



*A*SEAN

SHORT STORIES & POEMS

by

**S.E.A. WRITE
AWARDEES**

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สมาคมภาษาและหนังสือ
แห่งประเทศไทย



PEN INTERNATIONAL THAILAND CENTER



ASEAN

SHORT STORIES & POEMS BY

S. E. A. WRITE AWARDEES

1999

EDITED BY
SRISURANG POOLTHUPYA



THAI P.E.N. CENTRE
Bangkok

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PREFACE

The Thai P.E.N. Centre or P.E.N. International Thailand Centre is called Samakhom Phasa Lae Nangsue (Language and Book Society) in Thai. The society was established in 1958, became P.E.N. International Member in 1959, and was accepted under the Royal Patronage of H.M. the King in 1973. The chief aim of the Thai P.E.N. Centre is to promote literary growth and act in accordance with the P.E.N. Charter, for example, to use what influence it has in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations. On the 21st September 1999, in the seminar at Suan Phakkad Palace on "Literary Exchange and Cooperation among ASEAN Writers," S.E.A. Write awardees and representatives of the Thai P.E.N. and the Thai Writers' Association decided that the Thai P.E.N. should publish prominent works of the S.E.A. Write Awardees of 1999 to promote good understanding among ASEAN countries through literature. Since the works are in English, they will interest readers all over the world. Unfortunately, the awardee from Myanmar passed away and no one could translate his short story into English. It is hoped that the contributions from the other nine awardees of 1999 will make international literary circles aware of the distinctive as well as common cultures and aspirations of ASEAN countries.

Srisurang Poolthupya
President of the Thai P.E.N. Centre

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Most of all, the Thai P.E.N. Centre must thank the S.E.A. Write awardees for their contribution and co-operation which make this book possible.

Srisurang Poolthupya
President of the Thai P.E.N. Centre

SIARAU RIVER

Norsiah M.S.

BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

There you sat with your legs dangling over the edge of a wooden bridge. Everyday you sat there dreaming and watching the birds, frogs, fresh-water fish and surrounding people. You noted it all in your diary, your constant companion. Once you were so engrossed, watching an old man running about throwing stones at some creature, that you forgot and almost burst out laughing when he skidded and fell. The creature lifted its hind legs, displaying its buttock to insult the old man, and you were amazed at its ability. The creature's behavior made you burst out laughing so you had to shut your mouth hard and press your belly. When you stopped laughing, you tried to imagine the old man's eccentric behavior. You stood up and walked back and forth awhile before imitating it.

I

He couldn't control his anger anymore. He tried initially; but a few minutes later, it exploded and obscured his vision. He started to curse, mentioning someone's name; cursed again, repeating more names. He did this until satisfied. Then he started to throw stones, chase the creature, and throw more stones again. he became angrier when he didn't hit his target. He kept on chasing the creature with all his might until he started panting, out of breath. Only then did he stop chasing it. He sat down to rest until regaining his breath to chase it again, but the

creature ran even faster and left him far behind. Obviously the creature was swifter and more agile. The man, however, after a brief acceleration, fell into a sitting position like a catfish short of breath in shallow water. Fortunately, the old man could stand up again. He continued to chase it while throwing stones.

II

They laughed heartily. Couldn't stop, couldn't control it. They continued laughing while pressing their stomachs. Some even laughed while stamping their feet. They laughed without realizing its strangeness. One of them laughed hysterically, not only pressing his stomach but knocking his forehead with his left hand. The knock left a translucent red mark on his fair skin. Suddenly, they stopped laughing. One of them behaved like a musical conductor and used his hands to signal them to stop. There was a momentary silence, but soon they burst out laughing again. It was worse than before. This time they sang as they laughed:

*"Pity he didn't hit it, the old man left miserably
short in stature but smart;
Lips dangling from a wide face,
that's him with no resemblance,
mistaken for a jackfruit.
He throws but misses
neither short-sighted nor blind,
that nurse-maid of deity."*

The old man stopped throwing stones and turned around.

"Why are you laughing at me?" he asked them.

"We're laughing at it," answered one of them.

"Who is it?" he asked again.

"You don't know it?" they asked him instead.

"But then, what was it?" he asked again.

"The one just now."

"Who?" he asked, more confused.

"Yes, the one playing run-and-chase," they explained.

"That was me, but I wasn't playing," he explained.

They were confused by his answer. They exchanged glances while nodding and shaking their heads.

"Problem!" they said simultaneously. "We were watching. It's the one who played chase," they added again.

"That's me out of anger. I chased the creature, threw stones and cursed it," he explained. He looked at them a while, gazed a while longer and kept staring. They remained silent. They bowed and didn't dare speak.

They were still quiet when he told them: "You deserved it," pointing at their faces.

Then they started to sing again in unison:

*"Duck, duck, duck, duck
eggs, eggs, eggs, eggs
awe, awe, awe, awe,
the plank crossing broke.
The duck lays eggs,
the hen hatches them,
wo, woo, wooo, woooo
yee, yeee, yeeee . . . !"*

They stopped for a while. Two minutes later they started singing again:

*"Oh my darling sweetheart
your wild flowers are gone
plucked completely by Jamil
Jamil with the red eyes
ye, ye, yaho, yaho."*

They stopped singing, and it was quiet for a while.

"Please don't be angry, uncle. We told you what we saw. We were not fabricating stories. We spoke the truth," explained the shortest one among them.

"Ugh. Of course many people are like you. They are afraid of telling the truth. They hide it and give excuses

to avoid any consequences," the old man exclaimed loudly.

"We actually laughed at the creature; not at you, uncle."

"Is it true that you only laughed at it?"

"Yes, it was so comical."

"So funny, but why?"

"Dear friends," responded one of the group, "didn't you hear uncle ask why we laughed at it?"

"Yes we did. Why shouldn't we laugh at it?" asked a young man with a thick mustache and black spectacles.

"We were not laughing at you, uncle. After all, it didn't concern you," he added.

"What crass behavior!" the old man responded. "Pretending to be good! Look in the mirror; look very carefully and question your behavior. Why do you loiter around here watching the village girls pass by and the pregnant women bathe in the river. Why don't you spend your time working on the farms or doing something beneficial rather than screaming and laughing like lunatics?"

"Don't bother with them, uncle," said an unknown man passing by. "They're just noisy and like to tease."

After the stranger shook his hand, they stepped aside. He whispered to the old man, "See, uncle. They're the next generation and the future leaders of the 21st century!"

This pacified the old man and made him smile, since he thought the stranger was making fun of the young village men.

"Don't you want to ask why we said that to you, uncle?" asked one of the tall young men whose hair was flattened with designer brand hair oil.

"Why ask?"

"So you know the reason," answered the short man whose eyes squinted as he laughed heartily.

The old man kept silent. He didn't want to respond to the young man who was so busy laughing noisily.

III

You had stopped imitating the old man's behavior in order to write down your observation of him. After a while, you sat down again with your feet dangling over the bridge and continued your observation.

It was getting dark. Bats were beginning to perch on the fruit trees near Siarau River. Its water was flowing swiftly because of last night's rain that had also eroded the river bank, making the murky water a deep yellow color. A big and thickly leafed Durian tree that fell across the river was now being used by the villagers as a bridge for easy access to a small mosque situated beyond. As long as I can remember, the villagers haven't preferred using the wooden bridge built by the government to visit the mosque for daily prayers. Since the Durian tree fell across the river three months ago, villagers have used it instead.

When it didn't rain, the water of the Siarau River was limpid and still. Children took baths there and dove in from the wooden bridge. Some villagers still fetched drinking water from Siarau River, even when it rained and the water became a muddy yellow, since its blessing by Syekh Kadir Jailani¹, who had been seen taking his ablutions and bath there. The villagers never questioned whether the person seen taking his bath and ablutions at the river was really Syekh Kadir Jailani. Who among the villagers really knew him? On the other hand, many villagers believed that the Siarau River was magic and could cure various diseases, because the river was situated near the mosque and became the site where people performed their ablutions before public prayers.

The village women also believed that the river water was special. When it was almost time for the *Maghrib*² prayer, many pregnant women bathed there to carry out their vows. On Thursday nights, the villagers placed coins along the bridge railings and lit candles as part of their

vows. The village children waited on the bridge to collect the coins they would use to buy smoked and pounded cuttlefish at Ramli's stall situated at the center of a row of houses. Have you forgotten that, when you were a child, you too carried candles and took coins placed on the bridge railings while chanting:

*"Salute, mister,
your descendant is coming.
Hey, Mr. Syekh,
allow your descendant
to carry candles and take coins
without difficulties
without misfortune.
Those from the trunk will return to the trunk.
Those from the river will return to the river.
Those from the forest will return to the forest.
'Cause your descendants wish to play
elbow to elbow.
Salute, mister."*

But you didn't use the coins. Instead, you put them in the "alms box" in your village mosque. Have you forgotten that some village youths teased you for donating the "coins" to the mosque fund instead of buying cuttlefish? Did you forget you had been accused of tarnishing village customs and traditions, accused of wilful behavior because you put coins into the mosque fund? Yes, that is the story of your childhood.

Everything was silent. The old man you were still watching was now standing there pointing to the right and left. Then you saw him grasp his hands and try to hit the wind.

Suddenly you saw them again from the bushes to your left. There were more now, and they were standing in an orderly fashion blocking the old man's path. Your assumptions about him had been wrong. Now you felt uncertain. The old man was alone and there were many creatures. More appeared—one, two, three more from

the bushes to your right. They were white, these creatures, and produced scary sounds. The old man couldn't hurl stones any longer, as he had done before. He couldn't even move his right hand that now seemed tied behind his back. Slowly the old man retreated while you stood there ready to take cover.

"I have told you that this place was haunted, the river guarded. *Haji*³ Nayan did not believe it, nor did *Haji Ibrahim*. My wife did not believe it; neither did my children. No one believed it," he shouted. "Now, see for yourself. Are these really transformational creatures . . . animal spirits?" he added while shouting.

"Why did you hurt my people? What did they do wrong?" one of them was speaking.

"Because they bathed and excreted in this river," the old man answered while retreating. "This river is not for animals like you. This river is for good people. It is a place for the *Wali*⁴, not creatures like you!" yelled the old man.

"This river flows swiftly. It is not dead. Even when the water is muddy, it is pure and sacred. Whether or not people urinate and excrete in it, the water is still sacred like the absolute." The creature stopped speaking for a while, then continued.

"Human beings are no better. They urinate and excrete in it. In fact, human beings are the worst. Not only do they throw everything into the river, including carcasses, they block it upstream then poison it, killing the fish. They leave the unwanted fish to float and rot on the river. In truth, fish are also created by God. The only difference is that you human beings have brains and thoughts."

The old man was speechless upon hearing this. As he listened, he moved back slowly, while the creature moved forward as if preparing to attack.

On seeing this, you could do nothing. You had mixed feelings of sympathy and fear. You felt sympathy for the old man and frightened of the creatures. Now you were certain that the old man was not stupid, not insane. You started to realize that all this time the old man had some

special power. He could see what other people could not; yet, all this time, he had been belittled by the young men of your village. They teased and taunted him. And you had never seen a single person dare advise the young men to stop making fun of him.

"Why did you chase him away?" the creature asked. "Was he bothering you? As far as I know, none of my people ever bother anyone as long as they are not bothered. We don't want to be hostile. We just want to live here as you do," he added.

Once again the old man was forced to keep quiet. He couldn't guess what to say, couldn't really think. And the old man couldn't comprehend this creature's ability to speak and to change forms so frequently.

You were also dumbfounded by this. You would also be ashamed for not helping the old man. Why didn't you scream out for help to the villagers? Why couldn't you speak or leave for help? Why did you just watch and not act like a man should?

IV

One villager after another left home for the *Isyak*⁵ prayer at the mosque. Those in a hurry would usually cross the Siarau River over the fallen Durian trunk, even though it was infested by ants.

Haji Ibrahim and *Haji Nayan*, both faithful followers of Islam, were getting ready to return home from the mosque. Each held a torch along the torch-lit path to the Siarau River, the fallen tree crossing and the wooden bridge. Both men were wearing white robes. On that dark evening, they looked like wooden stumps moving across the wooden bridge.

Even though they were approaching, you didn't notice their arrival. Had you made up your mind not to greet them, even if they passed in front of you, to not shake hands like a normal person? Didn't it occur to you they

would consider you arrogant and disrespectful to your elders? Did you want to be branded as a loiterer who didn't know the proper customs? Didn't it cross your mind that *Haji Ibrahim* was the person who led the prayer at the mosque and that *Haji Nayan* was the village head, especially influential among the villagers since he was a property broker and had gone to Mecca seven times to perform the Haj? And what about *Haji Ibrahim*? He was not only capable of memorizing the entire thirty-seventh chapter of the Quran, but many villagers learned how to read the Quran from him. It was only through alms given by the villagers that he was able to build a sundry shop in the village.

Why didn't you care about those two? Why did you dislike them? Shouldn't you be the first to stand up and bow in respect to greet an elder?

I am puzzled why everyone always blames me. Why side with them when you are me. You know I don't disturb anyone. I just sit here everyday. I sit and watch the people every evening. I sit and watch the scenery and wait for the moon to rise every night. I sit here waiting for the sunrise every morning and listen for the cock to crow each dawn. Is this not permitted? Is it forbidden? prohibited?

Let me stress this again. I was just sitting here dangling my legs over the bridge; yes, just dangling them. I admit I saw people passing by; people taking ablutions in this river; pregnant women and children bathing here. All this I have noted in my diary. And I also admit that I mimicked the old man's behavior of running and falling down in fear from being chased by some strange creature of unknown origin. Not only have I noted this down, I also drew the creature whose face quickly transformed into as many as six different forms. I also admit taking the coins and the lit candles placed by the people on the bridge. I know that they are mad at me for taking those things without permission; but, actually, it's a waste to

light candles and to put coins there since sometimes they fall into the river. The river doesn't need money to live. Without money, the river still flows on. Now I have collected many coins; but, in my feeble and disgraceful state, neither *Haji Nayan* nor *Haji Ibrahim* would allow me to step into the mosque area, let alone go in with other people to pray, not like when I was a child and free to enter.

Actually the strange thing is why the villagers didn't have the guts to prevent the young men from making fun of the old man chasing the strange creature. Was it because *Haji Nayan's* and *Haji Ibrahim's* sons were among them? Was this an exemplary judgment, or what? Since the villagers respect *Haji Nayan* and *Haji Ibrahim*, they never concern themselves with the behavior of those men's sons, what they were up to. The fact is *Haji Nayan* and *Haji Ibrahim's* sons are the ones who led the village youth to watch the pregnant women take baths in the river, to make fun of the old people, and to perform other mischief against our customs. Yet no one dared raise that issue and bring a complaint to *Haji Nayan* and *Haji Ibrahim*. Bewildered and frightened, the villagers just ignored it. At one time you complained about their behavior, but what you got was verbal abuse. Then they tied your legs together and threw you into the *Siarau River*. But you were lucky; you swam to safety along the river bank.

V

That morning the villagers flocked to the *Siarau River*. *Haji Nayan* was seen walking back and forth on the wooden bridge with his hands pointing agitatedly toward the bushes. Soon, *Haji Ibrahim* with several other villagers appeared from there.

"Found anything, mister?" asked *Haji Nayan*.

"So horrifying," replied *Haji Ibrahim*. "In all my life,

this is the first time I have seen anything like this," he added.

"What was it?" asked *Haji Nayan*.

"It makes my hair stand on end. Just imagine, one part on the left and the other on the right," explained *Haji Ibrahim*.

"The murderer must be very daring," he added. "Otherwise the victims would not have ended up like this." He stood shaking his head.

"Let's take care of the body now since the relatives are here," said *Haji Nayan*.

"All right, but the appropriate authority should be notified of this!" said *Haji Kundur*.

"What *Haji Kundur* said is true, sir," interjected *Haji Nayan's* son *Badar* who with his friends had jeered at the elder trying to catch the creature yesterday afternoon. "The bridge for the road needed at least one head as did the new mosque at *Kampong Pendaruan*. It needed at least three heads; otherwise, the building would be impossible to construct," he continued.

"Don't talk like that," advised *Haji Nayan* as he massaged his eyebrow in bewilderment. "We'd better ask around. Who knows, someone might have seen this incident," he added.

"No one else would be here day and night except *Palak*, the son of late old *Baha*," said *Mali*, *Haji Ibrahim's* son, quite suddenly. He was also with those young men who jeered at the elder chasing the creature.

Haji Ibrahim smiled on seeing him. *Haji Nayan* was annoyed.

"Why are you smiling?" asked *Haji Nayan*.

"It's true. We are in dire straits, but not to the extent we need to believe what a mentally unfit person like *Palak* says," explained *Haji Ibrahim*. "He can't take care of himself not to mention other people's affairs. Remember, he used to roam around naked," added *Haji Ibrahim*.

"That's true. I guess we don't have to find *Palak* anymore. Hey, all of you," *Haji Nayan* said to the young

men of the village. "Let's take care of the dead."

A police car could be seen from a distance approaching the crowd. It finally stopped directly in front of *Haji* Nayan and *Haji* Ibrahim who were still there talking to each other. A police inspector and a sergeant got out from the vehicle. *Haji* Nayan and *Haji* Ibrahim looked at each other. The presence of the police officers convinced them that some of the villagers must have informed the authorities about the incident. The police inspector was seen whispering something to *Haji* Nayan. Then *Haji* Nayan smiled as they looked at you.

You were reluctant to get out of the police car because you felt your condition might further disgrace the villagers. At the police station you had handed over your diary as proof.

As the villagers were busily preparing for the burial of the old man found dead in the bushes, you called out for a prayer as loud as you could in the police car because last night's incident was still fresh in your memory. Even though you knew Mail and Badar were not the ones who murdered the old man, you still maintained that taking money from a dead man's pocket was more disgraceful than being naked and collecting coins from the wooden bridge of the Siarau River.

NOTES

- 1 *Syekh Kadir Jailani*: An Islamic missionary, holy man, and famous theology scholar with many followers.
- 2 *Maghrib*: There are five daily prayers in Islam. The Maghrib prayer takes place at sunset.
- 3 *Haji*: A term of respect for a man who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca.
- 4 *Wali*: Muslim saint.
- 5 *Isyak*: One of the five daily prayers.

DON'T LOVE FLOWERS

Kuntowijoyo

INDONESIA

Father finally got transferred to this city after having waited for years. He used to say, "I want to get to know the world, not just my small village". Just one day after we moved, father had already begun to work and arrived home in the evening. My father looks much healthier now. His body was big and strong, nothing could tire him. Father was very pleased to get a job in the city. He was always occupied by his work. "Laziness is a man's deadliest enemy," he said. It is true that we have a lot of neighbours, but they weaken the mind. And he disliked that very much. Father's work made him unwary of his neighbours, luckily mother has started to make new friends, as she usually does wherever we live. My father would nod at people who happened to pass by, and hastily went back in the house. Mother has often persuaded father to get more acquainted with our community. "We live together with other people," she would say. But none of us has gotten to know our closest neighbour.

People say that a lonely old man lives in that old house with high brick walls. The house is next to mine. A high brick fence conceals the house from outsiders. There is only one door in the front, and it is covered with thick bamboo weavings. I have never seen the old man. After I climbed the brick fence with the help of a papaya tree in my yard, a beautiful scene was revealed before me: a Javanese house, clean and tidy as if it had just been swept, with numerous patches of flowers! I wasn't able to see its owner. I was never home for a whole day, my mother would tell me to go to school in the morning and take

religious lessons in the evening. The first weeks were spent for making new friends in this city.

The urge to get to know the old man never went away. As you can see, the holes in the bamboo weavings were my doing. I made them in the daytime after school. One time, when I was peeking through the holes a friend warned me:

"What do you think you're doing? Beware of him. Something will happen to your hand. Just wait and see."

I was struck with fear. Will I get sick from trying to open this fence?

"Who says?" I argued boldly.

"Everybody," he replied, "You're doomed. He's cursed."

He left me standing beside the fence. My fear intensified. I ran home as fast as I could. Father was sitting on a chair and reading the newspaper. I calmed down. By that time I realized that I left my school bag at the fence next door. It was already evening when I dared to retrieve my bag. And my bag was still where I left it. Nowhere in the world, except on that fence, would a precious bag be left untouched.

My friends would say about that incident: Surely no one would dare take that bag. Who would trade his life for a school bag? It's harder to gain a life than a school bag. No store sells a life, yet every store sells bags. Well, of course!

Since then, my curiosity ceased. It would be too dangerous to investigate with my own eyes. So I started to question other people. Their answers were still vague. Some said that he goes out to shop once a week. Others would say that he shops once a month. Some say that he has a son in another town, yet others say he doesn't have a wife. Nobody really knows for sure about him.

Among my friends I am probably the only one who wants to know more about the old man. My friends just don't care any more. I too have become bored of asking. Anyhow, they couldn't give me a clear answer, and

sometimes they taunt me by saying, "Why don't you be his grandson?"

I have also asked my father. He threw the newspaper in his hand and left me. "For what, huh?" was his answer. That was an answer I have too often heard. "Ask me of locomotives, not of old men next door." I was alone in this world with my urge to know.

I unexpectedly got to know him closely. This is how it happened. It was kite season, the wind was blowing hard. Not many cars passed the road in front of my house, so the police let us fly our kites there. We liked to hang around in the evening. The wind blew freely because there were not many trees.

There were no religious lessons on Friday evening. In my hand was the best kite I had ever made, complete with glass shard strings. The wind merrily lifted my kite. Other kites started flying from neighbouring villages. My kite went astray. My friends cheered and ran after my kite. It was my best kite, and I just stood there gazing at it. Suddenly I felt someone hold my shoulders. I was surprised: An old man with white hair and wearing pajamas. He smiled at me.

"Don't be sad, my child," he said. The voice was hoarse and heavy. I shuddered. The vision of an old house with a high brick fence came to me. My eyes wandered until I saw him. A violet colored flower was in his hands. My body became cold as ice.

"Don't be sad, my child. Life is like flying a kite. Everybody likes kites. Everybody likes life. Nobody wants to die. Yet a kite can break loose. You can feel sorrow. You can suffer. But you will always fly kites. You will always hope to live. Say that life is just a game. Smile, my child."

He reached for my right hand. He bowed and kissed my hand. I was speechless. He slipped the flower into my hand. I held it tight. It was like a dream.

He pulled my hand. I followed him. The flower was in my right hand. Before I knew it, I saw the fence of the

old house. He must be the old man! Oh, my God! I screamed as loud as I could.

Mother brought me home. All I remembered was that mother was already escorting me. At home I saw father sitting in his chair. I felt calm. I felt very embarrassed.

"What's with all that screaming, huh?" greeted my father.

Father inspected me from top to bottom. He stood and reached for my right hand. He said:

"What's this flower for, huh?"

"I don't know why, but I have fallen in love with this flower."

He reached my hand, and grabbed the flower. I saw father's huge muscles clutch my little flower. I tried not to scream.

"Men do not need flowers, Son. Women do. But you are a man."

He threw the flower. I shrieked. Father left me. Mother was still standing there. I crouched my back, took the flower, and brought it to my room. The stalk was bent. One of its leaves was scratched. I kissed it deeply for a long, long time.

That night I was not able to eat. Mother came in my room and tried to persuade me.

"Of course you can raise flowers. Your flower is very good. It has a purple color. It's called an orchid. I like flowers. I'll get a vase, you can fill it with water. So you can put your flower in the vase. This room is going to be beautiful! Alright?"

When I woke up in the morning I felt that the old man and I had become good friends. I remembered it very well: skinny hands with protruding muscles, white hair, hoarse voice. I went to school and passed in front of the old house as usual, but this time I had a friendly feeling. I smiled at the fence, a smile which was meant for the old man, my new friend. I missed him.

I tried to find an opportunity to meet the old man. After school I climbed a papaya tree to get atop the brick fence.

I walked back and forth on top of the fence, and spied at the old house. I caught a glimpse of the old man in the house. I called him and, unexpectedly, he went out to meet me. He was standing below, near where I stood on the wall, and he smiled. He was very kind, good hearted, and loved children.

"Come down, my child. I have a ladder. Just wait."

I climbed down the ladder, and for the first time, stepped into the front yard. The old man laughed gleefully. He patted my head and blew on my forehead. "You will be somebody, my child. I am sure of it. Your eyes show it."

He tugged my hand. My legs walked in fast paces to follow him. We sat down in the lobby. There were many chairs there. He asked me to sit next to him.

"Sit down my child, right here beside Grandpa. Now, what's your name?" So I told him my name.

My eyes wandered around. Everything was full of flowers. I stared at the old man's wrinkled face. I said:

"There are a lot of flowers here, Grandpa?"

"Oh, yes. There's a lot. I love flowers."

"I have never seen them before."

"Of course. Why didn't you come before?"

"Why didn't you come to my house, Grandpa?"

He laughed and rubbed my head.

"You're smart. You often climb that fence, don't you?"

"Yes." It seems that he had known all along. "Who told you?"

"My eyes, child."

"I was just looking around, Grandpa."

He laughed, shaking his whole body.

"Of course I know. You're a nice boy, child. Because the eyes of my heart are more keen than the eyes of my head."

I started to feel at ease sitting beside him. There was no longer anything to worry about. We became good friends. I don't know why, but it felt so wonderful to sit here with him. My fears had gone. I felt quite at home here.

The air felt rather cold, the wind so refreshing. Red, blue, yellow and purple flowers. Green leaves. Ladybugs flying among flowers. Wet soil. Dancing leaves, shadows of the sun. Oh, yes. A cock running between the flowers. Wearing beautiful feathers, it chased a hen. They both stopped in a corner. The old man drew a long breath.

"My wife is gone, my child. Here I live alone. I have a grandson, but he lives far away in another city. Would you be my grandson, my little friend?"

I nodded.

"Don't worry, child. Just think of this as your own house. Come here when you have time. Accept me as your grandfather. We can sit here together, looking at the plants. I have lots of flower here. Life has to be full of flowers. Flowers bloom, unwary of the busy world. They bloom, radiating freshness, youth and beauty. Life is like a flower. You and me are flowers. We are a pair of orchids. The beauty of flowers for itself and for those who behold. Forever exerting beauty, they were born to make the world beautiful. Gaze at a flower, and the world will reveal its beauty right in front of your eyes. Smile like a flower. Smile, my child!" And I smiled. My mind wandered afar to a strange world, full of mysteries, full of excitement.

