite from a mendicant kite salesman. Feeling chagrin that the forlorn child within him had taken over his thoughts instead of the man, he flew his kite in a more obscure area. He was somewhat relieved to find an innocent pleasure to engage in. A half hour later the child diluted into his manhood and there he was in full embarrassment of himself. So he reeled in the kite and sat down on a park bench. A sidewalk salesman smiled at him.

On a rug this mendicant had six-inch motorcycles crafted from bamboo. Nobody knew the art of a smile like the people in the Land of Smiles. Toothless as babes they contrived smiles with the curl that has distinguished a smile from a bite with a full opening of the mouth. Thai infants and toddlers knew. They intuitively knew that with enough naughty actions a toss into the trashcan was not inconceivable. They intuitively knew big sister would be sold off to a man when she turned 14 and the fetus that was little brother or sister had been forced out by deliberately rowdy sexual liaisons, making his or her exit no different than menstruation. With enough shaking of the can of soda pop all beings disgorged the same when the tab was opened. Thai babies knew. They had their instinct to smile because of the cellular replication planned by the DNA architect who made all Thai babies the same as an American subdivision. How gullible was a human to the wish of being struck down with pleasant feelings. When a mendicant salesman with

teeth sparkled them from his tanned face even an impoverished Thai couldn't resist the inclination to buy. It was the congenial feeling more than the product itself that a consumer wished to gain. Consumers bought to get a fuzzy feeling and forget the hostile 9 to 5 working world (9 to 9 Thai time). How manipulative were the benevolent lies of Thais in the business of survival. Jatupon bought one of those purposeless products. He argued to himself that he could put it on a shelf-that is, if he had a shelf to put it on.

On the bench he pulled out of his book bag the Lao classic, "Thao Nok Kaba Phuak which in English meant "The White Nightjar." The back cover said that it depicted the second queen consort's birth of a bird and her exile from the kingdom. The preface stated that both Laotian queens had prayed that life be recycled in their wombs but only the youngest became pregnant. At the consort's request, the oldest queen blindfolded her when the labor pains ensued. She solicited the help of the court magician in particular to take advantage of the younger queen's squeamishness over the sight of blood by using the time to switch the baby for that of a bird. When the child was replaced the soothsayer could then deceive the king by making him believe that the younger consort had had sexual relations with a foul bird months earlier. This was not needed since the consort actually begot a bird. Jatupon stopped reading the preface. It was spoiling the book. He began to read the first chapter. "I, who have composed this narrative fled far away just like the little one for I, your servant, sleep alone; I am very lonely, in my bedroom, with my arms dangling empty. It is destiny that keeps me away and prevents me from embracing my beloved. I am here, without my younger one, since I left my home to go among the Thais where I have no friends..." Jatupon thought about his basic nature. He had lived for 14 years in Thailand but still he did not feel particularly Thai. He wished that he had been born in some other place like America with a nice American family. As he was falling asleep he heard the counterparts:

—What will happen to him on that bench?

—I can't imagine anything good happening from it. He could apply for a job but instead he plays with his kite and sits on the bench. He wants to be an aristocrat.

—You don't say.

—Yes, it is true. He thinks that all whores, laborers, and professionals are slaves. He thinks that they all have petty lives.

—How would he gain such conclusions?

—Partly from me. Partly from the amphetamine-poppers under the overpass. Partly from his own original thoughts. I am surprised to see that he is half way intelligent.

—There isn't much chance of him being an aristocrat.

—No, none. He will soon be accosted.

—By whom?

—By a man desiring to have sex with him.

—Explain this approach.

—The same as any other I presume: hello, hello, how are you, I'm fine and how are you. The man will be thinking to himself, while engaging in small talk, that he'll put twenty dollars into Jatupon's underwear when they are alone in his apartment. He will not have any doubts about being able to buy him.

—Just for the feel of human flesh?

—For a human that feel is indispensable. They are gadabouts and they expend themselves in motion as a defense mechanism by which to avoid their own thoughts. It is the same for feeling the silk of other skin.

It breaks them from isolation. They find their thoughts such a prison.

He and Porn had an American style apartment. She was content with it for a few days and then became discontent with the furniture. The chairs and the sofas, despite their padding, were still wicker and stiff. He knew that having the landlord take away the furnishings and using his credit cards fully for the purchase of her wishes would not ameliorate the discontent that all beings had and few could rein in.

He had met her and her mommy on the bleachers of the stadium on Ramkhamhaeng Road while sketching out a field and trees and yet still Nawin felt that she did not know who he was. He went to classes in the morning and from late afternoon he was busy painting. He couldn't understand how she thought that he should just conjure up images instantaneously with his brush, spend money, and take her places.

He kept avoiding the issue of taking her across the border. She had a student visa since she was technically enrolled in a language school

(although she rarely attended) so it wasn't in fear of her visa status that made him want to avoid the issue of the border. He had his American passport and yet he still had never spent a day there. He told himself that he should. And yet it continued to seem to him like such a dreadful place.

He told himself that it had been a mistake to bring her here. He hadn't known how far the campus was from the city. In part he chose the location with Noppawan and Porn in mind. Still, it was a mistake and he knew it all along. In Thailand she had seemed so excitable. She was a gadabout and she always made friends out of strangers from adjacent tables in restaurants they frequented. She had seemed so open to the world. Now she seemed like such a Victorian whore, jumping around in motion but prudishly obdurate to change within. She was conventional—this Victorian whore of his. Like virtually everyone else, she was part of the big band and the universe of movement fully cognizant that the most popular and sexy people were the ones who could twist and turn with universal movement.

He was the oddity. This Nawin, the romancer of whores, was all for show. Deep inside was not impetuosity but paralysis. This artistic brooding was not part of the natural course of events and who was he to chastise her normalcy. He just smiled and evaded her wishes.

Chapter 8

A little disparate to the poem, Thao Nok Kaba Phuak, he dreamt he was a black version of a nightjar cradled by the Laotian queen whose pigment was as light as a northern Chinese woman. He suckled at her nipple with the violence of his beak as she scavenged for dew to appease the parched walls of her throat and berries that would provide her with fortitude against failing strength. Her breast bled from his appetites. She grappled with waning confidence that she would find a way out of the labyrinth of trees that overtook her. She wanted to kill this disgusting child that by its birth had usurped her of status and had prompted her exile from the kingdom. This feeling embroiled her psyche but feelings did not thwart her motherly instincts for the strange creature that she named Jatuporn.

Then, immediately in front of the park bench there was a woman before him who carried two heavy buckets of ice and drinks. Startled to an awakened state by the woman asking if he wanted anything to drink, at first he gave a negative answer, "Mashai" but then he changed it into a formal feminine ending, "Ka" which could mean "yes." How absurd he must have seemed to this woman speaking like herself instead of using the masculine word, "krub" or the neuter yes-word, "chai," but at the time, he had thought of himself as a bird when he spoke and so there had not been any gender confusion whatsoever. He paid the woman for a bottle of water. Then a man with his stinking body holding a bag with little bags inside came to his bench. Jatuporn bought two of his bags and began strewing the ground a few feet from the bench with the dust of crackers, breadcrumbs, and corn.

He did this slowly while trying to solve his indecisiveness on whether to stay or go home. The thought of suicide seemed to him even more repellent than the two major options but it was a tiebreaker he wasn't going to reject absolutely. He had a pocketknife. He thought to himself that when night came upon him he could find an obscure area of a tree's shadow in complete darkness away from the gas lamps and slit his throat. He looked down. Pigeons were beginning to come to him and eat what he had allotted to them. He liked giving to ostensibly small and insignificant creatures. When the bags were empty he saved himself by his impetuosity and returned on bus #203. He dangled from the steps because of the lack of space provided to him. Standing there on the precipice of the step he looked in the bus at the crowded Siamese passengers. At moments this mosaic fusing of contortionist-bodies seemed as a mass of amorphous human flesh, a multi-head, body, and limb monster, which choked air and breath from the bus and, worse, had the outline of Kazem. Bus #203 zoomed along the river and then over the bridge of the Chao Phraya River. The cool breezes slapped hard against his flesh. He felt like the 15-year-old nightjar that took its first flight from home, strutting its bird-body independently and finding itself watched attentively by the princess, the older queen's daughter—only in his case he was homeward bound and no one was watching him. Matter of fact, he thought, if he were to slit his throat his body might after some hours just be kicked off into a corner of refuse somewhere to rot.

When he arrived in the basement cell no one was there. He sat down in front of a strange box. His kneecaps never splayed in the normal outward direction of crossed legs. Moreover, attempted prayer and television trances in imitation of the usual posture had always brought to him extreme pain making many people over the years perceive him as someone who was both anti-religious and, worse, counter pop-cultural. Kazem and Suthep had vehemently criticized the shoddy construction of his kneecaps. Kazem had always been pleasantly indifferent to this subject. As always, all he could master before the box of chocolate was an irregular sitting posture that looked like the letter M or W depending on the perspective; and most likely, and most comfortably for him, the letter N as in Nawin. It was indeed a strange sight: the letter "N" in front of a small box of Russell Stover chocolate candies with the parent company of Kansas City, Missouri, USA on the label. Inside, more than half of the chocolates still remained. He helped himself, almost feeling like an American spreading out relaxingly over the world with Thailand and other countries as his footstool, carefree and gormandizing chocolate down his gullet. He almost felt that nothing bad could ever happen to him again. And then he remembered being six years old standing with another dirty boy in front of the Dunkin Doughnut shop near a mall in Ayutthaya looking through the glass window that was a partition between them and the customers who were inside. Even more, it was a partition between feeling hungry and dirty to the immaculate

ones consuming their doughnuts within. He made funny faces and danced in front of the window where a young man and woman sat at a counter looking onto the commotion and air pollution of Bangkok. He pretended to kiss the woman through the glass. She laughed and he kissed her more. Then as the man was putting his doughnut into his mouth, Jatupon opened his own mouth widely as if, through the glass, to rip it out of the man's teeth with his partially rotten fangs. The couple laughed and the man motioned them inside. They ran in and were given doughnuts. Like then, sweets had an antithesis of meanings for him. They made him feel as one of the elite, carefree and happy and yet at the same time reminded him of the disparity to which he was one of the largest masses—that being the underclass.

Half an hour later, from his gluttony, the box was empty. He drank some bottled water and fell asleep to more images of Laotian queens walking through cocoa fields with their little black birds. When Kazem came home with more shopping bags and saw the symbol of a more auspicious life that he wished to share with his brothers totally devoured by one alone, he wanted to vituperate him if not slap him around a few times. He restrained himself since, for other reasons, he did not want him to again run away. He saw that Suthep was not in the room for whatever reason and this absence triggered in him a desire to molest the youngest. It would be a punishing pleasure, a desperate hegira from one's solitary domain to brief moments of coupling, banging onto empty walls, the release of stress, and the intimacy of "love". And yet he again restrained himself by comparing it to the gloom after masturbation. To Kazem, a boy shoved off into manhood, sex with Jatupon was an innocuous pleasure like some marijuana or a brief roller coaster ride but the gloom was of being a puppet of wanton desire for something that was far from his ultimate wish. And gloom for a man of little self-respect was deleterious. It was fine for the brain to forfeit logical restraint for that relaxation of fleeting pleasure that couldn't be sustained or for one to use whatever was before him, but someday he wanted a wife as much as he now wanted to think that he was living up to his ideal of the fraternal benefactor. He didn't want his whole life obsessed by the inconsequential pleasures of his night sports.

Kazem disheveled Jatupon's hair with his fingers and slapped him on the head.

"Where the hell were you all day, you bum?" he asked. "You thought we'd start work again so you took off." He laughed and sat down on the sole wooden chair that was the furniture of the apartment.

"I don't want to talk to you," Jatupon said.

"I bought you both some clothes. I don't know if any of it will fit since neither one of you came with me. Also, I had to see a movie all by myself. Suthep could have had some type of a tom yam tasting popcorn. They called it Mexican."

"Why didn't you get a girlfriend and bring her with you? Isn't that what they are supposed to do: go with you shopping and to movies?" Jatupon sneered.

Kazem felt an icy sword in his heart. "I wish I could take these clothes back. Neither of you deserve anything."

"Why don't you get a girlfriend and leave me the hell alone," continued Jatupon as he turned over on his side and glared at him.

Kazem lit a cigarette, smoked, and blew it into his brother's face. "Because you love it too much." He paused. "You're right about me getting a girlfriend. I should get a nice Chinawoman like your brother Kumpee and then run off with her leaving the two of you to eat worms from the sidewalk. What a good idea, Jatupon."

Jatupon turned away from him and feigned sleep.

Sometimes he hated all of them—they who had made a funny vulgarity of his name; Kazem, the creator of the nickname, who solved his stress by physically accosting him; Kumpee who always flayed and flouted him at every chance; and Suthep who treated him with the blades of indifference (the worst of all weapons). He vehemently hated them sometimes and yet—

He imagined the mosquito speaking to him. "And yet you'll gain the antibodies of hard, fortified indifference from the illness of hate. It isn't so bad. It is a practical emotion that has been demonized as of late by Buddhist and Christian practitioners although thoroughly embraced by the Jewish, Moslem, and Hindu world. I'd think it over carefully before exorcizing myself of it. It is just one more darkly pragmatic aspect of life as needed imperatively as microorganisms are needed to lurch on the deceased."

"I don't want dark things. I don't want to hate them. Tell me what to do so that I won't hate them."

"Hmm...You are such an idealist. Well, Suthep couldn't care less about you except when he cares to sting you with not caring but he is the one who taught you to play football and takraw, and although Kazem violates you repugnantly in painful tactile thrashings much worse than Kumpee's socks and sneakers ever did to your olfactory nerves he is the one who saved you from drowning and being beaten to a pulp by your father. Also he probably does genuinely care about family despite his bombastic proclamations of now being the eldest brother. He is the one who stifled the sadistic belittling of you that would have pulverized your self-esteem to dust had the father and eldest son been left to inveigh against you incessantly. When you are financially free and independent you can kill off all three of them from the present and remember the children they were. Then, you won't hate them any longer. Maybe then you will even feel love but you will have to kill them off first."

If only good things beget good things and bad things beget bad things then, thought Jatupon, there would be divine order. Then, the invisible presence of God or the forces that he would not matter. Dead or bored as God might be, still the laws of the land would have been laid out like that of a deceased founder of a company. The principles of Buddhism would be in place and operative. But such was not the case. Kazem was not a devil and he, Jatupon, was not a saint. He loved having Kazem's tongue enter his anus prior to his entrance. This "priming up" was a pleasure that he was addicted to have. Wasn't his resentment of his brother this evening more from the fact that such pleasure had not been given to him throughout the day? Wouldn't it have been lovely if he had been made into a sexual slave 24 hours a day, totally free from logic? Somehow, he felt that the mosquito would agree on this point.

The politician, judging aptly that a deposit of 20,000 baht would be like asking a pack of dogs to put the chicken in the refrigerator, had one of his aides escort the boys to Chatochok Market which had almost everything for their business (woks, burners, gas canisters, ice coolers, utensils, glass vegetable shelves, carts, oil, noodles, cabbages, bean sprouts, tomatoes, meat, cucumbers, and rice). It was one of the world's largest outdoor markets and Thais always gloated that everything in the world could be obtained there. The purchases were made in double since the senator believed that they needed more than one joint livelihood and a hungry pack with meager resources forced into the same struggle for sustenance would foster acrimony. He hadn't exactly thought that they would be jumping onto the same prey viciously. He didn't really have many thoughts about it. He hadn't given this issue, or them, much thought apart from how to best unite and part benevolently within the space of a week if not sooner. This was just his assessment of males in general. He saw males in action on a daily basis in their debates on various bills. These were rich men and yet their lust for sinking their teeth into prey was great.

He did care up to a point. He felt that he had aggrieved them by not attending their parents' funeral. He hadn't wanted the discomfort that his ex-wife would feel standing beside him again. Being human, he hadn't wanted it for himself. It would have made him feel uncomfortable and more out of place being there. It hadn't occurred to him, then, that she wouldn't attend. Furthermore, from what little he believed in Kazem's answers to his questions, he felt that he should have protected these three from having their parents' assets sucked up into some unrevealed bank account. They had been clinging onto the idea that ultimately Kumpee would act the part of the oldest brother. They had watched him go away without accountability and did this with hardly a whimper. The senator could have taken it upon himself to hire an auctioneer and then could have put the money into his own account. He would have given out the money when wisely warranted. He hadn't acted responsibly and he regretted it.

Jatupon stood by, inert and despondent, as these purchases so abstract and foreign to his hopes were loaded off onto a mover's truck. Despite his wish to survive being fulfilled, it was the aristocratic life he yearned for. Only leisure was life. A laborer was just movement and reflexes. A laborer did not run barefoot through the weeds and allow the smells to be one with him, transfer the beauty to a complex style on canvas when the beauty passed through his complicated mind, or attempt to understand why the pollen attacked him like a sickness. He wanted someone to grant him the honors of placing him in an orange robe, which he felt he was entitled to have—that special robe not of monks but of the type that surely belonged to aristocrats. He wanted leisure to see the rhapsody of every small movement under the lambency of both sun

and moon. He wanted to meditate on coruscating city life as the Buddha of Bangkok. He wanted to be free of the noodles that were winding about him tightly and to grasp the leisure that should be his and no doubt was his in an earlier life. Poverty ravaged the mind in desperate acts—the mind ached in one continual groan for something within or without that might be sold. No appreciation of the present moment could be had in such a state. He wanted to know the splendor of the veins of each distinct leaf towering over him. Still it had been determined by the powers that be that he would float between the businesses of the two brothers who would have their separate livelihoods in different parts of the city.

Still, there was something to be gained in being so lost from memory and he was inured to being forgotten. The baby of the family that he was, he had been pulled out of a cranky woman tired of having children and responsibilities. Nursed and taken care of like any child, still as the years passed he often felt guilty for being his mother's burden and his attempt at being his mother's little helper did not engender her appreciation. Forgotten again this time, he would nonetheless be the instrument that fused the two carts into a family business and he could get along with both all right, he supposed. He didn't think that his brothers were so different than himself: like him, they would work hard and feel themselves, at times, strangled in noodles. Suthep would be seeking an alternative being in video games, snookers, Thai boxing matches, and movement; and Kazem would seek his being through sickening carnal releases on his brother the result of an imagination that could make Jatupon into one rapturous whore or another, and a propensity to always take things apart, beat on them, and put them back together. For Jatupon, his escape came in his ride of feeling in love (tame as it was for new love), comic heroes that pulled him into more noble pursuits, and dreams of an aristocratic life.

There was a garbled mass of half-remembered faces that gnarled Nawin's thoughts when he woke up one morning. No different than noodle workers toward customers buoying in their brains at the end of the night, he had to let these myriad faces—most of whom he had encountered in high school and at the universities he had attended—gradually subside into forgetfulness. He sat up in bed and rubbed his forehead. His mind felt like one whose shoes were trapped in the coils of fallen barbed wire. He looked at Porn, this woman with whom he had mentally signed a contract to serve her needs and she his. Her hair billowed against her pillow like feathers. He thought to himself that she, being a prostitute, and he actually establishing a relationship with one, were so different from all other human beings. Maybe they were surviving hominids. They were definitely a divergent species of animal.

He thought about Songkran Festivals. All of his grandparents were deceased early into his boyhood. In his family there was no tradition of each relative taking bowls of water and cleansing the hands of the older family members and this tradition of offering good luck for the New Year, respect, and deference had never really embedded itself into his mind as a moral duty. He had never been Thai. Circumstances had made him into a hominid. He wondered pityingly about the circumstances that had maimed and freed her. He stared at her face with great pain and pathos. Tears weltered in the corners of his eyes. He did not know what to do with this feeling so he buried it and made love to her.

She took him in her mouth. The quicker and deeper she went the more pleasurable it was. Little did he care if she choked on it. When he was ready to ejaculate he pressed her head so that he could penetrate more deeply. His body had its cellular knowledge that a quick thrusting and a deep penetration would be more pleasurable exciting and the excitement and especially the depth of the penis in the vaginal opening would cause the male to ejaculate more semen that had a greater chance of impregnating a female. Such was the primitive making. When his savage frenzy had ended he knew the extent of his own selfishness and was relieved to be exorcized of it. He felt a humane sensitivity descend on him. He knew that of all the selfish and negative energies that influenced his thoughts, they were, for the most part, not him. With the exception of times of sexual frenzy, he was able to find a deep and benign part of his nature and knew it to be the true Nawin, the artist who drew the oppressed and had sensitivity to the pains of others, the one who wanted to enrich Porn and all he knew intimately in truth and beauty.

Perpetually the same, those of leisure yearned each year for the halting of time and, in dissatisfaction gained from comparing themselves to others more youthful, yearned for a return to earlier times of higher pleasures. But it was the laboring classes who continued to labor in insentience without reflection. They cooked their rice and noodles

ceaselessly. They clung to their jobs like tiny, sedentary, clinging salamanders to windows during a storm. They found their beings (their minds and the feelings that would be refined into thought within them) lost to the reflexes of the day. Months blew away like empty bags skidding on the pavements. Evanescent and mutable to their ultimate end, their lives passed by blandly in dizzying headaches caused by the sun of the weatherless country during the dry season. When the rainy season set in there was the discomfort of leaking and wind-swept canopies, the lack of customers, and being drenched by the rain; but these issues were minimized by the fact that varied weather made each of the days more memorable. The brothers, transplanted into Bangkok with a livelihood, continued on as if in Ayutthaya. Memory of the uncle's unfulfilled promise of a dinner had worn away like the memory of their parents or the abandonment of Kumpee.

At first Suthep strutted around in his independence like a dominant rooster but as the months went by the independence underwent the metamorphosis to loneliness and by 1 a.m. of each early morning, an hour or two after Jatupon would leave him, Suthep would often feel the chill of adulthood. One late night/early morning as the smoke of charbroiled fish and the steam of rice, noodles, and pork soup rose up the sweat-profuseness of his face and into his hairnet, he watched a girl giggle and slurp up her noodles with her boyfriend. He imagined all traffic on the streets and sidewalk gone and that there was just the three of them. He imagined those customers leaving unhappily. Then, as they were beginning to walk together, there was a dispute that intensified to the point where he attacked her. He imagined him dragging her by the hair, slapping her down, and denuding her. Suthep imagined himself walking over toward them and watching their canine copulation for a period of minutes. Then an idea possessed him and he started up his motorcycle and circled the couple, eventually chasing off the body that had been forcing itself into her. He imagined himself helping the trembling body of the female dress. He didn't want to cover her but he did it to comfort her so as to gain her confidence to obtain a new round of banging that would involve himself and would last longer than if he were to force another encounter on her now. Pleasures that had the potential of being perpetual were always the best. He imagined that he learned about her life with contrived sensitivity and with time secured himself as the being whom she yearned for.

Then the happy couple was again a reality and he was standing alone in front of his cart. There they were at the table slurping their noodles joyfully. Adulthood was the maturity to relinquish the rebellion against society for relegating one to his petty station in life bereft of the pleasures he sees around him. Being wise was realizing that most of such pleasures were neither good nor beneficial. Although Suthep was an adult, he was a bitter man and he bit his lip in the thought of all the pleasures that were out there waiting for so many others and not for him. He resented being such a lowly clod. After the couple paid for the meal and left he sat at their empty table and looked out across the cars that veered near a discothèque until at last he fell asleep. For a moment or two of REM he dreamed of his youngest brother dangling by some friend from an open window of an appliance warehouse only to have his shoe slip off in the friend's hand and the body unwillingly succumbing to gravity with his force tripping off the alarm. But unlike what really happened two years ago to Jatupon and a teenager once they extricated themselves and arrived in the big city on a bus, he, Suthep, was the friend and when the shoe slipped off he laughed and ran. He woke up, shook off his sleep, and then began washing his dishes in big plastic bowls. He felt a loneliness eat up on him. Each evening it seemed to be exacerbated.