That afternoon we played amidst the flowers. Grandpa talked much about flowers. Patiently he described where their seeds came from, how to raise and cultivate them. It was very interesting. His knowledge on flowers is amazing. Grandpa's flowers filled the front yard, the back yard, and the house. It was a house of flowers.

"This house," he said, "is a tiny piece of heaven."

That evening I went home with my hand full of flowers. I climbed the brick fence. Grandpa took me to the ladder and held me tight. "Be careful, child," and slapped my buttocks gently. I stood on the fence and kissed the flowers in my hand. I waved at Grandpa, then I climbed down the papaya tree. Hiding the flowers, I ran merrily home.

When I got to the door, father was already standing there. I realized that it was late and I forgot to go to my religious lessons.

"You have to take your lessons, don't you? Where were you?" father scolded me with a cold and heavy voice.

I just stood there. I tried to hide the flowers as best as I could, but father had already noticed them. Father wasn't the type to be argued with, so I kept silent.

"You went to pick those flowers. For what, huh?"

My throat was stuck. I didn't say a word. I dared not look at his face.

"Where did you get them?"

I had to hide the source of my flowers.

"In the river, Dad," I lied.

Father took my flowers. He threw them in the garbage. I felt a familiar feeling. I wanted to take the flowers back.

"You're very childish, Son. It's alright to go to the river and have a swim, not pick flowers."

After father went away, I picked up the flowers from the garbage and brought them to my room.

Yes, I have to be cautious with father. Everything's just fine with mother. I think she was pleased so I was quite comfortable at home. There were always vases filled with flowers in my room. Father had never bothered to visit my room, and that was fine. He was too busy with his work.

I started to feel reluctant to meet father. He was like a stranger to me. His presence made me uneasy. Father would come home with greasy clothes. Filthy, black oil smeared all over his body. Muscles bulging. The house trembled at his arrival. Sometimes I saw father rub his dirty hands against mother's chin, and she smiled while I felt sorry for her.

When father came home I immediately went to my room. Gazing at the flowers in my room made me feel a world away. It was unnerving to hear father call my name. But when he summoned me I would hastily come, for I always stayed in my room.

A few days passed. I had been very cautious since that unfortunate day. I knew what time father would come home from work, and I tried to be home by that time. The visits to my old friend had to be perfectly timed. I thought father and mother were unaware of my behavior. At one time, father summoned me, and I promptly came out of my room.

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"At home, in my room."

"What are you staying in your room for, huh? Men should not stay in their rooms!"

Father told mom to order me to play outdoors. "You should choose a good sport," said my mother. Your father told you to play ball, or swim. If you don't, he'll order you to help him out in the repair shop." And a few days later, a soccer ball made of fine leather was made available for me. Father also gave me a sport utility, and demonstrated its use. But merely lifting it was too heavy a task for me.

It was very pleasant for me to stay in my room. My friends would come and ask me to play, and I would always refuse. Games are for children. What could be more thrilling than flowers in a vase?

Grandpa was my closest friend. We often exchanged our thoughts. He was such a clever old man. I felt no other obligation aside from going to school and taking religious lessons. And the rest of my time were for us, me and my old friend. Mother and father would scold me if I skipped school or my religious lessons. Father would summon me. He would command me to look at his face. A kind of hell filled my mind when I saw his rage. Grandpa was very different. The old man could only smile. He was much kinder than my father. In his own words, he greets the world with a smile and a tranquil soul.

I went there one afternoon. As usual, I sat in the lobby. There was a large vase with flowers. Flowers floated in the sparkling water. It was such a beautiful vase. It looked

as if it was carved from glass. The vase was on a small, four-legged table. Grandpa stared at the flowers and said:

"Tell me, my child. What could be better than a tranquil soul?"

"Nothing, Grandpa," was the reply that flowed out of my mouth, "Nothing could be better than that."

"Excellent. I never expected you to be this smart, child." He tapped my shoulders, adjusted his seat, and stared again at the flowers.

"Everything subsides. Look here, child. The floating flowers symbolize serenity, tranquility and strength of the soul. Outside, the sun blazes. Cars pass by. People walk back and forth chasing time. Factories run. Machines hum. In the market, people argue over prices. Pickpockets practice their trade. Leaders shout empty slogans. Children fight over kites. What does all this mean, my child? They have all deceived themselves. Life is found in tranquility. Not in the howls and growls of the world. Gaze at those floating flowers. The cold air refreshes your heart. You discover yourself. You will understand who you are. Heed that nothing transcends the tranquility of the soul and strength of the heart."

I listened closely. He adjusted his breath, then stood up.

"The time has come for us to take a walk."

We strolled through the flower groves. Grandpa tipped every flower and laughed. "Excellent. Excellent, is it not, child?" I smiled. "Yes, the world is as beautiful as a blooming flower. It creates a peaceful world. Our world!"

That afternoon I went home with flowers in hand. I climbed the ladder and jumped the brick fence. As soon as I got home I took a pan from the kitchen and filled it with as much water as I could. I carefully brought it to my room and put it near the door. I spread some roses on the water. The reflections melted in the water. Some of the flowers were partly submerged and created a dent on the water surface. The color of red on the crystal water! The water was clear and calm. And those flowers! Your

eyes could not shy away from that spectacle! I sat on a chair. A relaxing calmness slowly poured into my soul. I was in peace with life. What could be better than the tranquility of the soul and the strength of the heart? I was undoubtedly grateful for my acquaintance with the old man.

Mother entered my room. The pan in front of the door did not miss her attention.

"Get something to eat, . . . but what's the meaning of all this?" she said referring to the pan and flowers.

I took a deep breath. Sitting on the chair, I said:

"Mother, tell me. What could be better than the tranquility of the soul and the strength of the heart?"

Mother stood still. She stared at me as if I wasn't her son. She looked at me deeply in the eye. I understood. She was shocked. My behavior was new to her. That was understandable, given that she came from the hectic world. She looked as if she did not recognize me. She observed me attentively. I was a new person. Mother called my name. I replied politely. She called again. I replied as polite as I could. And then she left. I barely saw it: her eyes were red from tears. I knew she was sad. Why should she be? I followed her. Mother sat beside the kitchen stove and sighed. Surely she was sad, but for what? I approached her, and said:

"Mother, why are you sad? Smile. Life is just a game. The truth is that . . .," I stopped. She turned around, and said in a commanding voice:

"Go to your room!"

So I went to my room. I waited till dawn. Oh, yes. That evening I went to my religious lessons. I took with me a jasmine in my pocket. It calmed my soul. Every now and then I would take it out and smell it as long as I pleased. The lesson was named *Al Ma'ruf*, which means goodness. They learn to be good. But who amongst them has a tranquil soul and a strong heart? No one, but me. That evening I sat on the mosque's veranda. Who else could smile watching children play marbles? I witnessed the

excitement, children evoked by desire. I smiled in tranquility. My soul was possessed by drowning inner calmness. I had no urge to play. I would rather sit solemnly and smile at all the fanfare of the world.

When I came home from my lessons, the floor of my room was wet. And those flowers! The flowers were smudged on the watery floor. It seems that somebody spilled the pan. Suddenly father held my neck.

"What are these flowers for, Son?"

I was helpless in front of my father. His rough hands, ready for destruction, held my shoulders. I kept silent.

"Throw those flowers away. Go!"

I stooped and picked the flowers up. Tears were flowing from my eyes. I wanted to cry not from fear of my father, but for them. For those flowers! I had to expel them with my own hands!

My hands were full of flowers.

"Where are they?"

I extended my hands. Father took the flowers and crushed them with his hands. My heart pounded erratically and struggled to hold on.

"And wipe the floor, Son."

Only when I finished wiping my floor was I free from that beast.

After cleaning my room, I leaped the fence and then I cried in Grandpa's arms. He stroked my hair. My old friend was so kind to me.

"Hush, child, hush," he said, "Don't cry anymore. If lust succeeded benevolence, you would not gain tranquility. Your deeds become harsh, out of lust. That creates sorrow. This world is destroyed by lust. Be calm." My cry subsided.

"Crying is a wrong way to hinder sorrow. Why not smile, my child? Smile. Even the instant before you are murdered. Tranquility of the soul and strength of the heart overcome pain. They even overcome death."

I realized that crying is worthless. I smiled. Grandpa wiped my tears. His handkerchief smelled of flowers. I

inhaled it deeply. And I was free from my grief.

"If your soul is tranquil, you become polite. If your soul is in turmoil, you become rude." Grandpa kissed my forehead.

I immediately went home. Father would surely punish me if he knew that I went to the house next door. I entered my room through the window, and then shut it close. Father would not discover what I have done. He worked in the repair shop until evening. After dinner he would continue his work at home. I slept. Only mother was at home, and she was much more soft-hearted than my father. I had nothing to worry from my mother.

Mother was obviously pleased with me because I became very polite. My room was always clean. The flowers could stay, at least with much effort so that father would not notice. I had my own vase, so I did not need to borrow my mother's kitchen utensils. My bed was tidy. Come to my room any time. Breathe the sweet smell of flowers. Let your eyes feast on the beautiful colors of my flowers.

I was in my room one afternoon when my mother suddenly came in. She nervously said to me:

"Go out, quickly. Grab anything you can. A sweep, or anything else. Hurry."

I did not understand what she meant. I froze. And there in front of me father stood with his filthy clothes. His body was smeared with grease. The suffocating smell of oil filled the room. A car growled and stopped in front of our gate.

"Son, show me you hands. Both of them!"

I held my hands up. White as snow. The symbol of tranquility of the soul and strength of the heart. Father snatched my hand and smeared grease on it.

"Your hand should be dirty, like mine!"

Father smeared the grease on the rest of my hand. I didn't resist. My father was lust. I smiled. Mother just stood there, unable to do anything. My smile grew larger. Mother's face became pale when she saw me. Why worry,

smile!

The grease was up to my arms. Father slapped both of my cheeks, and said:

"What are these hands for, huh?" He raised my hands. I didn't know the answer, so I kept silent.

"For work! You are a man. You are a man. You must work. You are neither a devil nor an angel, Son. Go and fill the buckets with water. Clean your hands and let it tire from work. Go!"

I glanced at my hands. Dirty they were. Father went away in the car. Mother stared at me, and before I could come to my senses, she said:

"Obey your father, Son."

I like to be clean. Washing my hands is a good thing. I ran to the well. The images of father, Grandpa and mother swept through my eyes. I took some water to my room for my vase.

Father brought home some tools. He erected a small shop in the front yard. He put the tools there. Father started to go home at noon. After lunch he worked in the front yard, hammering iron. My house became noisy, just like in a repair shop. Father's friends helped him, and the house was full of clamor. One time father brought home a generator and the pounding sound of that machine filled the air.

Once in a while father would give orders to me.

"Son, stand there. Witness them build the world." I would stand still and watch them work. Grease. Muscles. Filthy clothes. The clamoring of iron. My ears hurt. In my mind I saw men filled with agitation.

When father was not watching I would run to my room, close the door, and gaze at my flowers. The sweating men outside would be forgotten. All that work was horrible. Were I still distracted in my room, I would jump out the window and head for the fence. Then I would say to Grandpa:

"Do you hear all that noise, Grandpa?"

"Don't bother, my child. Let them be ignorant. You

and I are here, surrounded by flowers. Two shining lights dwindling in the dark of the night."

It was day. Grandpa probably slipped his tongue, so I said:

"But what is the night, Grandpa?"

"Every lust is a dark night."

"Yes, and we are goodness. Not lust. Isn't that right, Grandpa?"

"Yes, and our deeds reflect our tranquility."

"And strength of heart!" I added.

We strolled through the flower garden. The noise from my house could still be heard. But Grandpa said:

"It is inaudible to our inner ear."

It seems that father found me out. The vase was broken. The flowers were on the floor. Water flowed all over the room. I smiled at what I saw. Father already stood nearby.

"I broke it, Son. Why, huh? Man cannot live merely from flowers. Come here!" I obeyed with a surprising calmness. Father commanded, "You stay here. I will make a screw. Watch. And tomorrow you will make it yourself. Watch out, if you can't do it." I watched and memorized what I saw.

Father took a glance at me and said, "What are you thinking, huh?"

I fought to find the courage to say something. So I uttered:

"Father, there is truly nothing better than tranquility of the soul and . . ."

"Be quiet! What's all that for, huh? Take this hammer!"

He gave me a hammer. "Pound this piece of iron until it becomes flat. Do it." I obeyed, and held the hammer. I sweated the whole evening. My hands were sore, but I kept working from fear of my father. Late in the evening father told me to stop. Mother greeted me warmly.

"Don't argue with your father, Son. Take a bath. Oh, I forgot, you have to take your lessons."

Father was a rude man. He occupied my whole time

with work. I could only visit Grandpa in the morning before school. And only for a while. Grandpa was sprinkling his flowers.

I said to him.

"What are you doing, Grandpa?"

"Sprinkling life, my child." He looked at me. "Now you have a lot of work to do, child?" I nodded.

Something came up to my mind, so I asked, "What job are you taking, Grandpa?"

Grandpa stopped and looked at me.

"I am now sprinkling flowers, child."

"Yes, but what do you do for a living?"

"My work, child," he paused, "Oh, yes. I seek for the perfect life."

"Where do you seek it, Grandpa?"

"In tranquility of the soul"

"Yes, but where?"

"Here. In the flowers."

I realized that I had to go to school. I asked his permission to go.

After school father had me work in the shop. He did not give me any chance to rest. He would scold me every time I paused. "Work. Don't let your hands rest, Son." I remembered about Grandpa.

"Father," I asked, "why don't you seek for the perfect life?" Father halted his work. He stared at me. He looked into my eyes.

"Yes," he replied, "That is what I am looking for, Son."

"Where, Dad?"

"In my work."

"Yes, but where?"

"In the shop, of course."

He stood there firmly. His face was burning. It reminded me of a strong black locomotive on its rails. Growling and howling with the burden of freight cars on its back.

"You must work. Rivers need bridges. Steel furnaces must be made. Tunnels must be dug. Dams must be built.

Buildings must be erected. The flow of rivers must be directed. Barren land must be fertilized. Must, must, Son. Look at your hands!"

Father grabbed my hands.

"What are these for, huh?"

I thought for a while.

"What are these hands for, Son?" my father repeated. Then I found the answer.

"Work!" I shouted.

Father burst in laughter. He kissed my hands. He slapped my cheeks hard. He shook my body. I saw that black greasy face radiate vigor. I saw a mighty man in front of me. He was my father.

That night I went to bed full of memories. Grandpa-tranquility-flower beds, father-work-repair shop, mother-religious lessons-mosque. There was something for me to decide. It would be late at night before I could fall asleep.

After all, I am the son of my father and mother.

THE LOTTERY OF KARMA

Chanthi Deuanesavanh

L A O S

In the past, Xiang Khane never paid much attention to number or lottery tickets. He earned his living through his own sweat and labor, eating as much as he earned. He thought that earning money easily was not an honest way of making a living.

That used to be his belief. Now his social environment, especially his friends and neighbors who used to be in a miserable state like him, had changed to comply with the new changing way of the government's party in the age of the wide-open free market. People began to struggle to find a source of money. Those who had never been involved in any kind of trade took to trading in every way, legal or illegal. Most of them were engaged in selling contraband goods along the Lao-Thai border. Some became rich through winning the underground lottery, development lottery and even Thai lottery prizes. At the same time many families became destitute. Some of them even had to sell their houses, cattle and farms in order to get money to invest in private credit fonciers for interest. Some families were ruined because of their beliefs in dreams and omens. Whatever sum of money they possessed was spent on buying numbers.

In Xiang Khane's district, there were some people who used to win the lottery prizes almost every time. They were able to build two-storey houses equipped with color TV sets, refrigerators and air-conditioners and other things. Many families even owned cars, pickups, or at least tuk-tuks (motored tricycles) to be used as taxis to supplement their income. A part of these things was

obtained through illegal trading and another part from winning lottery ticket prizes.

In such surroundings, Xiang Khane could not overlook the townspeople's prosperity. What was more, his friends treated him to liquor and beer on a daily basis. Each of them persuaded Xiang Khane to buy underground or government lottery tickets in case he might be lucky and win millions. After some speculation, Xiang Khane began to waver. He would like to change from a life of physical toil to one of taking chances since recently he had dreamt of numbers many times but refused to buy a lottery ticket. When the villagers bought the numbers he dreamt they won. They all said that his dreams were very accurate. Every time they won the lottery prizes they would give Xiang Khane ten, twenty or one thousand *kip* and treat him to drinks.

Xiang Khane's work was repairing motorcycles in front of his house; each day he was able to earn five to seven or eight thousand *kip* and each month he could save many thousand *kip*. With the money he received he would buy lottery tickets from some honest villagers.

At the beginning of November, 1993, the people of Vientiane would scramble to buy the special development lottery tickets for they all wanted to win a prize of a two-storey building at Kilometer 7 on the way to Don Noon, together with a van and a pickup. In every nook and corner of the city, in every coffee shop, liquor store and noodle shop in the free market, everywhere people would gather to talk about numbers and lottery tickets, especially about dreams. After each night, whatever each person dreamt the night before would be interpreted in terms of numbers. The devout men and women would take a ride to Vangviang or to the Buddha's Footprint at Phoneson, and they would visit the revered monks in sacred monasteries both inside and outside the city to beg them to interpret the dreams. At night, hearing the sounds of wood mites biting through wood or baying dogs, they would interpret them into numbers. Even the sound of a

husband farting or a wife peeing would also be interpreted in the same way.

Xiang Khane could not resist the temptation for he happened to fancy the two-storey building and the 4-door pickup like the others. Every night before going to bed he would offer flowers and popped rice to the Buddha image on the shelf over his bed and express his wish to the sacred deities.

Sadhu, sadhu, I am an honest man who has never seen thousands or millions in my entire life. May all the sacred deities take pity on me and help me to get rich like others! After finishing his prayer he would bow three times with his forehead touching his hands and his palms pressed to the floor in a gesture of reverence before going to bed.

Many days passed. On the 10th, the eighth day of the waxing moon, of October 1993 Xiang Khane dreamt of a very big eagle swooping down to catch a turtle and soaring up to the sky with the animal in its beaks. When he woke up in the morning he went to the elders to ask them to interpret his dream. One old man who was an expert in interpreting dreams said to him,

"Khane! Aren't you going to be lucky? If I am not wrong, the numbers you dreamt of are the number of a turtle combined with the number of an eagle!"

It took three whole days before Xiang Khane could buy the number of a turtle combined with the number of an eagle. After he had bought them, he folded the tickets and put them in his shirt pocket. He bought 15 tickets with both three digits and two digits among them. If he did not win first or second prize, a consolation prize would not seem so bad.

November 28, 1993 was the scheduled date for the drawing of the special development lottery and it was the day Xiang Khane and his friends won a prize for the amount of three hundred thousand *kip*.

When all the lights were turned on all over Vientiane, Xiang Khane and his bosom friends found seats for themselves on Lan Xang Road where the results of the

development lottery were going to be announced. While waiting for the wheels to turn, his friends ordered liquor and beer for Xiang Khane to while away the time but Xiang Khane only sat there spinning dreams in his mind. "Sadhu, If I didn't win the special prize at least let me win second or third prize. If I win a pickup I will sell it back to the development lottery bureau right on the spot. I will spend the cash to buy land and a house, dig a fish pond, buy a taxi or a *tuk-tuk* to earn money. When I have a house and a car, there will be a color TV, a refrigerator, a porch with a sofa and a full set of furniture, along with a show case and other things to entertain guests in my house."

The time for announcing the lottery results drew nearer and nearer. All eyes were fixed in the direction of the six girls, each one standing beside a wheel that would be turned to pick a number. Those eyes were not looking at the girls but at the wheels.

Xiang Khane took the bunch of lottery tickets out of his shirt pocket and clutched them in his hand in preparation for comparing the numbers. The six girls began to turn the six wheels at the same time. The six numbers spun rapidly and then gradually stopped one by one. When each number came to a standstill the announcer for the lottery committee made his announcement at once.

"The special prize is. . . ." The people gathered there shouted in unison. "No! Not even close!"

The turning of the wheels went on routinely. The next prize came out. It was the third prize. The person who won the six numbers of this prize would receive a 4-door pickup. Xiang Khane did not even have time to believe his own eyes. He stood up and approached the wheels to compare the numbers shown and the numbers on his own ticket. Suddenly he almost cried out loud in exultation but held his breath and gathered his wits, hurriedly putting the ticket back in his shirt pocket. His heartbeats were fast and irregular. All of a sudden his face beamed

like a new flower blooming in season. In order not to let his friends notice any strangeness in his behavior, he rejoined them at the table and resumed drinking his beer. Time passed and the turning of the wheels to find the last prize came to an end. The crowd dispersed and people returned to their respective lodgings. The revving of the motorcycle engines, small and big, mixed with the buzzing complaints expressing regret at not winning the prizes. Some people bought up to two or three hundred tickets but none of them came close to the winning numbers. So their heads drooped. Some were more lucky and won the two and three digit prizes.

Xiang Khane's friends got up from their seats and prepared to return home but he called them back suddenly.

"This evening you all have treated me. From now on I will treat you, for today I won a lottery prize."

A friend asked, "Where to?"

"*Dok Bua Thong* (Golden Lotus) will do."

"Okay." Xiang Khane then got on his friend's motorcycle. The other motorcycles began to roar and headed in the direction of *Dok Bua Thong* on Luang Phra Bang Road.

When they entered *Dok Bua Thong* Restaurant, the sound of music playing a slow beat was heard. Most of the tables were crowded with people. Some were drinking. Couples of men and women were dancing to the slow music on the dance floor. Cigarette smoke made the room dim and smelly. Xiang Khane and his six friends headed for a table in the south corner of the room.

As soon as they took their seats a young waiter greeted them politely and asked whether they needed anything. Xiang Khane, who was the host, replied at once.

"Whisky. Two bottles of Johnny Walker Black Label with some side dishes. Whatever you consider delicious just bring them."

One of his friends added, "Bring seven girls to sit with us too."

Within two minutes the red-cheeked, young looking girls in their tight-fitting dresses came one by one to sit at Xiang Khane's table. They were eager to please and snuggled close beside the men while smiling and making eyes at them. Xiang Khane who was not accustomed to this situation felt hot and cold alternately. Actually, he was feeling quite happy in his mind. The taste of beer that he had drunk at the lottery announcement made him eloquent. Seeing his friends touching and caressing the girls, he imitated them. The girls themselves allowed the men to fondle them freely. When the whisky arrived, Xiang Khane invited his friends to a toast and ordered beer or soft drinks for some of the girls who did not drink.

When the whisky and soda joined the liquor and beer already waiting in the stomach, his intoxication increased. Usually Xiang Khane was quite shy at home and did not dally with women much, for he felt embarrassed by the fact that he already had a wife and three children. But this night made him forget everything. He became eloquent and quite generous, causing his friends to be surprised, for they had never seen him going out of his world and being this generous. Every day he would bury himself in his motorcycle repair shop. Whatever money he earned would be saved for household use and for buying lottery tickets from the neighbors. He never had a fight with his wife, for each of them had a duty to be responsible for the family. His wife was a weaver who wove to the orders and designs of some tradeswomen.

That night Xiang Khane was generous for he had the lottery ticket winning the 16 million *kip* pickup lying in his shirt pocket. The future of Xiang Khane and his family would be full of happiness and they would have all the things that other people had. He would not bend to his life as he used to. People would respect him and no one would look down upon him as before. He would not go places riding his bicycle. He thought he would sell the ticket back to the development lottery committee in exchange for 16 million *kip* cash. He would consent to

receive even a lower amount for he would like to get a lump sum of cash to buy land and a house. The rest of the money would be used to buy a *tuk-tuk* to earn a daily living. He would hire someone to dig a fish pond near the house in order to raise fish for sale every year. He would send his children to school to seek knowledge so that their future would be guaranteed. He would not let them be as ignorant as he was.

An hour passed and the two bottles of whisky were drained, Xiang Khane ordered two more. The girls were allowed to order anything they wanted for he thought that it would amount to only about a hundred thousand *kip*. He used to eat at some small restaurants where the price of beer was 900 *kip* a bottle, that of whisky only about eleven to twelve thousand *kip*. His friends took the opportunity while Xiang Khane was drunk and generous to urge him to drink and eat and even took the liberty to order for him.

Intoxication made Xiang Khane forget his birth and status in life. He let himself be carried away by his friends' flattering words. "Our friend Khane is kind and honest. He is a generous *Thao Kae* (Chinese shop-owner). You girls can order anything you want to eat. Our boss has money to pay without stint."

Xiang Khane felt that his stomach was churning like the lottery wheels. He wanted to throw up at the same time that the lights in the room were turned on and the sound of the song *La Kon Jak* (Good-bye) was heard. The waiter placed the tray containing the bill before him. However drunk he was, Xiang Khane was still able to see the amount that he had to pay—231,000 *kip*. He pulled out a wad of money from his right pants pocket to count. It was not enough. He put his hand into the back pocket and pulled out another wad. His friends helped him count the money. The girls who had been accompanying them and eating and drinking from the beginning each wanted a small amount to buy *pho* (Vietnamese noodles), or to buy an appetite-inducing

tonic, or to pay the fare home. All of these forced Xiang Khane to pay 2,000 *kip* each, amounting to 14,000 *kip* altogether. It meant that he squandered 245,000 *kip* that night, a sum that he had won from lottery over a year but had to spend in only one night. There were only 55,000 *kip* left in his pocket to be used as capital for the following morning.

Once outside *Dok Bua Thong* Restaurant, Xiang Khane got on the back of the motorcycle again, and then he began to throw up all the way home; even the driver's shoulders and back were covered with vomit. Xiang Khane's pants and shirt were wet and covered with vomit all over. When his friends finally got him to his house it was half-past one. After handing Xiang Khane over to his wife, who had been waiting for him since dusk, the friends hurriedly left, each one to his own home, leaving Xiang Khane to moan in the bed. By then he only had his underpants on because his wife had stripped off the rest of his clothes and soaked them in detergent for she was angry with him for being drunk to the point of incoherence. Apart from taking the remaining money out of his pants pocket, she paid no attention to the shirt pocket for she thought there was nothing in it since it was so flat. She soaked the pants and shirt in the laundry tub and rubbed them hard many times and poured the dirty water out. Then she poured some more detergent in the tub and let the clothes soak, intending to wash them the following morning.

About four o'clock in the morning Xiang Khane regained consciousness but still felt dizzy and wanted to vomit. But he got up and shouted at his wife who was sleeping beside him.

"Where are all my clothes?"

"I have soaked them in detergent water and will wash them in the morning."