The next evening he was struggling in ambivalence on continuing to work or closing early. Feeling forlorn and lonely, and yet needing to talk to Kazem about a decision he had made, he chose the latter. And when he arrived near Kazem's cart with a hairnet still on his head Kazem's countenance was at first chiding.

"You couldn't have lost your shirt already," he said.

Suthep took off his shirt, wadded it into a ball, and threw it at Kazem. Kazem wadded it up and threw it back. Soon the three, in hairnets, were Thai boxing and laughing with each other. The few customers they had were ignored. It was dereliction of responsibility. It was a hiatus. It was bantering. It was enjoyment of each other. It was a bit of love followed by the sharing of duties.

On that fine evening of gentility Jatupon was able to leave earlier than usual. While the other two brothers washed dishes, wheeled away the

cart to a parking lot, chained it up to a fence, and took supplies they couldn't lock up into and under the cart back to the apartment, Jatupon went to Sanam Luang. Once there, he walked on the long cobbled oval track; interweaved aimlessly around trees and pedestrians; and watched the wind animate a bag with absolute breath and power. The wild, breathing plastic, reminded him of being—the putative lightning that struck the ocean and caused the crystallization of elements.

Six adroit teenagers playing a game of takraw were in a crescent position like the broken face of the moon. They hit a bamboo ball back and forth with their feet and heads in a motion that depicted continuum. Perhaps they needed to believe in the continuum of action and being (the random balls of matter that they were). Inside the stadium-shaped park were homeless families lying on their thin sheets of rectangular bamboo mats and towels. Above the center of this football field of dust he saw a few prolonged kite flyers and their instruments swishing as mad serpents of the open night skies under gas lamps.

He felt the lifelessness and perfunctory movements of being a noodle worker further exorcized from him and became enriched in the freedom of his own impulses. Still, he told himself that even though he was almost as poor and homeless as those strewn about him, he should not be out here to be possibly robbed. It was an inherent defense because, more than fearing robbery, he knew that he would most likely do anything for money. Also there was a secondary voice of a cruel conscience that taunted him for being such easily sold goods even though he had never really put himself up for sale and had never been bought. As American as he wanted to be, in Thailand (even Sanam Luang in Bangkok) there was little chance of being robbed or murdered. He realized that he wasn't really worried on that score.

He was the same as the visual images of street life that had come to him earlier that day: dogs that gnawed through the trash; a man whom he had seen in the middle of the afternoon holding a tree of hooks attached to small plastic sandwich bags where water and goldfish dangled within (how his child cried particularly for the sake of the fish); strangers pushing against each other in the mad rush to sell something and improve the lot of their lives; and a blind man who had screamed a song into a microphone to gain the one baht coins he was begging for. Like them, he would do almost anything for survival and the gaining of a better life that would shake in the pockets of his pants. Life was rained on one like rocks thrown at the emaciated dogs as they scavenged for their food or listlessly lay in the center of congested sidewalks.

Like those homeless individuals on their mats, he wanted someone to look into his eyes and confirm his humanity. He wanted to hear a voice in the solitude of the night that would give him hope that life was not entirely random and that he had an importance. He wanted to believe in illusions. He wanted to believe that the incidents that happened in one's life were for a good reason and that they were the iron scaffolding that built up his life into one monumental edifice which would go on and on. And yet if his family didn't care to deceive him into seeing connections and connectedness in random events and time, no stranger out there would be benevolent enough to attempt the task. He was a rotting organism there to be trodden on like any insect. He sat on a bench and reread the earlier part of his Laotian poem: the queens' prayers; the youngest queen's pregnancy; the oldest queen's plot foiled by reality stranger than the plot; the birth of the bird; the exile; the growth as a boy in the shape of a bird; the growing independent striving of the boy-bird and the longer flights away from home; the princess who saw the bird and wanted it...

"Who are you?" asked a girl who was around his age. Jatupon felt nonplused. Beauty and truth were extracted from him. He was forced out of himself and his reading like a boy who stared at the light so long that when he walked away from it he fell into a ditch. Stupefied, he did not say anything to the dark skinned glasses-girl. "I'm Noppawan Piggy," she continued. "What are you reading?"

"A poem. It is from Laos."

"Are you Laotian?"

"Not really. I don't know what I am."

"Why wouldn't you know who you are? If you were born here from a Thai mother or father you are Thai and if you weren't you are a foreigner. I can't think of anything simpler. By the way, your grammar is awful. It's 'who I am.' Not 'what I am.' Maybe you are Laotian"

"Well, I do. I do know who I am. Maybe I'm just wishing to not know."

"And you are reading poetry to not know?"

"Yes...I...I know its different," he said with diffidence, "but I'm wanting that."

"You are wanting to become a different person by reading poetry or poetry will make you someone different? Maybe you are wanting to be different than other people"

"All of the above. Why is your name Noppawan Piggy?" he asked.

"It is a nickname."

"Noppawan isn't really a nickname, is it?"

"No, Piggy is. I got that from watching too much of the Muppets and Sesame Street when I was a girl." She laughed.

"People don't have last names as nicknames-only their first names."

"Well this person does."

"Why?"

"Why not? I don't like my last name."

"Well, it has to be the same name as your parents."

"Now you understand why my last name is a nickname. It would be rather dumb to have two nicknames."

"I can't see that I understand at all. And no, I'm not Laotian; and my Thai grammar is impeccable. I'm not stupid. I am a self-taught individual."

"Good for you," she said. "They are the best kind."

He slapped the park bench with his hand and moved to a corner so that she could sit down. She sat there. "So explain your reason for the last name as the nickname."

"I thought I did. Well, I've chosen to make the last name a nickname because it is my decision to do so; and foremost, I want to be divorced from my parents."

"Children can't get divorced from their parents, can they?"

"Watch me. "

He chortled. "You are so honest. Most Thais aren't that way. Sometimes they act like servants and sycophants and then talk behind those people's backs. Sometimes they are scared to say anything at all like about the kings or anyone higher. You say everything openly even though you don't even know me. I'm beginning to think you are the one who is not Thai. I've never met anyone like you."

"I'm one of a kind," she said. "I've never met a poor boy with an educated head sitting on a park bench before."

"I'm one of a kind," he said.

"I like people who read something different and imagine something different. I hate people who read comic books and play video games all of the time or buy lots of things from the malls each day, don't you?" There was no answer. He had trouble denouncing these items that seemed to him so alluring although already his rash flood of feelings prematurely told him that she was the best thing that had happened to him while living in Bangkok and he didn't want to destroy an emerging friendship with honesty. After all, at present he had no friends. "Aren't you going to ask why I'm out here?"

He couldn't let it be shown that he was feeling scared to speak for fear of saying something that would make her turn away from him. He didn't realize that his vulnerability could be read from his countenance and the sweat that was beginning to come from his forehead.

"Well, why are you out here so late? Are you a homeless orphan?"

She laughed. "Listen, funny guy, see the pendant on this 14 carrot gold necklace."

"Yes, I do. Maybe you should take that off. It would be safer. Put it in your pocket."

"Oh," she said diffidently. She took off the necklace and stuffed it into a pocket. "Thank you," she said. She paused and then went on.

"I have parents and they are very rich. I live in a nice home. I'm just running away from it. I'm running away from them. You have a kind face but you should wash it more often. I see a pimple."

"So. I've got oily skin. It doesn't mean I don't wash it. Now it's my turn to give a question to you. Your parents did something that upset you. You are running. From what?"

"I wish I could slip into your poem."

"It can't happen but if you read it you can let the poem slip over you. That's better really because that way you don't slip away at all but just put on some modern armor. It is like feeling invincible—like slipping on a

soldier's uniform and strapping on a new gun."

"I like that idea. That is beautiful. What's the book about?"

"How a prince born as a hawk changed into a man through love and atonement. I've read it before. Here." He gave her the book although he hadn't completed the poem itself but only the preface.

"You won't read it again?"

"No." He lied. He wanted her to like him. He wanted to give her something so that she would remember him.

"Did you know that my father owns three factories and is a high official in the government?"

"How would I know that? I just met you." He felt that it was strange that someone so dark should have parents who were entrepreneurs and high government officials. He also felt that it was strange that she should think that he would know her so deeply. Still, their conversation seemed to him so uniquely intimate like long established friends. "Here's a pen and the book. I want you to write your name and address on the front cover."

"Okay." He took her pen and wrote it there. She took back the book.

"Jatupon Biadklang. No email address?" she asked. He didn't understand much about such things. He just said "No" and shrugged it off as if it lacked importance. In his heart, however, he wanted to ask her questions about this technological age.

Then the girl said goodbye and went away. He did not understand this needy feeling suddenly brewing within him that yearned for the presence of another to stitch his open wounds. He wanted her to come back to him and he waited there on that bench for an additional hour with that one thought dominant in his mind and a foolish expectation that she would come back to converse with him further even though neither of them really knew the other. Still, when he eventually left, he felt hope in something within his disappointment that she hadn't returned. He wasn't quite sure what the nature of this hopefulness was. Like lightning flashing once to which the unaccustomed eye blinks twice it pierced darkness and restored faith in forces beyond mortal knowledge. Like the refracting rays of the sun coruscating at 5:00 onto the Chao Phrya River in round wild and random organisms of light before motor-gondolas and barges, so he felt that something brief but beautiful had happened to him and that the residue of it would always stay with him.

Born in boredom and anguish at seeing snow fall while doing her dishes in front of the kitchen window, delivered meals, disposable plates, and throw-away silverware of plastic came into being. They had seemed at first to her the perfect tools to minimize discontent. Then she kept the drapes shut at all times to keep from seeing the snow. Still it did not help; and one evening she beat on his locked studio door and screamed to it that she was going to her language class. She hadn't been there but once following her enrollment.

While she went out with the snow and the wind, Nawin still remained locked away but free in his colors. They flowed in tight brushstrokes of an earthy tone. They were of French-Canadian mannequins performing their perfunctory duties of marriage. A summary setting of a banquet table was under the window. A profuse ochre sunlight poured through the window permeating the scene at the wedding banquet. The table cast a shadow that inundated around the feet of the mannequins like a pool providing the scene with form and volume. However, greatness was in the details and that he was still lacking. He was listening to Thai news from his computer. The anchorman said that Moslems and Hindus were burning houses in one Indian community. Hindus were throwing Moslem children into bonfires, telling them they would meet their deceased fathers. His pastel colors began to have a fiery gray bleakness. He felt great despair. He wondered why in the 3 million years of Australopithecus through the 100,000 years of his species (if his species was to some degree related to Australopithecus) humans had not learned love. They had learned speech and social skills for society to exist but they hadn't learned love. He wondered if this word was totally empty without substance. Maybe it was a make-believe word to make humans feel better about themselves. He wondered if there was anything outside of human selfishness.

He had once gotten out of noodles—Noodles stirred in a wok or alive, like worms, in a vat. Briefly, he had gotten out of his boyhood assignments of washing bowls in tubs, being the seamstress attaching jasmine flowers into rosaries from a long, thick needle, selling them on the streets in the traffic, and then returning to wash more bowls. There was a time when his aunt had had mercy on him and had come into his

life despite the inauspicious marriage that her sister had made. It almost seemed like a dream. Hadn't she first enrolled him in a Bible School class? Within that class so long ago, from a lost being of himself, had he not taken a paper image of Christ and varnished it onto a piece of wood? Then his aunt let him dabble in education and gain the full thirst on the new taste buds. Neurological responses burgeoned and bifurcated within him. Now this wooden, shiny-faced Christ or the ashes of it were somewhere in a colossal garbage heap with so much Kumpee had coerced them to throw away or sell "to have as savings." That image of Christ or the conceptualization of it in his head had not spared either himself or it from the trash heap. He was, nonetheless, fond of it. Strangely, Bible school for him had been the initial stage of his education at the temple school. He wished that he had that plaque to keep forever. If he were to have that plaque now it might be precious proof that a young scholar had actually lived.

This part of him was undeniably gone. Gone it was, for he continually slid out of his skin so fully and naturally even though he was rarely cognizant that this continual sliding away from himself was taking place. He was just slumbering as all slumbered. This was life, and unlike a movie, music did not accompany its plotless plodding of time. The sliding out of his skin happened every minute of his life and yet there was perhaps some consistency one might isolate as a Jatupon if one were to imagine such a being when Buddhism stipulated that the self was nothing but a delusion. Whenever he saw an emaciated dog wadded into itself like crumbled trash or sprawled out onto the pavement as if dead he would always say, "poor baby dog." It was a long embedded sensitivity that he had developed in Ayuttaya from early boyhood. In Bangkok where they seemed even more pathetic, the sensitivity was exacerbated and he repeated this phrase over and over again no different than when he was six years old. This was surely proof of a bit of a consistent self. Friends always went away after they learned, shared, or enjoyed the company of a given person for they needed to evolve to the next level and forget previous levels. However, one surely did not lose himself completely. He did not know.

Still he was changing and within the darkness that was subjugating him into doziness a new embedded consistency was formulating. His mind kept flitting back to the thought of this girl, Noppawan, and his imaginative curiosity invented a mansion where she no doubt resided. He could imagine her governess and feel how contained and alone she might be within a rigid schedule of private teachers and tutors. He imagined her accompanied by servants while her continually busy parents remained remote and detached from her life.

He was as happy to be returning to his sordid smelling cell as that time when he had returned from the fair. With hairnet as a tail in his back pocket, his eyes gleamed of hope, and curiosity brewed about Noppawan. Change also marked the life of Suthep, who was sitting on two bags of his clothes, latent with the night, when Jatupon approached the apartment building.

"What are you doing?" he asked. Suthep was smoking near a tree.

"I got an apartment. I'm about ready to leave. I thought I'd tell you goodbye but maybe get you to help me with a bag if you don't mind."

"You're leaving?" He felt nonplused. His senses tingled and throbbled in confusion like the onslaught of the mosquito when drugs had conjured illusions and excavated buried, opaque truths. "If you want to leave us, why were we all working together earlier today?"

"For old time's sake. I'm not leaving completely—just from time to time when I'm tired and want to be able to sleep without having to come all the way back here."

"What does Kazem say about this?"

"What he says doesn't matter. What does it matter what he says?"

"I guess none but I want to know."

Suthep paused. He wasn't accustomed to confessions in the confessionals of tree branches. He sighed and spoke with begrudging reluctance. "I've explained this to him for months. He has told me many times that he wants me to stay here. He always gets angry whenever I talk about it. Now I've stopped talking and am doing it, aren't I? No, he does not want anything to interfere with his notion of what big brothers ought to do. He acts like he is a lot older than I am. Anyhow, he is obnoxious: always dropping by my business when he can't catch me here pretending to be concerned that I might need something. Most of those times he was just trying to persuade me that we need some type of joint savings." He coughed a deep chronic continuum that shook his body. He

was of an average build but seemed to Jatupon as gaunt and sickly at such moments. "I laugh at his face each time he does that. I've been there, done that. Kumpee made us saps enough."

"After Mother and Father's death we were stunned."

"Maybe. Maybe or just believing that only bad things would happen which is probably about right. Anyhow, I'm more or less gone. You both should be thankful to be rid of me so that you can carry on without being witnessed." He laughed. "Go ahead and look innocent and confused."

"I don't know what you mean."

"About looking innocent and confused?" asked Suthep in a chuckle. He also wanted to keep the conversation murky.

"About any of it."

"Good, stay that way. None of us want to know anything-least of all me. Here, you can help me by taking a bag." As Jatupon reached for a bag he uncorked his flatulent gas.

"How disgusting! Are you going to fart all the way up there?"

"Where is your apartment?" asked Jatupon, anxious that the subject be changed.

"You need to have a doctor check you out with all that farting you do" said Suthep. He was enjoying Jatupon's embarrassment. "A fart doctor," he said. They both laughed. They began walking down the soi to the main street. Suthep smoked and coughed. His face cringed and then he spat out some mucus in front of a 7-11. He buried it with the sole of his sandal. They began walking again. Jatupon was feeling even more reluctant to experience change and this reluctance spoke to him in the scraping shuffle of their talking sandals. Jatupon did not know what his brother knew and his mouth opened a couple times as if wanting to ask him. Still, he could not speak such things.

"How much is your rent?" he asked at last as the two of them waited for a period of minutes for a bus. He was anxious to wedge them out of the coffins that buried each of them separately into themselves.

Only words and actions were his crowbar.

"Just a thousand" Suthep grumbled. But from there the journey was a wordless void.

Before they arrived at the smaller cell Suthep bought a couple cartons of beer from a convenience store and the two of them sank into themselves within the barren room. Exhaustion stung them and yet both, wishing to find a chamber of themselves not mandated by work and sleep, let the liquor and marijuana smoke toss about their beings—beings that were sprawled on pillows on the tileless wooden floor.

Suthep stared at him so directly for a period of seconds with a face that looked like his aunt when she had peered out at him from her glasses. His stare seemed incessant and those eyes burned his face that blushed from the worry of what the stare and the invitation to visit here all meant. His aunt's stare through her glasses had long ago been like a version of the sanphraphun, the dollhouse of the spirits that was often placed in front of businesses and residences. At such sanphraphuns Thais put down plates of food and lit incense that would carry to the gods their wishes. She had been his guardian spirit in a sanphraphun of those glasses and yet she had abandoned him. Like the aunt, Suthep's eyes were probing. In the smoke of the cannabis he too seemed like a spirit. Suthep's gaze attempted to measure the traces of manhood that were in the youngest brother. They attempted to not be repulsed by the boy, the victim, that still surfaced. Suthep noticed that even in the masculine activity of beer drinking Jatupon sipped the beer in little suction-like the infant to its bottle.

"Go ahead, little man, swallow as much as you can in one gulp."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"I'm not so little. We're nearly the same age and I'm taller than you."

"Age and height don't make one big. It is experience, and you are lacking experience."

"Lacking experience in what?"

"In what? In everything. In women, in outlook, whatever. You're a child."

"And you dragged me here to tell me that?"

"I didn't drag you. You are making yourself the victim again." Suthep chuckled. Jatupon avowed the truth of this with a smile.

"You make it sound like Mother and Father defended me as the baby boy" he half joked.

"Well, Kazem took up that role when we were out to beat you senseless."

"Don't you ever want to return?"

"Return where?" Jatupon swallowed in larger sips while his head was like a boat swiftly churning its propellers but going nowhere.

"To what we were. Like when we were able to finally afford a restaurant and Mom would come with Kumpee in the taxi and they would slide sacks and boxes of vegetables, rice, and pork that we would put away enthusiastically; or when we ordered a plastic ball from box tops of cereal boxes like the one that we spent months getting...the spacey one with many suction cups...it would stick to about anything when wet; that one Songkran where we were in the back of a pickup truck with a barrel of water for ammunition, aiming at every moving target. Father had rented a truck to pick up something. I don't remember what. But then, for some reason, he changed his mind and took us..." They both sank into their father's rare episodes of kindness and then their minds switched to the pure fun of Songkran chaos where society became freer and fragmented to thoughtless instinctual responses of guerrilla warfare where aiming guns for the open windows of busses and targeting other rival gangs had no consequences.

"I am a man now. I don't want to hear bullshit about returning back. What good does it do to be sentimental, anyhow? Chance took them and if they are looking down on us it will be with as little concern as when they were alive. As I see it, whether we honor their jars of ashes at the temple or spit on them it doesn't much matter. Their spirits didn't keep Kumpee from running off with what he could. Do I want to return back? Back wasn't any good either; so, no, not really if I were to be honest about it." Only the high he was experiencing allowed him to be so honest.

Anxieties began to wreak Jatupon's sensitivities. The rag of a drape hanging against the window in a knot looked like a gigantic condom. There was a huge hole in the wall symbolic of life being a void. His brother was a person whom he was beginning to know well at one moment and a stranger with a strange face reminiscent of an aunt, dreamed or real, the next moment. He thought how odd it was that the whole perspective of someone he had known his whole life was interchanging so randomly with the worst moments being when his brother seemed to have a stone alien countenance.

He let another golden wave hit his tongue. It was like being hit by a wave from an ocean all bitter and suffocating. He began to laugh. He couldn't help it. Pains and pleasures seemed to him as such an irrelevant and comical absurdity slapping a person around in its inundations. One moment he would be here and happy and then he would be there and miserable. He drank more of the beer and laughed.

"Chug it all down!" repeated his brother.

He thought to himself that here they were—two very young men who had once run freely together through puddles on the streets and yet despite their history (regardless of it not being a particularly close relationship) Suthep and all that should seem him was tenuous and frothy when it should be solid in his memory. Staring at him for a couple seconds, somehow he couldn't believe that someone who said "Chug it all down" was his benefactor. He looked down. As he did so, he sensed that the bubbles were increasing in his can of beer. The mosquito, that had been folded, spread out its large mass once it climbed out of the beer can.

"I don't want to be lectured to by you," said Jatupon in his mind to the mosquito. "I might want an education but not some garbled ideas of an insect created by my own inebriated brain."

"You get what you pay for. These opportunities of hearing me on my soapbox is as much truth as any noodle worker will be exposed to."

"I know you are horrible but I don't mind it anymore. I'm not scared of it anymore. I'm used to it. If I can't get rid of you, at least you will no longer upset me."

"So quickly you people acclimate and adapt to rough ways. How have you been?"

He felt stunned. How good it was to hear those words. "Okay."

"Is the job going okay?"

"It is the same old thing."

"Don't you feel proud being there enslaved to the needs of higher classes than yourselves-especially when they are rather lowly to come to you to begin with? All of these department store workers and so forth."

"It's all right. I don't know any better. I want to know why you like blood."

"A bold childish inquisitiveness without considering order or propriety. You really aren't afraid. You are getting bolder by the day in a more childish way. Why do you like chocolate?"

"I don't know. I just do."

"But why do you think that you like it so much?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You can guess if you follow your instincts. If you follow your instincts they will take you into prehistory when the sweet taste buds formed for succulent bone marrow. Which came first: the taste buds for what was sweet or the experience tearing into bone marrow? For the answer to that question you don't need a PHD. You just need to follow your instincts and they will let you know everything."

"I guess people in the past were often desperate for nutrients and found that they could survive by eating bone marrow. Nature began to instill man with a taste for that which was sweet so that he would more likely eat bone marrow when in a desperate situation."

"Excellent. In answer to your question, maybe the boredom of flying around this rocky planet causes us to need to bite into something deeper. Anyhow, I came to find out how you were doing financially now that you have employment"

"We don't need to worry about staying alive."

"What more can you expect from life than that?"

"Jatupon!" There was a pause. "Jatupon!"

"A le nah? (what is it?)."

"You are fading off completely," said Suthep with a grimace. "I think you need to get the hell out of here. Your lover's waiting for you. Thanks for helping me bring some of this junk."

Chapter 9

Nawin fell asleep in the suds of his bathtub and when he woke up his thoughts were frothy. Melancholy dripped from the shower nozzle and from time to time hit his head (the contents of which emulated the slow and sad repetition of the dripping). A year earlier it had been in such a bathroom at an artsy party at a friend's house near Silpakorn University that he went away from the crowd to sit on the edge of the tub and weep with the fatuous wrestling of personal pain. Noppawan came into the bathroom to find out what was wrong. She sat on the edge of the tub next to him and heard about the crash of the United Airlines jet. Without words she took one of his hands. Without trying to absorb the sadness of his face in the emotion of sympathy, he could tell that she was imagining details beyond his relationship with his deceased uncle or the explosion of the plane. Seated there, quickly overcoming personal loss in favor of a more philosophic stance, he believed that America was a self-centered bully and the Moslem world would continue to attack her for being so opulent in a famished world, controlling world policies without giving smaller nations a voice, cuddling the Zionist entity of these self-professed "Chosen people," and for having the dominant culture of individual freedoms that went contrary to their Islamic tyranny. The couple looked out into nothingness with similar thoughts. Both knew the naturalness of hate in recreating civilization and that destructiveness in society was no different than the kinetic universe as a whole. Both knew that only hope came in recoiling in one's passive intellectual pursuits. At that time he felt sick like when one hadn't eaten for days: people who should have been important and salubrious spun around in his head as hollow as all the others. Only his uncle, a man who did not love him and had no particular self-interest in the boy had saved him. Only Noppawan, during his time of mourning, kept him from complete despair. He wiped off his hands and arms and made his call on the telephone as his body leaned stiffly to the edge crushing through frothy embankments of his bubble bath.

"Piggy?"

"Yes?"

"Piggy, is that you?"

"Yes, Nawin."

"Piggy, I feel tongue tied here. This shouldn't be a question a husband poses. I...I don't know what to say. We are married technically. Technically, and emotionally from my standpoint, that is the case so as a husband don't you think I'd be curious when my wife is going to start making love to me?"

"I have, Nawin, but there isn't much I can do with us on different sides of the planet."

"Well, you should be here and she shouldn't. I asked you to come."

"And I said that I had papers to grade and research to do."

"I understand all of that. Nobody is to blame. I'm not even talking about that. I'm talking about three times before we got married. 2 1/2 times afterward. We're newlyweds. I need for you to need to smell my feet, massage my back, do womanly things I can't talk about on the telephone. I need you."

She thought to herself that appetites were not the substance of memory. She wanted to lecture him but only muttered, "Did Porn leave you?"

"No, she is here. But that is not the point. The point is figuring out if you will ever need me like a wife."

"The way Porn does? Honey, she is a businesswoman. I'm sure she enjoys you immeasurably but you would go broke paying for both of us." She laughed. She was fully amused by herself; but then she noticed that she had caused him to retreat in silence. "Hello?" she said uneasily. She picked up the poetic story, Thao Nok Kaba Phuak (The Nightjar) that was on her bookshelf. She opened the book, which had his name and address on it when he was 14 years old and her name since he had dedicated the book to her. Her fingertips caressed the illustration of the Nightjar on the cover page.

"Yeah, I'm here. You continued to encourage me to have my relationships after we were married. It was crazy but I went along with it. I thought it was a game: playboy artist encouraged by his wife to continue to draw saddened whores. I even went to the airport with Porn thinking you would come there and stop us."

"Surprise, surprise!" she said. She laughed lovingly. "Men explode,

Nawin. They get it out of their system for a few hours but a woman percolates romantically throughout the day. She loses all sense of reason. She does everything for the sake of that relationship. She loses herself."

"So-no one wants to reason 24 hours a day. You can't think that people get married to stop sexual intercourse. If that was your idea I wish that you had told me before we got married."

"Nawin, the reason I married you was not to percolate nor was it to be a recipient of your explosions when you can't get any temporaries to service you. I realize that temporaries are more erotic than wives, Nawin, the same as temporaries are probably more erotic than husbands. Anybody new will not be like stinking socks kicked off under the sofa."

"Is that what I am?" He remembered the stench of Kumpee. She couldn't have chosen a more grotesque image. He again felt like the ugly dark skinned Jatupon with his pimples.

"You understand what I mean."

"I don't understand you at all. I don't understand what we are, honestly. Do we even have a relationship? Do you know?"

"Of course, we've known each other forever. We're just trying to figure out some new movements-our own ways of behaving."

"I just want us to behave like normal couples do."

Both of them were silent, digging deep into their brains for memories of what normal families and normal couples did. They couldn't find what they were seeking. Both exhumed half-dead children of themselves whose eyes were blinded by pain and too much exposure to darkness. What did they know of families, couples, and what normal people did?

"We have a relationship but it's a peculiar thing. It is one of those rare finds based on understanding and admiration. One great thing about you that I admire is that, despite your moral turpitude, I don't have to worry that you will someday become a bitter old man who hates life. Bitter old men, Nawin, tend to be that way because they resent young men off having pleasures when they can't engage in them any longer. You have your art, your permanent window on the world. You aren't just wasting your life on the next thrill-I mean not completely. You'll have something to show for your life."

"I need intimacy with my wife."

"Isn't what I'm doing now intimacy?" she spoke with a bit of anger. "Isn't going to an art museum even a higher intimacy? Isn't being an artist or in my case sharing my research on zoology to a conference intimacy at its highest degree. You're ignorant but you aren't stupid. You're not even so ignorant: just a victim of too much testosterone clouding over your senses."

"I need tender love."

"Tender love isn't in a man's lexicon. You think you need women to be tender enough to let you bang away on them. Pleasurable banging, and one or two women as your permanent trophies: that's your need. I don't think it is much of a need. Wanting the right people is good. Needing them isn't." She paused and waited but his voice was not forthcoming. "Nawin, are you still there?"

"I'm still here. Piggy, you haven't contacted me in weeks. I was beginning to think that you were filing for divorce."

"The line was too large at the lawyer's office" she joked. He chuckled.

"Are you okay, Piggy?"

"I'm fine, Nawin. Thanks for finally asking. How are you and Porn? How are your classes?"

"The class on the influence of Caravaggio is useful. All of the classes are fine. Noppawan, I think that Porn hates being with me now. I think she is disappointed being here with me."

"Why?"

"I'm too busy to take her wherever she wants to go."

"Where does she want to go?"

"I think anywhere but here-New York mostly."

"Why don't you go? It is just a day's journey, isn't it?"

"I don't know," he sighed. "Piggy, I've tried to call you twenty times. Why are you at your sister's?"

"Oh, Nawin, that is a good question. You know how the landlord let four Chinese students rent out an apartment near us."

"Yes."

"Do you remember that we always heard that sizzling sound of them frying food in their woks."

"Yes, so—"

"Well, they fried most of the apartment building. The sprinklers didn't turn on. No one was hurt fortunately. You had only a few canvases. I took out your paintings and my computer and ran out before the flames reached our door. Our ideas are safe."

"Thank God! Thank God, no one was hurt." He imagined the horror of having all his canvases in that location and his image emblazoned in light, heat, and smoke. What a way of setting his reputation on fire. What a way of enlightening the world. And yet, in accordance with Zen, burnt canvases would nip his ego and remind him of the true traceless aspect of being. If this had happened, to which his whole being poured out praise to whatever forces of the cosmos intentionally or unintentionally caused it to not occur, it would have taught him the awareness that permanence was an illusion. It would have taught him an acceptance of fate and an appreciation of the simple pleasure of just being. He thought of the time that he and Noppawan were in a Songkran Festival water fight in Banglampool. Both were unlucky enough to have both sides of their faces shot with water containing some form of caustic chemicals that burned lacerations which later changed into black eyes. For a few weeks the friends had been freaks but then they were always freaks, and at the age of 14 or 15, the inception of their friendship, they had attended the natural science freak museum at Siriaj Hospital. In Thailand no one told the truth. They were careful and obsequious with their "wei," their traditions, and their buried tongues. They were in favor of just getting along. To Thais, he and Piggy would be perceived as intractably strange. The couple couldn't claim to be comfortable as freaks although freakishness was their natural order.

"Also, the monkey, the cat, and the parrot: I got them out too."

"Noppawan? Noppawan Rongthang" he said timidly in the fog of self-doubt.

"Jatupon Biadklang" she mocked him and laughed at his insecurity.

"Why didn't you move into the condominium?"

"My sister's apartment is near the university."

"I'm feeling lonely," he said while laughing at himself. "I love you but I'm doubting if you love me."

"Feelings come and go, Nawin. We have a commitment to each other as friends and we're married. The way I look at it that is more stable than what most people have. There is me and there is you and from those two important things we create us. Where's Porn at now?"

"She went to her language class."

"Oh, is she now trying to learn Thai?"

He laughed victoriously choking on his saliva. He coughed. "You are jealous!" he said gleefully. "You do love me. You are jealous out of your mind."

"Dream on, Nawin."

"Piggy is jealous."

"In your dreams, Nawin."

He stopped laughing. "Piggy? I want to tell you about something."

"Are you whining, Nawin?"

"Well, I was ready to."

She felt that husbands used women to rape or as confidants for the release of their suffering boys. She found it vertiginous and a bit nauseating.

"Yes," she said coldly, "What is it?"

"I just want to tell you something that happened...I think I saw my brother-one of them when I was leaving for the airport."

"The one who beat up on your face when I first met you."

"Yeah. Maybe. It's nothing. It is just on my mind."

"Did you talk to him?"

"No, just saw him from a distance."

Hanging up, he got dressed and, paintbrush in hand, he returned to his dreams: dreams of people in movements imitated from their fathers and forefathers-those in traditional marriages and traditional jobs who were in their movements as perfunctory and dead as noodle workers. He swept color on his canvas. He made imagined forms of those who had not, in their early childhood been maimed in this mechanical apparatus called family. For selfish reasons, like those tiny salamanders clinging to

windows during a storm, he thought that he should spend time with Porn, know her in more detail, listen to her, and understand. In part he was able to click into that tender inquisitive probing and non-judgmental listening called empathy, but the thing that clicked his brainwaves in this circuitry was often selfish. He knew that he, his wife, and his Porn were all maimed ones. They were indeed a family. They were part of him and he did not want to lose them. Both brought him pleasurable respites from himself who was often attuned to the pain that was rife in all things. When Porn came home he went to her. He asked how her day was. He listened to her complaints. He paused and waited. He understood her isolation. Still he did not promise to take her to New York.

Impermanence was in all things. Galaxies collided or were pulled into joint oval orbits. Planets were sucked into those suns in the realignment. The suns themselves eventually flared up into supernovas consuming all planetary bodies orbiting their realm and died. Long ago while the senator was in his first year of law school his sister had become one of the hundred women on a given day that sought to get traveler's visas at the German Embassy escorted by their boyfriends so as to begin a departure that would keep them in exile. His parents were now beginning to act the parts of invalids and leeches. To his parents he had failed them by being divorced and not having children that would have fostered the illusion of continuum. They also thought he had failed them by not inviting them into his home. The result was a continual stream of their calls on his mobile telephone where the mother and father diagnosed themselves and each other, listing all symptoms and proposing materialistic requests and more time together that would alleviate or distract their mental and physical suffering. Women whom he had thought of as having permanent relationships gained new perspectives from the intake of new information. They also gained more immediate and dominant feelings engendered by newer relationships. They went on and became something different without any way of relating back since, like the expanding universe, it all needed to go forward. With aging parents and relationships awry came the growing daily awareness of the limits of his lifespan making him all the more glutinous to have money, status, and women who could produce for him children. But with each year of impermanence his identity of himself fell on its own weight like a black hole and he did not know who he was. The loving neediness of wanting that special woman who would take care of his sexual needs, give him children, and not extort him of finances with a divorce grated against him stridently. There was no security against another mishap especially at his present age of forty when his physical attributes were diminishing and a woman would not be likely to marry him for how he made her feel.

Jatupon wanted to be an aristocratic bum. He wanted to commune with inner voices within himself and to have the relationship of green blades of grass firmly poking into the crevices of his toes when he ran about barefoot in a park. He wanted to return to that state of knowing perfectly what to say when others asked him, at age five, what he wanted to become when he grew up. "I want to become a tickle-man," he would always tell them and then he would try to tickle them before they tickled him. A decade later, this old long-lost game with Kazem in particular could not be surpassed. He still couldn't think of a better vocation than a tickle-man.

Outside of the continual wish to have an aristocratic life free of the specious ambition to either sustain himself as a working class slave or by the stretch of his imagination a CEO slave, a doctor, or a senator, Jatupon's inward feelings were beginning to subtly change away from his love of his brother, Kazem. His ideas and feelings were shifting toward impermanence with each letter he received from Noppawan Piggy. Finally, he had a friend although for the past few years Jatupon had virtually had none. As much as new manhood awakened old instincts deep in cellular memory for the odor, the touch, the pleasure and the pounding of any type of sexual activity where the differing force of the thrusts and the stirred waves of his hormones all whizzed him in a unique frenzy for a brief time, he yearned more for Noppawan. He yearned for her ideas and her presence.

He considered his need for her one time as the two brothers lay naked immediately after a sexual encounter under a ceiling fan that was newly installed. He watched the blades chopping through the musty air and in a very minute sotto voce of his thoughts he yearned for destruction. He wanted for the wobbly fan to fall and guillotine his head. For the most part, however, sexual acts like this one were his rocket fuel to Nirvana. It always brought him into a religious state that he couldn't duplicate in

any other way. That one moment after his brother's sexual act and his own masturbation, he was free of wanting anything. At such times he just lay there breathing in the oxygen deeply and feeling fully satisfied with being. This too he yearned for and only his brother was able to grant him Nirvana.

At last he had a friend. This relationship gave him more meaning to the days than even the rain. Sustained reflexes as an assistant cook had caused the days to stumble along on deformed feet so uneventfully after his parents' death. Now it wasn't so bad. After the washed-plate monotony of late evenings he would often pull out of his back pocket a letter that he had read many times before. At both restaurants Kazem and Suthep individually razed him about his new girlfriend but they believed that he did not know anyone. To them the girl had to be some remote villager wanting to learn about life in Bangkok by advertising for a pen pal in the back of the comic book pages. On one night of one particularly troublesome week without a letter he went to sleep from his banal world at an empty table and dreamed his anything but banal dreams. Within Jatupon's sleep there were at first tire swings and butterflies nestling on succulent flowers but then on the flowers there was the perfidious couplings of mosquitoes. He smelt the pheromones that the male had emitted to make the female believe that it was following a whole army of male hunters who had procured food when really there was just that one male poised relaxingly waiting for the ovulating specimen to come to its perch. The female was as white as Kumpee's Chinese girlfriend and she hated and loved the guile as much as the deceiver in that unique mix that makes sex such a delight. Then, after finishing its frenzy, the mosquito was back with him.

"I don't understand this delay in meeting" he dreamed of himself telling the mosquito.

"Still, after nearly four months in this city, you think that the senator is really trying to fit you into his schedule of dinner guests and your sweet mother and father are going to return from the dust."

"Something like that. I don't want to be forgotten. If Mother and Father are really dead in the true sense of the word I won't be able to see them again."

"Dear me, when are you going to shake your boyish Thai ways? Being respectful to a couple morons who accidentally conceived you in their sexual frenzy is too preposterous. Regarding death, I can't see anything wrong in just plain death. You kill enough of us when you do your laundry each week. I see you emptying out puddle-remnants of the previous week's water from your plastic buckets where we are laying our eggs and then pouring in new laundry soap and water. You attempt to flatten us with the palms of your hands. You never seem to consider death such a tragedy in those circumstances. I can't see why any being—mosquito or human—would want to continue on for thousands of years anyway. A being continually growing from the same old bud in an environment not all that conducive to growth becomes as fallow as the world around him. So much negativity from all of those disillusioned experiences withers one in ennui—I can't think of anything more horrid! Then comes petty greediness to have something; and no one is pettier than old men whom you give the "wei." Thais extend this deference to these beastly wrinkled beings as if age makes such grumbling, maundering creatures continually thinking of their mortality and their aches and pains enlightened beings. I can't see that it would be good to live forever. It is better to die off completely and let the energy come back as something totally different. This new being will dance its dance and celebrate the novelty of the world before adulthood hits him across the face with a mallet."

When they got home it was sleep again so that they would wake up with energy and motivation to do more work. Before Jatupon awakened naturally to the sun-god (the night having deadened his soul and put him to sleep as any ancient Egyptian laborer long ago believed of his own life), so Kazem in darkness came to his startled awakenings with an alarm clock as well as the alarm of and in his own brain that yearned for sustenance and more which always came from money. With no love oil, and no rimming, he took Jatupon with maximum thrusts engendering within him the inclination, if not the incitement, for violence. Jatupon's first thoughts of the morning were that he wanted to slit his brother's throat. He wanted to cut off Kazem's head, stuff it, and put it on a bookshelf had they purchased a bookshelf. It was no wonder, he thought, that this one had no girlfriends. Who would care to have one so large-so large! As the lovemaking subsided, it tossed Kazem back into a nap like the soothing backward movement of the tide. Jatupon felt that he was

bleeding and so he went to the toilet and sat on the stool feeling beneath him from time to time to see if there was blood. There wasn't any. He sat and sat virtually thoughtless until the idea returned that he could kill him. He wanted to kill him veritably. He could take one of the new television sets that Kazem had purchased for he and Suthep and smash his head while he was sleeping. He could spray paint the walls with air freshener and light a match. The whole room could be set ablaze like a funeral pyre. He got up and dressed. He needed to escape. He needed to run away to the street people before his actions matched his thoughts. He needed to be with the street people. He told himself that he loved them veritably. He scavenged money from Kazem's pants and took a taxi to an abandoned railway station with its severed tracks where weeds or moss grew a little on most of everything and homeless, crippled dogs with one or more smashed paws found a respite. He purchased some amphetamines from one of the street people and, done in sync with his glue, his head began to spin. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which he was exposed to from a movie on the television earlier that week, played in his head and the dogs with their mangled paws began dancing. Plaid or corrugated he thought two things intermittingly as the dogs continued to dance: * Kazem, when he thought of Kumpee, wanted to twist off his head like a crawdad-he who had stolen their money and put them in this hole. Then his anger subsided by again recalling a good thing that had come out of it. He, as yet, did not have to pay for rent or utilities. Also the two of the siblings were gone allowing him to be liberated. The idea of being a teenager free of mother and father had been intriguing to him. As much as he mourned the deaths of his parents, their deaths had seemed to him liberation to manhood and his own sexual fulfillment. The same was true of Kazem and Suthep. He didn't resist Kumpee's plan to replant them in the modern sordid capital of Bangkok. He sensed all along that Kumpee would leave them and he didn't murmur a word. His opposition to Suthep's departure was mostly a show. He wanted to pursue that liberation with impunity. He went to work . * "I can't stand the boredom of everything around me" "But you have to survive," said the mosquito. "All animals have to survive." "I am declaring a day off. Besides, when I see you I can't do anything else." "Aren't you the lucky one?" said the mosquito. * Kazem liked how obscure his petty actions were in the city. No matter what one did here it was obscure. Here no one pretended to care-so absorbed they were in making sure that their own sordid activities were kept inside that they didn't need to feign being shocked or to gossip about human anomalies all which were as old as the species. * "Why aren't you sitting. You are just leaning against the building, staring across severed train tracks." "I'm in pain. I can't sit." * Long before light or orange robed monks made their alms he hauled his cart from a lot where he stored it for a fee. Hauling it on the edge of the street like any other hapless ones, occasionally he met gaunt dogs, salesman of real stores helping the deliverymen get their produce off the trucks and dragging the boxes to the sidewalks, ice-cream salesman on tiny bicycle-driven stores, and the glass aquarium fruit cars with their gravel of ice that other hapless ones pushed along the street; and from it all it was hard to feel alone. Sound and motion beat off the cruel static morbidity of his own thinking that had the compunction of criticizing him for his actions with the youngest brother and saw no future outside of monthly drunken vigils with fellow restaurant workers and those rare occasions when he went off with Suthem to ladies of the night he paid for.-is he thinking about me, thought Jatupon. -as he sets up the restaurant, is he thinking about me? * "And taking that makes you feel less blue?" "At least less alone." "Maybe you are an addict." "I don't think so. It is recreational." "Sounds like a venereal disease. It sounds American." * He liked being unmonitored. Sure, there was adrenalin gained from the hunt of a woman but more came from the more forbidden pleasures. A man with money was more alluring to a female who needed this more vehemently than sperm for the making of offspring. What did he have to give a woman. He had dated before. He was big. It fascinated but repelled them. * "I told you. I was feeling blue; and I like how the world turns around like a carousel of caricatures when I mix the glue and the pills. Tracks, dogs, and the old abandoned railway station seem to be breathing. I don't have anyone else. Sometimes I like hearing from you." "How kind!" said the mosquito stoically. * Suthep's apathy had come from the acceptance of something deeply sordid in himself. Policemen were paid their paltry sums and had bigger crimes to corner than family perverts. His was a business so meager that it retained a tax exempt status by the nature of no status at all, a business existing with no address although this oversight was compensated for by a policeman who came to extort money from Kazem weekly. Being sordid was a type of wisdom. From it he was cognizant that such instincts to

conquer sexually were part of the sadistic imaginings of the creative force or the pragmatic cause and effect that engendered the floundering of human existence and he was hardly the god for redesigning it all—especially he who rarely thought of it as being essentially wrong in theory despite feeling nominally guilty. * “Do you think that he loves me?” “What definition of love are we using now?” “The real one. I’m older now—almost 15. I know. Do you think he loves me like someone with a great sickness inside of him who desperately seeks medication or a yearning to slam himself into me fully like one entity?” “Okay, I’ll grant you that one,” said the mosquito and then it guffawed. * And so, unchaining the tables from beneath his cart, pulling out the plastic stools underneath, and kicking away a few sleeping dogs that were lying there to be tripped over like disheveled rugs, alone he started his business. He chatted with those he encountered and felt the light commotion of an awakening world fill him with its harmony before routine tasks dominated over him. * His father had tried to squash him. He was excoriated for standing, sitting, combing his hair, where he parted his hair, the food he ate, the meat he abhorred, and the clothes he put on. He couldn’t do anything. He wasn’t anything. * Stirring a pot of rice deep memories ran by him in glimpsed ghostly passing stirring up raw negative feelings that created the hard product of his thoughts. His father had been an aggressor at all times who never mellowed any to his death. For many early years Kazem’s ears had been pulled daily. He had been dragged by the hair. He had been forced to sit daily on a little red footstool next to his father as punishment for not only youthful exuberance (youth which ran around on two feet whereas he had to flounder with a cane) but for the intractable insolence that would interfere with his punishment of the two “suck-calves” of the youngest brothers whom he hated. Kazem still had the scars of cigarette burns in his brown skin as palpable and tangible proof that the man had really existed.—No, more than that. His love for me is more than just a sickness although it has that in it, said Jatupon to the mosquito.

He couldn’t tell where he was. Faces of his parents, Kumpee, the aunt and uncle, the monks at the temple school, and that boy he had been friends with for so many years (the one who had been with him begging in front of the Dunkin Doughnuts shop and, a couple years ago, had allowed his feet to slip from an open window that time they had made their petty attempt into major thievery on that runaway trip into Bangkok) all were without faces but wandering around like ghosts in his thoughts. He could see the forms of these people in his head but only a few of them had the slightest trace of a face. He had somehow defaced them. Time had defaced them. Memory was fading. As the hours passed uncomfortably he became more aware of himself. He forced himself to be more rational. He was hungry and tired. He wanted to go home. He told himself that he’d kill his brother the next time he did something like that. And yet, when he was about ready to be put in jail that time in Bangkok it had been Kazem who had stolen money from their parents. It was Kazem who had paid off a police officer.

Nawin reflected Porn’s feelings. “So, you don’t feel purposeful. You are in a relationship with a man who spends his time with his paints leaving you alone in the cold of Canada without feeling purposeful. You got so sick of washing dishes that we’ve now gone to paper plates.” He chuckled. She smiled. “ I care about you. I’m glad you are here with me. Regarding purpose, we’ll work on that. I’ll see if I can get you a job on campus. I’ll definitely stop things from now on anytime you want to talk. If you want to go out to a movie, I’ll go out with you.”

“I want to go to New York City.”

“That is something to be considered too,” he said evasively. He changed his cynical ideas. It seemed to him that empathy was love.

Chapter 10

Jatupon agreed to meet her at Siriaj Hospital. From a bus he took an express boat. Seated there, he tried to read the Student Weekly published by the Bangkok Post but attempts at understanding English were to no avail. The sun and wind together shot him with tranquility darts that took him to an ethereal, unearthly peace exempt from the conflicts of consciousness but also from assembling understanding from the fragments of the pieces to the day that came through his senses in a mosaic. He wanted to understand his place in the world. He wanted to understand the premise of his life that constituted a compromise of the internal conflicts of the mind. But he also wanted peace of mind and he sank in with his ease until he was asleep.