"I'll be dammed!" Xiang Khane cried while he was running toward the laundry tub. He pulled out the shirt and daintily unbuttoned it, sticking two fingers in the

pocket to take the lottery ticket out. But everything inside had disintegrated into pieces until there was no trace of the original shape.

"O my god! You have ruined our lives, haven't you?"

His wife got up in a hurry and asked.

"What are you talking about? I don't understand what you mean. What was in that pocket?"

"What else? You soak a 16-million kip lottery ticket in water and what would be left? I must have been cursed to be born so unlucky." He spoke and cried at the same time, banging his head, kicking the table and chair noisily like a mad man.

"Why didn't you at least ask me before soaking the shirt? O, I am so sick at heart!"

His wife was as sorry as he was, but then she said, "How could I ask you? You were too drunk to know anything."

"Stop and don't say a word!" He jumped to get a hammer, thinking to teach his wife a lesson but then stopped, realizing that things had gone beyond reparation. Even if he hit his wife, nothing could be brought back.

Ever since that event Xiang Khane was fed up with numbers and lottery tickets. Even though he dreamt, be they good dreams or nightmares, no matter which angel came to tell him, he never bought lottery tickets again. He continued to earn his living the same way that he had done before.

RED ROSES IN A BOUQUET

Khadijah Hashim

MALAYSIA

Whether Siew Ping sits or stands in her small 10 x 12 feet stall she is surrounded by fresh and colourful flowers. Flowers that are grown in the hilly region of the country.

Seng Hock, her thirteen-year-old brother, usually collects the flowers from the railway station each morning before setting off to school. Siew Ping will arrange the flowers into beautiful bouquets of different sizes. Her mother, who has to prepare lunch at home, often arrives at the stall around eleven.

Siew Ping deftly arranged the chrysanthemum blossoms in a plastic pail. Red, white and yellow roses were placed in large open-mouthed bottles while the other pails contained expensive as well as cheap orchids. Red and white carnations were put in another container.

The containers were then set on multi-tiered racks. The small stall looked resplendent with all its beautiful flowers. Siew Ping kissed a red rose before placing it in a bottle.

A lady in a yellow blouse and batik sarong stopped at her stall. Her face lit up as she examined a crimson red rose. "How beautiful," she uttered softly.

"How much does each cost?" she asked Siew Ping who approached her.

"Forty cents."

"Can't I get it cheaper?" the girl bargained. Siew Ping just smiled.

"Thirty cents, please . . .," she implored. Siew Ping was undecided. She knows that the girl loves flowers. In fact all girls love flowers. Flowers are beautiful and comforting, her cheerful friend, Ali, had once said.

"This one is thirty cents each!" said Siew Ping as she

picked up a rose. "Same colour and variety. It's only a little smaller."

"I prefer this," the girl decided; her dark round eyes were fixed on the rose of her choice. Siew Ping smiled. 'Once your mind is made up, you'll buy no matter how much it costs,' thought Siew Ping.

When the girl left, Siew Ping got hold of a pair of scissors and started to make floral arrangements for the day's sales. She fixed a red rose on the flower holder placed in a plastic container she had designed. Red is love, she whispered. She added a white chrysanthemum to the design, white is pure. And then a yellow rose. Yellow symbolizes joy, she smiled. She felt happy and fresh as the roses. To make her creation more lively, she added pink roses, some *kasa* and wild yam leaves. A simple floral arrangement worth five *ringgit* was now complete!

Two women returning from the market stopped at the stall to purchase some flowers. Siew Ping left her work to attend to them. One of them offered to buy three stalks of orchids at two *ringgit*.

"I only make a small profit, Auntie," Siew Ping always gave the same excuse when confronted with customers who haggled. It is true that she makes only a small amount of profit. If the flowers withered, she would have to bear the losses.

When the middle-aged lady and her companion had disappeared, Siew Ping pondered what would happen to the beautiful orchids that she just sold. In a living room furnished with exquisitely carved chairs? Or on a cabinet in one corner of the room? According to Ali, who frequently buys flowers from her, pretty flowers decorate beautiful places! Siew Ping could well remember those words.

A few baskets of flowers were now ready for sale. The bigger ones were sold at fifteen *ringgit*, the medium-size cost ten *ringgit* while the smaller ones varied from eight to five *ringgit*.

Siew Ping sat and watched people went past her shop.

None could resist taking a second look at her flowers. Beauty is something that God bestowed to the world. Ali remarked when they discussed nature's beauty. Siew Ping sighed but smiled when a vivid image of Ali appeared in her mind. Where could he be? He had not bought my flowers for quite sometime. Was he sick?

A young couple had just bought a bunch of flowers from her. She wondered why they purchased so much. Were they getting engaged or married? The red roses would add glamour to the wedding and make the bridal chamber smell sweet. There is truth in what Ali said: "Beautiful flowers are made for beautiful places."

Siew Ping sprinkled water on her flowers that were in the sun. She adjusted the wreaths in front of the stall. A jasmine had withered in one of them. She threw away the withered flower and replaced it with a fresh one.

The sun was already high. Her mother had not appeared yet. She glanced at the unsold wreaths. Were there no deaths today? If no one dies, the flowers in the wreaths will wither. Mother would suffer losses and frown.

A blue Mercedes Benz pulled up across the street. Ali! She murmured softly. She could recognize the car at once. She even remembered its registration number JM 8696. A young man got out of the car and walked towards her.

"Hello! Flower princess, Queen of my heart!" Ali greeted her teasingly. Siew Ping only smiled.

"I haven't seen you for quite some time. Where have you been?" she asked in a voice full of longing.

"I went to Daratan Indera."

"For a holiday?"

"My boss was."

"So you went on a holiday too . . . , " Siew Ping replied, smilingly.

"That's the good or bad side of being a chauffeur to a big wig," Ali answered frankly. He looked calmly at his princess's eyes.

"There are lots of flowers there, right? My flowers are from there too." Siew Ping remarked as she arranged the chrysanthemums that had fallen from the pail. Ali had accidentally tipped one over.

"But they are not as beautiful as the flowers here," Ali glibed. He smiled and gazed at her. She turned her face away to avoid his deep staring eyes.

Siew Ping's mother arrived with a basket containing a bowl of rice. She walked straight to a table at the corner of the stall. A young man stopped to buy five red and white roses from the stall. She wondered who they were for. Perhaps for his wife who had just delivered their first baby! Or to win back his girlfriend's heart. Beautiful flowers for beautiful occasions. Siew Ping turned to Ali who remained dumb when she attended her customer.

"Don't you want to buy flowers for your sweetheart?" she teased. Ali snickered.

"I don't have to . . .," he answered.

"And why not?" she asked softly.

"Because she's surrounded by flowers!" Ali's eyes sparkled when he looked into Siew Ping's perturbed face.

Siew Ping did not pursue the matter further. She did not understand why she felt restless when they were together. Ali is a sensitive person. And smart too. Did he mean what he had just said? Siew Ping's mother uttered something in Chinese which Ali could not understand. Siew Ping did not utter any reply.

"You want to get some flowers?" Siew Ping suddenly enquired.

"Please get me three roses, two chrysanthemums and three carnations," Ali replied. Siew Ping hurriedly picked them out.

"My boss's wife is attending an *ikebana* class this afternoon," he explained. Siew Ping kept quiet but Ali kept on teasing her.

"I wonder where are all the butterflies. They don't seem to like your flowers any more, Ping!" Ali remarked, pretending to be disappointed.

"You can't find butterflies in this city," Siew Ping replied nonchalantly.

"What a pity! They must be afraid of the flowers in the city!" Siew Ping was once again lost for words. How poetic you are and you can read my mind too, Siew Ping thought. Ali glanced at the old woman who was sitting at the table in the corner of the stall.

"How much?" Ali enquired.

"Two *ringgit* and sixty cents," Siew Ping answered and handed him the bouquet. Ali paid her three *ringgit* and left the stall.

"Hey, your change . . ." Ali merely shook his head and drove off.

Siew Ping smiled. She then sighed faintly. Ali, you are so kind, she thought. Ali always asks her to keep the change when he buys flowers from her.

Siew Ping thought of the flowers that Ali had bought. How would his employer's wife arrange them. And where would she place the arrangement. Siew Ping wished she could see it. It would surely be a beautiful arrangement. In spite of not having mastered the art of flower arrangements formally, Siew Ping is still proud of her daily creations that sell well.

Her mother refused to allow her to attend a flower arrangement class, arguing that it was a sheer waste of money. She pointed out that there was no difference between the floral arrangements done by people who had learned the art and those who had not. No matter how you arrange the flowers they are beautiful for the simple reason that flowers are beautiful, her mother added.

What she said was true. My flowers have graced many weddings, big bungalows and offices in the city, Siew Ping thought.

Another car pulled up in front of the stall. A middle-aged man got out and hurriedly picked one of mother's wreaths.

"How much?" he held up the wreath he had chosen.

"Twenty *ringgit*," Siew Ping answered. The customer just paid the money and left hurriedly.

"Who died today, mother?" Siew Ping asked. Her mother did not reply.

Later another man came to buy a wreath. He too, picked out a wreath at random, paid the price and left immediately. Which rich man or important person passed away that day?

On seeing that her wreaths were in demand, Siew Ping's mother immediately made more wreaths out of evergreen ferns and flowers. She had slept late last night to make the rattan rings. Siew Ping did not help her.

"Ping . . . help me out with these ferns," she instructed, facing a heap of evergreen ferns bought from a gardener. She was elated. The sun was shining fiercely outside.

Siew Ping sprinkled more water on her flowers. Then she helped mother to make more wreaths and at the same time attended to her customers.

She wound the evergreen ferns around the rattan rings. The bigger the rings, the thicker the leaves.

"Busy?" Ali asked. He had arrived unexpectedly.

"It's you again! Looking for more flowers?" she asked innocently.

"Yes," he answered. Siew Ping's mother who was wrapped up in her work paid no attention to them. Siew Ping at once left her work to attend to him. "Which flowers do you want?"

"Your flowers of course," Ali whispered smilingly.

"Stop fooling around!" Siew Ping pretended to be angry.

"I know you're busy . . ."

"Orchids or chrysanthemums? Pick your choice," Siew Ping said impatiently.

"I want a wreath. An offering to the dead," Ali explained and pointed to the biggest wreath available.

"Who passed away?" Siew Ping asked curiously.

"People . . .," Ali laughed quietly.

"I know . . . A rich man surely," Siew Ping said, irritated

at being teased when she is serious.

"That's not important. What's important is that you profit when people die," he remarked confidently. Siew Ping frowned, she was hurt by Ali's blunt words.

"You're angry?" asked Ali on seeing her expression suddenly changed.

"I'm not," she said tersely.

"Why are you frowning then? You should be happy when people die," Ali continued to tease her.

"You don't seem to understand me," Siew Ping protested morosely. Ali actually understood her. He cheered her: "Why's the sky turning grey on a bright day?"

Siew Ping remained quiet. She was confused. Ali is fond of teasing her and also quick to make up.

Yet her curiosity got the better of her. She asked again, "Who died?"

"An important man."

"He must be. The poor don't get my flowers," she said angrily. Ali laughed.

"Very true, and not someone like me, huh? Not for the small fish or the destitute," said Ali testing her feelings. Siew Ping could not answer him. But that was a fact. She had no intention of treating the rich and the poor differently because she too came from a poor family.

"No one will send me flowers if I die, Ping." Siew Ping silently adjusted the flower on the wreath before Ali took it away.

"Will you send me flowers if I die, flower princess?" Siew Ping sighed. She was not happy with what she had just heard. Again her mother uttered something in Chinese which Ali could not understand.

"You'll have this?" asked Siew Ping.

"Anyone will do. The dead can no longer appreciate flowers," Siew Ping smiled. She was tickled by what Ali had said. He could make fun even of the dead. Yet his words set her thinking.

"You take this, it's still fresh and pretty." Siew Ping

picked a wreath for Ali. Ali paid the right price. He knows how much it costs because he often buys flowers for his employers.

When Ali left, Siew Ping's mother complained, "You treat him better than the rest of our customers." She disapproved and frowned. She looked much older then.

"I don't approve of it," she added. Her hands were still busy making the wreath.

"Is it wrong to treat a customer well?" Siew Ping asked rather harshly.

"I don't like him." There was a threat behind those words.

"He's kind . . ."

"Just because he tips you thirty or forty cents you say he is kind?" Mother rebuked her instantly. She looked sharply at Siew Ping's face. Siew Ping kept quiet to avoid senseless argument with her mother. It was not money that attracted her to Ali. She sighed. She feels happy when Ali is around even though he hurts her sometimes.

Siew Ping attended to a girl customer. Her mother had often objected her relationship with Ali.

"Have you forgotten that he is a Malay?" Mother's face was filled with hatred when she mentioned this.

"You grandpa was killed by a Malay," she reminded Siew Ping.

"That was during troubled times. The Chinese too killed the Malays," Siew Ping argued.

"That's immaterial! I only know that your grandpa was murdered by the Malays." Her voice was a bit tremulous and her face showed revenge.

Siew Ping sprinkled more water on the roses. The wreaths were sold out. She looked at her mother's radiant face and then at the unsold orchids. "You're alright, you take a long time to wither."

That night mother was really happy. She had counted the day's earning and was resting in bed after a hard day's work. Seng Hock could buy his school books and the balance would be saved for the house rent and stall.

Since her husband's death ten years ago she had supported her family entirely on the earnings from her flowers. Her husband had died of lung cancer. According to the doctor, it was due to excessive smoking of opium.

Three of her daughters were already married. Daughters! She sighed. You cannot depend on them once they are married. They will only visit you on each Chinese New Year Day and bring along their children and moon cakes.

Her thoughts turned to Siew Ping who was forced to stop schooling when she reached form three to enable Seng Hock to continue studying. She could not afford to have them both at school. After all Siew Ping would eventually marry and leave her as her other sisters did.

She is counting on Seng Hock to provide her with a comfortable life when she is old. He must further his studies and get a good job, not be a flower seller like her.

That night she made more wreaths. Perhaps many more people would die the next day!

"Mother, aren't you sleepy?" Siew Ping asked. She was bored to see her mother work so hard at home.

"I'm not sleepy," was the answer. Siew Ping shook her head in disapproval. How could she be certain that people would die tomorrow. But life is like the flowers, Ali once remarked. They grow, bloom and then wither.

Ali, you are a philosopher. He must be a smart man. Why is he only a chauffeur and not a big wig himself? Probably it was fated this way. Ali had confirmed this. "It's our destiny," he had philosophised. No one can determine his fame and fortune. People are like flowers. No one can predict their future. They may be placed in an elegant and air-conditioned room or grace a merry occasion. Or probably laid on a lonely grave. Siew Ping pondered deeply over this. And Ali came smiling into her thoughts. Ali, she whispered. She longed for him.

The city was normal that day. Cars zoomed here and there endlessly. Pedestrians walked up and down the

street. Siew Ping attended to her daily chores and created new floral arrangements.

Yet, she felt something amiss that day. Her eyes wandered around as if she was searching for something she had lost. She looked closely at everyone who walked by her stall. It's not him. It's not him.

Ali did not turn up for five days. Where could he be? Was his employer sick? Perhaps he was sick? Siew Ping gazed at a red rose in a bouquet, she was worried over Ali.

Ali would come everyday or on alternate days. If he did not buy flowers he would chat with her while waiting for his employer to finish work.

She was startled to see a young man wearing a batik shirt walked past her shop. Ali! To her disappointment, only the shirt looked like Ali's. The youth was as dark as Ali but his nose was flat. Ali's face is spotless and he wears a fine moustache. Where could he be? Perhaps he has forgotten me!

She looked again at the red roses. I will give them to him if he comes. She longed for him and at the same time worried over him. Ali, where are you?

She jumped from her seat when she saw a blue Mercedes JM 8696 stop right in front of her stall. But she was disappointed when she saw a middle-aged man came out of the car to look at the array of wreaths. Who had passed away? Why didn't Ali come himself? This man is probably Ali's employer. Where could Ali be?

"How much is this?" he enquired, pointing to the smallest wreath in the collection.

"Fifteen *ringgit*, sir," Siew Ping said in a tremulous voice. The man took out his wallet.

"Who passed away sir?" she asked spontaneously.

"My driver."

"Your driver?" Siew Ping exclaimed. Her mother listened attentively. "He's dead?"

"Ali?" she asked again in disbelief.

"Yes, Ali, my driver. Do you know him?"

"Yes . . . he often buys flowers here. How did he die?" Siew Ping bravely asked. Her knees had turned soft and her body suddenly felt chilly.

"He died in a motorcycle accident at his village," the man explained as he handed fifteen *ringgit* to her.

"No, sir. Consider it my gift for Ali," Siew Ping said as she gently brushed away the man's hand. Her mother hurriedly rushed to their side. "Fifteen *ringgit*, sir. Fifteen *ringgit* sir . . ."

The man looked at Siew Ping and then at her mother. He was confused. Nevertheless he paid the price and drove off in his car.

"Mother, you're avaricious. You're avaricious . . . !" she screamed and cried her heart out. She hid herself at the corner of the stall.

"You foolish girl. Who will give us fifteen *ringgit*?" her mother said angrily.

"How could you do this to me? Ali was my friend . . .," she sobbed.

She was terribly sad. "What's wrong with giving him flowers for the last time? He was my friend. He was kind and I loved him . . ." she said sadly, no longer able to contain her tears.

"You hate him even when he is dead," Siew Ping uttered, depressed. She cried the whole day.

Her mother was speechless. She was filled with pity when she saw her daughter cry. Suddenly she remembered her deceased husband. But she regretted. Why is the Malay boy so special to Siew Ping? She sighed with relief. It's fortunate that the boy died. Poor Siew Ping. I will consult my sister regarding the possible betrothal of Siew Ping and her son, a grocer at the village market. If time permits, I will go there next week. Quietly she made her decision.

Siew Ping could not take her lunch that day. She was still sad. She rested her head on the table and thought of the happy moments she had with Ali.

She could clearly see Ali's face and hear his voice. Ali

teased and giped her. Ali had once said: "Life is like the flowers, Siew Ping. They bud, bloom, wither and then fall to the ground." Ali, I had not expected this untimely parting. I wish I could see you for the last time. But . . . where is his village? It was my mistake for not asking where his village was.

She looked sadly at the bouquet of fresh red roses. I am sorry, Ali! Tears flowed down her cheeks again. She felt completely broken-hearted.

In the afternoon she helped her complaining mother who found it hard to cope with her customers alone. Siew Ping's eyes were red and swollen. She scrutinized every face that passed the stall. Was that Ali? Everybody looked like Ali.

Siew Ping looked listlessly at the street. She could not hear the roars of the cars and human voices. The world seemed empty and lonely. She felt she had been abandoned at a port without a single soul.

"Siew Ping!" Her mother yelled. Siew Ping did not answer.

"Siew Ping!" Her mother called out again. Siew Ping still did not answer her.

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GREAT-GRANDFATHER WITH TEETH

Catherine Lim

SINGAPORE

During a vacation home from my studies in the United States in 1992, I decided to spend the night alone in the old, abandoned family house at Pek Joo Street, one in a row of dilapidated shophouses that must have been built before the turn of the century, soon to be torn down to make way for a gleaming shopping complex.

The reasons behind my decision were two: sentiment and bravado. The sentiment concerned my birth in one of the three bedrooms on the upper floor, which still contained the birth-bed, an old, carved, monstrous piece of furniture. The bravado concerned the alleged population of ghosts in the house, which I was determined to confront, alone and unaided, so that I could regale friends with vivid telling of the houses on Pek Joo Street; passers-by could feel the odour of its unsanctity.

"It's definitely unclean," they shuddered. Strange sounds, shadowy presences, fleeting movements—all had been heard or sighted in the derelict house of my birth.

The ghosts were those not only of forbears who had lived and died there, but also of maidservants sold into bondage to the family. The last ancestor to die in the house was the first to be born there, my great-grandfather, Tan Siong Teck, who died at eighty, just months before I was born, his first great-grandson. The only existing photography of him, yellowed with age, shows a handsome, robust, well-built old man with a perfect set of teeth. In those days of stiff, formal poses for the camera, people never smiled. Great-grandfather did, for the pure

pleasure, I was told, of showing off those marvellous octogenarian teeth.

"Tell me about *Chor Kong*," I used to ask my mother when I was a boy, impressed by the fact that he exited the world just as I entered it. But my mother would look displeased and turn away each time, as from a horrible secret not fit to be told. Great-grandfather became an absorbing mystery to me.

Two maidservants had died in the house, one of whom, a nineteen-year-old called Ah Kum, had hanged herself from a ceiling beam one cold dawn before anybody was awake.

I relished the prospect when back in the States after my vacation, of tantalising my college mates, especially my roommate, Bryan Roberts, a dry, cynical Business Studies student, with a cool, detailed description of 'My adventures in the Haunted Ancestral Home'.

"I spent a night with the spirits of my forbears, apologizing sincerely, on behalf of the Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority, for the rude expulsion from their home, and promising to help them, in whatever way I could, in their resettlement in a new home. On behalf of the government, I offered at least a million dollars in compensation, burning ten stacks of ghost money until everything was properly reduced to ashes. It is said that some spirits do not even know they are dead, and wander around in a confused state for years, on the face of the earth. I showed extra sympathy for these poor benighted souls which surely included that of my great-grandfather, a fine-looking old man who must have done horrible things in life to make his descendants too fearful to even mention his name. As for the spirits of the suicides, they are supposed to be the most tormented of all. So I had to be extra gentle with that poor maidservant Ah Kum whose body, when it was detached from the hanging rope, was found to be with hild. I was therefore dealing with two distressed spirits, not one; no pair of ghosts could be

more tragic than those of mother and unborn child."

I already saw Bryan Roberts' jaw dropping. He often spoke patronisingly about the bizarre customs of the East, in particular the obsession with the supernatural. I would rub that in, and watch his reaction with perverse delight.

My mother said, "Kwan, I wish you wouldn't." (She never called me by my Western name, Rudolph.) I had told her of my plan, and she had appeared upset by it. She went on to say severely, "Don't go disturbing them or making fun of them. They can be dangerous. What's the matter with you?" She never referred to ghosts by any other term than a safe pronoun. She also probably regretted my Western education which had given me a Western name she could not pronounce, a Western religion she could not understand and a Western levity she could not condone.

"Kwan, light these joss-sticks for *Chor Kong*," she said, placing them in my hand. She was clearly worried that my frivolity had displeased the ancestors who must be appeased quickly. But I could not make myself do it. That gesture of appeasement would have a hollow ring to it.

That night, alone in the family house on Pek Joo Street, I saw the ghost of an old man. Strangely, I was unafraid. Perhaps it was my ability to stay detached from the culture of my childhood, to watch it coolly from the outside and not be intimidated by the exotic ghosts, ghouls and graveyard trysts that had so frightened me as a child. Indeed, I was elated at the thought of having a *real* supernatural experience, one actually independent of my imagination, that I could later narrate to my Western friends in every authenticity of detail.

I was lying on the bed of my birth when it happened. I heard small rustling sounds and instantly sat up to see an old man standing at the foot of my bed and staring at me. He was thin and stooped, with wisps of white hair on his head. He was wearing a short-sleeved, white singlet and black cotton trousers. All these details registered clearly in the dim light of a street lamp coming

through the wooden window slats. From the outside world too came the sound of cats snarling and of a garbage bin overturning, as if to confirm to me that what I was experiencing was not a dream but reality.

The ghost stared at me for a long time and I looked back, still unafraid. He moved slightly and opened his mouth, as if to tell me something. It was at this point that I saw, with a start, that he had no teeth. A toothless ghost. Even while gazing awe-struck at him, I was aware of the literal and metaphorical comicality of the situation. His gums were completely bare. It was almost as if, as a joke, he had appeared with the precise purpose to disclose that special feature. Then he vanished.

The next morning I told my mother about the ghost. She became very agitated, shaking her head vigorously. She said, "I told you, but you wouldn't listen." What she meant was that I had, by my reckless deed, tampered with the past which now, like a disturbed pool, was stirring with dark, ugly secrets.

"Who was the old man?" I said.

"Your great-grandfather," said my mother. Great-grandfather of the robust, well-built body and perfect teeth? Or did ghosts continue to suffer the ravages of time in the other world, becoming older, greyer, feeble?

"It was your *Chor Kong*," my mother repeated, and was of course compelled to tell the horrible tale she had been holding back for so many years.

Great-grandfather Tan Siong Teck, up to the eightieth and last year of his life, had never suffered even a minor ailment like a cough or cold. His good health was legendary, which he would proudly proclaim every morning to the world through an hour's exercise of *tai chi* in an open piece of ground at the back of the house. Neighbours stopped to watch admiringly. While other old men and women drooped, shuffled, limped, wheezed and used walking sticks, Great-grandfather strode briskly about, always wearing a short-sleeved white cotton singlet and black or grey cotton trousers, the best exemplar of

the much desired longevity and good health enshrined in every Chinese greeting.

But the greatest source of his pride and pleasure was his teeth: Great-grandfather never visited a dentist in all his life. He scorned to use anything but charcoal powder for cleaning that prized feature, carefully applying the stuff on every tooth and rubbing it vigorously with his forefinger. Then he rinsed his mouth several times with clear, clean water from a large tin mug. He spat out the water, in dark streams, into a drain, watched by fascinated children. For their benefit, he clowning about, baring his charcoal-blackened teeth to frighten them and rinsing his mouth with loud, exaggerated sloshing sounds. The elaborate ritual of teeth-cleaning was always followed by the pulling out of a small mirror from a trouser pocket. Carefully examining his teeth, now white and sparkling in the mirror, Great-grandfather would amuse the children further by inviting them to come up for a closer look. Once somebody gave him a small tube of Pepsodent toothpaste, Great-grandfather threw it away in disdain.

His pride and vanity about his teeth made him overly critical about other people's. He laughed unkindly at the brown, rotting stumps of Ah Chow, a neighbour who was a good fifteen years younger. He pointed with spiteful glee at the three remaining teeth wobbling precariously on the lower jaw of Ah Poon Soh who sold vegetables at the market. Ah Poon Soh could no longer eat the pork she loved, and watched with good-natured envy as Great-grandfather cockily cracked open boiled chestnuts and crab claws with his excellent teeth.

Great-grandfather welcomed the visits of the itinerant dentist who came to the neighbourhood once a month, because he loved to watch, with childish fascination, bad teeth being yanked out by the dentist's brutal-looking spanner-like instrument, and the bloodied hollows being plugged with large wads of cotton wool. The dentist carried with him on his rounds a small spittoon into

which yanked teeth and the used wads, soaking with blood, could be thrown. Great-grandfather even made fun of his own family members, none of whom had teeth that could remotely match his.