He woke on the hard orange chair inside the boat to a splash of polluted water against his face. Once again he was staring at the waters that gyrated against the boat. He watched the frothy mist from the motion of the boat arise to the window-sized glassless hole that was beside him. Again he was in the world of conflict and for a moment he resented being there as if breathing and thinking deigned him. His conflict was what he was doing now. He was continuing his part as the absent employee and he worried about the consequences. He thought of going back. All he had to do was step out onto any dock and wait for a boat going in the opposite direction; but his legs were like stone. He would not budge. The boat was moving forward and so would he. He removed his sunglasses, put his hand into the water, scooped in a residue of the moisture that did not fall from his fingertips, and cooled the hot throbbing of the swollen blackish blue skin beneath his left eye. He was proud of his courage. Four nights ago Kazem had finally given into his demands for his mail but it had been a calculative maneuver to mitigate their protracted altercation that had gotten out of control over his noodle soup/fried rice-truancy.

His thoughts carried him piggyback at a gallop. There were savage impulses amuck in that instinctual need to dominate in procreation and yet how was it he had let himself become the one who was ridden on instead of the one riding? It was a mystery as to why he should be content to a role so clearly defying the male instinct to be the sexual aggressor. Maybe, he half-wondered or felt in some murky and illusive way that failed to come together as a cohesive thought, it was from not taking on that masculine pose of one ready to preempt his own selfish and sadistic impulses onto others for his own self-gratification.

He wasn't addicted to drugs any more than he was to love, he told himself. One needed a bit of both. He wasn't weak. Except once of clearly finding himself addicted and being forced to go through detoxification with some charitable monks (that had been the cocaine period the result of frequent raids of the cash box and an episode of thievery in Bangkok), he believed that his mentality was a strong one. Of course, until the move to Bangkok, the family had ensured that for the past two years he was rarely allowed out of their sight and never came near the cash box. This had assisted his lack of addiction. Even now his interaction with customers was overseen suspiciously. And laboriously friendless as his life droned on (with this new exception if indeed she cared to really be his friend and he was anxious that she should be such) he perceived himself as a freakish aberration to so many boys his age that had normal if not exceptional lives. They walked together in throngs-schoolboys in their light blue knit shirts and dark blue shorts walking the streets, entering 7-11s, clustering in for "All You Can Eat" Pizza Hut specials, or walking hand in hand with girls to the malls. He half hated them. He hated their laughter, which seemed to deride him. Sometimes he wanted to hit against the wall that entrapped him. It was like he was a Mexican and America had deliberately concocted a wall to keep him out. If only it were an eggshell, he thought to himself, he would be able to peck his way out.

And here he was at the Siriaj pier. There was a Dairy Queen, and a Black Canyon Restaurant near the pier and a long winding outdoor market. He wondered why she had chosen Siriaj Hospital for their meeting place and why, given the location, she had not chosen for them to meet in one of those restaurants. Instead, he was supposed to meet her in front of a museum. He meandered in different pathways throughout many buildings until he noticed her sitting on a stoop under a sign that said "Museum" in English. Her hair was shorter than the last time he saw her and her cheeks seemed chubbier. She was dressed in her school uniform.

"Sunthon Phu, there you are," Noppawan said. Sunthon Phu was an

important poet long ago who had risen from humble parents to become a private secretary for King Rama II because of his literary abilities.

"Here I am," he said. He smiled glowingly. There was nothing about it that was affected. He came nearer to her.

"I was worried that you wouldn't get my last letter."

"I got it yesterday in my new mailbox at the post office" he said with pride.

"Good. That brother of yours was really keeping my letters, was he? What a scoundrel ."

"I'll always get them from now on. Do you want to go into the coffee shop? I can buy our coffee."

"What happened to you?" She was staring at his left eye.

"Oh." He realized that he had forgotten to put the sunglasses on his face.

"I got into an argument with him."

"Over stealing the letters?"

"Yes."

"Is he the brawny one you told me about before—the oldest one?"

"Yes."

"Well, then he should be put in jail for thievery, assault and battery, and being a brawny moron."

"I have money. Do you want to eat at Black Canyon? You might not want coffee. I never drink it. Just water and cola."

"If we were to eat at Black Canyon or someplace less dingy—really elegant—I'd make sure my father paid for it. We wouldn't need money. The whole day could be put on a credit card."

"No, as the man, I insist on paying."

"Maybe later," she first spoke in irritation. She wasn't interested in his chivalry. "I want to go in here now. Have you ever been in here?"

"No, what is it?"

"Do you like museums?"

"I love learning. That's all I love."

"Not just Laotian poetry?"

"Everything."

"Now you know why you are my friend. When I saw you reading on a bench—and reading an English translation of a book—I knew that we would get along well. This is a special place. When I run away, I often come here. I spend hours not just learning about natural science but becoming friends with it if that makes sense." She took his hand and led him in. "Don't be alarmed," she said, "Things that are beautiful are often ugly, and what is ugly is often beautiful. I like coming to someplace where everything is true. I hate lies, don't you? Even ugly truths are better than that?"

He thought about what the mosquito had said. "I've been told that truth is sometimes a little ugly."

"I think it's always ugly and beautiful—not just a little bit." They climbed up three flights of stairs. The air in the building smelled like a biology laboratory during the dissection of frogs. They entered: internal organs in glass boxes of formalin; brains; an ear with a joining canal; and then there was an entire baby standing there also in formalin and also inside its large glass aquarium. The child was hauntingly ceramic in a grayish orange or ochre complexion and his body was so tightly rigid. It had calcificans congenita and, she said, it must have been born as a non-movable rock. Then there was a child that had a gigantic, alien head. It had suffered from internal hydrocephalus . It was all there: babies born with amencephaly (some with partial heads and all with no brains); fetuses; four month old fetuses with placentas and umbilical cords (one with hands together as if it were praying or gesturing the "wei"); fetuses that were zygotic twin quadruplets; babies born as Siamese and conjoined twins such as pycopasus twins that were attached from their buttocks and Siamese epionathus parasiticus that each had a brother's foot inimitably in a mouth; full term fetuses with their chests dissected so that their internal organs were exhibited from the slit; gigantic skeletons; dwarf skeletons; twisted adult skeletons; regular skeletons upright in glass cupboards or in standing coffins each with his photograph above his skeleton—a photograph of what was; fetuses of all sizes and ages; and a naked man and woman in whole with the front skin, muscle and skeleton removed to give full view of their internal organs as one saw their private exterior organs. There they were more

than naked and fully intact as if basking in a tanning booth in order to get a suntan-only they were ochre and stiff as ceramic vases and floating in formalin or formaldehyde.

He told himself that that from which one should hide he should appreciate since it delivered him from the way he wanted the world to be to what it really was. He repeated this to himself many times to quell the weltering tremble of nausea and to hide his horrified child in the presence of Noppawan. He told himself that seeing this almost delivered him to a new level of maturity. If one could confront this without losing his nerve, he reasoned, he could break from the ghosts of mother and father, the innate need for family, and the wish to be a less damaged "good for nothing." He could sense the nuance of manhood begin to brew up through him like a hot spring. Passing through another aisle of stocked fetuses, he wondered about his conception. Had it been from loving caresses or a desperate release of stress and frustration on one who had capitulated? Yes, the exhibition was beginning to deliver him into a new awareness and the two of them could sense that it affected the other in the same way and also thrust that individual into a soft sensitive regret for those who were never given a chance to sense themselves against the tactile sensations of the sun, the warmth, the feel of grass under bare feet, the wind, the caresses, the rain, and the respite from inordinate heat and sun. Feeling virile and assured of this new manhood within him, he grabbed her hand swaying it in the pretense of joy as they interweaved slowly around the myriad cabinets. He stared at it all as fully as he could. It was there shelf after shelf with some of it towering so high that he couldn't see it very well at all.

"I'm so happy that you aren't afraid. When you come enough it almost seems like there is a spirit hovering above it all and that they appreciate someone being there for them. I know that is silly. I'm not even religious. Maybe it is just that it is very quiet. I often bring my books to the table near the skeletons. I just do some reading. The doctors, the nurses, and the museum curator don't seem to mind. They just say, "Hi, Piggy." And again, it is a good place to run away from it all. Maybe it is a bit of a strange place to hide out for most people but most people are scared of their own shadows. If nothing else this museum is a good place to know what death is-or at least come as close as one can. Most people haven't a clue what really happens to one's body after death. Decaying corpses would of course be better than this but they are vile to one's nose with everything going back to the elements and all." They descended the stairs. She sensed that his hand was very sweaty. "You are glad that I brought you, aren't you?"

"Sure" he said although he wasn't fully. He knew that seeing this had made a dark impression on him that he would never be able to shirk. He suspected aptly that this friend of his had intentionally stabbed the little innocence that was in him to match that of her own. Enlightenment had punctured his innocence. Outside, he stuffed his hands in his pockets. He felt a cold numbness in his limbs, a slight coldness toward her, and ennui from memories of his peculiar history that would impair his future relationships with girls. They sat on the stoop.

"I hope you don't want to run away from me."

"I'm not running. I'm sitting here with you, aren't I?"

"Okay, I guess so."

"When you said "at least this was not a lie," what did you mean? I mean what are the lies?"

"In society?"

"Yes."

"There are too many to count."

"Mention one."

"All right-religion. My parents are Christians. The servants are Christians. When I was little the servants took me to Sunday school. There, the teachers would always talk about heaven. I couldn't figure out why if one would be with her family in heaven after she dies, as the church teaches, that wouldn't mean being there with all humanity regardless of religious preference. If one were to be there with her father and mother, she'd be there with hers, and she with hers, and she with hers, and that seems to me like everyone. After all everybody is supposed to be related to Adam. That to me would mean that heaven is some type of polluted hellhole a million times worse than Bangkok with overcrowding so that you can't turn around without banging into someone. I don't know. It isn't important really. It just shows that nobody thinks anything out. Maybe Heaven is just a Country Club only for Christian Hara Krishnas who say Christ is salvation in rote but I can't

see how they'd extend much of an invitation to me. I never have been much into rote." Jatupon didn't know who the Hara Krishnas were or what a Country Club was but these items didn't detract from his positive impression of her opposition to sententious punctilio. He smiled. This was certainly better than talking to a mosquito.

"Tell me another."

"Another? All right. I can keep firing them all day. I can't see how they can claim that King Phraya Taksin was really insane. I mean the man created military strategies that were successful at getting the Burmese out of the country, or at least removed to Chaing Mai. Then he decided to control the church as well as the politics. He became arrogant and said that he was now equal to Buddha and could dictate doctrine and political laws. The people said that he was insane and his military executed him. He didn't just go from being a great military strategist to insanity and if he was insane, that's a sickness and they wouldn't have executed sick people—just people they were scared of."

"How do you know that?"

"It's easy, Jatupon. Just think it out. Use some intuition and common sense. He just was overly ambitious and they hated him and today we aren't supposed to think of him at all except as someone who was insane. We don't even have a road with his name attached to it. Have you ever traveled on Taksin Road? It doesn't exist. Back then they put the first general in his place and declared him King Rama I. Kings emerged from the Chakri Dynasty when really it should have been the descendents of Taksin. I don't even know why, in such a poor country, we throw away tax money on these guys."

"Be quiet. Someone might hear you. We could get arrested."

"Do you really think they'd arrest 14 year olds?"

"They'd arrest a 14 year old's parents."

"My father should be arrested."

"Why?"

"Do you promise, as my best friend, to not tell anyone."

"Sure."

"He raped me. Don't run away from me Jatupon. Promise you won't."

"No, of course I won't." He felt nervous. He didn't know what to say. "I'd never do anything like that," he affirmed.

"So, you will buy the coffee?" she asked; and on the second floor of Black Canyon the fumes of the molecules of coffee steam and "love" slapped his senses. From the window of the air conditioned restaurant they watched motor gondolas and express boats stir the waters the way housewives in America would watch as their electric blenders stir cake mixes—each wave falling, being sucked into the force that pulled in the new part of the wave and then being pushed out into the wave again. It was all so fast and all so interconnected and systematic that each of the waves looked like frozen motion or like society itself.

He became mesmerized in the weltering waves. He spoke glibly. "Families are supposed to be shelter. They're really just walls cobbled up from dirt, you know. Mine doesn't even exist but in Kazem's head. I feel sorry for him in ways. But sometimes I think I should just run away completely and become a monk."

"Why don't you?"

"Monks don't have sex. At least they aren't supposed to. As you said, lies."

"Do you have sex?"

"No, of course I'm a little young for that," he lied. He looked around the restaurant to make sure that others were not listening to them. "But I don't want to give up that part of me. I don't think that is right."

"My Auntie—well, really the servant but sort of the same except that she must obey me usually—she says I should never come ten feet near a monk since they are sexually repressed and might try to reach under a girl's skirt."

"Maybe but I've never heard anyone talk that way about monks. The newspapers rarely but that is with individual monks accused of crimes—not monks altogether."

"My family is a bit different that way. It's their only good attribute."

They sipped their coffee and then went to Silom Road on the express boat. The annoyance of standing there in a crowd without a seat became an ethereal essence of truth and beauty for him. He could not remember being so happy. It stayed with him as they road the bus to Lumpin Park.

At a lake, in the park, they rented out a fishing boat. They paddled it

chasing one puff of cloud in the hope of using it as an umbrella. They had cheese sandwiches, cola, sticky rice, and potato chips that they consumed intermittently.

"If I stay much longer," she said an hour later, "they will start looking for me-or at least the servants will. I usually only run away on Saturdays and Sundays. I don't like missing too much school."

He knew what he had suspected on their first meeting: that her rebellion was far larger and more personal than anything he had witnessed before. She kept mostly to intangible subjects like religion because her repugnance toward religion had been easier for her to communicate. He felt her rebellion. It stood out like a Long Necked Karen (the native Burmese people living in Chaing Mai who had the tradition of distorting the growth of their necks). He felt her rebellion and it was a novelty for him. It intrigued him and it felt wholly real. He thought, in Thailand one gave the "wei" to Buddhist statues, stupas, shrines, temples, and people who were older and of higher classes if such individuals exerted a powerful role over him; and yet one did this not understanding why it was done. It occurred to him that it was all ludicrous in a way and not just limited to Thai customs. How could she or anyone communicate the exact items that they were rebelling against? Rebellion was seen in the eyes but it could not be readily explained and in ways it went contrary to nature and the social response. Greed and aggression were entrenched in the survival of a being and lay latent but active within every cell but those cells were sugar coated with that cloying substance of Thailand, the land of smiles.

As they paddled back she looked up at the puffy whiff of clouds above her and said, "This is real. Relaxing and being part of the clouds and the second, attaching to the mystery of it all . . . the universe and time-that is the only thing that makes sense, don't you think?" He smiled and nodded his head in pleasure. Yes, this was certainly better than talking to the mosquito. How strange they were. Their serious probing of life and their awareness of the geyser of unique thoughts that erupted in them certainly didn't seem Thai. A typical urban Thai yearned to languish if not extinguish himself or herself in strolls in a shopping mall, a movie, a video game, laughter, cellular telephones, beer, and comic books. Jatupon did pursue the pejorative in comic books as most Thai males from five to fifty and the two of them were pursuing their quest of leisure as lazily as the best of Thais; still to him they seemed so different from all others.

She asked about his parents and was saddened to hear of their tragedy. She probed into it further in interest and then backed away when she saw his pain. Kindness and empathy illuminated her countenance. She tried to mitigate his pain by becoming absorbed in her own that she pursued philosophically exempt of emotionalism. "My parents are always moving around in the future. Ambition moves them around like the pieces on a board game of chess-or draughts played by motorcycle taxi drivers when they wait-with the pop bottle caps-have you seen them?" He was startled by how her ideas had such confluence with his own. She was an augmentation of his own thoughts.

They left the park reluctantly. She did not want to leave at all without assurances and he offered them. He told her that his brother was not a violent person. He said that Kazem sometimes belted him when he really deserved it but that there were plenty of times he deserved it and yet his brother wouldn't touch him. She seemed to believe his assurances and went away.

As she vanished from his senses his empty hollow mind was filled with images of half-headed beings, twisted skeletons, rigid corpses like old ochre vases, the naked man and the woman floating in their formaldehyde glass coffins with their fronts carved out for the display of their entrails, the fetuses and their placentas, one child that had such a gigantic head and another one that had been born like a solid never feeling motion. These images attacked his consciousness. It seemed to him that the world was a loveless and ceaseless factory that replicated over and over again manufacturing slightly damaged and terribly damaged products with impunity. He paid his two baht to the lady in the glassless window and went into the public bathroom. He wept for those who had deserved better than this. Then his weeping poured into himself. He knew that after what he saw he should not want anything more from his life than the noodles that sustained him and yet he did. He knew he should not want a more purified love than what Kazem extended to him and yet he nonetheless did.

The hours of that spring day came and went indistinguishably from other seasons, and all days were clones with stoic dispositions. His

majesty, King Rama IX, a few hours earlier, had changed the seasonable robes of the Emerald Buddha like a girl dressing a doll. He then presided over the plowing ceremony with its blessings to the rice goddess; and watched one cow predict the agricultural future of the nation from its bovine appetites—the cow wandering over to preferred troughs filled with anything from brandy to barley, beans and rice, or just plain water—instantly consuming something or another interpreted as conditions prosperous or economically disparaging.

Further into the heart of the city, Suthep slept removed from the mooing of omniscient cows in Sanam Luang which stood on an island of dirt where kites had flown surrounded by inundating dark black exhaust fumes and fast, obnoxious wheeled beasts, honking their loud voices as they passed each other. Tucked in his smaller cell he rode the REM of being. He dreamed he was on a motorcycle leaving his uncomfortably tight partial apartment that was comfortably free of brothers and awkward moments of catching them together. Hired to cater his fried rice with chicken he cooked it, put it on paper plates, and sealed the plates with plastic wrap. Then he put them in baskets on opposite sides of a bamboo pole. Balancing the pole of baskets on his back, he drove to a government building. Why the banquet only had that one dish of “kow pat” (fried rice) was a point that the dream did not address. Also the street names were not those of the Dusit area but those of central Bangkok. As he came near the building, a limousine hit him and hurried off. Blood poured from the orifice of his face. There was nothing but gray and a firm belief he would die. The ambulance drivers, none of whom were paramedics, came to pillage him of his wallet and watch. He got up, Thai boxed them for his things, and realized as they ran from him in fright that he was as ethereal as a cloud. And then his parents came out of nothingness and he told them that they needed to go away since he (ghost or man) was now a free agent and did not need them any longer. As he got back on his motorcycle someone knocked on the door.

He woke up but his brain was retarded in an earlier being. As he heard the knocking he imagined that Jatupon was lying beside him and listening to his scurrying feet move toward the door. So many years they had slept in the same room. They had slept side by side until a few years ago. Did he love his brother so much that he would wake up with him skirting around in his dreams? Maybe he did since the habit of being with him was long. The youngest sibling was so much of his past and he had been accustomed to him without major aversion. The habit of being with someone without major repugnance was indeed the only thing that constituted fraternal love; and yet, little as it might be, it was what the particles of black space in the universe were created for.

Suthep, slapped a cap on his head with the visor inverted to the back of his head and greeted the knocker in his underwear.

“A le nuh?,” (what is it?), asked Suthep as he straightened the cap. It was a man in livery asking the surname of this family of impoverished brothers. Suthep imagined the stink of his armpits as he addressed the guest and the staleness of air in the room which was in deep need of a deodorizer. He began to feel foolish but he kept his boyish poise while the man tried to withhold his laughter. He didn’t hear the question. The man repeated it and Suthep wanted to prevaricate. Then he reluctantly said that his last name was Biadklang. It was the senator’s page and they were finally invited to meet the apotheosis that had given them their living.

Chapter 11

It was no wonder that one set of freaks felt cognate with another set. For him, the sight of the formaline or formaldehyde-laden corpses at the Siriaj Hospital Museum as well as the girl who introduced him to them seemed to have exhilarated a nascent courage, an oozing, a growth hormone of the mind. New neurological connections were burgeoning or the same ones were reconnecting in different patterns. Anyhow, he felt the inception of something new that made him feel that he wasn't quite the same: that he was outgrowing patterns of behavior. He was not able to distinguish if his freakishness was exceptional, deficient, or exceptionally deficient to the point of being inept. Certainly if his gray matter made him innately exceptional, his noodles made him less than ordinary. His gray matter was becoming grayer with each dusk of a dying day. Being with noodles so long no doubt loosened this compact tissue of brain into something quite slimy. The use of his brain in the mundane tasks of thinking about the size of meat he wanted to cut with the butcher knife had perhaps cut his corpus callosum. At least he thought so. But regardless of being superior or inferior in his freakishness, this was who he was. There was a history: the history was of being maimed. There was the character of Jatupon: there were dark prodigious forces inside and outside that frame that were ineluctable. No celestial power would rectify his life by making family better than what it was or himself, the sordid bastard that loomed there, as hallowed and saintly as what he once believed monks to be. Nature begot freaks of the worst kind and so becoming a freak in the tossing of the passing years was understandable.

Jatupon's ego was not turgid. In ways it was self-deprecating. That which hadn't been squashed by his father and eldest brother, poured into countless bowls, or slapped onto myriad plates had such deformed and stunted growth. He had trouble making opinions about people. He did it with shy reluctance and usually the feelings he had about them never emerged all that much in a cohesive thought. He considered Noppawan Piggy to be his superior in intellect and yet there was one thing about her he had to admit that he detested and that was the abhorrent smell of baby powder that came from her body. It made Jatupon feel like his nose had gotten trapped in a dust storm in which naked and screaming babies flew with the dust in an attack against him. Not all girls and women in Thailand smelled the same but those who had abhorrent smells, although not abhorrent themselves, couldn't be said to be totally agreeable.

Upon leaving the park his intention was to go to the library and look up information on the peculiarities he had seen in the museum that had smiled upon him freak to freak but he found himself distracted by a large comic book kiosk that whisked him off from this world to that of another. One such comic book was set into the future of 3000 AD and non-existent creatures with little resemblance to anything extant propelled him into problems of their non-existent agricultural and mining planet-colonies and he lost himself there for an hour. How splendid it was to lose oneself wholly and he savored the time there until his left foot fell asleep while he was seated on a plastic stool. Then he stood up.

"Your time is up again." Jatupon faced a scrawny teenager with glasses who was a year or two older than he was. "Are you reading or buying?"

"Reading" he said; but afterwards he stretched his neck only to see his reflection in the store's anti-theft mirror. The skin around his eye looked darker and it felt even more painful.

"You need to pay another fifteen baht to continue reading."

"No, I guess I'll stop reading. I'll go," he said.

Standing there ready to go, his taciturn heart pardoning Kazem who had been the only one who cared about him, he tried to not think about the hot stinging of the swelling around his eye. Instead, he thought about this uncle whom he had only met on rare occasions long ago. It seemed that it only took the frequent utterance of his name and they had been granted a livelihood—a continuing sustenance as if by magic. And yet it had not exactly been much of an effusion of magic. It had been the most niggardly and scanty display that any affluent magic man could bestow and it brought the renewal of their servitude. Before they were restored to a similar but diminished livelihood, they had often spoken of this vaguely real or super-real entity (this uncle by a marriage) as one might think of the early king Ramas of the Chakri Dynasty.

Walking away from the kiosk, he wanted to return to early childhood: of hopscotch, climbing trees with his brothers, Suthep teaching him how

to throw a ball, taking cups of ice to the customers so that they could pour out the water in pitchers that were on their tables, skin around the eyes that wasn't black and swollen, and the time when his body wasn't being invaded. He could run away for good; but where would he run? There was nothing in Ayutthaya and if he really wanted to run away he would be more invisible in Bangkok. He would need money. He considered becoming a Luk Thung singer of Traditional Thai music. They wore their heavy makeup and pointed golden tiaras for beggarly bits of baht. However, he told himself that his voice probably wasn't as good as the worst of them and even if it was he did not want to do tricks for a few baht. It was too demeaning and contrary to the aristocratic life he envisioned. There was a famous Swedish Luk Thung singer named Jonas Anderson who had lived his whole life in Thailand but only someone with vocal training and boldness could persevere to be someone accomplished in this musical genre. He could run to Noppawan Piggy's home. He had the address on the mail she sent to him. But there would be no sense in running to someplace that Noppawan herself was running from and the likelihood of a rich family taking in a strange teenager, and an ex-burglar and quasi-drug addict at that, was more than a remote possibility. An emaciated dog with clumps of fur falling out had a greater chance of being made into a pet. Just as the need for the enzymes of animal protein was one trait of many linking the human to and as an animal, so enmeshed in soul, sentiment, and survival he clung to Kazem for his sense of home and family.

He knew that he was just a collection of molecules being shot out into space and time. Others were the same but they flew away from him in their own deviant paths. He knew. He thought he knew. Did he know? Did he really know anything? Thoughts were so dreary. They enervated him. He got on a bus to go home (that stationary foundation from which outlook, experience, thought, and restoration of energy for movement were generated). Even on such a simple event as going home he was lost in the intricate circuits of his brain, lost in the labyrinth within himself.

But through the window he saw the clear beauty of other beings that passed; and even in the ugly faces there was a posture, a smile, even a vehement depth of lonely despair so uniquely beautiful and yet universal. The bus passed four stores each of which seemed to alternate a presentation of boys, dogs, and combinations sleeping against the facades of buildings. The passing was quick like fingers moving against a keyboard and the sight was as euphonious as melancholy in sound. Then for a second, in stalled traffic, Jatupon found himself looking into the deep eyes of a deformed boy beggar. Jatupon was inside the bus and the boy outside of it, but they both saw an affinity in each other. They were the same. They were both unfortunate beggarly outsiders beaten up by life; and yet he was riding around in an air-conditioned bus. He was not one of the 2 billion people who lived on 2 dollars a day in a rural area on the verge of starvation. Inside the bus the facial expressions of the money collector were stone as death with monotony that was distinct, ebullient, and luminous as sunlight against wind-rippled leaves. A woman sleeping in a seat to his right had a head that fell toward the aisle, straightened, fell again, and straightened like a pendulum.

He might have gone back to work to appease Kazem. He might have started taking orders from the customers with no explanation and let the hours make the whole issue of his long absence mute. His brother would not have made an embarrassing scene in public. The hours would alone have just slowly uncorked it all allowing the rage to disperse slowly and unnoticed. The restoration of old habits would have made the past issue so irrelevant that a bit of the mind would have questioned if his absence had even occurred. It had been his intention to do so when he left the comic book kiosk and it continued to be his intention when he sat on the seat in the bus. Yet a human being fulfilled few intentions. Scholars were sociable creatures who needed meaningless action and cacophony even when it adulterated their aims. Petty government officers on their meager salaries, as well as the well-paid top tier, didn't need to be cloistered in the political issues that mired the day but yearned for sports columns in their newspapers and genuflected to the action effusing from their television sets. And tired people on Bangkok busses that were plodding their way slowly through traffic had intentions other than sleep but yearned for rest and an easy way home. He was one of the latter that needed sleep; and yet when he was in the cell, which was his home, his mind was active in dread. Its color was gray, its texture coarse, and the molecules that oozed up from it acrid. Within the space of his own head he was vanquished in the gloom, the nothingness, the vanished thoughts of the hollow cavities that were part of one waiting for punishment. He lay on the floor with an old, previously read comic book

in his hands. His head was so preoccupied with the barrenness of thought and the feeling of dread that he didn't understand the pictures and the words. He got up. He dipped up a bowl of rice from a rice cooker, drenched it in soy, chili sauce, and a bit of pepper and vinegar. He did his pushups in front of a televised soccer game and when the game was over he shut off the set and in an hour sleep percolated over him. In his dreams he was in a penthouse on the fifteenth floor and below him were beggars like moving dots. Above the moving dots were moving golden skies of sunset. Gigantic clouds moved through the air in the shape of viruses.

Then there was a punch on his face and it reopened the facial wound causing blood to rush on the floor. In that second his dream fragmented into many dreams and spun out of control. He was no longer in a penthouse but was a sidewalk-based seamster with his little antique sewing machine, a pedal, and a hill of torn clothes he was supposed to sew. He was all alone on a cement cover of a city sewer that went under the sidewalk. Then he fell into the sewer. Self was gone. In the last of his dream or dreams, before he completely awakened, there was no self. There was just the scene of a large park ahead of him, the aesthetic glow of a withdrawing sun, and an old man who bought some phad-thai and found a pavilion near a lake. He sat down and began to eat his noodles, watching the lights of skyscrapers and the fast moving traffic far beyond the lake. The cacophony of boys playing football irritated him because he was envious of it. He put his empty Styrofoam container back in the plastic bag and laid it down. A rat scurried from one flower and fern bed; and dragged the bag into another flowerbed. The old man could hear the gnawing of the Styrofoam. Jatupon sensed that the rat might be himself.

He felt blood oozing from him and uniting as a puddle under his face. Kazem, dumbfounded by the vehement rage that disgorged from him, floundered a few steps in the room, sat down, and whined, "It's all on me. If you are on drugs or stealing something, I've got to get you out of it. It's all on me. I have to be responsible for you but you just do whatever you please." His voice trailed away and faltered. He cleared his throat. "You don't ever behave with any responsibility toward me. I give you days off here and there. I don't get any. You work or don't work or work for one of us and not the other based on how you feel on a given day. You steal money out of my pockets and I don't say anything. Don't blame me. You've brought it on yourself." Jatupon sat up and glared with one eye. The second eyelid was already drooping from swelling. It wouldn't open fully and it squinted from a bit of blood that sank into it. He intuitively guessed that his brother knew he was losing control of him. He waited and observed the guilt-ridden countenance and the gauche retreat from the offensive. He judged that the assault had been a desperate one. Jatupon smiled malevolently as of a masochist exuding pride that the pain had only brought the opposite wish of the inflictor. Kazem's unpaid noodle worker who wasn't allowed to loosen his fetters and shackles had slipped from them anyway. He had gone out to see Piggy and there was nothing Kazem had been able to do to stop him. Jatupon smiled wider. Then he guffawed scoffingly like a lunatic although the pleasure soon extinguished itself.

"Do you want me to come over there and squeeze the juice out of your head?" The muscles in Kazem's arms and legs suddenly stiffened like one ready to suddenly stand and attack.

"I'm not listening to you," Jatupon spoke firmly. "You are a pathetic bully—a fucking ape—and it is the end of it for me. It is the end of it!" Manhood's conviction and effrontery reeked from his mouth like foul breath and Kazem, who already wanted to wreak havoc on his impudence, flipped him over with the elastic of his underwear like a pancake.

"Okay, swim in your own blood. Swim! Let's see you drown in it." Jatupon's hair was twisted in Kazem's fingers and his face was in his own blood as the thick leather hand swatted him a few lateral slaps. Then Kazem's compunction again caused him to flounder back to his seat.

It was the only chair in the room. He put his elbow on his leg and hand on the forehead of his genuflected head. His ideas were discombobulated.

Jatupon was floundering too from more than the nausea of lost blood. He was half a boy and half a man and this newly begotten half called a "man" was having manhood castigated, excoriated, and leaked from him. Callow as he was, he was not just half a man or half a boy the way the Nightjar poem concerned itself with a bird-boy. He was a hybrid of boy/man and God with vast wisdom from fathoms of himself examined from suffering.

He again stared at the other presence in the room. It was a monster, a being of violence, and an unknown phantom. Still this monster was the one who had delivered him from the watery abyss, the one who did not chastise his addiction (at least then he didn't) but was with him through the withdrawals, the one who fixed his bicycle, who had introduced him to basketball and his first beer. Appearing like his brother it was the brother mixed with some type of shadowy creature he could not comprehend and this being, familiar and unfamiliar, he loathed. The elastic of his underwear had been encroached. He had been violated with those fingers. His body had been flipped over like a pancake. He had felt his face pushed in a puddle of his blood. Sitting on the floor, piercing him with his eyes, he wanted to purge this beast from his life. Then a few seconds later his next conscious assembly of understanding only made him want to vanish. He wanted so much of the impossible that second: for the substance of his own life to vaporize swiftly and meaninglessly and opposite of this, to kill the monster and resurrect his dwarfed manhood in his own eyes. Sitting there he felt as if time had ended and that all entities on the Earth were waiting and watching the two of them in silent dread but neither god nor man cared about any aspect of this relationship at all. Things went on as cruel as death. In one second a fly flew and landed in a bottle of water, a dog barked from outside, a rat scurried around in front of the building for food, a family was feuding in the apartment above him, and a car came onto the thin long back-road called a soi.

Kazem looked onto this bludgeoned ugly little face reluctantly and Jatupon felt like a piggish or bovine woman whose acquaintance said, "We could never be more than friends, you know" and she—Yes, she could see. She could see—hadn't she seen it before? Had she really dismissed those countless earlier smirks of repugnance aimed at her fat enervated face and her clumsy tense body both of which made her nothing. Mother nature made the being breed with the best of bodies to create a good physical specimen in the baby. Sex, romance, or just an intimate talk with a man would not be hers since she could not trigger the pleasure response—not even intellectually. Romantic and sexual inclinations were discriminatory. They were as cruel as death and she would tell him that sex wasn't intimacy although she wouldn't believe it. She craved such intimacy more than she could ever articulate and she would not tell him that. She would tell him that being in love was a delusion that one biologically craved to propagate the species. She would say that she did not want to go through the brief illusion of being in love. She did not want to be high in urinary molecules from his underwear flying into her face when he had her denuded and lying on a bed littered in clothes. She would tell him that one generation after another would dance its sexual dance before passing and that she had been fortunate enough to be born a disagreeably unaesthetic thing with a face like a mushy old apple.

Feeling sick and weak, his mind was running away from him. His head was thinking himself a different gender. He was believing that he could hear the content of the feuding family upstairs. The eldest son, having gotten his girlfriend pregnant, had been compelled to bring her into the home and the fight was about him running away from the family every evening after work to drink with his buddies.

Then suddenly, without even knowing it, he stood up, grabbed the television that Kazem had given to him as a gift, and he was running toward him. There he was aiming the television at his brother's head only to have it reflexively snatched from him by Kazem's dexterous fingertips. Finally, there he was peering up at it and backing away into the corner where he came from, realizing that one impulse materialized in action had caused a counter action that was about ready to kill him. It had been just one unrestrained impulse that, repulsive to the consciousness, he hadn't even considered; and it had slipped from his brain slimy as a worm. It had materialized in action and now it had lethal consequences.

"Don't play so hard, boys" said Kumpee. In Jatupon's perspective the stink of his smoke-ridden clothes and the beer of his breath gave an acrid and fetid cloud which was miraculously saving him.

Kazem lowered his arms. "Where the hell have you been?" he asked. He put the television on the floor relieved at having escaped the worst passion that can fulminate in a man and lose him in the deepest abyss of regret. Sweat poured from Kazem's forehead and his face became a deep red in chagrin.

"With my woman. If you were to have a woman you wouldn't have so much time to play with your Jatu-PORN."

"Where's our money?"

"Invested."

"Invested how?" He grabbed the chair and sat down. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. Jatupon was already seated in a corner with his puddle of blood.

"But your worries have ended. The senator's page visited you, didn't he? Maybe he was our uncle's chauffeur. I forget now. You look confused. He came to my apartment to tell me the definite date for the agreed dinner after somehow finding Suthep and informing him. Well, anyhow, it happened because of my own efforts."

"You visited him and got him to agree to see us? You? How could you do that looking as you do? I tried many times. I don't believe you."

"Well, there's nothing I can do about your hateful beliefs, but all the same I'm telling you the truth."

"So, you are the big brother looking after all of us now" said Kazem incredulously. He snickered.

"Sure. It's obvious by age and merit. I've never tried to kill one of you in the entire duration of my 18 years. Aren't I the lucky omen? I saved you both from killing each other and had some additional favorable news to spill out."

"What was your reason for coming here?"

"Nothing. Just to make sure you were coming."

"When?"

"Next Saturday."

"Time?"

"6 p.m."

"You can deal with him. I don't want to stay here tonight. I'm finished watching over these two. I'm leaving."

"Two? I only see one. The other monkey didn't like you and ran away. And where, might I ask, are you going?"

"A Hotel. A bar. A massage parlor. Anywhere I like although it isn't any of your business."

"It seems rather wasteful to me when I have provided this apartment for you rent-free but I guess you can go ahead."

Kazem laughed sardonically for a minute. He needed to release the shock of discovering the vile hatred that had arisen in himself and Jatupon and the serendipitous arrival of Kumpee, who if worthless at everything else, had delivered them from being sealed into the body bags of unrestrained emotion. "It hasn't been rent free for a long time. We get billed from the father of your Chinese bitch and we pay the money like responsible tenants-bank transfers."

"She was a bitch," said Kumpee pensively. He became preoccupied with this self-absorbed thought. "And her father just couldn't warm up to what could have been his son in law. I'm seeing her sister now." Then he stared at Kazem with a specific intent. "Just remember the appointment and that you need to be punctual. Since you need some time away I'll look after the little one." Jatupon mumbled a response.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"No, come on. What did you say?"

"I don't need you. I hate you worse than I hate him," said Jatupon. Kumpee laughed and then all of them were taciturn for a minute. Kazem folded some clothes and put them in a bag. Kumpee got a bottle of coca cola from a carton in the corner and pulled off the bottle top by wedging it like a lever between the drawer of a cabinet and its handle. He drank slowly savoring every sip.

"Maybe that attitude toward older brothers is what has caused your head to be kicked around like a football," said Kumpee after Kazem left the apartment and he heard the door shut. "What do you think about that, you little monkey," he said as his fingers disheveled Jatupon's hair abrasively and then pulled his ear playfully. "Just you and me, Jatuporn. Jatuporn. Why do you think that you are called Jatuporn?" Jatupon slithered into a dry corner and began to shake. He tried not to cry. "Why did you do that? I'm not going to hurt you," said Kumpee; but it was really the loss of blood, the trauma, the opaque surrealism of what had occurred that made him tremble. "I see your eyes all watered. You want to cry, don't you?"

"I want to sleep. I don't understand any of this. I don't."

"You've got to know more than I do about it."

"Well I don't"

"Mmmm. Well, he was ready to put you in the television. You did something you shouldn't or maybe you just wouldn't let him put himself into you. Have you become a frigid bitch? Have you, Jatuporn? You thought I didn't know about that, didn't you? You thought that the nickname we created for you didn't mean anything but just meanness but we had a reason for giving it to you." He chuckled. "I keep an eye on my boys. That you can be sure of."

Kumpee sat down beside the sprawled body of his brother and drank his cola in equanimity, from time to time placing the bottle between his legs. "I needed more from my life than this, you know. Do you remember when we were kids and we collected bottles like this. We got a few baht from the stores for every twenty we brought into them. We thought we would buy a Chinese restaurant for father and mother with air conditioning and an electric juke box." He laughed. "Maybe you don't remember. You were four or five."

"I do." Jatupon really couldn't remember this but yearning for some unadulterated version of innocent love or compassion not linked to the selfish inclinations that were part of being human, he halfway believed that he remembered and he put his hand on his brother's arm. Kumpee's posture tightened. The eldest brother felt squeamish from a man's hand on him but, not wanting to reject the youngest outright he did not move his arm. Also, a sick curious depravity began to flood out of the squalor of the recesses to his mind. He looked at the half-empty phallic bottle, picked it up, and said "What about this bottle? Would you take in anything hard?" But the youngest brother was asleep and so, a minute later, he removed the hand and abandoned him.

Chapter 12

It was their third time playing the board game of Monopoly that week and Porn sensed that another ineluctable habit was being imposed onto her more from within than without. She often deliberately tossed the dice directly into his token when it was near her side of the board but mostly her rolling was with a lethargic rattling in her palm and the apathetic dropping of dice from her numb fingertips. Once she spilled the content of her glass, which then flooded over Marlborough and Vine Streets as well as Community Chest. She snowed her popcorn crumbs over two colors of property. He silently blamed her clumsiness on the vodka that she had mixed into her cola. From time to time he could see irascible facial expressions cutting through her guile of complacent concentration and close lipped smiles but he told himself it was just a bit of competitive strife or tipsiness even though he knew better. At the beginning of each game, for the brief period that it lasted, he felt for certain that she enjoyed playing and discussing life with him. He was right about the former. For her the beginning of the game brought the rush of accumulating play-money, gibbering her attempts at English to play the game, and having one monotony replace that of another. The game was one way of killing an hour or more of a given day as sedately as a hot bath. She hated cold weather to such extremes that, outside of her irregular attendance at the language school, the nearby grocery store a block or two away from this distant campus had become her only cultural attraction. She was waiting for spring but meanwhile her life was becoming as frigid as a housewife.

"It certainly is coming down," he said as he heard hail beat against the windows. "You surely aren't thinking about going out in this."

"I never do," she said.

"I mean you can if you want."

"Yes, master."

"You get to massage my feet for that comment, dearest. I especially like it when you go down on each toe the way you do; but, as a gentleman, I don't force that on you."

"No, master."

"Do you like anything about the classes at all?"

"The students and the teacher are old, Nawin. There's nothing to say."

"How old?"

"Old. Retirement age. "

"Hmm... it is strange that they should be immigrating to Canada at an old age like that." She ignored him. "Don't you think so?"

"I don't know Nawin. Roll your dice."

She knew that the only force really binding her on that chair at the kitchen table was herself. She was uncomfortable with his tenderness because it shackled her at his side but out of courtesy to him she tolerated the situation with only a few major grimaces. This quality time together had occurred for her sake but she minimized its effects where she could. She cynically told herself that these games were his pathetic way of finding relief from his solitary ways. She felt sorry for him and this sympathy ameliorated the loathing she was beginning to feel for the introverted bore. Looking back on what she knew of him, she assessed that this wooer of whores had always stayed in safe circles. In Thai parties that they had attended following his exhibits he had never been much of a mingler and had relied on her to be his public relations gadabout. Here in Canada he wasn't a celebrity. For him there were just classes and an occasional sale of a painting. She had no role with him here. She was a bed partner and a grocery shopper. Even when fulfilling the wifely forgery of grocery shopping, she was curtailed by financial considerations. If she didn't buy generic food of inferior taste he reprimanded her for overspending.

Porn asked if Park Place and Boardwalk were real properties and he told her that they might be. It was a question that she had also posed two days earlier but Nawin responded to it with the same cheerfulness as if there had been sense in asking it a second time. She asked if he thought they were well known New York City properties and he told her that was quite possible. She glanced at their quality time together through the slow perennial movements of the second hand. These movements of the long second hand were so wobbly as if 60 seconds were like climbing over a mountain range. She would not only glance up at the kitchen clock but also the window as if expecting the snow to be melted and birds singing in her window. She had wanted his attention

and now that she had it she realized that this was just aspirin dulling the headache. There was a bigger problem. Being poor and lacking choices had caused her rabid craving for more of everything just as something long ago down deep in him was probably responsible for his artistic brooding. The past was always sucking one into its whirlpool.

He rolled the dice and moved his token. "Oh, Old Kent Road-I want that."

"Why do you want worthless properties like that?"

"I don't think either of those two properties are worthless." He smiled as radiantly as a child pleased to have one of his best friends participating in one of his favorite games. He closed his lips in a tight thoughtful smile. "You know what I've been thinking about?"

"No." She didn't really care.

"When you met Piggy for the first time."

She frowned. Was this what they had become: a couple of tycoon wannabes, two individuals acting like a married couple, or worse two people acting like an old couple reminiscing about their early days in front of bored games or a deck of cards? They did not have years together—just two or three months of knowing each other—and she thought he had no right to reminisce about anything. As much as she hated the past, the present was equally bad at absorbing one in its reality. She had now become his wife because she was with him at present. His wife had been relegated as one force that had brought them together because she was not immediately accessible nor was she sexual. "Oh," she said disinterestedly. She rolled the dice with more force and moved her token from the present to the future. "I'll take that railroad," she said. Still she couldn't help being influenced by him and for a couple seconds she was absorbed in that immediate past. That day had been good but strange. After Noppawan had taken her shopping at Chatuchok Market for clothing, they briefly went into the Butterfly Farm and Insect Museum (a neutral alternative to the deleterious proposal of Siriaj Hospital's dead people museum that made Porn gasp). The butterflies were fine. She enjoyed seeing their colors fluttering around the caged park although the encasement of dead insects in the adjacent room was not to her liking. The face bug with its human camouflage on its back was for her as frightening as it was fascinating to Noppawan. She watched this wife of Nawin. She was the type that would put her nose and glasses up against, in her opinion, the damndest of things. When they arrived at the married couple's second home on the opposite part of the city he was fixing a meal for the three of them. He was preparing salad, toasting hamburger buns on a barbeque, and microwaving meatless tofu hamburgers in a culture that was all his own. As the two women chatted on the balcony Porn tried to overcome feeling like a face bug caught in a key chain. As they ate, dusk elongated and then intertwined their shadows before night approached. Soon the remnant of the day became a violet, a purple, and a black and she felt like a child first introduced to colors through crayons. They watched the lit barges on the river and gorgeous glassy skyscrapers with lit angular tiaras. Strangely enough she felt at peace with them as if they were more than friends but family and the words of model or prostitute did not exist. Still it was strange and uncomfortable because it was so strange.

He dreamed that he was in her mind, that there was adrenalin in the rebellion, that this adrenalin was the meaning of it all, and that the meaning of all luminesced from her. Immediate relatives and some more distant ones had her life planned for her; and her parents, the main instigators of the status quo in their family, were rocks. They didn't change apart from greed that intensified with years and tiers. Stratums of higher and more violent winds raged them in insatiable appetites. Wants fed more wants insatiably. They stayed on the same growing pieces of land, had the same opulent homes and efficient factories (although more and more of them), matched political ideas to whatever brought benefits to their wallets, and with these government positions they implanted such aspirations on the little brother's mind with the idea that he was clay by which a conqueror with a double edged sword of business and politics was formed. After going into the monastery to have his foray as a monk and finishing his university education he would be this and once she found a man in college she would be that.

She, the girl, would be less of the plan but still, years into the future, they would partition a piece of their land and give it to her husband. She would be expected to reproduce her higher beings on their land allowing the elderly parents to be spared loneliness by the sounds of young voices. She would be expected to take care of them as their servants had taken care of her and to absolutely inebriate them against any suffering

as if Buddha's attempts at bypassing human suffering had been an avoidance of it. This would begin in a decade or so (such a quick passing of time). She would be expected to succumb to female yearnings-this needing of another to escape the lonely void, this need to reach out for the silk of human flesh, to consume, to care, to be intermingled entities in love, and reproduce. And yet she had been nothing but a little doll that they had shown off and shoved into a storage room especially when she was dirty or naughty.

And then her bedroom became a limb of a tree and there she was transforming into an adult female mosquito and he was becoming a male one. There they both were in complete maturity. He did his dance and he rubbed his legs so as to attract her with his sound. She was ceramic in her stiffness. Her skin was ochre like the dead bodies at the Siriaj Hospital museum sunk into their glass caskets of formaldehyde. Yet her eyes were lively even though they looked at him so askance and distant. She smiled with her closed insect lips. The smile was ingenuous and warm but wry. He could tell from these infinitesimal muscular contractions and relaxation in her stony insect face that she did not want him to think of their friendship as a relationship and the words passed from brain to brain (hers to his, his to hers, and hers to his like a mutating ping pong ball) something to the effect that a being was born selfish and two selfish beings together were a compounded selfish knot and so something new was in order. Something new was in fact in order. There, ardent in her eyes, was the relationship of her parents: it was based on hoarding property and power. It also was based on begetting emotional servants for their old age and that in particular was abhorrent to her. But he, the male mosquito that was programmed for copulation and no other task, loved her. He had to since he needed her for the satisfaction of his hungers and a deliverance from the past. He continued with his male-on-the-make dance. She bit into him. His blood was on her lips.