"*Siow*," they complained privately to each other, meaning that he was crazy and not behaving with the decorum and dignity expected of old age.

Then something happened. When Great-grandfather turned seventy-nine, one of his three sons, Second Grand-uncle Oon Hock, aged fifty-one, died of a mysterious illness. Only the day before, he was enjoying his usual drink of Guinness Stout in the coffee shop three doors away. The next day, he complained of dizziness and asked his wife to rub Tiger Oil on his temples. She did so expertly and then went to get him a cup of hot Ovaltine. When she returned, he was slumped in his chair, dead.

Second Grand-aunt was inconsolable. After the funeral, when she had sufficiently calmed down, she made a sly remark to the effect that longevity for the old was fine, but should not be at the expense of the young. She had touched a raw nerve of the culture's abiding dilemma: what to do about old men and women who exceeded their apportionment of long life, stealing years that should have been their children's. It was not in the natural order of things for parents to bury their children.

Second Grand-aunt, in her resentment, had planted the seeds of fear in that house on Pek Joo Street. It hung in the air, heavy, uneasy, palpable. It isolated Great-grandfather, already isolated by the eccentricities of his behaviour. But the old man, ever proud and stubborn, chose to ignore the snide remarks and continued his healthy regimen of daily morning exercise and meticulous teeth cleaning. He was looking forward to his eightieth birthday the following year and to the eating of the longevity noodles at the celebration dinner which his children and grandchildren were obliged, by filial duty, to provide, and which was sure to confer at least another ten or fifteen years of good health.

Then another death in the family took place. This time it was a grandson, the youngest child of one of Great-grandfather's two daughters, First Aunt Kim Chee who lived at Downer Road, a few streets away. The boy, aged eleven, had fallen down while playing, slipped into a coma and died within a week. His frantic parents had consulted one temple medium after another for a cure, but in vain. First a son, now a grandson. The old man's longevity was proving to be a curse in the family; it was dangerously extending itself by eating up the life-years of progeny. A relative went to consult a fortune-teller who instantly identified the specific source of the continuing evil: Great-grandfather's teeth. They were abnormal teeth, too long, too strong, too powerful, indicating a monstrous appetite. They were the teeth of perverted parenthood that would devour its own flesh and blood. How many more offspring would have to be sacrificed? Great-grandfather's perfect teeth had suddenly become the focus of everyone's resentment and fear.

Since the gods sternly forbade any disrespect for the old, this resentment could only be expressed indirectly. The aggrieved victims, Second Grand-aunt and First Aunt Kim Chee, single or together, made caustic remarks to neighbours who were certain to pass them on to the hateful old one.

Great-grandfather seethed with anger. He felt all the pain of the insult as well as all the confusion of an ambiguous gift from the gods: had the teeth of longevity turned into a weapon of destruction in his own family? Had the prized symbol of his good health become a toxic gift?

In his confused state, he became peevish and quarrelsome, isolating himself even more. As his birthday approached, he said loudly and testily, "No need for any celebration. Why bother at all?" It was of course unthinkable that the august eightieth birthday of an aged parent would go uncelebrated, that the longevity noodles would not be cooked and eaten by everybody.

At that time, my mother, who was married to one of Great-grandfather's grandsons (my father died when I was nine), was pregnant with me. A son, a grandson, a great-grand-son: would the savage teeth chomp through three generations? My mother, a young bride at nineteen, was terrified. She avoided looking at Great-grandfather. Whenever she passed him, she looked down, and raised her hands instinctively to cover her swelling belly, to protect the unborn great-grand-son. She had begun her married life at 37, Pek Joo Street, a house with only three bedrooms and an endlessly proliferating family. At one stage, the family spilled over into the adjoining house at No. 38, which happened to be vacant, by simply breaking down a separating wall.

On the special day of Great-grandfather's eightieth birthday, at the precise hour when the food was all laid out on the table to be eaten, with a huge plate of the celebratory noodles in the centre, Great-grandfather was nowhere to be seen. The children were sent to look for him. Someone had seen him, hours earlier, in the toolshed at the back, fiddling with tools and making strange noises. Nobody remembered seeing him doing his exercise that morning or cleaning his teeth. Everybody became worried. What had happened to Great-grandfather?

Then somebody whispered, "Ssh, he's coming!" and the family quickly took their places at the long table, silent and anxious. They watched nervously as Great-grandfather came in, looking paler than usual, and took his place at the head of the table. Then he began to help himself to the longevity noodles.

It was at this point that the family realised that something was wrong. They looked at him in horror, or rather, at his mouth, as it opened wide to eat the noodles. For there were no teeth. The gums were totally bare, and still bleeding from the despoliation, probably with a spanner from the toolshed. (A child later discovered all the teeth, a very large number, thrown into an old tin bucket in the shed, in a mess of blood, spittle and old

rag.) Great-grandfather ate the noodles slowly, drawing in each long strand carefully, so as to maintain its length and wholeness, as tradition required. One by one, each long, wet, slippery noodle was sucked into the toothless mouth and swallowed, with great slurping noises. Then when he had finished, Great-grandfather looked at the faces around the table, looked at each long and lingeringly. He said nothing but his eyes were bright with savage triumph: "Are you all satisfied now?"

He turned to my mother and looked hard at her, and again it was his eyes that did the talking: "Your unborn child is safe, Granddaughter-in-law. If anything happens, remember, I'm not to blame. The young must not always blame the old. I've done my best."

My mother said it was the most horrible moment in her life. Once again, she had instinctively placed both hands on her growing stomach to protect me from the malevolent stare.

Great-grandfather died soon after. It would appear that with his prized teeth gone, he had nothing more to live for. He lost interest in life, refused all food and medicine and went into rapid decline, dying only two months after his eightieth birthday. He was a shadow of his former self.

I went back to the house at No. 37, Pek Joo Street. I wanted to see Great-grandfather's ghost again, this time to thank him. He had laid down his teeth for me. For this I would first beg forgiveness from the ghost and then thank him with the fullness of a humble, chastened heart. I waited all night and when dawn broke, the time for the spirits to return to their abodes, I knew Great-grandfather would never come again. He had left No. 37, Pek Joo Street, forever.

Before I returned to the States, I paid a visit to the Shining Light Temple in which his ashes are kept. The Kong Seng Cemetery where he had been buried had been cleared for industrial development in 1984. Great-grandfather's grave, together with hundreds of others,

had been duly exhumed, and the remains collected by one of my uncles for cremation and final resting in an urn in the Shining Light Temple.

Lighting two joss-sticks to stick in front of Great-grandfather's urn, I felt an urge to talk to him. I would have much preferred a ghost, palpable and real, in the urgency of its brief visiting time, to a cold, silent urn with its cold ashes. I stood awkwardly before the urn, one among hundreds in neat rows, and was not sure what to say, the great-grandson from a world separated from his by a howling, immeasurable gulf. But for one brief moment on a dark night in the old house at 37, Pek Joo Street, we had managed to reach across that gulf.

THE CHANIANG POT BY THE WINDOW

Win Lyovarin

THAILAND

The six-inch tall red-lime-colored terra cotta flower pot without decorative motifs standing by the window had a rough texture. Almost full of coal-black loose soil, it stood on a wavy-edged tray. The plant, a little taller than one *kheup*¹, was called *chaniang*. The man had never heard of this plant with a strange name until Ket told him about it. Its straight stem was greenish brown and its leaves looked so common, like those of other plants. The red of the pot contrasted sharply with the pale green of the window, two extremes of colors juxtaposed, two differences that could never mix.

[Just like me in this place.]

The window panel made of *makha* wood was of a push-out-and-up type. The green paint of the frame had faded since it had never been repainted in so many years. The lace curtains with an old-fashioned pattern, aged through washing, were tied with strings darkened by accumulated dust. Once in a long while the breeze outside caressed the curtains, making them flutter, but the *chaniang* did not quiver. Actually it had been standing still by the window for more than three months, seemingly indifferent to its surroundings or the odor of the disinfectants that permeated the air.

His eyes moved away from the *chaniang* pot by the window and turned to fix on the old brown ceiling fan turning slowly like planet Earth rotating around itself since time immemorial. He watched it turn thousands and thousands of rounds from morning till night—and quite often—from night till morning [723, 724, 725, 726,

727 . . .] He counted the revolutions: such a long and never-ending duration of life, like a journey through a pitch dark tunnel with no light at the exit. Even death was something beyond reach.

He absent-mindedly looked at the fan for a long time before shifting his gaze out of the window. All he could see was the cloudless dark blue sky. It was a day when the sky was very beautiful. [But I am not in the mood to appreciate it. Actually I am not in the mood for anything.] The wind outside blew stronger. A few leaves floated by the window. [*Bah! It isn't so bad. Try not to look at the world pessimistically!*] He had read from somewhere that the mind was more important than the body. The will to go on living was the best medicine to cure a disease. A strong mind in a strong body. [*Has the bastard who said these words ever been stretched out here? My symptoms are not that of a disease.*] At least the many months that had gone by were a proof of that. [*Try again one more time. At least for the sake of the family. Don't forget, you don't have life insurance.*]

He focused his concentration on the tips of his fingers. No use! Those organs would not budge. Actually he had experimented many times. So difficult! It was like the first time when he discovered that he could not move. [*You'll only waste your time doing this. You'll never succeed.*] He could still remember the discouragement, the despair. [*You damned fool! You idiot! Do you still not understand even now? Your symptoms are incurable. No way indeed! You'll have to remain in this condition forever . . .*] He closed his eyes, trying not to let his thoughts bog him down. Why was his mind raging so? [*You don't have any insurance. Not a damn thing. Like this, your future will end up with nothing.*]

All of a sudden an awareness of despair surged up faintly from his abdomen and boiled through his chest. His heart beat faster, his skin searing hot as if he were standing beside a huge bonfire while the tips of his feet were numb. Fear covered his back with cold drops of

sweat. *[Son of a bitch! What are you afraid of? Are you afraid of being left in this condition all your life, your wife leaving you, being paralyzed, unable to move, your willy limp?]*

He believed he was crying. *[Shit! I don't even have accident policy.]* He could feel the tears rolling down his cheeks. *[Bah! Six months and still you can't make an adjustment?]* His teeth clenched, he inhaled softly. If he could only bear it out a little longer, his fear would be gone soon . . . The facts of life taught him that there was nothing permanent in this world. There was no emotion that could remain in man's mind forever, not even fear.

Slowly he exhaled until his lungs were empty. Then he held his breath for a long time before inhaling again slowly. The breathing principle of yoga was: inhaling: holding the breath: exhaling = 1 : 4 : 2. He tried it several times and soon enough his mind gradually calmed down. Like dirty water in a glass placed inside a moving car, no sooner had the water become still and precipitated than the dregs were shaken up again. *[Beware of your mind. Keep up with your emotions, do you understand? Just pretend that you are a hibernating frog. The frog breathes so slowly that its breath almost stops.]* His eyes were fixed on the *chaniang*. It had been three months since that woman planted it.

That woman! Ket—the woman with the most beautiful eyes. It was not the beauty of the shape of the eyes but the warmth in them. Thinking of her, he seemed to hear the gentle soothing voice of his mother. His mind gradually calmed down. Soon he plunged into slumber. In his dream he saw another woman appearing before him. He recognized that it was On, his own wife, appearing as an image that had been locked up in his subconscious for a long time. Stripping, On had only her sheer white clinging undergarments on. Her waist was waspish, her abdomen unblemished despite the fact that she had borne him a son, her hips broad. The back light bathed her body at an angle of 45 degrees, creating a

frame of white light around her fluffy hair, her breasts and her waist. The figure moved, letting the last piece of clothing fall. The smooth ivory skin dazzled his eyes. [*So beautiful, but why am I not turned on? Why can't I have an erection?*] The beautiful image turned to smile at him and all of a sudden the face changed to that of Ket, the nurse's. It was then that he woke up with a start.

His back was soaked with perspiration but he could not budge. He would have to let it dry in due course. The clock on the wall had moved only a few minutes past one. The nurse had not come yet. [*Why did he dream of her a moment ago?*] It must be because every day in the many months that had gone by she had remained close in his company. [*Shit! It is her job, isn't it? Then why do I have to pay attention? When has she become a part of my life?*]

It was six months ago since he arrived at this hospital. While he was being pushed through the doorway of this unfamiliar place, blurred images flashed on his retinas in his half-sleeping, half-awake state. Pain surged through his body, long-lasting like a germ that clung tightly to his soul. He vaguely recollected that while driving across the bridge he was singing contentedly in tune with the music from the car radio. All of a sudden that truck was rushing toward him. He swerved the car to the shoulder with all his might. The last thing he was aware of was the impact against the obstructing fence, the whirling fall from the bridge down to the vast open space below. The last sound he heard before losing consciousness was the loud splash of water. When he came to he heard people murmuring as if from a far, far away place. Sometimes the voices sounded like chanting and sometimes like the clamor in a shopping center.

"Is his condition serious?" It seemed to be a woman speaking.

[*Where . . . am . . . I?*]

"Quite serious." A man's voice answered. "The cervical

cord has been dislodged and many parts of the thorax cracked. The larynx has been shattered. . . ."

"Is he going to be paralyzed?"

[Are . . . you . . . talking . . . about . . . me?]

"I'm afraid so. It seems that he is going to be paralyzed for life."

[Paralyzed means being crippled. Paralyzed for life?]

That word kept ringing in his ears while he was dozing off under the influence of the tranquilizer. On the threshold between reality and dream his body seemed to writhe violently in misery, cold sweat spreading over the bed.

During the first few nights in hospital his sleep was intermittent, his consciousness floating in another world, his retinas quivering. He did not know how long it had been going on like this. The last time he was fully conscious a woman was looking at him. Her white dress was rather shabby but clean and neatly pressed. Her face reminded him of a typical Thai woman of fifty years ago. She had short hair, a dark complexion, and the flesh on her arm was frail. He never knew her real age but it must have been no less than thirty-five. She smiled at him . . . not with her lips but with the expression in her eyes.

[Who are you? Where am I?] He whispered his questions but no sound came out.

"My name is Ket and I am a nurse here. I will be taking care of you for quite a while."

[Why can't I talk? Why can't I move?]

Ket went on talking. "You had a terrible accident. You will be unable to move around temporarily. Not being able to talk might make you feel somewhat uncomfortable . . ."

[Is my larynx shattered like the doctor said? Am I paralyzed? Why can't I move?]

". . . But you will feel better soon."

[Don't lie to me. I am not a child. I heard the doctors talk among themselves.]

"Believe me. Rest a while and you will feel better."

[Do you always have to lie to patients in your career as a nurse? I don't want to deceive myself. I know that I have been seriously injured.]

"Don't think too much. Now your wife is waiting outside to see you."

A soft hand touched his forehead gently. On's hand.

His wife On was standing before him right now.

[I miss you so much, On.]

On's face was ashen, her eyes red from crying. She smiled at him. He tried to smile back but could not fake it. He could only hear the nurse speaking to On. "I will go out for the time being. If there is anything just press the buzzer over the bed . . ."

On gave the young nurse a nod before turning to him once more. "I have been waiting to see you for ten days but have just been allowed to do so after you came out of the ICU . . ."

[Have I been unconscious for ten days?]

"But your condition is not so serious."

[Being unconscious for ten days is not serious?]

"The doctor says that a few days rest will make you feel better."

[Then why does On cry? Why must everyone say the same thing that I will feel better after a little rest? Why must everyone in the world conceal the truth from me?]

He looked into her eyes. Her face was wan. On must have had a tough time getting through this period. For a wife who had to carry on the duty of a housewife looking after her child and at the same time working outside to earn some money, the task was too heavy a burden for the frail shoulders of a woman to bear. He could not imagine how she could have slept each night.

He did not want to imagine.

"My boss is allowing me to take one week off from work."

Could On be allowed to take leave? He knew that her boss never allowed her to take leave easily. On was a

cashier in a restaurant on Silom Road. She worked from ten in the morning to eleven at night, six and a half days in a week. As far as he could recall, every time she went to work late half a day's worth of her salary would be deducted. Every time she asked for sick leave her pay for that day would be deducted. "Why do you still work there?" He used to ask. At that time her answer was, "Sometimes we get stuck in a certain kind of trap."

[Yes. And now I am stuck in this trap. Please help me get out.]

"This week I leave the boy in the care of Aunt Raht next door. She understands the situation well."

[I am causing trouble for On and the boy. I am sorry, On. I don't even have life insurance.]

"Your temperature is normal now. Do you want to have something to eat? The doctor says that if you want to you'd better eat rice porridge first."

[I don't want to eat. Tell me if I am permanently paralyzed.]

His wife added. "If you are hungry, blink twice then I will know."

[Look at me straight in the eyes. I saw you talking with the doctor for a long time. Am I permanently paralyzed?]

On met his eyes and remained quiet for a long time, saying nothing.

[Yes. I am permanently paralyzed. As a matter of fact I don't have to ask you. I know very well about myself.]

The whole room remained in silence for a long time and then he blinked twice.

The steaming hot rice porridge with minced pork before him exuded a tasty aroma. On had cooked it at home. Her skilful hands had sprinkled chopped spring onions, fried chopped garlic, and a dash of pepper on it, followed by chili and three spoonfuls of vinegar to his taste. She fed the porridge into his mouth. It tasted good as always. It was strange that a paralytic could still savor the taste of food. She patiently fed him each mouthful. He looked

at her but On did not meet his eyes. He began to pan his eyes around the room, taking note of everything. On the table in the corner of the room lay the same kinds of presents brought by visitors: flowers, chicken essence, evaporated milk. He and On used to visit some patients and every time he bought chicken essence for them. On always asked, "Why do people buy only these few items? Usually patients don't want to eat anything. All in all when they are hospitalized they must eat whatever the doctors prescribe."

But when it was his turn to be a patient she brought him chicken essence.

[It must have been quite expensive, right, On?]

She fed him spoonful after spoonful of porridge which he swallowed with difficulty. He could smell her. On was a beautiful woman. She was industrious. When they got married both of them worked hard for a better future and managed to get through the grinding phase until they were firmly on their feet. The accident he had experienced was considered the worst obstacle in their lives.

After he had finished his porridge, On took the dishes into the bathroom to wash them quietly and then wiped them neatly before putting them back into a bag. It was her routine to wash the dishes after meals every day at home. She said, "I have to go home now or else the boy will be waiting for me too long."

[Go home now to be with the boy. Don't worry about me.]

On forced a smile at him and walked into the bathroom. His ears picked up a certain sound.

[Is she vomiting? What's wrong with her? Is she vomiting because she is sick or because she can't stand seeing me like this?]

A moment later he heard the toilet being flushed once. On came out of the bathroom, her face white as a sheet. She forced a smile. "I am going home now."

[Her face looks so pale. Is she sick?]

"Don't worry about me and the boy. Relax and take it easy."

He believed that she could take care of herself. Right now there was only her left to look after the family, including himself. She bent down to give him a light kiss on the cheek and walked away. The sound of a door closing. He was not so sure if the dampness on his cheek was On's tears, or was it only his imagination?

On visited him five days in a row, every time bringing him food. After that she did not come at all. He understood. On's job did not allow her much time for the family. Sometimes she was busy with her job and the kid. Sometimes she could not stand his condition. Every time she visited him she never asked him what she should do next with their lives and the boy's. Even if she did ask he could give her no answer.

Right at that minute he wanted to die.

His eyes fixed on the brown ceiling fan rotating slowly like planet Earth revolving around itself day in day out since time immemorial. Such a long and never-ending duration of life like a journey through a pitch-dark tunnel with no light at the exit. Even death was something beyond reach.

[867, 868, 869, 870, 871 . . .]

"Is there something the matter? I notice that you have been looking at that fan for two hours now . . .," Ket's words broke the silence.

[Since morning I have counted 800 turns. Look at me. I can't do anything. I want to die.]

"Do not despair . . ."

[Help me. Please press a pillow over my face. I want to die.]

"Life is still meaningful . . ."

[Are you joking? Even my wife does not visit me any more.]

". . . I really believe so."

[I want to die, do you hear? I want to die. I want to

die!]

"I have a book I brought from my house. Do you want me to read it to you?"

[I don't want to listen.]

She began to read.

"Understanding Obstacles and Mistakes by Luang Vijitvathakarn. 'Twenty years ago I made a journey by boat down the Mekhong River and noticed a most peculiar and at that time incomprehensible scene. When the boat drew near the bank I saw some villagers sitting on a rock which projected into the river, catching fish with small dip-nets. Their way of fishing was to dip the nets downstream. I could not comprehend how they could catch any fish. At that time I thought that if I were to fish I would dip my net against the current. I did not pay much attention the first few times I saw the procedure. But when I went on with my journey for many days I saw the same thing happening every day. People were using small dip-nets to scoop up fish downstream everywhere. I got curious and asked a local man in my company why they did it that way. The answer was that fish always swim against the current. So, if people want to get the fish they have to dip their nets downstream to meet the movement of the fish, which swim upstream. Then I began to wonder why fish swim against the current everywhere. Why don't they swim with the current which would be easier and less tiring? I got a clear explanation from an authority on the matter, in order to find food, fish must swim against the current since food usually floats along the current. If the fish also swim with the current they would not find any food. Moreover, if fish swim with the current by nature, the fish in rivers and streams would become extinct. There would no longer be any freshwater fish left in the world since they would all swim out to sea . . .'"

[I don't want to listen. I am not interested in the damn fish.]

"Nature has created man and animals to fight

against obstacles, to exert their energy, and to persevere, otherwise they would not be able to survive. Fish must swim against the current to find their food and so should man. In order to survive, to establish ourselves, to shape our future, we must face obstacles. One who has never faced obstacles will never make progress one way or the other. In order for a kite to fly high it must go against the wind. The stronger the wind, the higher the kite flies. A kite that is carried by the wind is one whose string has broken and one never knows where it is going to fall”

Her voice droned on like a monk preaching to the faithful in order that they might escape the hell of eternal fire, but he did not want to hear it for he was already in hell.

[I don't like such didactic text. I don't want it. I want to die and be reincarnated.]

She stopped reading for a moment, her eyes meeting his. “The expression in your eyes tells me that you are angry . . .”

[Yes, I am angry, angry at everything in the world.]

“Why?”

[I have become worthless, useless to society, a burden for everyone. Taking care of me is a waste of time.]

“You still have friends coming to visit you all the time. Everyone still loves you and is concerned about you.”

[Which son of a bitch would still be visiting me when I must be in this condition all my life? Even my wife has not shown up for two months now.]

On was just like the others, no different from his friends. Everyone put on a mask. He remembered that at first his room was full of visitors. Flowers and cards to cheer him up were placed around his bed. The visitors came with soothing smiles and they sounded really concerned. Soon the flowers started withering while the familiar faces disappeared, one by one.

“And even your wife has her reason for not coming, I know . . .”

[You know? What do you know? Does On tell you why

she hasn't shown up?]

Even On could not stand seeing him in this condition. She must have thought that it would be better not to see him. Maybe she was right. Had she been in the same condition he might not have come to visit her either.

"Actually On came to see you two weeks ago but was taken ill all of a sudden. I then took your wife home and advised her to have more rest. Your wife is a little bit over-stressed. It would be better for her to have a quiet rest. That day both of us had a chance for a long chat. On is a very lovely woman . . ."

[I know that she is lovely but why hasn't she come?]

The young nurse did not answer his question. She would never know what was going on in his mind. She only smiled coolly before going out of the room, leaving him to lie there counting the number of turns the fan would make all through that night. The next day when she dropped in again to observe his symptoms she saw how pale his face was. She knew that he had not slept all night but said nothing, only smiled. After breakfast she started up a conversation as usual. "Do you want me to read some newspapers to you?"

[I want to die.]

"What do you want to hear . . .?" She picked up a newspaper and flipped it through ". . . Only news about killing. I don't think you want to hear it. Your eyes tell me so . . ."

[How do you know that I hate this kind of news?]

"I can read the expression in your eyes . . ." Her eyes met his and she smiled. "Believe me."

[If you can really read my mind, can you tell that I want to die?]

Her eyes seemed to pierce through his mind. "There are only stories about death—either murders or suicides caused by disappointment in love. These people never knew how precious life is . . ."

She was such an optimist!

[Is this the reason why you chose to be a nurse?]

"Someone committed suicide just because of a trivial thing . . ."

[Are you being too optimistic?]

" . . . Because a matter of life and death for someone is only a small matter for many others. I will tell you a story. I used to know a blind man who was a friend of my father's. He used to have a secure job and was happy in life. One day he had an accident and lost his sight. He lost everything. His girlfriend left him. He lost his job since no one wanted to hire a blind person so he had to sell lottery tickets for a living. I believe that he must have gone through a great ordeal at that time. For a man who had lost everything in life at the same time it was a difficult thing for him to accept. He fell down sewers and bumped against people and things. He had to carry the ticket case from his house and took a bus to shopping centers to sell his lottery tickets there. He had to take notice of the bus stops which was a difficult thing to do but he still fought for survival."

[That guy must be a masochist.]

"I used to wonder why he was so undaunted. One day when I had a chance I asked him about it. He told me that he kept on fighting because someone had read a book to him. Do you know that he gave me that book? I read it every time I am in low spirits . . ."

[The book you read to me yesterday?]

"It was an autobiography entitled *My Life Story*, written by Helen Keller. Have you ever heard of this name? Helen Keller became deaf and blind when she was eighteen months old. When she grew up she did society a lot of good. Her life would have been left to fate had she not met a teacher who one day would change her life completely. The teacher gave her encouragement so she could fight her way through physical and mental obstacles until she met with success. Helen noted down that the first day she met her teacher was the most important day in her life . . ."

The narrator paused for a moment.

"I remember the story well. That day was a spring day and Helen was almost seven years old. She felt she was like a ship floating in the middle of the ocean without a compass. There was no way to tell how far away the port was. That afternoon her instinct sensed some strangeness in the house. She was sitting on the step with the afternoon sun shining through the honeysuckle on her face. It was a sweet season she liked. Her inner touch told her that something was going to happen. And then she met her teacher, Miss Sullivan, for the first time . . ."

The patient listened calmly.

"On that day Miss Sullivan gave Helen a doll, using her finger to spell the word 'd-o-l-l' on her palm. Helen was having fun with this new game and imitated her teacher. She ran to her mother and excitedly wrote those letters on her mother's palm. She began to learn that everything in the world had its name. Since then she learned a new word every day by touching, word by word.