And when he woke up he wasn't himself. His ideas were discombobulated and he could tell that his consciousness or sanity was like a loose button on a thin thread dangling from his shirt. He was ill and numb as if all of his senses were bandaged over in gauze. He woke up fully, checked his face in the mirror to see that it was still the same, and washed it. He tried to desist from many thoughts. Thoughts were pins stabbing him. He turned on the television, muted the sound, and saw images as the hours of the day became vanquished. Then Kazem came back early to bring him some food and in so doing he suspended their mutual reticence briefly.

"I have some food for you," he said in disgust.

"Thanks" Jatupon responded in insolent despondency.

The next day it was the same. Kazem came back briefly with some food and a new pair of sunglasses for Jatupon's face.

"I have some food for you," he said in disgust.

"Thanks" Jatupon responded in insolent despondency.

"I also have some sunglasses for you" Kazem said in disgust.

"Thanks" Jatupon responded with a surly and begrudging tone of a nearly mute volume.

He controlled his contempt out of an instinct for self-preservation. He wanted to keep himself from being bludgeoned with the sledgehammer of his brother's fist or beaten with the leather skin of his slaps. Kazem wanted to ask if Kumpee had said anything more about their dinner engagement with the senator as an effort to establish its veracity-a senator they called uncle as a disingenuous ploy to bring them into a greater stratum of wanting and needing, winds of higher and more pleasurable velocity.

The mosquito buzzed around Jatupon's blackened eyes and then around the opened bottle of glue. With his wings he made a pejorative click the way people use their tongues when they shake their heads. Jatupon was not glad to see him. He did not want the condemnation. At first this glue-begotten ride had been an enjoyable thrill. The newness of a newborn was at that time gleaming out of his orbs. He was like a child in wonder of himself flossing his toes in the grass, having his hair massaged by the winds, and chasing god in the clouds. Now the mosquito was here spoiling the solitary party of one which was steadily waning.

The mosquito greeted him in English. "Hello, little man." He thought it was Kumpee at first but, to his knowledge, Kumpee didn't know any language apart from the strident sounds of Thai and was more in favor of using the word "monkey" in place of "little man." Jatupon looked down at

a gigantic insect that was nonetheless smaller than himself. He responded in the same international tongue with a hello. "Where did you learn your English?" asked Jatupon; but no sooner had he done this than he realized how foolish the question was since the mosquito was an extension of himself. For some reason he was both cognizant of the fact that the creature didn't exist and yet believing in him. It was undeniable that if Buddha was right in claiming that the self was a delusion there was a chance that instead of the mosquito being less real it might be more real than himself. It was true that the mosquito wasn't afraid of a man but a man was afraid of a mosquito. Wasn't that, he asked himself, proof that the one who wasn't afraid was more real?

"Where did you learn your English?" asked the mosquito.

"Music, TV shows, story books from the library, Newsweek in my more ambitious times, cartoons mostly."

"Well, then, me too" the mosquito said. It paused and then pulled out a cigarette from its gums and lit it without a match by striking it against the metallic hair on one of its legs. "Another day without going to work?"

"Another day."

"Taking it a bit easy?"

"Taking it a bit easy. Yes," answered Jatupon.

"I would like to know why you have a black eye and a swollen face."

"You know everything and yet I'm supposed to believe that it hasn't it occurred to you that I'm not wanting to think about this-about this situation I'm in."

"I understand that but am nonetheless curious what you have to say on the subject."

"Very little, if you don't mind."

"All right. Are you snorting glue because of what has happened to you?"

"Why ask so many questions?"

"Because I am cruel."

"Yes, you are, you know."

"You don't like me at all?"

"Oh," Jatupon sighed, "I do like you in ways."

"What a charming endorsement! I elicit the same response everywhere I go. Oh well...truth doesn't have to be a comfortable realm. It rarely is."

"Yes," said Jatupon pensively, "I imagine it rarely is."

"The pain is so overwhelming you can't work?"

"The boredom is so overwhelming I can't work. It is a rot-a rot under my hairnet. I can't do it-reflexes every day and not with—"

The mosquito waited to hear the word "him." "Go ahead and say it" was in the mosquito's thoughts but it was Jatupon who articulated this oblique command, "Go ahead and say it!" to twist the direction of the conversation .

"I don't understand," said the mosquito.

"Aren't you wanting to give me your lecture that I have to survive?"

"I wasn't going to say anything but you are meant for more than this dizzying work and the instinct to survive is thrust on all living things in all actions. You can't but help obey it to some degree."

"I can't do it any longer."

"You might have a nervous breakdown if you were to continue. Kazem was your link. It's gone now."

"I'd rather die than go back to it now. Die in the streets if I have to."

"I think you are zipping up your pants again and finding them too tight. You are shedding your boyhood."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes," said the mosquito pensively. "Unfortunately, it was your best trait."

The mosquito dissipated with the smoke of Jatupon's cigarette that he rested and twirled in his fingertips. Smoking was his new habit that he pursued in the hope of having a more insouciant image, which with practice, he could learn to believe in. Boys of himself at earlier ages came and pressed their noses near him as he had done long ago to the glass outside the Dunkin Doughnuts Restaurant in Ayuttayha. Long lost versions of himself at various ages passed up against him and passed him by. They too dispersed with the gaseous midst of black carbon smog released by the traffic. His head was spinning around skyscrapers and billboards. They, he, a single homeless woman who rented out babies to

increase the chances of getting more substantial alms, two dogs copulating, and all, were dwarfed in advertisements for shark fins for the man with refined taste, Electric piecemeal billboards for Singh Beer and cellular telephone companies with new images rotating with the pieces, plain billboards of pimpleless white skinned Thai models selling or hustling some facial cream, flashing and mutating signs advertising various self-improvements seminars at different universities and at the Convention Center, neon animations of Barcelona's Bangkok tour for the Invitation Cup Football Match, and advertisements for every international and domestic product imaginable thrust into the hands of consumers in the form of flyers. Indeed, it was obscene enough to make a man become a monk: orgasmic organisms, sensation of void.

Chapter 13

The glue-induced waves of befuddlement came to him curled like talons and this twisted and grotesque inundation beat his shore pulling and pushing bits of himself fervently in all directions. It was as his father had told him often: he did not know if he was coming or going. He was both becoming more conscious of himself and his environment and yet more despondent with strange thoughts fulminating out of his living carcass, controlling him. He was moving toward reality and yet diverging from it. He believed that he was downtown with Noppawan and that they were wasting some time before the meeting with this former avuncular image. They were walking through a mall and he was thinking how long ago in boyhood he and his brothers had entertained the thought of this man really being family to ease the pain of routine constricting them in noodles. In the hallucination they left the mall and went into an adjacent 80-story building and then took a high-speed elevator to the top of that skyscraper. There the couple sat in the opulence of the Baiyoke Sky Lounge revolving around glass windows and ordering their cappuccino.

Then he wasn't there. He was in his room, his cell, staring out of the window. He was watching a tiger watching the descending sun. He was startled. He hadn't known that animals would look out at the beauty of a descending sun. The tiger noticed him and got up; but discerning this human's own benign posture directed toward the same sunset, the tiger returned to where it was at and once again revered the sun. Then he was walking the streets and feeling such a crazy loneliness. He began to mutter nonsense and he felt himself numb and slipping on his own frozen thoughts. It was very strange for he wasn't moving and yet the streets moved him—strange as the fetid one, Kumpee, having been the angel who had come at the right second delivering him from his worst impulses to kill Kazem. If anything had given him food for thought that week of idleness and recuperation in his cell, it had been the irony of the fetid one as his guardian angel. If the fetid one had not stepped in nothing would have intervened and he would have murdered his brother or been murdered by him. If Suthep had come at that instant, instead of Kumpee, he would have believed in Buddha or God. As it was, he believed in Glue and its power to imitate the strange magic of the world that was all around him.

His hallucination took him through the drenching storms of heavy rains and again to the heavily billboarded world of downtown opulence: iridescent Isuzu Ascender, its back wheels aired above a city, front wheels ascending toward the fiery black nothingness of space, ascend, it says, ascend, as if it, a thing, were the portal to creation, the why, the reason of it all, ascend; Compaq Computers, don't be left behind, don't, easy just a don't; large, sprawling cursory sentences of lumination on these black moliminous rectangles towering above all the tiny traffic, tiny cars and tinier lives, advertising self-help and get-rich seminars; a more conventional but gigantic billboard placed near a skyscraper lit like stage lights on an actress, a gigantic face of a beautiful Chinese Thai with clean and white Chinese skin that stayed pimpleless with Johnson and Johnson's Clean and Clear. There were electric rotating piecemeal signs advertising cellular phones and internet providers (instantaneous messages not for his patronage). Advertisements were on the sides of busses and bus stops of happy soap families and big-breasted bra wearers both of which made the saliva increase in his mouth the way an orange would. Shop signs crouched low with sidewalk beggars, international fast food restaurants and flyers thrust into hands: and it all spoke of the city the same as the skyscrapers that alone were the epitome of opulence and disparity. "What do you want from life?" said the whore at her door. "Enroll at Siam University and find new opportunities. Don't let bad grades stop you," she continued. "Come in, and I'll give you a massage that will make your body feel in ways you've never imagined," said the shark restaurant worker who made a commission luring those of supercilious tastes to a cuisine laced in marginal traces of mercury. "Shark Fins this way," said the tuc tuc driver eager to compound a taxi fee with an agency's commission for bringing a foreigner to a beloved half-hour lady of the night. "Want a girl?" asked the white robed female Buddhist nuns who had shaved heads and collection canisters in their hands as they stood on the steps leading to the platform of the sky train like Hara Krishnas. Jatupon heard the door open.

"Oh, God," he heard Kazem's voice. Surprisingly, it wasn't angry. He heard footsteps of restless movement. "Oh, God," he heard again. Then he heard the footsteps move toward him. The movements were slow and

careful. He opened his eyes and saw his brother. Kazem was scratching his head in confusion.

"I'm sorry buddy. I'm so sorry. I know I'm late saying that, but fuck, you were ready to throw a television into my head. I don't know how all that happened, but what a mess. Why did you have to get yourself all doped like that at this time-especially this time; and oh, fuck, did you get into my whiskey? You did, you little thief! Right? Right? Was that a nod? Was that a nod? Do you like that? I'll pull your ears off the way father nearly did. Man, we've got an appointment! Did you take anything besides sniffing this stuff? I mean besides drinking my liquor and sniffing glue was there a third thing? Think: I've got to know how serious!" This had been one of Jatupon's only times of being in the cell and flying within his own head. Nearly all the other times he had gone out to the streets to gain his high and stayed there until he was able to return home halfway sober and feign a sickness successfully. He regretted being witnessed and scrutinized by Kazem. The environment was bouncing to the cadence of Kazem's voice and stung Jatupon's hands through the conduit of the rubbery stickiness of desiccated glue that still hung in patches from some of his fingertips. He was pulled into the shower with underpants still on. The hair of his head was locked in Kazem's fingers. He could smell the sweetness of his brother's sweat. He could smell his body odor like any dog getting its molecular high. Jatupon thought it was very romantic. He smiled widely at Kazem whose fingers clenched him by the throat pinning him against the back wall of the shower as the cold waters ran over him and through his underpants. Jatupon fought like a suffocating fish and when he was free from the loosened grasp he gasped and then kissed and licked the body that he was denuding—the same body that had brought him near death but the same one who had saved him from drowning long ago when he was a boy.

Then after a good long vomit and a brief nap he exited with his brother into the light rain and they were off to see the wizard. They went by taxi with the idea of picking up Suthep along the way. Kazem waited in the taxi while Jatupon knocked on Suthep's door. Jatupon knocked, stood, and waited repeatedly for five or ten minutes without success. Then he began to return to the taxi looking down and scrapping his feet against dirt and rocks like a child preferring to be left alone in his imagination.

But when he returned the taxi had turned into a limousine like a pumpkin into a carriage. He wondered if he was hallucinating once again. Then standing there like a diffident and disconcerted child in total confusion, he noticed the window descending for him and out poked the head of the fetid one but his hair was cut, greased back, and nicely groomed, his face was shaven, and the cologne or aftershave lotion that he was wearing had molecules that poignantly bit into Jatupon's psyche favorably. Here was a dark but handsome man. He never knew him, before, to be such. "Get in you little Monkey—up front with the driver." When Jatupon was seated comfortably in softness and space he glanced back at his three brothers who reclined in an opulent shadow.

"Cheers, Jatuporn," said Kumpee.

Kazem clanged his glass against the glasses held by Kumpee and Suthep. "Cheers to every boy, girl, hollering hound, and wide spread whore on the planet," said Kazem. Suthep and Kumpee laughed.

"Yes, I'll have to say my cheers to them too," said Kumpee. All three brothers were drinking wine in the back seat.

"Should we give him something?" asked Suthep.

"Are you kidding," said Kazem. "That boy goes places we can only dream about. No more fuel for that tank. He's been there, done that. He's gone on one round trip today. That's enough." He drank more of his wine. "Sometimes I have to sleep with one eye open to make sure he doesn't drift further into mischief."

"Did you like how we fucked up your mind?" Kumpee asked Kazem. "It was Suthep's idea of parking on the corner. When you didn't leave the taxi we still waited a little until you fell into a smoking addiction. Suthep said, 'Just wait, he'll go into the 7-11' and that is exactly what happened. While you were in there buying your cigarettes we paid off the taxi driver and sent him away. Then we parked in his place."

"Well, if that trick was for me, it didn't do anything. I wasn't even surprised let alone shocked. I definitely didn't think I was out of my mind."

"Well, Jatuporn sure thought he was seeing things," said Suthep.

"He looked like the Emerald Buddha was talking to him," said Kumpee.

The brothers laughed. Suthep farted.

"Bangkok bus exhaust. Plug your nose," commented Kumpee. Their

laughter intensified. Even Jatupon was laughing with them.

"I want to know why Jatuporn is wearing sunglasses," said Suthep anxious to diffuse their thinking of his odor. Horrific odors were usually attributed to Kumpee and he cared to keep it that way.

"You know already," said Kazem. "Leave it alone. Why are you wearing that gold chain around your neck?"

"A girl gave it to me" said Suthep.

"What girl? Some girl behind a cash register. Did you pull out a gun and make her believe her brains would be splattered?"

"That wouldn't have been me. I am a woman lover. I don't make war," said Suthep. "Show me your eyes, Jatuporn."

"Leave him alone," said Kazem.

Kumpee grabbed Jatupon's head, yanked off the glasses, and twisted the face so that Suthep could see it. "A regular raccoon, that one is.

"No, even a raccoon is lighter than that. Maybe it's like watching a raccoon after he and a bear have been going at it: the bear with a television in his paws and the raccoon cowering near his puddle of blood. Thai boxing doesn't get as exciting as what I saw. I just regret not having been there for the whole show."

"Stop it!" ordered Kazem.

"Does he always give orders like that?" asked Kumpee to Suthep. Then to Kazem he said, "Hey, remember that I am the oldest one here. Could you say that in a more pleasant tone?"

"I would like for you to stop picking on him. Look at him up there." Jatupon's eyes were withdrawn and his head was slightly tilted to the dashboard.

"Here are your glasses," said Kumpee as he stood and bent forward with effort to give them back. His hand disheveled Jatupon's unkempt hair even further. "You need to comb that mop."

Arrows of the past, mostly from his father and Kumpee, shot out of the neurological circuitry of his brain paralyzing him in a numb withdrawal of survival. It was no different than at earlier stages of his life when he wondered why things didn't move forward but at the same time was fearful that they would. He was back in the horror known as family withdrawing himself from it, living in his protective bubble of withdrawal. "You are afraid of your own shadow." "Are you preparing for a flood? Those pants look stupid on you." "What are you doing sitting over there? Get out of that seat?" "I'll mop up the floor with you one of these days." "Why aren't you working? You are absolutely good for nothing." "What do you do in that back room, you pimple faced monkey? Get out of that cage of yours and put down those books. No use you thinking you are any better than the rest of us." "Get out of my seat you ugly little fart." He heard it even though none of these disparaging ideas were articulated in the limousine.

Jatuporn, Jatuporn, he thought. They knew and they mocked him with his ignominy. If he had been a girl and someone had sexually abused him he could speak of it and have a good purifying cry cleansing himself of his stress but his situation was different. It was one he had invited upon himself. He'd sleep with the others as well if it would make them kinder to him-so vehement was his need for their love. How horrible it was to meet this rich avuncular stranger, he thought to himself. It would be horrible enough meeting a bag lady with a face that looked like a raccoon and an aching in his raw bottom. He put on his sunglasses.

In an odd way for him it was like traveling on a poor man's cattle train back to the town from whence an exodus from the rice fields had occurred. No poor man would want to return to his farm and admit that he couldn't obtain employment in Bangkok and no one with any real self-esteem wanted to link again to a wealthy man who, for good reason, had been reluctant to have any association with his ex-nephews-in-law. His father had tried countless times to get money from the senator. His mother had been subtler and more industrious. She got a campaign drive active in her neighborhood to do her little part in trying to get him reelected. The senator never forgot such hard working activists and always remembered her birthday with a gift. She was content with that but for her husband it intensified his yearning for better things. And so it was with his brothers: they thought about how their dreams could be effectuated with a bit of the senator's savings. Jatupon did not adhere to this disingenuous wish for a family reunion and so trapped in a moving box with brothers who had one converging theme that was not his own, he felt like an unemployed laborer returning back on the poor man's train even though he was riding in a limousine.

The recurring idea that the aunt and the uncle had not gone to the funeral made him even increasingly repellent toward this meeting with the senator. He halfway wanted to jump out of the door and let a physics lesson ensue. Would he just drop or would he be thrust out like a projectile. Would his blood ooze out or would it disgorge like the insides of a tossed pumpkin? He looked out of the window at the quick passing of buildings and then up to the billowing clouds. They were gas with distinct and individual form. They were energy that was distended and fomenting. How mysterious it all was. When one was cremated he would be such gas. Man was ephemeral noise but nature was reticent and swelling. Distending and distending, it extended him beyond his petty thinking. How good it all was!

Well, he thought, there was no resisting the inevitable. He would be entering the senator's house mortified from his sunglasses and black eyes but the issue was petty enough that there would not be any serious consideration about avoiding this eventuality through jumping out of a moving car. Kazem had attempted to put a story into his head that might save them from being scrutinized about this subject. It had seemed plausible enough: an injury from the recent Songkran festival in Banglampool gained from a water fight where some water in the plastic guns had been adulterated with some caustic chemicals. However, he did not like casting shadowy illusions into the senator's mighty halls. No, he shouldn't be with this chain gang of prisoners going to the warden's home, dragging the noodles that bound them, asking for him to remove them. This avuncular stranger hadn't come for their parents' funeral. He hadn't wished them condolences. It would have been such a little thing to do; and since it wasn't done it was monumentally wrong.

Reticent and deep in himself so that his brothers' pejorative comments did not hurt him tremendously when they pierced, he implemented the same defense mechanism that had saved him from psychosis in such a family all of these years. This withdrawal made the rational self into a deadened membrane and shield. This shield deflected their arrows. How profoundly intricate the psyche's defenses were. What wouldn't the brain do to spare itself wounds! The mind, perhaps, did the same with love. Within life's physical titillations in this sordid realm through the smell and feel of breath rhythmically sliding onto his nose from the spewing mouth of his mate—a warm soothing wind crossing the hill of his nose; the tactile wearing of another's skin by touch more luxurious than any silk; merciful orgasmic clemency from logic; the moving of a chest; the heart beat; and yes, the feeling of being in love addictive and sensitive toward another human presence, one's ideas of life were whitewashed and exhilarated. For him, sex in the shower had annulled his hatred of Kazem. It had made the world into less of a hostile place. It had provided the specious idea that he was not alone. He looked out of the car window. The palm trees seemed like rock solid Cyclopes eating away the remnants of the sun. He noticed that the car was stopping. The gates opened to an acreage far from balloon peddlers, sandwich salesmen with a box strapped onto their chests, holy jasmine makers, goldfish in the bag mountebanks, car window newspaper accosters, and the sidewalk noodle workers.

"Will he be alone?" asked Suthep.

"His staff will be there," said Kumpee.

"I mean women. An Old guy with lots of money must have new ones around each week. I mean they wouldn't like him but they would feel important and ornamental to be there at his home."

"I wouldn't know one way or the other."

"What did you do when you were together with him?" asked Suthep.

"I wasn't really. It was through a speaker. I finally got him to talk through the speaker after pleading with all his servants that way.

I made him feel guilty. I told him he should have gone to the funeral. I told him he needed to help his relatives or I'd see if a newspaper reporter would talk to me."

"You said that!" yelled Kazem angrily.

"Oh, he agreed with me that he was wrong. He said that he wanted to see us. He told me that. Then we got visits from his men and this."

When they arrived into what was to them an opulent mansion (a couple of the dozen rooms that were only marginally spacious by western standards) they saw him in the living room in front of a big screen where, what to the gods, were tenuous carbon copies of men falling from the windows of a skyscraper with their myriad papers. America (specifically New York City) was under siege.

The boys gestured the "wei" to him. He saw prayerful hands in front of

faces and, except in the youngest who was hidden behind his sunglasses, their beggarly downtrodden expressions depicted their unworthiness to meet him. That was their ploy. He gestured the “wei” in return. He was begrudging of their entrance in his life and resented having to comply with the wishes of the eldest that the meeting take place. However, his plan was to neutralize the possibility of negative publicity. He just wanted to allow these meetings to take place from time to time. If the “thugs” thought that he would be giving them anything more than an occasional meal it was their own delusion and in the meantime he would be keeping any problems from occurring like the unlikely eventuality of an newspaper article scathing him for lack of interest in the welfare of his relatives and making an assumption that he wouldn’t be interested in the welfare of others. Something like that, unlikely as it was, could nonetheless happen if he didn’t pacify those who had the power to possibly create such problems. “Come in and sit down over here,” he said. The tone of voice of this avuncular stranger was grave and his face hardly glanced at them as their barefooted feet ascended into his domain. The television tugged in their diffident movements to plush, white, upholstered chairs and these chairs kept saying to Jatupon that he and his brothers had no right to sit there. Still and seated, they became like spectators at the Coliseum. It was a CNN glimpse into the future: skyscrapers ablaze from passenger jets deliberately being slammed into them. They were being made aware of horrific ways of dying and since it was so horrific there was no self-centeredness and movement by which to callously disregard it. They were empathic and there was no escape. Jatupon wanted to shake the gods from their slumber, to knock the emerald Buddha from its pedestal, and to hijack fate and turn it around at gunpoint from the cockpit. He wanted all life to cease and start again in parity and respect. He wanted deliverance for Siriaj Hospital freaks, the aborted, the stillborn, deformed, diseased, and the downtrodden, those who die from malnutrition, old men who always think that their lives have been for nothing, the elephants that lose their molars and so search for a soft shaded area of grass to lie down in comfortable death, weaker animals not yet dead fallen as prey, soldiers who must lose their lives in war, and child soldiers whose short lives were as instruments of hate. To him it was no wonder that they (humans) were bad. They were all conceived by greedy sexual devouring, these selfish absorptions and attempts at fitting into silk skinned robes and hallucinogenic shadows. The World Trade Center disaster was proof not only that people were bad but that there was no god overseer above looking at this clashing of wills. There was just malicious and inane preying on others and this time it might well be that these hijackers had not even been incensed at opulence and starvation which stood back to back like America and Afghanistan or a domineering state like America to a stateless one like Palestine. If this had been planned by the rich ex-Saudi, Bin Laden, it was just hate (senseless, irrational hate that existed for no particular reason at all), the desire for power, the idea of heroism and a sure ticket to heaven, and the dramatic thrill of destruction that would go down as historical.