"One day while she was playing with her new doll Miss Sullivan tried to teach her the word 'w-a-t-e-r.' She tried to distinguish the word 'w-a-t-e-r' from the word 'g-l-a-s-s' so many times that Helen became bored and in a sour mood threw the doll on the floor and broke it in pieces. She felt smugly contented with her antagonistic act. Then she heard the teacher sweeping the broken pieces into a corner of the room.

"Miss Sullivan took her outside. There was a well near the house. The teacher took Helen's hand and put it under running water. While she could feel the cold of the water flowing over her hand Miss Sullivan wrote the letters 'w-a-t-e-r' on her other palm several times. Suddenly she understood the meaning and the name of the refreshing cool thing flowing over her hand. At that moment she understood what the teacher had been trying to teach her all day. Experiencing an indescribable freedom, she left the place with a desire to learn about everything.

"When Helen got back to the house, she felt that

everything she used to touch had come alive because she was 'looking' at them through a different perspective. Suddenly she remembered the doll she had thrown on the floor. She picked up the broken pieces and tried in vain to put them back together. Tears brimmed over her eyes when she realized the thing she had done that day. It was the first time she felt sorry."

[It must have been like my mood now, which is sour at everything.]

"She learned more new words, beginning with words around herself such as mother, father, sister, teacher. What made it strange was that all the time she was growing up she felt she was a very happy child. Every day she was thrilled to learn new things and eagerly waited hungrily for the new day to begin . . ."

The narrator paused for a moment.

". . . So I believe that nothing is impossible in the world. Happiness does not originate from having all parts of your body intact."

[You are too optimistic. Human life is not meant to be tormented.]

"I recall reading an old adage that says, 'Laugh, and the world laughs with you; cry, and you cry alone.' Everyone in the world must face disappointment."

[How long are you going to preach to me?]

"I know, talking is easy, but acting is difficult. But sometimes we have to start acting. We must learn to force ourselves to smile, to fight. Soon it will be fine." Ket picked up the book on the table once again. "I know that you don't like it, but try to listen. There is one interesting story here. I will read it to you . . ."

"When Africa was occupied by the British there was an area where not a single tree grew. All year round not a single drop of rain fell but it was such a very significant, strategic area that the British felt it necessary to send their men in to set up a stronghold there. Thus the British went against nature by planting trees, lots of trees. They made a big business of it and tried very hard

to transport fresh water from elsewhere to water the trees. After twenty years of incessant effort, they got big trees that gave shade to abate the heat and also fruit for consumption. It was quite worth the effort . . .”

[It must have been easier than making a paralytic walk.]

Her voice sounded glib while she was reading intently. “. . . But another result which those who initiated the planting of the trees themselves might not have anticipated was that when the trees grew in abundance they were able to induce rainfall. Thus the area became a place where it rained regularly in season. It can be seen that exertion yielded result even in nature, and a much better result than anticipated . . .”

Closing the book, she smiled. “It’s a very beautiful story, isn’t it?”

He closed his eyes for a moment before meeting Ket’s eyes.

[Thank you for trying to encourage me, but this story and mine are not the same.]

She could read his expression. “You need faith and will power to go on fighting. Do not bother to think how it can help you right now. Just try to make your mind cheerful. That is all I want. We are different only in the sizes of our hearts. I remember that one day as I was walking along a street in town to do some business I saw an old woman selling lotus flowers on the roadside. She must have been not a day under seventy, with completely white hair. I cannot exactly say that she was selling the flowers for she was nodding off all the time beside the withered lotus. The buyers would put the money in the basket and take the flowers themselves. A few steps away, a young lad sat begging. You know what, he was about twenty-five, his face healthy with no sign of any deformity. When people walked past he would raise his bowl above his head in a gesture of respect. It was such a contrasting picture. Do you know what I did that day?”

[No, I don’t.]

“I spat in that young beggar’s bowl.”

He wanted to laugh.

[What a pity! You just see the world only in black and white. You could just not give that guy money. Why did you have to be so antagonistic?]

"I believe that anyone who had seen the old woman that day would never ever give money to any beggar. A woman as old as she still fought for her life. It teaches us that . . ."

[I don't want to hear any more, I don't want to live. Why must there be such depressing stories in the world? I want to die. Do you hear? I want to die.]

The brown ceiling fan had spun for the 720,000th time when On visited him again. She looked somewhat wan.

"I have been very busy." That was all she could say.

[Where have you been for two months?]

"You seem to have more color in your face." She was lying to him. He knew that he was going downhill fast both physically and mentally. He closed his eyes.

[You know that I have got worse. I needed you badly but you didn't come. Now I don't want to hear anything. I want to be left in peace all by myself.]

"I work overtime every day and do not get home until late at night."

He closed his eyes and remained still. How far had he counted? He could not remember. To hell with it! He could count however he liked to. [322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327 . . .] On said a few sentences to him but he did not open his eyes. On must have noticed his mood. She pressed her lips and said, "I will come again tonight."

After On had left the young nurse approached his bed. "I know that you are not asleep. You shouldn't have shown such a strong reaction toward your wife."

He opened his eyes and looked eyes with Ket. *[If you were me how would you feel if even your own wife did not come to see you?]*

"On has to work. I pity her. Right now she has to work even harder than before."

[But two months . . . and she did not have even the least time to visit her husband?]

Ket took a lunch box from the bag.

[What is that?]

"Your food. Your wife has brought it from home. She asked me to feed it to you."

[Thank you, but I don't want it.]

The young nurse raised her eyebrows. "You are angry with your wife . . ."

He pressed his lips tight.

She moved near him, her perfume permeating through his nostrils.

Was it her body scent or some cheap perfume? Or both?

She used a spoon to scoop the rice from the lunch box to feed him. "Open your mouth."

[I don't want to eat. My stomach should have been paralyzed too so that I might have starved to death sooner.]

"Open your mouth and eat. On has put herself through all the trouble to prepare it at home."

He pressed his lips and glared at the young nurse.

[I say I don't want to eat.]

She put down the spoon. "Your expression tells me you don't want to eat. Why are you angry with your wife?"

He closed his eyes once more. Ket pressed her lips. "I don't want to speak harshly because you are convalescing, but you have no right to be angry with your wife. On has done everything only for you."

[Is there any wife in the world who does not come to visit her husband at the time when he needs moral support the most?]

"All right, now eat your food." She tried once again, picking up the spoon of rice and putting it in his mouth. He pressed his lips tight.

He slowly moved his lips. *[I am not eating.]*

The young nurse could read his lips. She angrily put the spoon in the lunch box.

"You are so stubborn and temperamental. If you are really angry with On I will tell you the truth. She has not come for two months because . . ."

He stared fixedly at the young nurse's face.

[Because of what?]

Ket did not answer. She cleared all the food on the table and walked out of the room trying to calm her temper. He closed his eyes tight. *[Why? Don't I have the right to be angry?]* He felt disturbed by some indescribable emotion pent up inside him. He would like to release it by shouting at the top of his voice but he could not do so. *[You bastard! You have ruined my whole life and made me unable to talk.]* His eyes began to dampen, his teeth clenched. *[I want to die. I want so much to die.]* He looked at the sky and the clouds. Was there a God? If God really existed would He be able to hear his words? Did God know he wanted to die? He let out a long sigh of exasperation but tried to release it in the softest way. *[1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 . . .]* Soon he fell asleep.

When he regained consciousness the sky outside the window had become dimmer. The sound of people talking woke him up once more.

"He is asleep." It was the voice of Ket the young nurse.

"Then I'll go home now otherwise I'll miss the last bus." He then knew that his wife On had come to visit him again.

"Take plenty of rest, On. You don't have to come tomorrow. Are you feeling better now?"

"I feel much better now. He seemed so cross. He must have been angry with me for not having come to see him for two months."

"Don't think too much about it. It is a normal reaction on the part of one who has to go through this kind of thing."

"I will try to take things lightly."

"Very good. You are a very patient woman."

"Don't ever tell him the truth."

"Don't worry, On. He doesn't even know that you were

going to have a baby."

He froze even though his eyes were still closed, his face beginning to get numb as if it had become paralyzed like the lower part of his body.

[On having a baby?]

"Go now, don't you worry, otherwise you'll be too tired. After you had . . . an . . . you should get a lot of rest." The sound of a door closing. On had left quietly. He thought of the day she was vomiting in the bathroom. Now he completely understood everything.

[On had an abortion. That's why she hasn't been able to visit me for two months.]

His eyes were blurred with tears. Why wasn't his lacrimal gland paralyzed as well?

When the young nurse walked to turn on the light near the bed she saw his tear-stained face. Ket stopped short in her tracks, locking eyes with him for a long time. "You heard . . ." She could read the expression in his eyes.

[My baby? She was afraid she wouldn't be able to take care of it?]

Ket bent down close to him. "You must not blame On. It was not her fault. She just could not cope with the issue. It was too heavy a burden on her. You can't blame On. This responsibility is too heavy for anyone to bear."

[No, I am not blaming On. It was my own fault. I could not even protect my unborn baby. Because I was down, the baby in On's womb had to die too.]

"I know you are sorry to be in this condition, but this is reality. It is a reality from which you can't escape. So don't run away from it."

He looked at the food carrier on the table.

[I want to eat the food that On prepared at home.]

The next morning Ket came into the room laden with parcels. The young nurse pulled an object out of a plastic bag. It was a plain red-lime-colored terra cotta flower pot with a rough texture, about six inches tall. There was also a wavy-edged tray to put the pot on. She

took a small paper envelope out of another bag. The paralyzed patient's eyes fixed steadily on the nurse.

[*What is that?*]

She was smiling with those eyes again. "Some *chaniang* seeds."

[*What are you going to do?*]

Ket poured some soil from the plastic bag into the pot. In a few minutes the coal-black soil filled the container. She used a glass in the room to take some water from the tap and then poured the water in the pot to wet the soil before taking a few seeds out of the envelope and pressing them down firmly under the soil.

"In a few days they will sprout."

[*Why are you planting it?*]

"Last night I lay in bed thinking about your story for a long time. It is strange that you make me think of my grandfather."

[*Why? Do I look like him?*]

"My grandfather grew a lot of *chaniang* trees in his orchard. That's why I have been quite familiar with them since I was little. I have seen them from the time they sprout leaves, then blossoms, until they grow into big trees. The other day a friend from the South brought me some *chaniang* pods since she knows I like to eat them. I have some left so I am growing them here."

[*Ridiculous. Are you growing them to eat the seeds?*]

"*Chaniang* is a southern plant. You must have never heard of its name before. It is a rather big tree. No one grows it in a pot but I will try to grow one . . ."

She was smiling with her eyes again.

"Big trees never die wherever they are planted, isn't it so?"

The young nurse looked out of the window, her eyes sparkling. "My grandfather was so attached to the trees. When I was young I liked to climb the *chaniang* trees to get their seeds to eat. The curved pod is dark brown, about one *kheup* long. Inside there is a row of seeds. The seeds are round and flat. The seeds and the young sprouts are

edible. If the seeds are boiled first they will taste better, but I like to eat them raw. Actually if you eat them a lot you will have renal stones because they contain a toxic substance which is harmful to the kidneys. Most people like to eat them with *nam phrik*². Sometimes they are eaten with *khao yam*³ or may be used to make desserts. They are delicious when mixed with coconut meat and sugar. Even though the *chaniang* is very tall the branches are fragile. When it rains hard they may break easily."

He felt like laughing.

[Are you referring to me?—Big in body but chicken-hearted?]

"It rains a lot in the South. Whenever it rains the branches snap and fall but I have never seen any of the trees die."

[See? You finally make an allusion to me.]

"My grandfather was very much attached to nature. He was an amiable old man who had a simple view of the world. Every time something bothered him he would go into the orchard to look at the trees, the *chaniang*. Had it not been for grandfather, I would not have been able to live in this world as long as I have. He explained that all lives in the world have problems. One person's problem may not be another person's problem, meaning there is nothing which is a real problem. It keeps changing according to variables and situations.

[Are you trying to lead my thought away from my death wish—by planting this silly tree?]

"My grandfather believed that planting trees is building up life. Watching the trees sprout leaves is a drill in patience. It is learning to love. And all these lead to an understanding of life."

[Aha! Your grandfather was also a philosopher. But suppose your grandfather was lying here in this bed, would he still be saying the same thing? All right, if I didn't die first out of boredom I would be able to see it grow. But I think it would see me die first before I could see it grow.]

"You must believe in the power of the will to live. You must go on fighting for your family, for your wife and for your child. Just think of your wife having to fight all alone. Think of . . ."

[And has anyone ever thought of me? It is not any of my fault that that damn truck hit me and paralyzed me and I have to lie here waiting for death. Has anyone shown any interest in me? Everyone says the same thing, that I will live. But do they know that living is much more difficult than dying?]

Ket was silent for a moment. Her two hands pressed the soil down tightly for the last time before she moved the pot to be placed near the window. She must not have been able to tell what he was thinking.

"In only a few days it will sprout forth." Ket picked up a newspaper from the table. "Strange news in the papers these days. Listen to this one. A young man committed suicide because his wife had cut off his penis and flushed it down the toilet. Strange that he should kill himself over such a trivial matter like this."

[I see nothing strange in it. People think differently. I told you that life is not meant for self-torment.]

"Our life is meaningful so why surrender to such matters?"

[You are too optimistic. If one day you happen to be paralyzed and cannot move around, with your family abandoning you, I ask you truly whether you will still want to remain in this world.]

She looked him in the eyes. "The expression in your eyes seems to say that you do not believe my words. Hardship is not an obstacle in creating happiness in life. The . . ."

The paralyzed patient closed his eyes.

[I know that you really wish me well. You have given me your time reading these uplifting books to me to boost my spirit. But I don't want to talk about this matter. What you want to think is your own business. Right now I want to die. No! I am not angry or peevish. I understand the

situation perfectly. It is nobody's fault. It is only a matter of fate which may happen to anyone at any time. Do you agree?]

She remained silent as if she could read his thought. "I think I understand your feeling right now. But the most important thing is the will to go on living . . ."

[Ket, you did not understand the thing I was saying. I want to die not because I am emotional, do you understand? My presence in the world is of no use. It doesn't make things better. My case is not Helen Keller's, nor that of the blind man you used to know who at least could sit and sell lottery tickets. I am in no position to be of use to anyone, not even to my own family. You yourself know it. Don't kid yourself. Please put a pillow over my face. I don't want to live.]

The patient's and the nurse's eyes met. "I know. I understand. Once I used to feel that I didn't want to live in this dirty world . . ."

[Does someone like you understand the meaning of my hardship?]

The young nurse became silent again for a moment, her lips moved as if to say something but then stopped. At last she only murmured softly, "One day I might tell you my story."

From that day on the young nurse spoke less but still took care of him very well as usual. Three days later he saw the first tender shoot of the *chaniang* coming out. Ket's eyes sparkled. There was a trace of smile in those eyes as before.

"This is life. Very beautiful, isn't it?"

[You have a strange way of looking at the world.]

"You know, every time I see the young leaves sprouting I feel that there is still another side of life which is beautiful."

[I told you, you are optimistic.]

Another week passed by and the *chaniang* put forth four more leaves. Their green color was brighter than he

thought it would be, more beautiful than all the leaves he had seen anywhere before in his life.

"I haven't told you that I used to work in the maternity ward for two years, have I? It was one of the very good periods. Every day I saw many newborn babies, new lives. It made me hold on to hope, made me think of my childhood . . ."

[What was your childhood like, Ket?]

"My real name is Mom Rajawong Ying⁴ Thidarat Wongsudaphon and my nickname is Photchaman. My father used to be a member of the nobility in the Ministry of Interior. When my father died I had to leave the palace to stay with my mother in a hut near a deserted garden because my father's second wife who was jealous had inherited all of his one billion baht legacy . . ."

She laughed. "I was only kidding. Actually my life is not interesting at all . . ." She shrugged. It was the first time he saw a woman shrug and the first time in so many months that he felt amused and wanted to laugh aloud. ". . . Poor and unhappy I was born in a family of rural orchard growers. I had only a grade six education and then had to quit school to live with my mother who had been separated from my father. When mother died I lived with my grandfather until I was sixteen. Then my grandfather died and my father took me to live with him. After that my life changed . . ."

The breeze from out the window blew in softly. The tender shoot of the *chaniang* quivered under its influence.

"I married a man who used to be good at first, but later after he had problems about his job and was fired he turned into a brute. Whenever he became drunk he would beat me up. We are separated now but we still meet occasionally since I have a daughter by him. She is now six years old."

He was surprised.

[I didn't know that you have a daughter. I saw you work hard overtime and go home late every night.]

"I don't give it too much thought. Marriage is like

buying a lottery. If you are lucky you will win a prize, but normally not many people win. There has been many a time that I have contemplated suicide."

[You, wanting to kill yourself? An optimist like you?]

"Unbelievable? You will never know how much suffering I have experienced in life from childhood to adulthood. Great as it was, my physical hardship didn't amount to even one fourth of my mental suffering at that time."

[Funny. Hard to believe. It must not have been as bad as being paralyzed.]

Her countenance became more serious.

"It must be about twenty years ago. For a girl of sixteen it was worse than being paralyzed . . ." Ket's tone was calm and emotionless. ". . . One night I came home after washing dishes at a restaurant just like every day. The path leading to the house was utterly quiet but there was still light in the house. The people inside must still be up. It was past midnight then. My father and my brother were drinking together. The smell of liquor filled the air like every night. I walked past them without their paying attention to me. I took a bath and went to bed. My father staggered into my room, putting his hand on my shoulder. And then everything went on in a way I had never imagined before . . ."

The voice faltered for a moment but the expression in her eyes seemed to have no feeling attached. "Half an hour later, when father walked out of the room my brother walked in . . ."

The night breeze drifted in from out the window. The ceiling fan was still turning slowly the way it always did. How many revolutions had it turned? A million yet? The paralyzed patient remained motionless.

[And then . . . what happened next?]

". . . From that day on the same thing happened again and again and it went on like that for over a year until one day I could no longer stand it . . ." She clenched her teeth. Suddenly the hand that was holding the tip of the

chaniang broke it involuntarily. There was a snapping sound as the tender tip broke off. She gave a faint, sad smile “. . . It must have been like a rotten straw string that could no longer bear the weight. I was going to jump into the river to kill myself but changed my mind. I wasn't strong-hearted enough . . .”

[What made you go on living? Helen Keller's book? Luang Vijit's book?]

“Every day on the way from home I had to pass through a concrete-paved lane so old that there were cracks all over the surface. Along the cracks tiny plants shot forth. Every day the passers-by would trample on them but I never saw any of them die, despite the fact that they had to survive only on rainwater. On the day I thought of jumping into the river to kill myself, as I was walking along that path I was suddenly attracted by the presence of something very distinct on top of a plant. It was a yellow flower. I bent down to look at it closely for the first time. Unbelievably, the plant that seemed to be half-dead from being trampled every day was still able to bear a flower. I gazed at it for a long time. I thought it was the most beautiful flower in the world. If there really was a God or a supreme power above, I would believe that God must have wanted me to go on living by making me see that flower. That night I found a solution. The following morning I walked out of the house confidently, taking nothing with me. I did not try to find a reason why I was able to remain in that place in such a condition for such a long time. I did not feel angry or sad at my fate. It was useless to make a fuss since it would make nothing better. I discovered such a simple truth—that when night is over day would break. Obstacles never kill anyone. From that day on I have never cried. Every time I am discouraged or lonely I would stretch my shoulders and look up to the sky. I believe that anyone who has been through that kind of life would never be afraid of anything in life any more. Later I attended a school for adults until I graduated. I was twenty-four then and had

gone through a life full of hardship. I saved enough money and studied nursing until I completed the program. All of these I have accomplished by myself . . ."

[Why are you telling me such personal matter?]

The young nurse kept silent without looking him in the eyes.

[Thank you for telling me the abject incident that you experienced to make me feel better. But would you be expressing what is in your mind if I was not paralyzed, could not speak and blabber about it to someone? What had happened to you was very contemptible indeed. Your days must have been quite lonesome. You must be needing a friend, but at least you are able to walk around.]

Everything in the room came to a standstill. The chaniang tree, broken in the middle, stood motionless. She caressed it softly with her hand as if to show that she was sorry for having thoughtlessly broken it.

[What about your child?] He formed the question with his lips with no sound coming out. She could read it.

"My daughter is in school. She has never met her father again. I don't want her to know that she has such a monster for a father."

[Why?]

"Her father is only a drunk who will do anything to get booze to drink. No, I am not blaming him. He used to be a good person but I don't want to associate with the like of him any more since it will weaken my spirit. Do you know that once he took the child and hid her, asking for a ransom to get drunk? If I did not comply with his demand, he threatened to harm the child. Do you know how much money he wanted?"

[How much?]

"Two hundred baht."

[Only two hundred baht? That jerk did this to his own child? What did you do then?]

"I gave him the money and after that presented him with a knife wound as a souvenir. That was the reason why I believe that no one can hurt us if we have a fighting

spirit."

Three days after that night the broken *chaniang* tip sprouted a new leaf. This time the plant grew very fast as if afraid that someone would break it off again. A week later, the second and third leaves followed suit. When the tenth leaf came out there no longer was any trace of the wound left. Two months later, the rejuvenated *chaniang* tree stood prominently in glory near the window.

These few days he felt somewhat better. His mood was not as irritable as when he first came here. He spent many hours each day watching the growth of the *chaniang*. Oftentimes he could hardly wait to observe it grow. It was only a tiny tree that would never grow big like those planted in the ground. Ket watered it every day. He would watch her in silence every time she watered it, feeling like a babe being tenderly fed by its mother.

One morning Ket came in with a thermometer to take his temperature. "How are you today?" She asked without expecting an answer. A few days past he had noticed that her countenance was sad since she no longer read to him as she was wont to.

[I am fine now. What about you? You look unwell.]

Ket put the thermometer away. Suddenly her tears flowed. She was crying, but without a sound.

[What is bothering you? Tell me about it.]

She wiped her eyes. "Sorry, I . . ."

[You can relieve what is on your mind by telling me. I can keep a secret. I have no way to tell anyone because I cannot talk.]

"He . . . he tracked down the child and found her."

[Who? You mean your ex-husband?]

"My ex-husband. He took the child and kept her hidden. This time he wanted more money as an exchange for her. I never thought that he would track me down. He wanted . . ."

[How much did he want?]

"Ten thousand baht."

[And you gave it to him?]

"I gave him the money last night. It was the last amount I had. I have been saving it for my child's education . . ."

[Bastard.]

"For every mother, her child is the most important."

[What are you going to do next?]

"I will have to move again. I don't want him to harass my child again. Maybe I will have to change my job."

[You are not going to do so. You said yourself that one must get to the heart of the problem in order to solve it.]

"Maybe I will have to hit the nail right on the head," she murmured.

The pot placed by the window was a plain red-lime-colored terra cotta pot with a rough texture about six inches tall. The tray under it was wavy-edged. Coal-black loose soil almost filled the pot. That plant, a little taller than one kheup was called *chaniang*. Its straight stem was greenish brown. Its leaves and stem looked ordinary, like his life, like her life.

He shifted his eyes from the *chaniang* pot by the window to fix on the door. But the nurse had not come yet. Why did he dream of her a moment ago? It must have been because she had already become his friend.

The sound of a door being opened. He could recognize the footsteps. At last the door opened and she came in. Her face was brighter than on previous days.

"Sorry I am a little bit late."

[It's all right. Was the traffic very heavy?]

"I was detained by some personal business." Ket stepped towards him, taking his temperature with a thermometer. "You are perspiring . . . Are you ill?"

[I am fine. And you?]

She paused a little, meeting his eyes. "I didn't tell you the whole truth. Actually I . . ."

[You went to see him?]

"I went to see him. No. Actually he came to see me.

The same old story, you know."

[What happened last night?]

"He came to see me while I was packing. Yes, I was going to move. I knew that this wasn't the way to solve the problem by hitting the nail on the head. But it seemed to be the best way out right then. He came to me completely sot. Not one of the ten thousand baht he had taken from me remained. In one night the money I had been saving for years was squandered on booze and broads."

[He came to see you again?]

"He wanted to make up but I refused."

[The bastard knew that you had money.]

"I refused. He said I should do it for the child's sake. Her friends would jeer at her for being fatherless. He would turn over a new leaf. I did not believe him. He told me I would never be able to escape his clutches. His words made me see light. He was right. My life would never be free from evil men. The only way I could think of was not to run away. I threatened him that if he came to me again I would kill him. He laughed . . ."

Ket laughed. He was wondering how she could laugh in such an atmosphere.

"It was then that he used force . . ."

[What did he do?]

"He . . . raped me in front of my child."

Both of them were silent for a long time. One because she did not speak. The other because he could not speak.

At last Ket went on with her story. "He threatened me that if I would not take him back he would . . ."

[He would . . .?]

"He reminded me of my own father. My daughter is growing up. I don't want her to grow up like me. You do understand, don't you?"

Her countenance revealed no emotion that he could detect. "When he was asleep I stabbed him dead with a knife. Only one stab. No pain or agony . . ."

[That bastard deserved to die . . . but it is not worth

your life.]

But she did not hear his voice. "You were right. This world is evil. I have been too optimistic so I have always been taken advantage of."

She moved closer to him, so close that he could smell the faint fragrance.

Was it her body scent or some cheap perfume? Or both?

"Now I believe you that this world is very evil. I know what you have been thinking all along. I will no longer deter you from fulfilling your wish."

The *chaniang* by the window was already eight inches tall.

She arranged the pillow in place, picking it up and placing it over his face. She pressed it down hard. His breath choked. He became stifled and dizzy. His vision blurred.

[Yes, this world is so evil. Death should be the best way out.]

The ceiling fan still revolved for ever and ever. His breath became fainter and fainter. He glanced at the *chaniang* by the window for the last time.

[Thank you for the chaniang. You have taught me to appreciate the beauty of life . . .]

He saw her last expression, gentle as a mother's lulling her little baby into a happy and long-lasting slumber.

[But now I don't want to die.]

NOTES

- 1 *kheup*: A Thai unit of linear measurement from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the middle finger when the hand is fully spread out.
- 2 *nam phrik*: A dip made of shrimp paste, chili, garlic, lime juice, sugar, etc, normally eaten with rice and fresh or boiled vegetables.

- 3 *khao yam*: A southern dish made of cooked rice and many kinds of fresh vegetables and leaves.
- 4 *Mom Rajawong Ying*: A title used in front of the name of a fifth generation female (ying) descendant of a Thai king.

Poems by Ophelia Dimalanta

PHILIPPINES

POIESIS: a making

poetry is fancy pain
conscious artefacturing
and glibness is cheat
this emptiness violates speech
which shatters it

but metaphors palliate
produce the froth
upon pain's excrescence
the surging's slump
the heaving after
this welling in
but love's peripheries
the swirl about a raindrop
echoes of cloud meeting
sun meeting eye turning sigh
sonic sounding transfixed

one bursts suns
and the pen scoops moonballs
burps fire
and words whisper stars
screams thighs
and images flick
filigrees of rosewings
filtering desire
till not just pain
nor just joy
from neither singer-maker

nor bleeding sufferer
this tragic stasis
this something else apart
an instant of vision
a new toughness total
throat-lumps turned truths
bled into being

MONTAGE

Monday jolts and she bogs down, a ragbag
Splayed off at tangents, Windows
To the outside and flecks of faces
Spring the morning clear at her
To set her into her old dimensions.
Piece by piece she puts on eight o'clock;
Pillows and bedcovers in a tumble pat
Her in place. The clearest cutglass
Of grapefruit juice teetering on a silver
Tray for breakfast-in-bed exigencies
(Both for effect and effectivity)
Is for a fact but fictive in the mind
Which holds the fleeing moment longer,
Stalls the stupor of the previous spree,
Images of her beautiful in blank spaces
Wandering truantlike in private regions
Of the night, wisps of clouds jammed
In one wicked corner of sleep. She hoards
Them like a child at play, triumphantly
Pieces them into a single total perspective:
Splayed off tatters of Sunday, a dark
Undiscipline of clouds settled right
Into his alarming set-up environing
Her Monday-world, jolted suddenly
Into the teeth of everyday people
And clattering sounds of slapdash.
She exudes it now becomingly
As she glides and putters about
By turns, spreads it as a scent
Ambiguously enwombing her, her form
Dissolved in semi-tones, nameless jewel
Durably ensphered in mist, constantly reborn,
Solid, whole in ever renewing shades.

1. QUICKENING

Everyday now I feel this strange
Mystery of life moving in waves,
Vectorial, rising,
I would feel this is all of me moving,
This hundred-waves churning, turning;
Leaves bearing down in passion,
Lashing with rain, a rage upon me straining.
I feel each morning weary, wary
Of each jolt that moves my world,
All the awe and novelty in these little
Ghostly flutterings, butterflies cramming
My sense, soon little fingers
Frilling my homespun world. O so empowering,
Total, this victory, this feat.
This mystery of likeness, of desire
Impressed upon this given flesh.
This little passion, life soon to be, meanwhile
Storms through alone with its own
Battles; soon the world impales it
Upon this portion of reality, this underside,
And it shall begin to find its voice
At last, and lose its private dark
And calm, as I myself would lose this glory,
This beauty of sole, complete possession.

2. BIRTH

Suddenly, announcing love,
I touch this life in me,
This truth, this soon to be
Solid, this life awaiting me,
And I shall meet him there
Where there is no moon,
No stars but faces worn
With vigil and concern,
Masklike and heaving
Under artificial light.
There will be no sleep,
No twilight calm, no pain,
No syllables but pure primal
Rhythmic knowing, an urgent
Forward flow, a powerful arched
Wave, love, rhythm, leaves
Opening, opening.
The whiplash of love,
An arched flight of utterance
Common, hieratic, and he comes!
Aghast at too many faces
(we should have been alone
This first first meeting).
New ties: already, he is a lover.

SEACHANGE

And so he has had it
not even twelve
just looking outside
pacing the street,
his arms long and lean
and brazen upon his breast,
now ready to swell—
a sea bursting into
tiny silvery surfs
loosing to engulf
the shore of her body
just the small of the back
of her receding

throwing a thousand beams
(the sun striking the shore
noonward, amber grains flying)
troubling the sea in his breast
the waves in his arms
the crest and heave in his temples,
as he rises in power, in truth
just looking out
at noon
from a window,
not even twelve, and all
in his young mind
alone.

CONVERSATION

This midday chiaroscuro talk
is needless thrashing about,
cryptic and mean, stichomythic.
the very least for contact.
language does not leap the gap.
else there is no need for poetry.
whatever is left hanging
because no word can give it blood
is periphrastic, chilling,
skirts along, and finally
skimming through hinterlands of truth,
through word-gaps and hiatuses,
short-cuts and eye-synchs.
scoring victories with blatant
reticences, with only the mind
making gestures.
who may delimit and qualify
what is floundering-free and
circumambient? we can only try
to measure each other's thoughts,
shapeless upon the fringes of unreason,
taking the varied color of one's needs
and experiences. i do, yes, i do
myself believe, until i pin
belief down with a name.
even your most impulsive faints
and darts are deflecting,
only the sounds are untouched.
nearer truth. nearer that which seeps

into this smothering shell of noon
in one encircling seethe,
without a name and body,
this nubbin of a truth that could not find
a word to be mummied, immured in,
a touch bent towards its goal,
aching in mid-air, a brush discharge
potential which no word can give blood to,
that something we cannot put a finger to,
but which, mute, compelling, commits,
and thus, committed, we are the engaged,
locked as in love's vise,
struggling towards the point.
it is these gaps which bridge.
here there are no understatements.
only the cold opaqueness of the sharpest
phrase. how then may i finally say,
touch me here where i am most susceptible
and virginal, as i hand over a stanza
of pain, or else, now we may open up,
be opened, digested, pure as art.
here we are bound by the same code
of sympathies and fellowship.
we must then, poet-fellow, only thrash about
wildly outtalking each other
in silent repartees we mean and do not.
but sometime soon it is bound to happen,
sooner than your slyest lie
which verges on almost-truth
let us lie and lie and be lyric
as gladioli; exquisite as pain.
since it is in your silences
your voice cuts deep.

PALE THOUGHTS UPON A PALE CITY

(Session Rd., Baguio City)

Just as ailing is this listless
Winding into nowhere
Of wily roads leading to the same
Anonymous faces, the same mist.
Nostalgic, sheerest, palest of emotions,
This straining on tiptoes to reach
That up-there soulful pinkness,
Part of some past, the absent,
The secret, the privately yearned for,
Never there when you want it so
To happen, happening and then
Deliberately missed; yet the novelty
Is never lost upon you,
You come back again and again
Returning with the same old intent.
City of vaguely fashioned needs
Suspended upon quaint disenchanted clouds;
And, morning would find it as
Comatose as this part of me
Unreal and misty down session road,
Hanging by a flimsy string,
Giddy for warmth, in the cool,
Fog-bathed breath, the slackening . . .
What is it one wants up here, breathless
And waiting? as if this city is one gold
Enchanted chanticleer announcing all dreams
Granted, lived for just the living.

Still, this thin mist of wanting
Blends well with that slightest mauve
Of nonchalance, settling prim among the
pine-peaks, this neither here nor there
And this and that in us,
This shadow part of us, this seasonal
Falling away from what hourly rends
Heart mind, now with uneven child-steps
Seeks old routes in the heart of an age
Past all ages, lying beyond the compass
Of this sickly secretive, ancient,
Omniscient city of my haunt,
Tall as the mythical sky of one's renewings.

ON A HOUSE ABOUT TO CRUMBLE

sedate for all its lumps and bumps
of wear and tear, his staid and sullen
structure perks up for its final flaunt
of dignity and agelessness
to bow now gracefully to time.
it must go splitting beams squeaking rafters
and falling eaves hugging to itself
its secret soot and desuetude;
womanlike sinister in its sensual passing.

she has had her day,
weathering and warding off by turns
telling blows of seasons, violences
and passions weighing heavy upon
her spires even as parts of her
defy reject heavy and mystic
with velvet privacies and promises
withheld withdrawn now squat buddhalike
remote she purges her remaining lustral
fires within her visionary crouch
for who will now unflex her rigid and
ancient stance tap her forage through
her waning dimly petering off halls?

she must have to go and soon.

Poems by Huu Thinh

VIETNAM

QUESTIONS

I ask earth: How does the land treat the land?

- We raise each other higher.

I ask water: How does water exist together?

- We make each other more full.

I ask grass: How does the grass treat the grass?

- We knit together to make the horizon.

I ask people: How does a man treat another?

I ask people: How do we all treat each other?

I ask people: How can we live with each other?

GOOD-BYE BEACH SAM SON

Good-bye distant beach good-bye
Where almond branches rattle together in rain
Good-bye distant beach good-bye
Sam Son that is always surprising.

I must speak obliquely my love for the sea
I confess my love for the sky
I think you make a fine couple, sea and sky
I put words of grief far away.

Maybe I will return again to Sam Son
But that is just a cloud fairytale
Maybe this see me again
That is the bitter salt in me.

POEM WRITTEN BY THE SEA

Your are far from me
The moon is alone
The sun also alone
The sea as always so sure so long so wide
Without a sail feels alone.

The wind is not a whip that wears away the cliff
You are not the evening tinting my heart violet.
The waves should go nowhere
if not to bring you back.
The waves rock back and forth
gesture to me
for your sake.

POEM UNDER THE PORCH ROOF

Cock doesn't crow sky is still bright
Tree doesn't wither life is still sad

I crouch under the porch roof
Trying to believe today the drought will end.

On quick step the sound of breath continues
One slow step the sound of eating and drinking.

For whom do the leaves cry?
A long wet muddy road.

Tormenting through rain of Autumn torment-
How we thirst to cross the river.

WINTER LETTER

I write to you in blurring ink
Salt rain driven through the walls.
Mountain cold keeps me awake-
Morning light on a silver reed.

Snow lies in a thin mat
The mountain is veiled in smoke.
The ink is frozen in the pen-
I warm it by the fire to write you this.

Wind shivers the tree's heart
The seed sleeps unable to wake.
When my comorade must travel
I wish him well but enjoy the whole mat.

Cold makes the roosters lazy
The rattle of dishes gives me heart
The mountain hides a hundred letters
I grub for roots to eat, find nothing.

Rice gruel at dawn, I wait for mail
And keep the radio on all night-
No sight of you for years: hoof beats
Made me think you were coming.

Clouds often fill my dreams
You still sit by the red lamp-
The dream scent of Bo Ket
Makes stone soft, makes mountains warm.

WAITING

I return to the village, to the place they
call "Eighteen hamlets of Betel Gardens"-so many
gardens, so many summers-
She waits, her face toward the night.
Twenty years longing for the sky to darken early;
twenty years, meals gone cold.

Tet should not come again and make my sister sad;
no one congratulate her for one more year of life.
She is no longer young, but out of love and
respect, the villagers call her miss;
out of love, they don't show their children off in front of
her.

Twenty years. When my sister climbs aboard
loaded down with passengers,
she fears being drowned while still in her young
and beautiful years.
Everyone knows of her faithfulness,
and he, he still alive;
he shields the lamp to keep it from going out.
Twenty years, she wears a heavy brocaded dress at night,
full of life and waiting, though my brother, he is
unaware.

She is not like the snake who sheds his old skin under the
tree's shadow.
But without him, she is always the old relative at the
festival.

In the midst of the family's laughter, she is lonely.
In the cold night

her one hand warms the other.

She hears gun fire from the distant militia post.

At meals she still eats alone.

No matter where she sits, the scene appears out of
balance.

She hides her youth beneath her dimpled cheeks.

She misses him, longs for him,

she is sad as the flamboyant flower torn in two.

He is with those who will never return;

he has heard, and the plants and grass have heard,

how the leaves love him. They volunteer to camouflage
him,

though they will never make him as cool as she, under
her shade,

though they never can make him as warm as she, under
her hair,

As alive and light as this day, as grass in the dry season,
her breath winds its way all through his life.

His bandanna should be a sail,

his bandanna of a time of tears.

One day it will wave in front of the veranda, a

flag of happiness flying in the wind,

but tonight she is sad,

the ring loose around her withered finger.

Dear Sister,

SBEK THOM IN THE ART AND LIFE OF THE KHMER PEOPLE

Pich Tum Kravel

CAMBODIA

In the past, superb civilizations rose and fell on the land that is now Cambodia. The evidence is preserved in a profusion of inscriptions and reliefs for future generations.

More than a thousand temples built by the ancestors of today's Cambodians all over this region show events of a glorious, prosperous past. These temples show us both what was accomplished then and what is missing now.

From the fall of Angkor in the 14th century through the Longvek era (1587-1594) and the Udong era (1618-1867) that is, to the beginning of the French presence in Cambodia—there were many tremendous wars. The land under Khmer control was reduced from a vast area to nearly nothing. The population under Khmer rule that had reached 10 million in 1200 C.E. was reduced to 800,000 in 1863.

Many aspects of life in the past have disappeared. The harp (*pin*, Indian harp) that is seen on walls of many ancient temples completely vanished; leather art that was highly developed during the Angkor period was wiped out; a narrative art called *pheany* has vanished from public memory; a number of percussion, wind, and string instruments have lost their names in the memory of people—only their shapes are left behind in temple reliefs; the art of Khmer boxing that our forefathers inscribed on walls of temples scarcely exists; beauty ornaments, headdresses (chignons), and clothes, which were innumerable in those glorious periods, scarcely exist today.

But perhaps even greater than these losses are the losses suffered between 1970 and 1993. Everything—culture, art, custom, tradition, belief in religion—was crushed to the brink of annihilation. This war of more than twenty years reduced Khmer moral values and the soul of its national culture nearly to ashes. A number of temples were destroyed, including numerous antique Buddhist statues, some weighing many tons.

In the performing arts, a number of forms such as *beuk bat* (a kind of musical drama), a wooden puppet show, and a clay puppet show have physically disappeared. There are traces of other kinds of shows whose names we do not even know.

As for *sbek thom*, during the dark days of war much damage was done to it. Before the war broke out, there were two groups, one showing in Phnom Penh and the other in Siem Reap. The one in Siem Reap completely vanished and the one in Phnom Penh was partly destroyed. After the war, that is, during this recent period of half-war-half-peace, *sbek thom* has again been receiving significant interest from Khmer people. In these days when we have been compiling this manuscript, we can say that the spirit of the art is coming back to life although it is not yet strong, and certainly not in superb shape.

THE PERFORMING ARTS IN KHMER LIFE:

The vast majority of Khmer people who believe in Buddhism—in merit and sin, in the principle that if one does evil he will suffer evil and if one does good he will experience good—enjoy the *sbek thom* as much as they do the preaching about the odyssey of the Buddha before he became enlightened. They love this story that shows the magnificent powers of the superheroes they adore. While listening to the chanting, their minds drift away and land on a celestial planet where grandiose events take place, great struggles between the good—represented by Visnu, god of creation—and the bad—

represented by Ravana (chief of the Raksasas and king of Langka) and a group of ogres. The people normally take sides with Rama, prince of Ayodhya and a reincarnation of Visnu; Laksmana, Rama's younger brother; Hanuman, the mighty king of monkeys; and Sita, whom Ravana was trying to steal from her husband, Rama. They believe that these characters represent the good in themselves. People also see that although the bad have great power and an intricate array of tricks, and can turn many things to their advantage and prevail in most of the battles, in the end the good always win through endurance, patience, and the diligent efforts of Rama, Laksmana, Hanuman and his monkey army.

Khmer beliefs in spirits, spells, Buddhism, and Brahmanism have become entwined in a single complex of belief for many centuries now. *Sbek thom* only shows the Ramayana story, a story that every Khmer knows well, and also a story from the beginning of the era of the strong influence of Brahmanism, which was followed by Buddhism. Brahmanism strongly influenced our religious arts. Because Khmer people value religious art as a heritage passed on from our forefathers and as a source of support for daily life in general, we have been making great efforts to safeguard *sbek thom* for many centuries.

According to the general beliefs of Khmer people, *sbek thom* and the masked dance (*lkhon khol*), are not performed for the public in same ways as are contemporary popular arts. *Sbek thom* and the masked dance are considered sacred. They embody Brahmanism and Buddhism, the deep beliefs of the Khmer people, and they involve religious acts and entities such as supernatural beings, deities, witchcraft, spirits, venerable teachers, Indra, and Brahma. *Sbek thom* is also performed at birthday ceremonies of abbots, venerated parents, and other old people who have great influence in the society, or for the funerals of abbots or parents. Furthermore, from ancient times to the present, most Cambodians, who are farmers and depend almost entirely on nature to make

their living, have performed *sbek thom* when there is a drought, to ask the supernatural beings for rain.

SHADOW PLAYS IN CAMBODIA:

Shadow plays are found in Iran, Turkey, India, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos. The shapes, the stories, the techniques of staging and narration, the music, and the art on the figures differ according to the histories and customs in each region. In Cambodia, three different types of shadow play are found:

1. *Sbek Thom*:

Sbek thom figures are made from cowhide. Some are as large as two square meters and as heavy as eight kilograms. They have no moveable parts, and thus are not true puppets.

2. *Sbek Thom Mothium* (Medium Size Figures):

These figures are also carved from cowhide. They are different from *sbek thom* in two ways: they are smaller, and they are dyed, not painted. *Sbek thom mothium* are used in daylight performances, without a fire, and so this is not truly a shadow theater.

3. *Sbek Touch* (Small Size Figures):

Sbek touch are true puppets, because they have movable parts. They are made from cowhide and are much smaller than *sbek thom mothium*. Cambodian people like this kind of shadow theater best.

THE HISTORY OF SHADOW THEATER IN CAMBODIA

We do not know when shadow theater began in Cambodia. However, a passage from a stone inscription carved before the Angkor period describes dolls used in a ceremony invoking Svarasvati, goddess of beauty. This tells us that dolls were used then in religious ceremonies.

In considering the many superb sculptures and inscriptions found at Angkor, the following analysis

concerning the origins of shadow theater in the region emerges:

The reliefs on the walls of Angkor present scenes of important events in the lives of famous royal families and common people, scenes of religious stories and of ceremonies. Apsaras, the dancing angels that our forebears used as decoration on every terrace of these temples, show that the Khmer classical dance originated before the Angkor period. *Sbek thom*, like masked dance-drama (*lkhon khol*), is now a male art form. Even female characters are played, and female roles spoken, by male artists, because the performance is meant to publicize religion and, in Buddhism, women may not perform some activities. Both masked dance and *sbek thom* are used to perform Reamker. In Cambodia, Reamker was, at first, the most important story in the Brahmanic religion. Later it became a part of Buddhist lore. The two religions had flowed into the Sovannaphum peninsula, which included Cambodia, before the Christian era. The arrival of these religions in the area was certainly at about the same time as that of the development of the dance forms which became the royal ballet and the masked dance—that is, long before the Angkor period. When we compare the masked dance-drama with the *sbek thom* shadow play, and again the *sbek thom* with the sculptures on Angkor walls, the following points emerge.

1. In ancient times, Cambodians used buffalo hide, cowhide, or hides of wild animals in place of paper to draw plans for wall sculptures.

2. According to historical documents, Khmer have practiced tattooing their skin as decoration since the first century of Christian era.

3. The poses of a number of the characters in the *sbek thom*, especially in battle scenes, are similar to those of the personalities sculpted on the walls of Angkor.

4. The movements of the characters in the *sbek thom* are like those of artists in the royal ballet and the masked dance.

5. The styles of costumery, crown decorations, and jewelry are the same in *sbek thom* as in the royal ballet and the masked dance.

6. The *pin peat* orchestra is the same in all these forms.

7. As well as prose, poetic forms called *pumnol* and *promkiti* are used widely in *sbek thom*. These two forms of poetry were also used during the Angkor period.

The above constellation of facts strongly supports the hypothesis that *sbek thom* developed during the Angkor period.

THE MUSICAL ENSEMBLE FOR *SBEK THOM*

The musical ensemble that accompanies *sbek thom* is the same as that which accompanies traditional dance and dance drama. The ensemble (called *krom phleng pin peat*) may have been in existence since before the Angkor period; many of the instruments in it are pictured in sculptures on Angkor's walls.

For a normal orchestra, the instruments are

A small xylophone:	<i>roneat ek;</i>
A large xylophone:	<i>roneat thom;</i>
A large pot-gong circle:	<i>kong thom;</i>
A small pot-gong circle:	<i>kong touch;</i>
A large wooden oboe:	<i>sralay thom;</i>
A small wooden oboe:	<i>sralay touch;</i>
A double-headed, strapped, barrel-shaped drum:	<i>sampho;</i>
A pair of double-headed, pegged, barrel-shaped drums:	<i>skor thom;</i>
A pair of small cymbals:	<i>chhing.</i>

In smaller versions of the ensemble, the instruments are *roneat ek*, *kong thom*, *sralay thom*, *sampho*, and a pair of *skor thom*.

The songs and instrumental style for *sbek thom* are unique. One person with a stick in each hand plays both of the *skor thom*; each drum is placed at an angle on a

stand, with one head tilted up, facing the player. The *sampho* is played by one person, barehanded, with both hands, one on each head. The musical ensemble plays many songs, some of which have been borrowed from the repertoires of other Khmer ensembles to fit particular themes in the play. There are about twenty songs for *sbek thom*. Each of them describes the story, reflecting the actions, the character, and moods of each person in the story. The songs are as follow: Sa Thuka, Cheut, Cheut Chhoeng, Cheut Chap, Domneu Khnong, Lo, Phleh, Ruo, Ruo Bey Choan, Trak, Ot Touch, Ot Thom, Reav, Tanav, Sdech Yeang, Neang Lot, Chhou Chhay, Smey, and Phlom.

FABRICATION AND CARE OF *SBEK THOM* FIGURES

In Cambodia, red straw matting is a popular material. Besides being used for sleeping, receiving guests, and sitting on to eat everyday meals, a red mat can be a piece of decorative furniture in a Khmer home.

The technique of making a red mat has become a tradition of Khmer people to keep from generation to generation—passed on from mothers to children to grandchildren, who are taught as they make the material. The teaching of one generation by another adjusts to new discoveries, such as new ways of arranging patterns on the mat and new dyes. Recently, some patterns have incorporated scripts (writing). For many years now, makers have used *doeum sbeng* tree bark, or that of other trees, to color the mats. They boil the different kinds of bark until the desired color emerges; and they dip the dry matting straw in the solution and then dry them before weaving them into a mat. More recently, and only in some regions, weavers use chemical dyes, because they are more convenient. Despite this development, a red mat, whether it is short or several meters long, is considered a masterpiece and is as highly valued in Khmer society as *houl* and *phamong* hand-woven textiles.

Teaching the preparation of leather for *sbek thom* is basically the same as teaching the weaving of *houl*, *phamong*, and red mats. It is personal skill that is passed on from generation to generation with some variation (which is inevitable) in time. The leather preparation techniques outlined here are those of Look Krou Dep, a teacher of leather art and a resident of Siem Reap. Look Krou Dep was one of the teachers of popular (folk) arts in Siem Reap who performed in the tour of a large dance troupe (Mohor Srap) to Malaysia and Singapore with me (Pich Tum Kravel) in 1968. He joined the University of Fine Arts staff and was put in charge of leather preparation at the National Conservatory of Pageantry. He did most of the leather work for these places himself between 1970 and 1975, and took it up again after 1979. This was a good timing for us, because as we were beginning this manuscript, the Art Office of the Department of Culture was preparing leather to copy more than 100 old figures, as a part of our efforts to restore the art form.

Fresh cow skin is either immediately put into the preparation process or immersed in ash to prevent it from rotting. (This is normally done during the growing season.) If the skin has been treated with ash, before it is worked any further, the ash must be removed. In the first step of preparing the skin, it is spread out and any flesh or muscle still attached is shaved off using a sharp knife. Then it is soaked for many days in a solution of tree bark that has been prepared by beating until it has become soft and its sap can be readily released into the water solution. The preparation of the water solution from tree bark takes at least a few hours. The colors that result from tree bark are different from region to region in Cambodia, and differences in color have become matters of preference in this process. But the colors most people desire are red, yellow, or dark brown. In the Khmer tradition, so that the skins will last a long time, the types of tree bark used for color are mixed with types of tree bark that have bitter,

sour, tart substances. These substances keep insects away from the prepared leather.

After being soaked in the solution, the skin is stretched tightly on flat ground in the sun, with stakes on its rim so that when it is dry, it will be smooth. After it has dried, the hair is scraped off of it. It is important to be aware of the thickness of the skin during this scraping. The skin must be shaved until it is of a uniform thickness. When the desired thickness is obtained and all hair is scraped off, the skins are turned over to an artist who is an expert at drawing the characters in the *sbek thom* story. The artist knows the physical attributes of the characters, the scenes in which they appear, their movements, and details that reflect their moods. Each picture is different. This stage requires great care. Each character must be painted with the correct colors. At this time, the artist also makes small pictures of some of the characters for the convenience of the performers, who attach them to the bamboo staves of the large leather figures. The perforations in the figures are carefully cut out by a team of artisans.

In the Khmer tradition, Siva showing his power, Visnu radiating his power, and Preah Muni Eysi (the Ascetic), are not represented on ordinary leather. For Siva and Visnu, skin from a cow that is accidentally killed or has died of natural death is used. As for the Ascetic, skin of a panther or bear is used. And the artist working on these three characters must follow a strict discipline; he must wear white clothes, and finish his work all in one day.

When the *sbek thom* figures are not being used in a performance, they are stored in a well-appointed shed, built with its entrance facing the sunrise. In the shed, there are shelves for keeping the *sbek* neatly. In front of the shed, a spirit house is built, and candles and types of incense are burned periodically in remembrance of the teachers, especially of Preah Muni Eysi.

Because of their religious beliefs, their veneration of teachers, and the esteem they show for art, Khmer people

have treasured *sbeK thom* from generation to generation, from teachers to students, and have made sure that it has been protected.

NARRATION IN *SBEK THOM*

In *sbeK thom* the narrator is the most important performer. Most narrators are teachers of the art and leaders of a troupe. The narrator structures and leads the performance: he edits the story, adapts its length, arranges and composes texts to fit a performance context, memorizes them, improvises dialogue, directs music as the performance unfolds, and asks and answers questions.

There are two narrators in a *sbeK thom* performance. Both stand in front of the screen. Both have the ability to narrate or to lecture on the Ramayana in a way that deeply entertains the spectators. Both truly act as they narrate. They show anger, sadness, grief, desperation, heartbreak, lightheartedness, and sarcasm. They create a medium which engrosses the spectators, entertains them, and engages them in the story from the beginning to the end.