It was strange that people should perish so terribly and that those perpetrating this action could rationalize America as a monster worthy of monstrous actions that would humble this one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. Foremost it was strange to him that such suffering could be ignored, if not partially forgotten so quickly when Vanont, the servant, came in for the third time telling them that the dinner was getting cold and he wasn’t going to warm it up for the second time. No longer mesmerized, they came back to themselves. At the dining room table they began their banal chatter. They asked about the number of his servants, how long he had lived here, his typical working day, and what he did when he returned home. They wanted to ask about their aunt but they had determined as they rode over here that the subject might alienate their host. Except for Jatupon whose lips slightly frowned, the brothers gained pleasure pointing out various items in the room, asking questions about them, and feeling pleased to be in such opulence. The senator asked about Kazem and Suthep’s restaurant businesses. When Suthep made a more obvious attack to evoke sympathy for their nominal existence the senator said, “You are young. It is a first business.” Then to avert hearing anything more on that matter, he switched to Kumpee who had extorted this family reunion. He asked what he did for a living. Kumpee’s circumlocutory answer was no different than any hustler’s grandiloquence about selling one thing or another real or imagined. His quick words were inarticulate and glib. Nobody understood what he said for the words were mountainous heaps of illusion. The senator did find out that Kumpee had fathered a child. He

had a baby girl. Kumpee took out the photograph from his wallet and then he passed it around. The senator affected a smile when he saw the picture but he conjectured that “this boy” was living from this arrangement with the girlfriend and the baby he had fathered. Jatupon, surprised like his other siblings, found pleasure in the thought that he was now an uncle. For a moment he felt love for this unseen entity and a desire to ensure that her life turned out better than his but then he realized that he would never see her, and being the child of a rich Chinese Thai, she would have a better life than he had.

The senator asked Jatupon why he was wearing sunglasses. He gave the rehearsed answer and then had to remove the sunglasses at the senator’s insistence. “The Songkran festival ended over a month ago,” said the avuncular stranger. “Why do you still have black eyes now?”

“Yes, but my face was really hurt badly” Jatupon responded. The senator looked at him sternly. He didn’t want to waste his night hearing their lies, and if they were all like Suthep, he didn’t want to hear the truths either. Kazem opened his mouth. He was prepared to say that Jatupon had gotten himself into a fight but when he saw the stern expression of the unbelieving host his words retreated. Jatupon saw himself and his brothers shaded in the dismal gray of those who could not be trusted. A man’s mind was a tenuous object swayed in the winds of discourse so when it sensed a disingenuous response in the surreal uncertainty of understanding a matter fully it cringed. He felt like he was casting shadows onto the senator’s grand walls like children using their hands to project shadows of rabbits and dogs. But then his conscience waned. He again remembered that the aunt and uncle hadn’t attended the funeral of his parents. He remembered his aunt’s magnanimous crusades to become so important in his life, seeing him educated by paying his tuition and sending him to private tutorials, the Bible school, the varnishing of Christ’s picture on wood, the taste of punch at the Bible School, and how outside the building there was a soccer ball tied to a string and a pole and how the children tried to compete to get the ball wound up on their side of the poll. She would sometimes come to pick him up and take him to an ice cream parlor. She didn’t have any children of her own. He frowned at the senator’s scolding facial expressions. He met angered glances with those of his own. The family chatted on. The senator seemed friendlier and Jatupon even began to look up from his plate. The distrust had diffused to the point where it ceased to matter. They chatted and their chatter was irrelevant.

“Why did this happen?” blurted out Jatupon from nowhere. “If it is Islamic terrorists how could they hate that badly? Is it envy of a wealthier and more powerful country, or the hatred toward Israeli aid from the United States? I don’t understand it. We talk and talk and yet people are falling out of windows of 100 story buildings. How can we eat and carry on with things?”

Kumpee and Suthep scoffed at him.

“It is barbaric, barbaric no matter what line of reasoning they use to justify their actions. Do you know anything about the Islamic world and why it dislikes the west, Jatupon?” The choice of his words were influenced by his Moslem background.”

“I don’t really,” he said. “ If Bin Laden is so rich it isn’t inequality that he hates. Tyrants like building up empires but he doesn’t seem to want one—just wants to destroy the west. I don’t understand it at all. I know that there are 7000 American soldiers in the holy land of Saudi Arabia to protect that area from Iraq’s aggression and—” He swallowed hard. He knew that his brothers would hate him. “I know that America continues to supply Israel with millions of dollars in aid and billions of dollars in weapon sales even though Israel still occupies what was once Palestine.” He knew that he needed to summarize these issues with some scanty understanding to impress the senator. “America imposes sanctions against Iraq out of fear of its military buildup but these sanctions cause thousands of people to die from malnutrition. America financially backed Iraq against Iran in that war and the Taliban against the Soviet Union and now those regimes were the wrong choices. The enemy of my enemy is my friend was the wrong philosophy. Those were bad foreign affairs blunders. They continually interfere with the policies of Moslem countries so that the oil that drives their economy doesn’t cease. It is economic considerations that cause them to back the governments of Algeria and Egypt that they can influence even though those governments are not democracies. They’ve made Iraq and Iran as strong as America.”

The senator knew that this was a good understanding for a 14-year-old boy. “How do you know these things, Jatupon?”

"He reads a lot of comic books," said Suthep. They laughed.

"I go to the library when I can," he said modestly. "Sometimes I go there just to read comic books and once in a while I read Newsweek."

"Do you know English?"

"Yes, I do," he said proudly. The senator found himself interested in the boy the way his ex-wife had been. Her reasons, however, had been maternal ones and her disinterest had been from the same source. A voice of an alter ego that was fettered in a private chamber in the cellar of her mind shrieked stridently that this was no child of her own and it had been for this reason that she had dropped him from her life suddenly. His interest was of a man who sees continuum of what he is or a rejuvenation of what he was. Both reactions were selfish ones but this was the planet Earth where most good actions were dictated by egocentric realms.

Vanont yelled that one of the buildings was imploding and the senator got up from the table. "Continue eating," he said as he exited the room. Jatupon looked out of the window. Thai thunder crackled the skies like an empty bag of potato chips. Lightning streaked across the Thai skies naked and ominous. There he was seated with his brothers in that home they had always wanted to enter for so many years. And yet instead of being the happy family members visiting the relatives, they were nothing but a group of extortionists who had manipulated their way through locked gates. This fraternity of boyhood had evolved on higher tiers of wants into a Tower of Babel, a tower of thugs.

Low levels of hate still exuded from him toward Kazem who had done this to his face. He was sedentary in his own guilt for his attempt to murder Kazem, which later led to the best sexual experience he had ever had. Hate and the frenzy of love were rotting the best aspects of him that was so neatly named a soul. Hate and love had been horrible fulminations of neediness that ignited a person into another being, possessed will, and thrust reality into chaos. Sure this release of sexual tension, in the acme of ecstasy, led to Nirvana like any well thrust missile but each intimacy was like a cow that jumped over the moon.

He heard his brothers talk but did not listen to anything. Talk was a kinetic sport. The mouth was a spout. In it emotions were like boiling water steaming out the teapot. For him, the introvert who communed with the original wisdom deep in the stagnant pool of his being, there was only the window and a landscape of waxy greenery in the rain. He was mesmerized in the mellifluous monotony of rain slapping against the window.

Men falling from the windows of the World Trade Center in New York: the world was an evil place and he wanted to sink under the veil of Childhood for it was benign. Guileless, ingenuous, innocuous, worrisless childhood was where the imagined was tangible and personal. Planes deliberately crashed into skyscrapers incinerating buildings and people: this was solid proof that it was a godless universe, but then he had always assumed that it was such. Still to take a deep breath was amazing. To be thinking was amazing. To see from the window such a beautiful verdant acreage and rain pouring onto it making it greener yet was like fecund life commencing after the destruction of a forest fire. His parents died but in so doing here he was in the senator's dining room: wasn't this an amazing chain of events even if their arrival had been obtained badly? The senator called them to come in with their plates and drinks. For Jatupon it felt like they were a family huddled together in front of the television—images of tragedy shared together in common.

A half hour later the senator found himself irritated by the one likable thug looking the part. "Can you see anything with those sunglasses on?" he asked bitterly.

"Not much" said Jatupon.

"I've seen what you look like. Take them off."

"Take them off you little idiot" said Kumpee. Jatupon obeyed but glanced at Kumpee with a strong glare of hate.

"Did you really get that from Songkran?" asked the senator. Jatupon sensed that the senator's tone was jocular. He could tell that the avuncular stranger, like them all, just needed a respite from the grave images they were witnessing.

"He's always getting into fights" lied Kumpee stealing the words that still wouldn't come from Kazem's mouth.

"Is that so?" asked the senator but it was to no one specific.

"All the time" confirmed Suthep.

"Is that true?" the senator asked Jatupon. "Who with?"

"I can't imagine who. I guess myself," said Jatupon while he stared into the senator's eyes with a bold earnestness.

The senator laughed "I'll interpret that as a need for privacy," he said. He backed away from the truth. He sensed it already and it was really none of his business. In a strange way he was even beginning to like their presence. It was the closest thing he had to family, and so he told himself that maybe he should enjoy it.

Jatupon looked out across the senator's spacious living room and then returned to the center where they were. He noticed a bowl on an end table. The bowl contained wrapped caramel within it.

"Help yourself," said the senator as he passed the bowl first to Kumpee who was seated nearest to him.

They chewed. The senator continued translating pertinent bits that were anchored on the news program. "America under attack" was the logo at the bottom of the screen. The brothers had no label for this snack but they knew that it was catered to the higher status of palate and because of this they ate it gluttonously. The taste and the gummy texture were foreign to them. Jatupon thought of his own insatiable need for sweets any time he saw his aunt. If she continued to buy candy necklaces for him to slobber on she continued to care and it was for that reason that he craved for sweets so voraciously.

"The wrappers are labeled with the names of American states on them."

"Yes, I like caramel. I always have since Chusanee and I were married. She liked them so much. Anyhow that's over now. By the way, I'm not sure if you know this, Jatupon, but after your mother and father separated briefly, your mother went away to the states. You were born in America." Jatupon sat there in numb surprise with a caramel square smashed into the back of his mouth. He didn't chew or swallow as the senator elaborated on a trip that their aunt had arranged for their mother to give her some time to think. "I'm mentioning it to you now because you are American and you should know that fact if ever you have an opportunity to travel. It is easier with an American passport."

Then his face focused on the images. A second tower imploded. How many thousands were dead and dying was anyone's guess. It was a horrible thing and yet he felt that they all, rightly or wrongly, were linked together in the belief that gluttony and poverty were the main instigators. He wondered if his brothers thought that justice was being rendered.

Later, when Jatupon was returning from the bathroom, Vanont stopped him and asked him to go into the study. Ten minutes later the senator came in and sat down at his desk. He handed Jatupon a can of Coca Cola. The senator had a second one that he also opened and drank.

"Why do you think that your brothers have been so persistent about seeing me?" asked the senator.

"I don't know for sure. That's the truth. I don't think there is anything too planned in it. They're selfish. I know that. It was wrong how Kumpee arranged the meeting. Even Kazem thinks that; but it isn't so calculating for a bunch of boys with no real family—not even with each other—to want to know their uncle. I know that you aren't married now and it isn't as if you are an uncle like blood or have to have anything to do with us. Anyhow I think more than anything they just wanted to meet someone respectable when their lives aren't of any consequence. At least that is how I feel about it. Maybe they think that they can get something out of it but I don't think they've really isolated what they want. Maybe it isn't much more than just wanting to feel a bit linked to you. I guess I want that in ways, but in ways I don't. I mean you've been really nice but I don't understand why you didn't go to my parents' funeral. There was nobody really but us. Nobody came at all really."

"Maybe I should help you," said the senator." The words ran out of his mouth like a loose dog. He was surprised to see them running away. Jatupon could see that he regretted the words.

"I need out. I don't mean to come here with you. I want, on my own, to break from them. I can't go back there again."

"Which one beat up on you like that?" Jatupon didn't say anything but looked down at his legs. The senator asked, "Does it happen very often?"

"Well, I'm not a kid."

"You're 14, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that isn't manhood yet. It is an awkward age."

"I won't return. I hate him for doing that to me. He just left me in the

puddle of my blood. I hated him so badly I wanted to kill him afterwards.”

“Which one?”

“All of them hate me. Suthep and Kumpee resented what Aunt Chusanee tried to do for me but I don’t hate them.”

“She always said that you were clever.”

“I wish I could go away and be somebody different than what I am, and yet I wish that I could be important to them and that the four of us could be a close family. You too, if you want.”

“Jatupon, families aren’t forever. Boys grow up and they gain their own lives. They have children. Those children grow up. I don’t know what you might or might not have done to get into a fight with them or one of them but it didn’t deserve a fist in your face. You look awful. Give me a week. I want you to contact me in a week. I’ve got some work I need to do and Vanont will show you and your brothers out. He’ll point you in the direction of the bus stop. It isn’t all that late. All the busses should still be running. Tell your brothers that we’ll try to get together again in a couple months or so.”

From the window of the classroom, Noppawan saw the wind kick about the branches of the trees in an anomaly not characteristic of Bangkok weather. She hated feeling hostage to proctor the eye movements of these students, to walk every several minutes through the aisles of the desks, and to scrutinize wanton little individuals prepossessed of schemes for cheating that could improve their chances of getting good grades and hasten the end of the tests. Their main wishes were for the resurrection of their still cadavers to the kinetic movement of going with their friends to the next Hollywood movie, the next shrill of laughter, gossip, and karaoke booths in the corridors of malls. She liked the wind’s attitude of just knocking around the day, kicking off the old leaves, and dancing about. She wondered why she admired kinetic movement in nature and not in the uniformed idiocy of the students before her. It was, she answered to herself, because each of these uniformed specimens probably did the same exact actions of their fathers and mothers before them. Certainly year after year new groups of freshmen were identical to each other. They engaged in senseless programmed activities like ants: the mating frivolity before working and hoarding. As rich as they were (these future owners of their parents’ factories) they were walking down the same hill toward their deaths no different than the worker ants. None of them contributed to the permanency of thought and understanding. They just followed and followed.

Nature experimented, she caused uniqueness in form if not attitude, she continentally drifted lands for the hell of it, she erupted volcanoes and earthquakes in the damndest of places and let her creatures adapt or perish. Nature was an alchemist and a lover of the extraordinary. Noppawan wanted to open a window. After all, the students were cold in the air conditioning and she wanted to feel the breeze, but some fool or another who supervised proctors would complain that something in the room wasn’t orthodox. She didn’t want to get a letter in her mailbox complaining that she hadn’t sealed up the envelopes of the tests with enough tape or another odd irrelevant idea because she hadn’t been as orthodox as she should have been.

It was the administration that consisted of desperate fools during times that were irregular. She had been forced to teach an anthropology class this semester. How that was related to zoology she couldn’t say unless the administration was privy to the philosophy of mice and men. All she knew was that the anthropology teacher ran away and they were in desperate need of someone to fill the gap as well as perform her regular duties. A numb throbbing of life’s dreariness overtook her as she walked around these handsome faces and thought to herself how she really wanted to open the window.

Her husband had not throbbed his body in her inordinately so she did not understand why she was jealous of his activities, and yet she was. It was this beyond all other things that was a gloom over her sedentary thoughts that were constricted to monitor the eye movements and actions of the students and to be the perfect guard of these prisoners that had been assigned to her. She looked at the girl test takers. Unlike Porn, whose focus was business, they were disrespectful whores whose interest was only in sucking up the pheromone fumes, having babies, and raising them to fulfill their need for stability and permanence. To have a role in the world (that of being a mother) would override the love needs of the contributor of the sperm, and they would cling to motherhood as salamanders in the rain. That “salamander in the rain” idea had been one of her husband’s more clever thoughts that he attributed to the lack

of creativity he saw around him. He was clever and she had liked him so much for so many years. She hadn't been in love with him until his departure. If she had been like all other women she would have succumbed to these feelings and thoughts that she needed her man terribly. Their overwhelming power tried to destroy her resolve and only the idea that these feelings were illusions was she able to maintain her integrity. The feelings were unadulterated neediness because of his adultery-the jealous biological programming of a woman. This feeling of love, this motif of women and pop culture, vexed her. It was annulling her marital contract that had been engendered out of friendship of two people who were complete unto themselves. Well, he wasn't so complete. He did whine. That was for sure. There was a boy that came out from time to time needing a mommy. It had been nauseating to tolerate to say the least; but she had done so under the firm belief that most men were worse than he was on this point. And for her, there were female vulnerabilities but earlier she had been prudent enough to get herself sterilized and minimized her sexual activity.

Before she came into the classroom she had encountered a couple of her colleagues laughing shyly. In the couple seconds that she drew near them before passing they were tacit in the shamefaced ways of Thais. She knew that many of them gossiped about her who was the wife of a man celebrated for his adulterous debauchery. She could have been their holy martyr as the object of sympathy and the icon of women's suffering but her frank endorsement of her husband's activities to newspaper reporters had made her the subject of ridicule. A man would be totally lost if he didn't have his extramarital affairs, she said. He would have no knowing of the nothingness of his misadventures unless he were to experience minutes of despair after the orgasm was complete. This is what she told the reporters on a few occasions-each time expanding on her ideas and making them more colorful than at previous times. She was proud of creating the Noppawan doctrine and she knew that because of it the university wanted to get rid of her. In ways she was proud of being sneered at but it was uncomfortably lonely. She imagined the thoughts of these two instructors who passed her, "Craggy thing, no man would mount you. It is no wonder that you're forlorn for the whores." No, they'd never even say anything like that even to each other. They wouldn't even consciously think it. Thais were too polite and too deferential to even the despised for that: instead there was that shamefaced laugh and that reciprocal glance. Then, as she was walking to Building P with the tests that she had picked up from the administration office, a boy and a girl were in front of her. This pair, holding hands, were taking up the whole sidewalk and blocking everyone from passing in their slow movements. The girl had books on her head that she was trying to balance. The boy watched her lovingly. She wanted to smack them-these dummies who were dopamine gluttons. Everywhere she went it was young couples in love. She wanted to get out the biggest can of Raid and perform a major insecticide/genocide that would give Miloshevik a companion in the Hague; but being a humane individual such hideous thoughts could only instigate a wry smile or an occasional chuckle. When she saw such couples everywhere it made her feel an antithesis of things: like an uncomfortable young girl experiencing the wetness of blood being absorbed into her tampons for the first time and as of a 26 year old tripping around in her days with an old woman inside of her.

This subject she was proctoring was business law, a subject so unrelated to her field. She unfastened a sheet of paper that was posted on the window and looked at this list of student names. She matched their identification cards to the list of names and got each of their signatures. Weird ideas took over her brain as she looked into their faces one by one and at their photographs on their student identification cards. "Surawit ,without glasses you would be as ugly as with them; Wilawan, that bun of a pony tail is one thing that has just got to go; Sira, you have nice swarthy skin so fuckable but that nose is like it came from the days when wild boars used to roam the whole planet-totally obscene and pugnacious; Kanoknant, really are you the same girl in this picture I.D? How strange! It looks like your older sister and you look like you'd be one of the proud little girls who possess one of these book bags near the white board with little stuffed animals dangling from them-oh, god, I bet your parents hold their heads in chagrin after giving birth to you; Pornpitcha, ya' frizzed orange hair is of a disco queen; Wiliwan playing beauty shop with your pony tail-better on yourself than on other girls since that is the usual preoccupation in classes; Pawisar, wouldn't that fat face be less obtrusive if your hair was put in a pony tail-well, maybe not...maybe it would be worse but still that hair is dangling into your

face distracting you from taking the test and more importantly looking downright uncouth and stringy; Ekkachai, you certainly have a long tie-I wonder how big your penis gets." Those thoughts droned on and on in the same pattern of crude novelty.

Chapter 14

Restless in the dewy grass of the hard ground, he was asleep. His dreams registered what, numb, he hadn't comprehended so well the previous evening. His brain rehashed those images surreal and slow: Vanont slipping them a thousand baht; the decision on the sidewalk to go to the whores; Kumpee saying that he, Jatupon, was a ladyboy and couldn't go with them as if he had wanted to go with them (He might have wanted to go but not with them and not with that thousand baht); his numb malevolent smile at their laughter; being handed some loose change to go home with; and then getting on a bus randomly, handing the ticket tearer ten baht and pretending to be mute and dumb when asked his destination since there was none. He hadn't even said goodbye to his brothers and all of those years together. He just contemptuously smiled at their contempt and disappeared. One day he would be in America. In time, he told himself, in time. Being the cockroach had passed in time. He had lived in the world as that of an insect all those years. These family members didn't even have to ferret out his miserable little existence to stomp on him daily. It hadn't been much of a sport just to see him scurry around in the same space within his pain and yet it had been their main preoccupation. Bad as it was, it had passed without the necessity to kill himself. He just said to himself that it would pass and it had. He was no ladyboy. Maybe his serious intensity made his limbs rigid and his movements circumspect and gauche. Maybe it was strange that he rarely walked with his brothers but instead walked behind them. Undoubtedly he had been the sexual recipient. Still that didn't make him into a ladyboy nor did it make him gay. He was liberated. He was a changing creation. Past actions did not have to define him. The word, ladyboy, for once did not hurt him deeply since he was undergoing the metamorphosis of manhood. Manhood was indefinable since it could be anything one slipped off and slipped on at will during times that were critical junctures, as he knew this was. If he were to go back to Kazem or scurry over to the senator so begrudging innate inclinations to help him, he would be a man but a dependent one with childish yearnings to be shaped by others. He told himself he would smell like the fetid one, he would let the sagging elasticity completely peel off his underwear embarrassingly, and he would eat stray cats in the park but he would not sacrifice his newly discovered integrity for the sake of comfort.

In the early light of morning he woke up with maximum determination despite the lack of solid sleep and seeing that his new home was on the outskirts of a park. It was a grassy fringe that went behind the wall and gate that enclosed the actual park. The sprinkling of rain was falling onto him and he could smell the stink of his damp shirt as if the metamorphosis to manhood had made him into the fetid one. Behind the wall he heard the squeaking chains of empty swings being moved slowly in the wind. Cars that infrequently passed the park were unreal and eerie as descending ghosts. No sooner had he awakened than a middle-aged woman in a red jacket rode up beside him on her bicycle. "Fortune teller?" she asked.

"No," said Jatupon.

"Don't you want your fortune read?"

"No," he said. He knew he didn't have one.

"I teach English too."

"No," said Jatupon. "I don't have anything for you."

"Here. Give this to someone who needs it." She gave him a business card that was nothing but a sliver of paper with a computer printed, reduced, and photocopied message of Thai on one side and English on the other. In her palm she had a whole stack of these tiny square bits of paper. As she rode away he read the English. "Nattanat near Lumpini Park. (13:00-21:00) Office 3761/296 soi Yudee 9 Chan Road Tambon Bangko, Kate Bangkolaem, BKK 10120 Thailand. Tel.02-673-1436 Time call 04.00 AM or after 10.00 PM Fortune Teller: I give you many gifts I am teacher English teacher/ Thai language Ride big bicycle." She was one of the lucky ones. Occasionally she probably was able to find a foreigner who wanted to learn Thai and each day she was able to give some fortunes that allowed her to have her own little room and a telephone. Thin as she was, she was able to live even if, in part, she had to seek clients in the beggars themselves. He waited around for the park to open. Slipping into numbness with nothing industrious to do, his integrity was shaken. He didn't want to be here. He could still go back to Kazem, he told himself.