The narration of the story is in poetry. using different meters (and songs) according to the mood. The following are samples of types of narration from one rendition of the story:

NARRATION OF THE STORY BY THE STORY TELLER:

The reigning king, respected by all the deities, resided in heaven. Preah Lak (*Laksmana*) was flying to battle with Enthachit (*Indrajit*), the ogre, shaking all the other planets and arousing Indra and other deities from their normal life. The king was happy and blessed his two sons, that they might be victorious over the ogre. At that time, the two princes showed great power, and Enthachit backed off. Enthachit was afraid of the younger prince's mighty force. But, while withdrawing, he sarcastically said, "Hey! Preah Lak, you human being, is this all the force you have

to show me? If so, go tell your older brother to come and fight me. You are too weak for me, not up to my level. I will not fight you because you are like a woman. I will be criticized if I do battle with you."

SHOW OF ANGER:

Very angry, the king of Langka pointed his finger at Pipek (*Vibhisana*) and said, "Hey! Pipek, you are a traitor, a wanton; you allow yourself to not think of our family. You went over to Preah Lak and Preah Ream's (*Rama's*) side. What for? If the king's father dies, all the ogres will weep and the monkeys will be happy and cheer for victory. Will you be weeping or laughing? What is the reasonable thing to do?" After listening, Pipek said, "Hey! ogre king, what gives you the right to say that?"

EXPRESSION OF SADNESS IN SEPARATIONS:

"My beloved, I will not see your face for a long time. In hardship, in poverty, you always followed me and took care of me, just as in a flawless relationship between a student and a teacher. Early every morning you went into the forest to pick fruit and bring it to me in our house. You never let me worry. I have always had peaceful thoughts. Now, my beloved, you have died in the middle of this quiet forest. I will return to the palace in Ayudhya to tell mother and the rest of our family about all that has happened. I will tell mother that you have to be brought home in an elaborate ceremonial procession. The coffin will be gold, as will the crematory structure. There will be a white Wat Mony parasol, booths for charity in all eight corners, ten chickens for offerings, and crystal lamps hanging in a row. Simpili Krud (*Garuda*) will be at the base of each of the crematory supports and the ogres will have ropes run through their noses like wild animals. Kamphan holding a sword will be standing guard at the four gates to the crematory and elsewhere. Deities and angels will be everywhere."

MONOLOGUE BY A CHARACTER:

Enthachit was leaving the palace of Langka. Quiet and sad, he was missing home. Turning toward the palace, he said, "Oh! my home, my original abode." Enthachit was weeping. "I miss my wife and children who were beautiful—like thousands of stars surrounding a bright white moon; singing happily. Oh! Neang Sovan, my precious one, and Konthea Yeamea, my two beloved princesses, take care of yourselves, don't worry. I must go." Enthachit looked into the forest and saw a multitude of flowers. He said, "Oh! Langka city, my place of origin. Langka will be tarnished and vanquished. No one will rescue Langka if I do not return victorious. In the beginning, Langka was unparalleled, better than Heaven. In the beginning, Langka was a glorious palace. Now, Langka is sinking—becoming a quiet forest. The people are leaving this old royal city helter skelter to live elsewhere. All the young maidens have gone looking for other places to live. This is sad, regrettable. When Grandfather was in charge of the army, everyone was afraid of Langka. Of the thousands, millions, of people on earth, no enemies dared to come near. Now, we are in decline, heading toward the end of our family." Enthachit was weeping, feeling sorry for himself, because his death was imminent.

PERFORMING *SBEK THOM*

From ancient times, *sbek thom* has been performed at night in the open, in a rice field or a *wat* court yard. Before the performance starts, two bamboo or wooden poles are firmly driven into the ground. A sheet of white cloth is stretched from one to the other, to serve as a screen. Sometimes a piece of black cloth is attached to the bottom of the screen. Behind the screen, a low rectangular frame is built of banana trunks; it will contain the fire that will serve as the light source for casting the shadows of the puppets onto the screen. The raw materials for the fire

are coconut shells or firewood.

Usually, before performing, all the performers, including the narrators, the figure handlers, and the musicians, hold a ceremony to ask for protection and blessing, and to thank their teachers. During the ceremony, the figures representing the three characters Siva, Visnu, and the Ascetic are placed against the front of the screen, with the Ascetic in between the other two. In front of these three, there are offerings along with burning candles and incense. The ceremony is accompanied by music and involves prayers. (See below for a description of this ceremony.)

When the ceremony concludes, the narrators invoke the spirits of Visnu, Siva, Rama, Ravana, their teachers, and others, and perform an act to drive out evil spirits. They handle the Visnu and Siva puppets to show power and carry burning candles about in the dark. At one point, the narrators order the holders of three torches to light the torches. They walk in crossing patterns toward the rectangular firepit. At the completion of these patterned processions, they light their three torches. The narrators shout the cue words, "Yak O," three times, and all the performers repeat these words. In shouting the cue words, they use a spirit voice or gruff voice to frighten the spectators.

Before the Ramayana story begins, the performers stage a battle between the White Monkey and the Black Monkey. This battle, called "Sva Prachap," represents the fight between good and evil. In the end the good wins. The Black Monkey is captured and taken to the Ascetic, the supreme judge, to decide his fate. The Ascetic advises the White Monkey to let the Black Monkey go. (This event is described more fully below.) Then the Ramayana story can begin.

The music begins on the command of the narrators. The performers handling the figures are mainly responsible for two things: they have to make sure that the shadow of the figure projects well onto the screen;

and their movements must properly represent the actions of the characters.

THE STORY IN *SBEK THOM*

The Khmer Reamker is derived from the Ramayana tales of India. The Ramayana came to Cambodia along with Brahmanism and Buddhism, during the period Cambodia was called Sovannaphum. As time passed, Khmer gave their own geographical references and local popular characters to the stories.

From early times, Reamker was a well-known story. Reamker episodes and characters are pictured in sculptures on temple walls and lintels, and also in large sculptures displayed inside temples that predate Angkor Wat, such as Koh Keh, Ba Puon, and Banteay Srey. Almost the entire Reamker was sculpted on the walls of the west corridor of Angkor Wat, starting from the west main gate to the north and on the western part of the north corridor. These reliefs are matched by another famous Indian story, depicting a great battle between brothers, inscribed on the walls of the west corridor, starting from the main gate to the south. The story of the great battle between brothers, which we believe to have had a tremendous influence during the Angkor period, has disappeared in Cambodia since that time. Only a few Khmer still remember the story. But the Reamker story, which had great influence on the Khmer society in ancient times, has remained influential in present Khmer society, in spite of the many dark periods in Khmer history. Besides the sculptures or reliefs on walls of those temples that are in existence today, the Reamker is embedded in traditions, in customs, and in performing arts such as *sbeK thom*, the masked dance, and the royal ballet.

TA KRUD, A STORYTELLER:

In the past, the Reamker was often told to audience of

hundreds and thousands of people by famous storytellers, such as Ta Chak and Ta Krud. Between 1950-1960, I had many opportunities to hear the story told by Ta Krud at the Lycee Sisowath in Phnom Penh. Although nearly fifty years have passed, I can still vividly see Ta Krud's movements and hear clearly the tones of his voice. Ta Krud sat on a cushion, on a bamboo platform, placed on a stage made of wooden planks supported by empty gasoline barrels. Near him on the stage was a set of offerings for Visnu that included a hand of bananas, a candle, and a glass of water. There was also a bouquet of flowers for his teachers, a bowl of water for himself, and (later in the decade) a microphone and loud speaker. Ta Krud singlehandedly told the story to the thousands in the audience. They attentively listened, were moved and excited, and often laughed until they had tears in their eyes. One very funny part I remember was Ta Krud's movements imitating Hanuman harrassing the ogres at Langka.

SINGING THE REAMKER:

In addition to this kind of storytelling, there is another way to tell the story, that is, to sing it, accompanied by a two-string bowed lute, *chapei*. In this type of performance, only small sections of the story are presented.

THE KHMER REAMKER AND OTHER KHMER ARTS

The Reamker serves as the theme for traditional frescoes. Frescoes of Reamker are found on the walls of temples in many *wats*, such as *wat Po* in Siem Reap Angkor where the most refined frescoes of the Reamker are found. Khmer frescoes showing the entire story of Reamker are also found on the gallery walls of the Silver Pagoda at the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh.

There are many Khmer written works on the Reamker: such as Prince Chhayavadhanavong's 15 volumes

published by Buddhist Institute and Ms. Saoruos Peov's studies at the French Far East Institute on the Reamker of the 16-17th century. The Reamker has also taken root in the life of the Khmer people today, in such crafts as fortune telling.

We have already discussed the dramatic pageants in which the Reamker is presented: the two principle forms are the masked dance and the *sbek thom*. In neither form is the Reamker shown sequentially or in its entirety. Only isolated episodes are shown: for example, the episode of Enthachit's (*Indrajit's*) battle, followed by the scene in which Preah Ream (*Rama*) magically creates Preah Lak (*Laksmāna*). Apparently the choice of episodes and the order in which they were shown differed from region to region in Cambodia. This custom of regional differences in the choice of scenes performed from the Reamker is also found in other places around the world where the Ramayana is used as the basis for dramatic productions.

In 1986 and 1989, two Ramayana festivals were staged in India, in Uttar Pradesh state at its capital city of Ayudhya, not only the city where Preah Ream was born and where there are many sites associated with the Rayamana, but also the city where there are many temples or shrines to remnants of Buddha's existence. During these festivals, troupes of artists from all over India—the south, west, north, and center—performed the Reamker story. Although they were all of Indian nationality and performed the same Ramayana, their customs, decorations, and music were different, as were the scenes they chose to perform: for instance, some showed the battle between Sokkrip (*Sugriva*) and Peali (*Vali*), some performed the scene in which Preah Ream raised his army. The same process of choice of scenes occurs in Cambodia. Study of the practices of an older *sbek thom* troupe from Siem Reap shows that, although there are more than 150 figures from the Reamker story in this collection, they did not perform the entire story: only the battle between Enthachit and Preah Lak, a section which

they called the Battle of Enthachit. It took them from four to five nights to finish this part of the story. It was divided into sections named for the main events in the battle. They were as follows:

1. Neakabas: Enthachit's powerful arrow that is transformed into a dragon that coils around and constricts Preah Lak and the monkey soldiers. They are rescued by King Simpili Krud (Garuda), at the request of Preah Ream.

2. Promeas: an arrow that Enthachit shoots at Preah Lak. On the orders of Pipek (Vibhisana), the astrologer, Hanuman finds medicines for the wound. Pipek mixes them together and uses the mix to remove the arrow.

3. Poan: Preah Lak's powerful arrow which, when it hits Enthachit, multiplies into a thousand arrows. Enthachit is able to remove all but one, so he flies to his mother, Neang Mondokiri, for the milk from her breast with which to dissolve the arrow.

4. The last act of the battle, when Enthachit dies. His head is cut off by a Sar Promeas arrow shot by Preah Ream. The head falls onto a tray that Angkut (Angada) is holding. Preah Ream then shoots another arrow to send the tray with the head to Tak Sen planet, saving the earth from total destruction.

***SBEK THOM* PERFORMANCE IN SIEM RIEP**

Ta Ty Chean, from the third district in Seam Reap province, teaches Bannol poetry for *sbek thom* in Siem Reap. His colleagues there in the instruction of the Khmer arts include Ta Chum of Phum Ta Phol; Ta Pouch, a teacher of *phleng thom* (large [ensemble] music) and composer of ancient (traditional) music (who uses his knuckles to compute musical notation); Ta Chhoeung and Ta Chet, teachers of *sralay thom* and *sralay touch* (large and small flutes), and Ta Dep, who teaches the movement of the leather figures in the show and who is an expert in making *sbek thom* leather figures. From 1970 to 1975, Ta

Dep worked for the National Conservation of Pageantry in Phnom Penh and taught students and artists in Phnom Penh to make *sbek thom*. Ta Ty Chean and his colleagues said that the Enthachit battle played by the Siem Reap set of *sbek thom* figures requires four to five nights for a full performance. This is a precis of one such performance.

HOMAGE TO THE GREAT TEACHERS (SAMPEAH KRU):

The following are the ceremonial accessories for the showing of homage to the teachers:

A pair of *baysey* with three tiers (ritual accessories made from sections of a banana trunk, supported on bamboo legs and decorated with food, flowers, and foliage);

A pair of *baysey* Pak Chham;

A pair of *slathor* (a ritual accessory made of betel leaf and slices of areca);

Two pig's heads;

Two chickens;

Two trays of food;

Two trays of desserts;

A pair of *chorm* (ritual accessories made of a conical section of a banana trunk decorated with betel leaf and areca);

38 Riel (Cambodian money); and

Eggs to be stuck on each *baysey*.

Sometimes performances begin without the ceremony to honor the teachers, in which case, the following ritual accessories are present:

Four *chorm*;

Four Riel;

A bowl of polished rice;

A bowl of cooked rice;

A pair of *slathor*;

A pair of *baysey* Pak Chham;

A bowl of scented water; and

Fruit, displayed to the left and right of the other accessories.

After the candles and incense are lit, the figure of Preah Phleng (Preah Eyso [*Siva*] shooting an arrow) is displayed in the dark—that is, before the screen is illuminated. The musicians and narrators offer thanks and show respects to the supernatural beings in the world and heavens; to the lakes, rivers, creeks, and mountains of the ancient world; to all the teachers of music, drawing, carving, and acting in *sbek thom*; to the Reamker story; and to the figures of Preah Eyso (*Siva*, the god who created the world and all in it), Preah Ream (the incarnation of Preah Nearay [*Visnu*]), and Preah Lak. They ask the supernatural beings to come and destroy all evil, to bless the *sbek thom* pageant, and to grant them a life of peace and happiness. The narrators then say, “We are here. Hasten to light the fire behind the screen.” Then the fire is lit. This signifies that our world is born, thanks to the power of Preah Eyso and Preah Nearay. The nothingness before the world was born has been replaced by nature and light, and along with this, conflicting phenomena have arisen, such as hot and cold, good and bad, mean and pleasant, tall and short, and big and small.

After the showing of Preah Phleng is finished, the music begins, and the battle of the monkeys is performed as a preamble to the sections from the Reamker. The monkeys fight until the White monkey defeats and captures the Black Monkey, and takes him to Preah Muni Eysi, their great teacher. Preah Muni Eysi advises them to stop fighting and learn to help each other because they both are from the same order of being; they must wait for the arrival of an omnipotent figure and serve him as his soldiers. He tells the White Monkey to set the Black Monkey free. Then, the performance of the Reamker begins.

A SYNOPSIS OF THE STORY:

After the bridge linking Langka to the mainland is built, Preah Ream (*Rama*) sets up a bivouac, where, the next morning, he holds a meeting with his military and civilian officials, including Preah Lak (*Laksmāna*), Pipek (*Vibhisāna*), Sokkrip (*Sugriva*), Angkut (*Angada*), Hanuman, Champupean, Khanil, Khanul, and Nilkhan to discuss the war plans. Preah Ream orders Champupean to post lookouts along the shore.

Athikam Athikamlang, a Langka guard, sees the bridge to Langka, and human beings and monkeys on Langkan soil. He mounts his horse and dashes to inform Krong Reap (*Ravana*), who is in the midst of a meeting to discuss war matters with his military and civilian leaders, including Kumphaka, Kamphan, Kamphoan, Vonreach, Aphikay, and Mohakay. When Krong Reap is informed of the situation, he sends Nunthaso to summon his son Enthachit (*Indrajit*). With his wife, Enthachit comes to meet his father. They discuss the war, and Krong Reap gives his son orders to call up soldiers to destroy Preah Ream and his army at his new installation. Enthachit then leads his army to engage in battle with Preah Ream.

Preah Ream, while reminiscing about his wife Seda (*Sita*), hears the ogres' war cries. He goes to the meeting tent and asks Pipek, "Whose soldiers are they?" Pipek says that it is Enthachit, son of Krong Reap, and his army. Preah Ream orders Preah Lak to lead an army to fight Enthachit.

The two armies are facing one another. Enthachit shouts, "What are you here for?" Preah Lak says, "We are here to take Seda back to Preah Ream. Krong Reap stole her." Enthachit responds, "Seda lost her way and was picked up by Krong Reap and carried in a chariot to Langka." Having heard that, Preah Lak is upset and starts insulting Krong Reap, saying that Enthachit's father is sinful. Enthachit orders his army to attack Preah Lak. News of the war reaches all the deities, who together wish for Preah Lak to be victorious. Enthachit is losing

the battle, but says to Preah Lak, "It's not fair for me to fight you. You are not at my level. Go and tell Preah Ream to come and fight me instead." Enthachit then withdraws.

At the audience with his father, Enthachit says, "Preah Lak's army was overwhelming. There were many monkeys. Their weapons were only tree branches and stones. They tossed them at us and killed many of us." Enthachit asks his father for permission to depart for Noruchanti to learn about the Neakabas arrow recommended by the dragon king.

Following Enthachit's departure, Krong Reap gives an order to free Pohankay, his niece (the daughter of Pipek and Socheata [*Trijata*]), from prison. The prison guard escorts Pohankay to Krong Reap. Krong Reap wheedles her to transform herself into Seda's dead body and float on the sea, to make Preah Ream believe that Seda is dead so that Preah Ream will withdraw. Because Pohankay has never seen Seda, she asks Socheata, her mother, to take her to Seda. She meets Seda and carefully observes her. As she is returning to Krong Reap, she thinks that if she goes to him in her original form, he will not believe that she is able to transform herself into Seda. Therefore, she uses her magic to turn herself into Seda, and she goes to meet him in that form. Krong Reap believes that she is the real Seda, and he falls in love with her. Seeing him in this situation, she says to him that she is not the real Seda, turns herself back to her original form, and leaves him to carry out her assignment.

Preah Ream is bathing in the ocean while Preah Lak holds the fort. Preah Ream sees a body and believes that it is Seda, his wife. He retrieves it and holds it until he becomes unconscious. When Preah Ream does not return to the fort for a long period of time, Preah Lak calls his army and goes after his brother. He sees him lying unconscious on the beach and is worried. Hanuman sprinkles water on Preah Ream's face, and Preah Ream regains consciousness. When he opens his eyes, he sees

Hanuman, Sokrit, and Angkut. He becomes furious and says, "You three did more than I had ordered you to. Hanuman, you burned Krong Langka; Sokrit, you destroyed Krong Reap's parasol; and Angkut, you flattened Krong Reap's crown. Because of these things, Krong Reap became angry and killed my wife." In a rage, Preah Ream orders the three to be decapitated. Hanuman looks closely at the body and sees no marks of violence on it, and he suspects that it is an ogre transformed. He asks Preah Ream permission to test the body by cremating it. If the test determines that the body is that of Seda, he will accept the sentence.

Hanuman has his military leaders and monkey soldiers with him during the test and tells everyone to stand alert. He orders Sokrit to set fire to the body, and sends Angkut to watch from the ground while he himself watches from the clouds above.

Pohankay, as Seda's body, unable to stand the heat of the fire, tries to escape upward in the smoke, but is intercepted by Hanuman. Hanuman then orders his soldiers to take her away and beat her to get information. Finally Pohankay confesses that she is Pohankay, daughter of Pipek, who is now serving Preah Ream. She had come from Krong Langka on the order of Krong Reap, and had transformed herself into Seda in order to trick Preah Ream into thinking that Seda was dead so he would withdraw from Langka.

Hanuman, Sokrit, and Angkut give all this information to Preah Ream. Preah Ream orders Hanuman to take Pohankay back to Krong Langka and tells the others to keep all the information about Pohankay secret for fear that Pipek will be angry. Hanuman then escorts Pohankay back to Krong Langka. While traveling to Krong Langka, Hanuman courts Pohankay, and, arriving there, he asks for her hand. With her consent, they make love.

Preah Ream asks Pipek where Enthachit is, because all is quiet. Pipek uses his seer's sense and informs Preah Ream that Enthachit is now at the Noruchanti tree

learning about the Neakabas arrow. He advises Preah Ream to send Champupean to disrupt Enthachit's learning session or there will be trouble. Preah Ream orders Champupean to do as Pipek advises. Champupean transforms himself into a huge bear, who bites the tree, surprising Enthachit and routing him from his learning session.

Later, Enthachit asks permission from his father to go to a new battlefield. He wants Virulamuk Koma to come along. On the battlefield, Enthachit orders Virulamuk Koma to transform himself into Enthachit to fight the battle with Preah Lak, and Enthachit himself goes up in the clouds above and watches the fighting. When Enthachit has a good shot at Preah Lak, he shoots the Neakbas arrow and hits Preah Lak and the monkey soldiers. Enthachit meets Pipek and scolds him, saying that he is a traitor for siding with the enemy. He chases Pipek, with the intention of beating him.

Pipek escapes and goes to inform Preah Ream about the situation of Preah Lak and the monkey soldiers. Preah Ream then comes to the battlefield with Pipek and sees Preah Lak and the soldiers with the Neakabas arrow coiled around them. He weeps until he becomes unconscious. When he regains consciousness, he asks Pipek what to do to free them from the arrow. Pipek advises Preah Ream that the only solution is to send a message to Simpili Krud, Preah Ream's godfather, asking him to come and help.

Simpili Krud receives the message and comes down to meet Preah Ream and consult with him. Afterward, Simpili Krud goes to the battlefield, frees Preah Lak and the soldiers from the arrow, and flies back to his palace. Preah Ream is happy with Simpili Krud's help, thanks him, and then leads Preah Lak and the soldiers back to his camp.

The ogre guards see that Preah Lak and his soldiers are out of danger and inform Krong Reap, who sends for Enthachit. Krong Reap tells Enthachit about Preah Lak

and his soldiers coming back to life. Enthachit asks his father's permission to go and learn about the Promeas (*Brahman*) arrow at Nunthachak Mountain. Krong Reap gives this permission to his son.

Arriving at the mountain, Enthachit tells his soldiers to cut trees to build shelters. The spirit of the forest is angry with the soldiers and makes them all sick. Realizing that the spirit is upset, and unable to bear the pain of the illness, they organize a ceremony giving the spirit food and begging it for peace. Afterward, they all recover and Enthachit starts to learn about Promeas arrow magic.

After Enthachit's departure for his magic-learning, Krong Reap sends his military officers, Nunavek and Veyvek, for Kamphan, his nephew, so that he can discuss the war with him. Kamphan and his wife come to be with Krong Reap, who then sends Kamphan to clear up the trouble caused by the human and monkey soldiers. On the battlefield, the ogre soldiers begin shouting war cries that claim victory.

Preah Ream hears the noise and consults with Pipek, who, after using his oracular sense, informs Preah Ream that it is Kamphan and his soldiers. Preah Ream should send Hanuman to fight them, and a victory will be achieved. Preah Ream follows Pipek's advice. Hanuman enters the battlefield with his soldiers, and defeats Kamphan and his soldiers. Hanuman stabs Kamphan to death, then grabs his two feet and swings him into the sea. Hanuman returns to Preah Ream victorious. Preah Ream is happy. Realizing that everyone has been fighting a long war and is tired, he allows them to rest in the forest.

The ogre security guards see the defeat of Kamphan and Hanuman throwing his dead body into the sea. They send the news to Krong Reap. When the news reaches Krong Reap, he sends Kakphesa and Kumphalya to get Enthachit to return. Kakphesa and Kumphalya arrive at the Nunthachak mountain while Enthachit's learning session is in progress. They interrupt the session and give

Enthachit the message from Krong Reap.

Enthachit tells his army that they will go together directly to the battlefield. This time, Enthachit transforms himself into Indra riding Erawan (*Airavana*), the elephant, and orders all his soldiers to transform themselves into deities, angels, Apsara dancers, and musicians playing music in order to trick Preah Lak's army.

Preah Ream hears the songs and music. He tells Preah Lak to go out and look.

Indra (Enthachit) meets Preah Lak and tells Preah Lak that he is leading a dance troupe from Heaven to perform for Preah Lak's enjoyment.

Hanuman, suspicious of Indra, advises Preah Lak not to observe the performance, but Preah Lak refuses to believe him. Realizing that Preah Lak is absorbed in watching the performance, Indra (Enthachit) shoots and hits Preah Lak with his Promeas arrow. Hanuman rushes to pull out the arrow but fails to do so. He then rushes to break Erawan's neck. Indra hits Hanuman with his bow. Hanuman falls unconscious on the head of Erawan. Leaving his guards on the battlefield to monitor the situation, Enthachit and the rest of his men return victorious to Krong Langka.

Khanil and Khanul, Preah Ream's intelligence men, report the situation to Preah Ream, who then goes to the battlefield with Khanil and Khanul as his guides. On the battlefield, he sees Hanuman lying motionless on the head of the elephant and Preah Lak lying on the ground with the Promeas arrow lodged in his body. The arrow grows into a tree with extending branches. Preah Ream tries to extract the arrow but fails. He laments over his brother, and loses consciousness nearby.

Pleased with the situation on the battlefield, the ogre guards mount their horses and rush to tell their master in Krong Langka.

Krong Reap, very happy with the news, orders his military officer to tell Seda of the news, emphasizing that

Preah Ream is dead. Feeling sorry for her husband and his brother, Seda weeps as she discusses with Socheata, the wife of Pipek, whether her husband is really dead. Socheata says that Preah Ream is not dead yet and if Seda does not believe her, she can make a wish that if Preah Ream is really dead, the litter she is on should fly and crash into a mountain; if he is not dead, the litter should take her to the battlefield that very night. After making the wish, Seda and Socheata get on the litter, which takes them to the battlefield. On the battlefield, Seda walks past dead soldiers, looking for her husband and his brother. She finally sees them lying side by side and believes that they are really dead. She then weeps for them. Socheata also believes that they are dead, but advises Seda to make another wish that if they are dead, the litter should fly them out of the world, and if they are not dead, it should fly them back to the palace. The litter then flies Seda and Socheata back to the palace.

Pipek, on his return from rest-and-relaxation in the forest, does not go straight to the camp. He asks those soldiers with him to accompany him to the battlefield instead, because he has heard someone shooting an arrow. On the battlefield, he sees Hanuman lying unconscious on the head of the elephant. The monkey soldiers are weeping, feeling sorry for Hanuman. Pipek uses his magic to call the wind to enter Hanuman's mouth. Hanuman comes back to life and gives Pipek an account of the events and leads him to Preah Lak's body.

Near Preah Lak's body lies Preah Ream. Hanuman is surprised. He does not know how Preah Ream came there. Pipek dabs some water on Preah Ream's face. Preah Ream regains consciousness and asks Pipek what to do. Pipek advises Preah Ream to send Hanuman to look for medicines in a cave in the Nunthachak mountain.

On Preah Ream's orders, Hanuman leaves for the mountain. There, he calls out for the angels guarding the mountain, but there is no answer. He enters the cave to look for the medicines by himself. On entering the cave,

Hanuman is hit by a discus from the mountain guards and immediately dies. The guards are suspicious and look around. They see a monkey lying dead. They then bring him back to life and ask him why he has come there. Hanuman tells them that Preah Nearay has sent him there to look for medicines to cure Preah Lak's wound from the Promeas arrow.