Kazem had always been "kind" in the respect that he had domineered

over him and protected him from harm except for times when he harmed him; and this interestingly contradictory reality was what made their relationship more sexy and beguiling the way a similar one might beguile a battered woman in love to have more sex and children despite her wish to leave him. Sex (heterosexual or homosexual, conventional or incestuous) was a passion of frenzy based on pleasure bonding and emotional dependency, an inordinate amount of semen and sperm needing to be ejaculated especially after a few days of sexual abstinence, and force and self-consumption in a hunger to defy aloneness in rhythmic banging and basic hedonism. Kazem was strong and being a force that could reckon with the world physically, he engendered in others an instinct rife in interpreting powerful figures such as him as a prime breeding experience. A kind individual could never elicit the same response. For Jatupon a muscular presence that could harm him oozed not only a pheromone but triggered in him a yearning to breed with a prime specimen who asserted his will. If he had been a woman a baby of this kind might well be created. It would be a baby who would become a man well equipped to survive and be sexy enough to perpetuate another generation of this kind and deep in the psyche of every human was that wish to breed with the best physical specimens.

This being "in love" was an addictive rush and despite his mental convictions, his body craved for the beloved. Still one night had totally passed without him and there would be others. The time on the ground had been uncomfortable but he knew he could be inured to it. He could numb himself to survive and it wouldn't be all that bad. This wound Kazem had given him was a blackening of perspective as well as the eye. It was the only gift he had really given him: the gift of maturity.

He did not know what he was to do with the day. Was he to spend the last of his baht on bags of breadcrumbs that, like an old man, he was to spread out for his friends, the pigeons? He paid a couple baht at a public bathroom. After relieving himself, he took a partial bath by cleaning part of his upper body in a sink. Then he went into a booth that had a faucet, which leaked water into an Asian style toilet. Through effort he was able to catch some of the water before it went into this urinal that was embedded into the floor. He was able to wash off a bit of his lower extremities by these sprinkles. He didn't want to splash too much water or he might be fined or arrested.

Numb and wary how to proceed with the hours of the days, he did not know what to do with himself or how others in his predicament wrestled with their time. Was he supposed to meander along with nothing to guide his walking? Was he supposed to follow behind those who seemed like herds and those who seemed like flocks? If so, he told himself, it should be with those who were homeless. By following them he could learn how homeless people survived best and fulfill, at least in a minuscule way, one's innate need for society. He felt loose and disconcerted. His thoughts insurrected him and it felt as if they were towing away bits of his brain. The post office would open in a few hours. He could make the long sojourn to his mailbox and see if he had a letter from Noppawan Piggy but public transportation cost money so he just needed to comfort himself with the ideas that she had presented to him. She often said that everyone from ambassadors to beggars sewed such petty lives for themselves. At least he thought those were her exact words. She said something to that effect. Each time that he tried to remember exactly what she had written to him, and what she had spoken from the boat, it became different. It was distorted by the impermanent neurological circuitry of the brain (so little did one possess himself). The world was godless, love was a selfish realm, and from what he knew of friendship, it was with people who used each other to grow for a certain time or share similar attitudes in the hope of not feeling alone when going through certain stages of life. He wondered if even his friendship with Noppawan was evanescent as a whiff of clouds. Why should she write to him, he thought to himself.

If there hadn't been a bit of a thrill in becoming independent and killing off past associations with family, he told himself, he would commit suicide. He couldn't really see much point in survival anyhow with the inevitability of death biting at one's heels. It was good to kill off past family associations. His aunt, he thought, had invited a boy of his realm into her domain only to find that he had too many needs and wasn't worth the trouble-the dog that needed to be sent back to the pet store. He resented her and was pleased with his independent stance at severing family from his mind. He tried to forget the comfort of sleeping in his cell and never having to worry about having money for meals and public toilets.

He slept intermittently on park benches throughout the day. To avoid

hunger and thirst he took a cup he found in the trash and begged outside the park. He watched a blind old woman with a wooden attaché case of lottery tickets, a jasmine rosary salesman with merchandise looped around his arms like long bracelets who went from car to car, a woman at a table stringing them for her own sales (even the mendicants had to compete with each other to gain a mere sustenance), sidewalk seamstresses with their antique foot pumped sewing machines, and a man with a bicycle-pulled ice-cream cart who stood there scooping out a dip for someone. A sock salesman at his table sat on a stool with his hand poised under his chin when the rest of his life was faltering. They did not have such petty lives. They, no different than the rich, consumed food and expended their kinetic energy and liquids in the bedroom in this perennial trap that human instinct and physiognomy concocted. He put on his sunglasses to blind himself from the motion around him and time became stagnant as a traffic jam he was witnessing-the people finally oozing out of trapped busses and around halted vehicles like leaking oil. The hours passed somehow and again the park closed and he slept on its fringes with many others.

The next morning taught him that breakfast could be waived if begging from the previous evening had not gotten him the twenty baht required for a meal but he needed to always keep some coins in his pockets so that he could go into a public bathroom. Around 2:00 sidewalk restaurant workers tended to need their own respite from drudgery and a barter arrangement of a meal for an hour's work could sustain him and keep him from having to buy food. As non-preferable as it was, the police did not badger one if he washed away his rotting layers of stinking skin in the polluted canals or the Chao Phraya River so long as he entered and exited with his underwear on. The waters did give him a skin rash, after a few days of bathing in this manner, but this itch around his thighs was bearable. Lucrative ventures came every now and then when men wanted him. He, at such times, was sufficiently numb and insouciant in manhood and he would go there and serve them safely without letting the whining child within him clamor out. He performed, was paid, and left never combining emotions with such a physical act. These men would not be his deliverance. He had to force that idea into his head and fight off his wish for a savior.

Within a month and a little bit of persistency against refusals, the metropolitan authorities scheduled him for an interview as a money taker on a city bus. He was scheduled with a score of others despite his age. He might not have gotten any job at all let alone a better one than what he was applying for had English not rescued him. They needed someone knowledgeable of English in the information booth in an air-conditioned cubicle at a skytrain station. He would not be wearing the grungy blue suits of the money takers but white ones that looked like a captain. The thought of it filled him with pride.

They gave him an advance so that he could buy this clothing, rent out a cheap room, and not fast when it came to purchasing his lunches. They didn't give him a day off but outside of making change for the customers that needed to be done quickly, the work was easy. It just required a familiarity with major landmarks around each of the stops and that he be able to direct foreigners where they needed to go. National holidays (when he got them) were spent in the vicarious borrowing of a personal life from a movie at a theatre. He didn't really know his coworkers. Since it was his first job, and a new one at that, he kept quiet and focused on his work. He looked gauche and foolish and he worked around them trying not to get into much contact. They gossiped about others whom he didn't know (perhaps himself as well) and repeatedly asked how he knew English so well. Their tones always became more caustic in addressing him; and when it came to justifying his knowledge of English he would always vary his answers fictitiously so as not to feel that he was buried in a rubble of monotony. His introverted awkwardness was at variance with their complacent self-assured movements, and he withdrew into a world of shadows surreal as being sucked up into random scenes of a silent picture show. He was friendless and alone. Outside of Noppawan, he couldn't even imagine anyone who really cared about him a little; but he did not have time to go to his post office box and he feared that she was lost to him forever. A solitary person usually needed to invent a commiserating individual out there even if that person did not really care; but he did not know anyone with whom to fool himself and he saw that despite the Noppawan Doctrine against pettiness, he was securing a petty life for himself like everyone else and the exhilaration from his independence was waning.

As Vanont slipped 40 baht through the hole of the window, Jatupon changed it, attempting to keep his eyes steady in a marginally sunken

poise of professionalism without any special recognition of the customer wanting the change. The old man smiled at him warmly. "Where have you been, my boy?" he asked.

Nawin Biadklang: it was a label, just a simple and different group of words in which an entire metamorphosis took place. He was new and glorious and the lost and forlorn being that was Jatupon had fallen from him effortlessly like the stink of scathing skin that he had showered away in the morning. Nawin Biadklang stood near the Hualampong train station, watching the mosaic of light and shadow at his feet like a child fully in the splendor of the present moment. He was drinking milk at a newsstand and thinking about his recent meeting with Piggy in the Siriaj Hospital Museum. He had asked her to go with him to Wonder World Amusement Park but she wanted the silence away from the meaningless of action. He turned to the headlines of the Bangkok Post glancing at the cacophony of human relations.

He read that a very passive anti-war demonstration had occurred in Pattaya. 10,000 Thai Moslems had prayed for peace. Well, he thought, it was certainly gentler than placards and banners outside the American Embassy in Bangkok, equating Bush as Satan; however it was probably less effective. Was the God who allowed thousands of people to be incinerated in fire and melting steel caring especially about the fate of the Afghans from a meditation and a chant? He thought that it was no wonder people tried to shut out larger issues than themselves and seek comfort in the personal domain of their petty lives. He turned away from the newspaper. Four filthy boys came to him forcefully. They wanted milk from his grocery bag. They wanted the same as what he was drinking while reading the horror of the daily news. He gave part of what he had but he didn't want to give out the rest. He was already becoming coarse in his luck and he knew that he was guilty for providing them with a nominal gratuity and shooing them away. He went inside the building, looked for more food and magazines to take with him on his trip, and then entered the train.

When the train began to move he went into a corridor connecting two cars and rinsed his face in the sink. He looked into the mirror. Even his reflection seemed different. His eyebrows seemed more bristly and masculine. He wasn't Jatupon any longer. A good son must join the monastery for a while to fulfill his mother's wish to see her son take on such holy head-shaven rites. A good son must fund the livelihood of his middle-aged parents who wanted to be free from the hardship of work. A good son must renovate and extend the house of his elderly parents. A scenario of filial loyalty to serve the parents' wishes abounded in Thais' simplistic notions of "good" behavior but tragedy had freed him from it. Then abuse disabused him of fraternal loyalties. Now he would be educated and find new compounds in his sunrises and sunsets.

A train officer asked him to get his luggage out of the way of the aisle. Jatupon put his suitcase onto the ceiling rack and sat down watching the scenery go by-watching Bangkok zip past him and become the vanishing point from which something different would emerge from his experiences at Chaing Mai International School. He pulled the postcard out of his pocket. He read the words again and again, "I got them to allow me to come to Chaing Mai. I'll transfer there. See you in a week." He smiled, slapped the postcard against his lower lip, and watched the departure from Bangkok where the scenery became increasingly green.

When he came home he opened the door onto plentiful space. His body became stiff and cold. He needed to give directives to his legs in order to move. The movements of his splayed legs when he walked were like parting ice cycles even though the furnace was operating and it was warm inside his apartment. Nearly everything movable by two hands was gone, as well as most that would have required an additional mover. Only the heaviest things remained although clavicles of hangers dangled from the bedroom closet and pots and pans were loyal and steadfast. The sofa remained. It had been difficult to get in. It was no wonder that it hadn't been budged. His socks and underwear had been knocked out of the dresser before it was taken. He sighed. His canvases were gone and from them his new leitmotif that was maturing beyond Patpong whores in Bangkok to something more thoughtful and original. True, most of those canvases had been of her so she must have thought that she was entitled to them as well. She was the model and more who was seeking justice, he told himself, and justice was equity. He hadn't paid her so she was seeking compensation. All relationships were a contract. All contracts were based upon the two parties gaining some entitlement from the agreement. Was there nothing better than this, he asked himself. There wasn't. He had thought that he was helping her, that he was enlightening her, and that he was involved with her. A tear rolled

down his cheek. She thought that she was entitled to the canvasses too, he repeatedly thought. She thought she was entitled to it all. Then, for a second, his attitude changed about the stolen paintings and he was glad that, at least, she had cared enough to take them. Then he knew that she would shake sentiment from them no different than tossing out the contents of his clothing from the dresser. She would sell even those portraits of herself wherever she could.

He backed against an empty wall and slid down it squatting like a dog ready to defecate. Then he pulled into himself in a fetal position. He was Jatupon in his puddle of blood yearning for the love of the violator. If love was mixing oneself into someone like vodka and cola, he loved her. If it was a child crying over the loss of his favorite toy, he was feeling that. Should a Thai newspaper reporter get a look at him now, he thought, the nonchalant seducer of the souls of Patpong girls would seem to him as a fraud. The reporter would be disillusioned that this young man championed for his bit of hedonism had been an illusion. His head throbbed. He needed love from anyone, sex with a stranger, anything that would stop the pain in his head. With difficulty he slowly removed his winter coat and gloves with the awkwardness of a child.

Love, glue, or cocaine-it was all the same. It was all molecules of smell and taste. It was a vertiginous freedom and insobriety of action exempt of logic. It was the personal adventure in a world of impersonal actions. It was admiring certain characteristics that were lacking in oneself and it sometimes contained some degree of friendship and caring or wanting to be cared about. Maybe it was a vulnerability of a human's weaker domain that wanted to merge with another being to seem to himself as if he were less petty than what he really was or to record himself permanently in the thoughts of another being.

It was all gone including those canvasses on French Quebec mannequins. His evolution as an artist had been stunted. He wanted to cry but beyond that one tear there was nothing. All he could do was moan and pick up the telephone. He needed a connection. He needed Noppawan. Her sister answered. "Nawin," she said nervously, "she moved. She got a different teaching position. She wanted a change. She doesn't want to see you-I'm not really sure why and I don't think she means it permanently. Well, I do understand why. She's moving on. I don't think that she sees it as much of a marriage. Surely you understand that point. I like you but—" He clicked off the telephone. He couldn't help himself. The void was sucking him into its black hole. He wanted to lie on his bed. He was thankful to still have one. He wanted Kazem to materialize and to copulate with him on that bed. He remembered then, long ago, having his thoughts in a black hole and doubting if Kazem's love was real, seeing the abstraction of love in colors and design like cubism, and how hungry he was in love with Kazem especially when doubting that love. Nothing had changed. He loved Porn and Piggy each in their own way as desperate as a clinging salamander in the rain.

He called Thai information. He asked the operator to search for Suthep, the youngest and the one closest to his sympathies. At least he used to be. Then he had her search for Kazem and even Kumpee. None of the three had phone connections in their names. His aunt, if she were still living, would be married to someone else. How would he be able to find her again in this vast and mutable cosmos? He wouldn't. The operator gave him the number of Amorn Tuwayanonde. Maybe it was the same one whom he had sometimes begged and played with as a boy-maybe the same one who had grabbed his shoe instead of the ankle causing his dangling body to fall from the window and into the warehouse triggering off the burglar alarm. He dialed the number. A man answered. Nawin did not know what to say so he hung up the telephone. The one he really wanted to connect with was his uncle and he was dead. And yet they hadn't really had a relationship. It was strange that the man had paid for all of his tuition and stay at the international school, all undergraduate and graduate expenses, and yet had remained a stranger. He had been the man's son, in a way, and outside a couple times of staying at his home, during Songkran, he had not known him. When he died he did not inherit anything. He didn't even want or expect anything. He was grateful for the educational transformation that had been bestowed unto him. What happened to the man's money was anyone's guess.

If only he could commune with him somehow to again thank him it would solidify a meaningful connection in his barren heart. The cards congratulating him on his first art exhibition at the art museum at Silpakorn University and later, the temporary exhibit at the National Gallery showed that he must have cared about him. He must have been proud of him. "Congratulations on the showing." That was all they had

said. Nawin guessed that the man had read about him in the newspapers and knew of the exhibits that way. It was all strange.

On his knees he scurried through his socks while discarding his underwear in a pile. Most of those socks that she had littered on the floor were folded into each other as mates, but not all. He felt inside each sock and when he couldn't find anything he would throw it into that pile like a dead fish. Within the toes of one pair he pulled out four plastic bags of cocaine. It was his stash for periods of loss and he monitored what he took according to the dictates of his third of a teaspoon rule for self-rations. The Nawin rule stated that once every three months if an emergency arose requiring exhilaration or thrust away from the void, then he might administer the prescription. Such was his doctoral degree of addiction and from this philosophical islet inundations from void and addiction could not take him away. He sat on the unmovable sofa and snorted the cocaine from one of its wooden armrests. He could feel it like a Thai massage over his entire body and the insouciance it brought to his thoughts.

He put on his winter coat and gloves and got in a taxi. He told the taxi driver to take him to a go-go bar called "Foxy's." He had been there several times before. He watched women twisting their bodies around poles as if each movement of being a woman was centered on waxing the shiny phallus. Tissue paper probably enlarged their bosoms but he didn't care. He would eat the juicy fruit and its wrappings no different than any nigger his melon. He wanted to relieve himself in one or more of them. Lost, he wanted to be led by the hallucinations of his mind. When one who was on break said her hellos and sat down on his lap, he put his paws on all parts of her body. She told him that he was a "naughty boy" and asked him where he was from. He told her. She said that she liked Asian men since they were so small. He told her that he wasn't small. "I've seen them before. They are itsy bitsy small." She used her fingers as a measurement. It wasn't what he cared to hear and although he wanted to pierce her with his lengthy sword, he left in disgust. He walked further down the street to a male go-go bar that he had never been in before although his wistful eyes had scanned it numerous times in the past month.

When he entered young men from their angles of the platform were pulling on their genitalia within dark frothy briefs of an opaque translucency that made the movements of their genitalia obvious. He watched and waited not understanding why it was erotic. He watched and waited for the midnight all-legal fuck show. He was tempted to take these sly masturbators by force until what little was rational in his brain contrived a belief that he was shackled against the wall waiting to be attacked by them. That portion of the brain said to him, "Even if you were to get out of your shackles and fetters it would be bad manners to attack these men before they come to attack you." He watched their contortionist-twisting and the surreal images on the stage became more like flames and smoke. The why-the reason that the movements were erotic—eluded him. The why-the reason—that flames and smoke plumes made these adonises erotic in a spinning room of gnarling metallic walls was a mystery.

He wasn't sure if it was a dismembered part of a woman, a transvestite, or something amorphous and alien, but lips in the sky spoke to him. "Do you want to take one home, honey?"

"I want all of them," he said. She laughed.

"Do you have that much money?" she asked.

"Maybe for one," he said. "I need one to fuck me and my girlfriend throughout the night."

"That will be double the price, but well worth it. We'll see to that. Satisfaction guaranteed. What's your girlfriend's name, honey?" asked the lips.

"Foxy's," he said.

"Foxy's, like the girl go-go bar across the street?"

"I don't know her name," he told the lips.

"You don't know your girlfriend's name?" guffawed the lips.

"I never checked the birth certificate."

"Never checked the birth certificate! What a crazy mother fucker you are!" The lips laughed hysterically.

"Do you have paint and canvases?"

"Do I have what?"

"I need paint. I'll paint the fuck show on the walls. I'm a famous artist in Thailand. Don't you know?"

"No, is that so?"

"I have to draw when the fuck show begins."

The lips laughed hysterically. She coughed from choking on her own saliva. "Wanting to pay in paint?" she asked.

"Wanting to paint a fuck show," he said. He looked through her mouth. He could see down her throat into her entrails. Her brain was where her stomach should have been.

"Where to?" asked the taxi driver. The voice again seemed like one he could vaguely recall. A boy who had been on top in the fuck show (a boy 18 or 19 who was a snowman with a bit of a French complexion) was seated next to him. He remembered paying top Canadian dollars for this boy.

"Just keep going."

"You said that 15 minutes ago but I need a destination."

"Foxy's" he said.

"We passed that long ago. It was right across the street from where you were at," said the taxi driver through his gray balding scalp.

"Okay, just take us out of the city. Someplace rural."

"Okay, I'm now turning on a highway going north."

"Do you still want me with your girlfriend?" asked the boy.

"I was going to pair you up with a girl: voyeurism. I've had second thoughts." He kissed the boy on his lips. He wanted to drain him of all liquids including his breath.

The boy pulled back his face to come up for breath. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know, really. Maybe we should go to a hotel. I guess we can't do it in the backseat here, off of a road somewhere."

"Yeah, the back seat of a taxi thing wouldn't be too comfortable for anyone."

"Yeah, okay."

"There's a sign pointing out a Best Western," he told Nawin. "Can you take us to that hotel?" the boy asked the taxi driver.

"Excuse me. Is that the decision? Best Western?" asked the taxi driver.

"Yes," said Nawin.

Turning to Nawin he interjected, "You aren't a psycho, cannibal, or anything, are you?"

"I'm a vegetarian," said Nawin. He chuckled. "Don't worry. I won't cut you up into pieces. I'm harmless, and I hope the same is true of you."

"Sure, most of the time," said the boy as he yawned.

"Jatupon, don't be shocked! Look at me in the rear view mirror. Face your fears," said the taxi driver. Jatupon looked up. He was startled but he wasn't horrified. He saw that the mosquito was in the old man's form.

"I made a merger," said the mosquito. "I bought out the stock of his blood. With controlling stock I am the head of the company. I control all movements." He laughed. "How do I look?"

Nawin did not know what to say. "My God, I haven't seen you in 12 years, my boy. You've grown up. You have money and nice clothes. Who'd ever think we'd meet again and in Montreal of all places."

Nawin laughed bitterly "Don't use that word, Jatupon, with me. Okay? I hate that word. You didn't need to emerge. My lessons about life are all my own, now."

"Can you face life without clinging to anything?"

"It is the way of the Buddha"

"But is it your way?"

"Sure, why not? If I choose so I can do anything. If I choose, I can swat you out of existence."

"The only friend you've ever had?"

"Sure, why not? Just like with a gnat." He slapped him on the head and the mosquito seemed to shrink.

"Please don't. Who will drive you then if you get rid of me? You killed my ancestors in your buckets of laundry soap and slapped them into your palms like a sport. I think that is enough."

"I can get into another cab if I choose. I can stop the coke if I choose. I don't need women or anybody least of all you. But you know, you aren't so bad. You certainly aren't scary any longer. Maybe I'll let you stay."

"Gee, thanks." The mosquito paused for a moment. "Why do you have this go-go boy in here? Who is this boy?" he asked.

"Someone I'm ready to fuck"

"I gathered that; and that the tenor of the conversation had turned against back seat liaisons. I'm just puzzled by these changeable sexual patterns, Jatupon. Something's not right in your head."

"Listen! Don't use that name with me or I'll take you by the fucking neck and smash your face against the windshield"

"Okay, Nawin, calm down."

"For that matter, I could roll down the window and let you fly out and drive myself. I have an international driver's license. Nawin is a big boy, now, Mosquito." He guffawed at the pest and slapped him on the head. The mosquito/man hissed and stuck out its fangs. "You watch yourself. You are in forces over your head. You're not even in control of yourself. Why did you get married? Why did you bring Porn here? Why am I and this boy with you now? What forces drive you?"

"Hunger."

"Porn?"

"Hunger."

"Noppawan?"

"Union."

"Hunger again. Hunger for stability."

"Okay, hunger again. Women are a turn on"

"Are they? And here you are with a boy, Jatupon."

"The name's Nawin," he shouted. Then he calmed down and laughed at himself. "Yeah, it's Jatupon; and you're right, here I am with a boy." He laughed again. "Variety is the spice of life. That is an American aphorism, Mosquito; and Nawin here is a full blooded American born in the states."

"I don't see a Best Western. How far out on this road do you want to go?"

Nawin looked at the boy next to him who had fallen asleep. "He looks like a child-a hurt child trying in sleep to just figure out how to make sense out of his situation, survive and not sell himself out too fully. I should be saving kids like this-even in Canada kids can be trashed."

"Will you save him before or after you fuck him?"

"Maybe I ought to just go home. This guy on top or bottom isn't going to stop me from hurting or from being hungry. It just propels me quicker to the next hunger." He smiled. "I think I can get a grip on me completely. I really do. Having people plug up my pain is the glue that I disgorge into my nostrils, the caulk and the repainting that hides the broken facade. I don't want to be a wrinkled black thing like you and still picking up prostitutes. Piggy had the right idea. I might as well start the habit sooner than later."

"She's left you. She's gone now."

"It's okay. Maybe she needs some time to grow away from being a Biadklang. Maybe she needs to get rid of my name completely. I can be alone. I need a relationship with myself anyhow. Maybe I'll see her again and maybe not. Anyhow, there's some Aristotle and Plato I want to read-a textbook on tenebrism I need to get through for my Caravaggio class. I'll have to begin my doctoral thesis shortly."

"Hollow ideas."

"To the impetuosity of human feelings, hollow; but not to the mind. There the theory of forms is sensed as eternal. Take me home. Drop this kid off wherever he wants first."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CORPUS OF A SIAM
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