Upon hearing about Preah Nearay, the angels lift the mountain and fly it to Preah Ream immediately. The medicines in hand, Pipek sends Hanuman to the Hembopean (Himalaya) forest to look for semen from the bull, Asop. After getting the semen, Pipek asks Preah Ream to send Hanuman to get the grinding stone at Brahmithuda (the Brahman world). Hanuman flies to Brahmithuda and gets the stone.

When everything needed for the medicine is at hand, Pipek asks Preah Ream to send Hanuman to delay the sun from rising, because the leaves of the tree from the Promeas arrow will wilt when the sun hits them, and the medicine will not dissolve the wilted leaves.

Hanuman obeys the order. When the sun (Surya) sees Hanuman, his son, he asks why he had come. Hanuman says, "Preah Ream sent me to ask you not to light up the world yet, because Preah Lak has been wounded by Enthachit's arrow. If you light up the world now, the leaves of the arrow will wilt and the medicines will not dissolve them." The sun god responds, "We have a duty to light up the world on time. We can't stop being regular." Upon hearing the response, Hanuman rushes to break the tongue of the sun god's chariot and then returns to the battlefield. Pipek has all the ingredients of the medicines he needs, and he dissolves the arrow in Preah Lak. Preah Ream becomes happy and leads the army back to the camp.

Seeing these developments, Athikam and Athikamlang mount their horses and rush to tell Krong Reap, who, thus informed, sends for Enthachit. Enthachit gets his father's permission to release Sokacha from prison so

Sokacha can transform himself into Seda and they can ride a chariot onto the battlefield together.

Sokacha asks Krong Reap's permission to see Seda, because he does not know what she looks like. He receives the permission. Instead of going directly to Seda's palace, Sokacha takes the opportunity to visit his home to see his family and to say good bye to them, because he knows he will not return from the battlefield—he will die. After taking leave of his family, on the way to Seda's palace, he transforms himself into a maid. The maid tells Seda that she is there to pick flowers for Krong Reap to use as a sword. When the maid (Sokacha) has learned enough about Seda's appearance, she (he) bids her goodbye and departs for Krong Reap. Before reaching Krong Reap, he turns himself into Seda. When Krong Reap sees Seda, he falls in love with her, and tries to convince her to love him. Sokacha tells Krong Reap the truth, and Krong Reap asks Sokacha to prove it, which Sokacha does by transforming himself back into a man.

Afterward Sokacha rides with Enthachit to the battlefield. As they arrive, the ogre army shouts a victory cry. The cry shakes the earth. Preah Ream realizes that it must be the ogre army and he orders his brother Preah Lak to go to the battlefield with his army and fight the enemy.

The two armies face each another on the battlefield. Enthachit says to Preah Lak, "Preah Lak, you can come and take Seda to Preah Ream." Preah Lak responds, "Enthachit, if you really meant it, it would be more appropriate that you yourself take her to him." Seda (the transformed Sokacha) begs Preah Lak to do as Enthachit has suggested otherwise Enthachit will kill her.

Enthachit, seeing that Preah Lak is intransigent, grabs Seda, pulls out his sword, and chops off her head in front of the two armies. Then, Enthachit and his army take off to the Kuchkaut mountain to learn about magic arrows.

Preah Lak believes that Seda has been killed. He weeps for her. Carrying this sad news, he and his army rush

back to Preah Ream. Preah Ream is overwhelmed by the information and consults Pipek.

Pipek says, "Your Highness, it is not Your Highness' wife who is dead. It is a male ogre who was forced by Krong Reap and Enthachit to be transformed into Seda. If Your Highness does not believe me, Your Highness can send someone to inspect the body." Preah Ream then sends Khanil and Khanul to look at the body. After the inspection, Khanil and Khanul find that the head is that of a woman and the body is that of a man. They report this to Preah Ream.

Preah Ream wants to know from Pipek where Enthachit is. Pipek then uses his oracular sense and says, "Your Highness, he is at the Kuchkaut mountain meditating, and according to the prophecy, he will be hit by the Poan arrow today." Preah Ream acts on the information. He sends Preah Lak to destroy Enthachit. Preah Lak and his army arrive at the Kuchkaut mountain, surprising Enthachit who is meditating. He panics and throws out a discus which turns into smoke, under the cover of which he sneaks up into the clouds. Preah Lak, puzzled by Enthachit's move, consults with Pipek, who advises Preah Lak to shoot the Poan arrow into the clouds. Preah Lak shoots the arrow, which hits Enthachit. Realizing that Enthachit is hit by the arrow, Preah Lak and the rest of company return to the camp.

Enthachit is hit by the Poan (thousand-in-one) arrow. He manages to pull all out but one. He is badly hurt and haltingly flies back to Krong Langka to ask his mother for milk from her breast to get rid of the last arrow.

Neang Mondokiri nurses her son with her breast milk and the arrow disappears. Feeling sorry for him, she begs him not to return to fight Preah Ream (Preah Nearay's incarnation) and Preah Lak. But Enthachit responds that if he does not go, his father will. He does not want his father to go to the battlefield. It is Enthachit's responsibility. After saying goodbye to his mother, he returns to his family to bid them a last goodbye, because

he feels that, this time, he will die on the battlefield . After seeing his family, Enthachit reports to his father, Krong Reap.

Krong Reap sees his son with a sad face. He asks him if he can still go to the battlefield. Enthachit assures his father that he can and will fight to the death. Hearing this, Krong Reap orders his son and the army to the battlefield right away.

In the meeting tent, Preah Ream hears a war cry and asks Pipek about it. Pipek responds that it is Enthachit's army, and adds that, according to prophecy, Enthachit must die today by the Promeas arrow. Both Preah Ream and Preah Lak must go to the battlefield with the Promeas arrow.

On the battlefield, Preah Lak is face-to-face with Enthachit, who says, "Preah Lak, I don't want to fight you, because you look like a woman. It is appropriate for me to fight Preah Ream instead." Preah Lak responds, "Enthachit, see who is behind me!" Enthachit sees Preah Ream behind Preah Lak. He panics, throws out a discus that turns into smoke, and rushes up in the smoke to hide in the clouds above.

Pipek tells Preah Ream that Enthachit is hiding in the clouds. He asks Preah Ream to send someone to Preah Prom (*Brahma*) to ask for a tray to collect Enthachit's head so it will not fall to the ground and set the world on fire. Preah Ream sends Angkut for the tray. Angkut receives the tray from Preah Prom and rushes back to Preah Ream, who then sends him with the tray back into the sky to be ready to catch Enthachit's head.

Preah Ream then shoots the Promeas arrow, which cuts off Enthachit's head. Angkut catches the falling head on the tray and takes it to Preah Ream. Preah Ream asked Pipek what to do with the head, and Pipek advises him to send it to Than Toksen (another world). Using a promeas arrow, Preah Ream sends the tray with the head to Than Toksen, and he and his army return to camp.

The ogre guards report these developments to Krong

Reap. Realizing that his son is dead and unable to control his grief, he laments.

PERFORMANCE CIRCUMSTANCES:

This is a resume of the episode from the Reamker that *sbek thom* teachers from Siem Reap performed in the old days. A complete and meticulous performance of the Enthachit battle, took four or five nights. Spectators sat on the bare ground or on rolled out mats. The performance took place sometimes in an open rice field or in the courtyard of a *wat*. Besides being entertained by the pageantry of the show, the spectators listened carefully to the narrative and closely analyzed the activities and personalities of the characters. They followed the story as closely as they would a lecture on the magnificence of Preah Ream, the incarnation of Preah Nearay, or that of other characters in Reamker story.

THE NARRATORS AND THE MANIPULATORS:

The narrators, mostly teachers or leaders in the *sbek thom* art, normally stood prominently in front of the white curtain as they told the story. They provided the details about the activities of the characters, discussed the difference between two characters, or expressed the emotions of events by varying their tones of voice—sometimes in prose, sometimes in verse according to the circumstances—creating images of beauty in the mind of spectators and helping them to understand the story and be absorbed in it, sometimes absorbed to a point that their minds drifted to other world—the world where the Reamker story took place, the world where grandiose events took place, the world of the battlefield in which the good (represented by Preah Ream) and the evil (represented by Krong Reap and Enthachit) collide. Upon the orders of the narrators, the music was performed according to the actions of the characters and the moods of the story. The competent manipulators of the figures

were able to make every movement of the figures look lively.

CEREMONIES FOR THE DEATH OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS:

During performances lasting several nights, upon the death of a principal character, a farewell ceremony was organized. The ceremony gave the opportunity to have a last look or say a last word before the final separation: for example, last words to a wife and children or last look at a palace. The extent of the ceremony depended on the rank and power of the character. For example, at the death of Sokacha, Sokacha's picture was put up in his palace to say goodbye to his wife and children. Then a pure beeswax candle was lit and struck to the picture, and blessing-water was sprinkled about to drive away bad luck. During the ceremony, no one was allowed to pass in front of the performers.

The accoutrements for a ceremony that took place before Enthachit's death were as follows:

A pair of *chorm*:

A pair of *baysay* with five tiers, and with eggs in each;

A plate of food;

A plate of dessert;

A pig's head; and

A chicken.

At the farewell ceremony, Enthachit's picture was put up in the palace to say goodbye to his wife and family, a pure beeswax candle was lit, a prayer was offered to drive away bad luck, and no one was allowed to pass in front of the performers.

***SBEK THOM* IN CAMBODIA'S PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE**

Since 1970, the Enthachit battle has rarely been performed for the general public in Siem Reap because, beginning that year, the war flared up all over the country. The

security of families deteriorated drastically, as did their religious life and opportunities for entertainment. One after another, almost day by day, performing shadow plays, *bassac* drama, and *yike* plays died out.

The war pushed the Cambodian people deeper and deeper into heartbreaking misery. Ears that used to relish sweet music heard only the sounds of guns and bombs. Eyes that used to delight in all kinds of plays saw only the savage, the tragic, the separation of loved ones, and the exodus from home villages. Noses used to elegant fragrances smelt only sour blood and gunpowder. The people lost their humanity. They lived like animals, like ghouls in a hell on earth. Bones were thrown into wells. Bodies of innocent people were scattered all over the ricefields and along water canals. People were killed by blunt objects, the backs of the hoes, sugar palm fronds used as saws, and bullets. Children, Buddhist monks, and women were killed and thrown in the Tonle Sap or the Mekong. Bodies were buried anywhere: in caves, pits, and common graves. In the blink of an eye, Cambodia lost at least a million from its population. The protracted war also reduced Khmer culture to ashes. The wats, depositories of knowledge and solidarity, were devastated. The books of rules, regulations, principles of life, and teachings were burned. national patrimonies—ancient temples, sculptures, and antiquities—were lost through theft or destruction. Music, dances, and plays—a national heritage that had been plentiful—were almost totally destroyed.

In the old days, in addition to the *sbek thom* set in Battambang which was lost during the war, in the whole country there was only one other set: that belonging to the old teachers of Siem Reap. In 1965, the students of the University of Fine Arts began to learn from teachers in Siem Reap how to narrate, to maneuver the skins, and to perform various styles. Between 1970 and 1975, the Department of Culture funded the copying of a set of *sbek thom* about the Enthachit battle, and gave this new

set to the Siem Reap teachers. Their old set was kept at the National Conservatory of Pageantry in Phnom Penh. Since that time, Cambodia has had two troupes performing *sbek thom*. Although the artists of the National Conservatory of Pageantry successfully learned to perform *sbek thom*, they were never able to perform the entire Enthachit battle. Indeed, even though we know that the venerable teachers of Siem Reap have the tradition of performing the entire Enthachit battle for many nights, we are aware that our society is now moving at a faster pace; because we wish to popularize the *sbek thom* so that the general Cambodian public will be acquainted with their national heritage and because we wish to publicize this art in the international community, especially among foreigners who come to visit Cambodia for a short period of time and desire to know more about Khmer art, we have actively chosen to produce only some short excerpts from the Enthachit battle. (See the Appendix for more on these shortened versions.) We have also developed a type of show in which the battle is shortened to eighty or ninety minutes for national and international audiences, by cutting out overlapping sections of the narrative, the maneuvering of the skins, and the musical performances. However, we have endeavored to represent clearly the full content of the story, the delicacy of the movements, and the beauty and complexity of the art. Nevertheless, though we have proceeded carefully, through this shortening process some loss is inevitable. Perhaps this kind of loss is in line with the evolution of a developing society. As the society becomes more and more crowded and its pace of life faster and faster, the people's time becomes more and more regulated.

In the old days, it took three days and three nights to complete the rituals of a Khmer wedding ceremony. There were many musical tunes to celebrate the ceremony. As time passed, the ceremony was compressed into one night and one day. Now, it takes place in only one evening

and a morning; and only the essential parts of the ceremony are celebrated. Thus, countless musical tunes have been omitted. If we do not take precautions to organize a project to conserve these rich aspects of our culture, we will certainly suffer from this loss. But, of course the greatest loss has been the destruction of our cultural treasures by the war. An entire set of *sbek thom* in Siem Reap was lost. A number of pieces of the original *sbek thom* that had been kept in the National Conservatory of Pageantry in Phnom Penh also disappeared. And ninety percent of the artists performing the *sbek thom* perished in almost a single heartbreaking moment.

Translated from Khmer into English by Sos Kem
Abridged, adapted, and edited by Martin Hatch

APPENDIX

Programs of Three Types of *Sbek Thom* Performances

Type One:

This is the shortest rendition of *sbek thom*, between 15 and 20 minutes. It is about Sar Neakabas the magic arrow of Enthachit, son of Krong Reap. The episode ends with the release of Preah Lak and his army from Sar Neakabas and the return of Preah Ream and his army from the battlefield.

Type Two:

This show lasts from eighty to ninety minutes. It presents highlights of the Enthachit battle, and is designed for an audience with a limited amount of time, such as Khmer dignitaries and foreigners.

Type Three:

The third show is for the general public of Khmer people. It is the complete staging of Enthachit battle as described above.

ABOUT THE AWARDEES

Winner from Brunei Darussalam

NORSIAH M.S.

Norsiah M.S. is the pseudonym of Mohd Shahri bin Pokjlaid Haji Md Hussin. He was born in Brunei Darussalam in 1947.

Norsiah M. S. went to Sekolah Melayu SMJA (Malay School) and Maktab SOAS (English School). He started writing in 1965 and has produced a big number of publications which were sold locally and overseas. He also writes poems and short stories with other writers as well as having his own individual publications.

Norsiah M. S. was judged on one piece of work only: HIDUP KE-2, a novel.

Norsiah M. S. says that the S.E.A. Write Award gives him a new hope and motivation to keep on writing. He sees it as a challenge to create more works of better quality. Acceptance of this prestigious award means for him an obligation to carry on giving meaningful contribution and, with other members of society, commitment, to play a positive role in maintaining world peace, solidarity of the people and prosperous living through the expression of feeling, vision of the mind, utterance of words of flicking of the fingers.

In this anthology he contributes a short story, **Siarau River**.

Winner from Cambodia

PICH TUM KRAVEL

Pich Tum Kravel was born on June 2, 1943 in Kandal province, Kingdom of Cambodia. He studied at the National Institute of Pedagogy, the National School of Theatrical Plays and, finally, at The Royal University of Fine Arts, reading Choreography. After graduation, he became actor at the National Conservation Department of Theatrical Plays and professor at the Faculty of Choreography. For two years, 1997-1998, he worked at the Free Asia Radio in Washington D.C., U.S.A. Presently, he holds the position of Under State Secretary of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts.

Pich Tum Kravel has written poems, theatrical plays and research textbooks. He has also directed a number of plays, the most famous being "The Historical Events of Cambodia".

Pich Tum Kravel was judged on a combination of works and thus selected as Cambodia's first S.E.A. Write awardee. "I have a strong determination, as an artist and a contributor, to develop the Khmer culture, to help improve the national culture to blossom as a diamond flower and to participate in establishing the garland of diamond flowers in South East Asia and ASEAN with peace and security and to become a part of the progressive world flower."

His only available work in English is a cultural essay on **Sbek Thom**, a type of shadow play.

Winner from Indonesia

KUNTOWIJOYO

Kuntowijoyo was born in Yogyakarta in 1943. After finishing his first degree at the Gadjah Mada University (1969) he went to the University of Connecticut, Storrs, under the Fulbright Programme (1973-1974). Then he went to Columbia University with scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation and finished his third degree in history (1980). He stayed for seven years in the United States, therefore, many of his short stories have American background. Returning to his hometown, he continued his former position as lecturer in the Department of History.

He is interested in literature, history, religion, culture and politics. He has published some fifteen books, both fictions and non-fictions. His articles and short stories could be found mainly in the newspaper Kompas and Republika. His literary publications are **Impian America** (American Dream), a novel, 1998; **Daun Makrifat, Makrifat Daun** (Leaves of Gnosis, Gnosis of Leaves), poems, 1994; **Dilarang Mencintai Bunga-Bunga** (Don't Love Flowers), a short story, 1992; **Khotbah di Atas Bukit** (Sermon on the Mountain), a novel, 1976; **Isyarat** (Signal), poems, 1976; **Suluk Awang Uwung** (Celestial Songs), poems, 1975. His works in process are **Mengusir Matahari** (Debasing the Sun), political fables, to be published in 1999; **Hampir Sebuah Subversi** (Almost a Subversion), a short story in 2000.

Kuntowijoyo was judged on the short stories written since the seventies. His short stories are detailed descriptions and analyses of extremely complex

relationships between the young and the old, man and woman, the traditional and the modern. In some of his works, the writer delves deeply into mystico-religious problems of human existence.

Kuntowijoyo strongly believes that literature must relate to reality if literature still attempts to be the source of wisdom.

In this anthology he contributes a short story, **Don't Love Flowers**.

Winner from Laos

CHANTHI DEUANESAVANH

Chanthi Deuanesavanh was born in 1940 in Xiengkhouang province, Laos. Ever since he finished primary school, he knew where his interests lied: literature. He read many books whether they be in Lao, Thai, American, English or Chinese. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in journalism from the Hanoi Institute in Vietnam

Chanthi Deuanesavanh joined the patriotic and anti-colonialist movement in Xiengkhouang province in the early 1950s. In 1954, he was employed by the Central Bureau of the Lao Issara Movement and became secretary to the Ministry of Culture and Artists in Houaphanh province in 1957.

He was member of the Radio Diffusion Committee of the Lao Issara (patriotic movement) in 1962 before becoming member of the editorial staff in 1963 having written a novel "**My Life**" which turned out to be very popular in Laos and was used for literal courses in secondary schools around the country.

He was deputy director as well as director of the Party News Agency, "Sieng Pachaxonh" and of the National press and Information Committee, respectively in 1976 and 1978. He is general secretary of the Lao Writers Association and Chief Editor of "Siengkhene" newspaper.

Chanthi Deuanesavanh said he was very proud to be awarded this very honourable prize for literature: S.E.A. Write Award: "We writers should exchange and share our literature, our culture and our customs so that every nation in ASEAN can learn and understand more about one another's society and moral."

His short story in this collection is **The Lottery of Karma**.

Winner from Malaysia

KHADIJAH HASHIM

Khadijah Hashim was born in Buta Pahat, Johor, in Malaysia. She was a religious teacher before becoming a journalist with The Utusan Melayu Group (1974-1976) and then The New Straits Times Group (1976-1985). Today, she is a full-time writer concentrating on her own publishing company which was set up in 1984.

Khadijah is a Malaysian female writer who is very prolific in various forms of literary works. She wrote more than 60 drama scripts for the radio before venturing into writing short stories and novels actively.

Khadijah's name became familiar when her first novel, **Badai Semalam** (Storms of Yesterday), was published in 1968 by Pustaka Nasional in Singapore. This novel was chosen as a textbook for schools in Malaysia and Singapore. Ever since, many novels came out one after another, many of which won literary awards.

Besides novels, she also wrote many successful short stories, emphasizing on family life.

Khadijah was judged on the basis of a combination of works but mainly on novels and short stories. Her latest works, two volumes of a trilogy and a book on "pantun" (Malay traditional poems) published in 1999, made her Malaysia's 1999 S.E.A. Write awardee.

Her contribution is a short story named **Red Roses in a Bouquet**.

Winner from Myanmar

U KYAW AUNG

U Kyaw Aung was a well-known novelist and translator. He won the National Literary Award, the highest literary award in Myanmar, three times for “**Virgin Soil Upturned**” in 1976, “**Let’s Unite at the Crucial Moment!**” in 1981 and “**O Jerusalem!**” in 1995.

U Kyaw Aung devoted himself to writing since the age of 19. He wrote many short stories, novels and translation works. He also wrote articles on politics, travelogues and themes on social life of the people.

“His works touch the heart of the readers. His representation or depiction is quite clear and attractive. The national character and patriotic spirit can be seen in his works”, the National Literary Awards Selection Committee noted.

Regarding translation, U Kyaw Aung viewed that Myanmar should know what was going on in the world. He wanted the Myanmar readers to appreciate the international literature. As he personally struggled, most of his works conveyed patriotism and are beneficial to the people and the state.

During the period of 53 years, he wrote 11 novels, approximately 800 short stories, articles and various items of translation works.

U Kyaw Aung’s literary stand was “Art’s for people’s sake.”

Unfortunately his work is not available in English. He died in 2000.

Winner from the Philippines

OPHELIA DIMALANTA

Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta was born in San Juan, Rizal where she spent her childhood days up to the day she got married. Her early interests were music and books and these led her to her lifetime passion, poetry—and later on— teaching.

Ophelia Dimalanta graduated from the University of Santo Tomas with a bachelor's degree in Journalism at the age of 20. She started to teach at 21 and proceeded to take an MA and PhD in literature with honours.

Writing poetry, reviews, literary criticism, lecturing in her country and abroad, teaching, holding writers workshops and influencing quite a number of her students from her university to become themselves writers of note after graduation—these have been her life. Aside from poetry, her academic career is a major pre-occupation. She had risen from being chairperson of Journalism and Literature and later on Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters, University of Santo Tomas and a full professor in literature.

Ophelia Dimalanta has been named one of the four major poets of the Philippines in the Oxford Companion to the English language. She has received several national and international awards for her poetry, her two short stories and literary criticism.

She was judged on the strength of her five volumes of poetry: **Montage** (1976), **Time Factor** (1984), **Flowing On** (1988), **Lady Polyester (Poems Past and Present-1993)** and **Love Woman** (1998).

Six of her poems are included in this volume.

Winner from Singapore

CATHERINE LIM

Catherine Lim was born in Malaysia in 1942, one in a large family of fourteen children. She grew up in a typical traditional Chinese household but her education was entirely in English.

She obtained a degree in English Literature at the then University of Malaya in 1963 and came to Singapore in 1965, where she married a Singaporean. In Singapore, she obtained a master's and a doctor's degree in Applied Linguistics. She worked as a teacher of English and Literature in Singapore's secondary schools before being posted to the Curriculum Development Institute of the Ministry of Education. Subsequently, she worked as a lecturer in RELC (Regional Language Centre) before retiring in 1992 to be a full-time writer.

She has to date published 14 books comprising of novels, short story collections and a book of poetry. Her short story collections are used as literature texts in schools and colleges in Singapore and abroad. Two of her novels have been published abroad and translated into many languages. Currently, she conducts creative writing workshops and gives lectures at local and international seminars. She is also a guest lecturer on cruise ships such as "Queen Elizabeth II" and travels extensively in connection with her work as a writer.

Her short story in this collection is **Great-Grandfather with Teeth.**

Winner from Thailand

WIN LYOVARIN

Win Lyovarin was born in 1956 in Hadyai, Songkhla, Thailand. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in architecture from Chulalongkorn University and an MBA in marketing from Thammasat University. From 1980 to 1985, he was architect, interior designer and graphic designer in Singapore and in the United States. At present, he is creative director at Radix Company Limited.

He has written several short stories: **The Black List and Fallen Leaves** in 1994, **Lament of the Prognoses** in 1994, **On Moonlit Sky** in 1996 and **A living Thing Called Human Being** in 1999. He also wrote a novel, **Democracy on Parallel Paths** in 1995 which made him the 1997 Thai S.E.A. Write awardee. He won many literary awards, from Chor Karaket popular award in 1992, to Best Novel Award in 1995, the S.E.A. Write Award in 1997 and again in 1999 from his book of short stories called "**A Living Thing Called Human Being**".

His short story named **The Chaniang Pot by the Window** is from this book.

Winner from Vietnam

HUU THINH

Huu Thinh was born in 1942 in Phu Vinh Hamlet, Vinh Phuc province, into a Confucian peasant family and spent an uneasy childhood, living six years with his uncle and beginning work as a corvee labourer when he was only ten.

Only when peace returned in 1954 did he have a chance to go to school. He graduated from high school in 1963 and joined the Army as a soldier of the Tank forces. Huu Thinh spent many years in the battlefields along Route 9 and the Ho Chi Minh Campaign as a driver, squad leader and journalist.

After 1975, he entered the Culture College and attended the first term of Nguyen Du Writers' Training College. Then he worked as head of the Poetry Council and Deputy in Chief of Van Nghe Quan Doi, the army journal of art and literature. Since 1990, he has been Editor-in-Chief of Van Nghe, journal of art and literature.

Currently, he is deputy General Secretary of the Vietnam Writers' Association. Being a very famous, popular and lyrical poet of the Vietnam Literary Forum, he received the poetry award from the Vietnam Writers' Association in 1980 for his long poem **Duong Toi Thanh Pho** (On the Way to the City) and, in 1995, for **Thu Mua Dong** (Winter Letter). The latter and five other poems are published in this volume.

ASEAN Short Stories & Poems by S.E.A. Write Awardees 1999

"The South East Asian Writers Award, popularly known as the 'S.E.A. Write Award' helps people in different countries share their experiences, so that they can relate more with each other despite their differences in culture and history."

*M.R. Sukhumbhan Paribatra, Chairman,
S.E.A. Write Award Organizing Committee 1999*

Lord David Puttnam, guest speaker at the S.E.A. Write Award Presentation Ceremony 1999 said, "The 'printed word' remains the essential component of the cultural and creative lifeblood of any nation. It sustains the conscience and the vitality of a society. One measure of any community wishing to regard itself as truly civilised is the quality and depth of its achievement as expressed through its writing."

The ASEAN Short Stories & Poems by S.E.A. Write Awardees 1999 will essentially help the reader appreciate the culture and creativity of ASEAN nations.

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