

# 10 THAI short stories – 2010

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TRANSLATED BY MARCEL BARANG

- 3 – Ariya's first voyage – SIRIWORN KAEWKAN
- 13 – generosity – TAK WONG-RAT
- 19 – Fresh Kills – KANTORN AKSORNNAM
- 27 – the flower jail – MANOTE PHROMSING
- 38 – in a public place and in accordance with the law – PAITON  
THANYA
- 50 – that crazy story – JARAN YANG-YUEN
- 57 – it looks like rain – REWAT PANPIPAT
- 68 – the sky-blue jar – PANU TRIVEJ
- 81 – just looking – JIRAT CHALERMSANYAKORN
- 90 – a tale without a name – WIWAT LERTWIWATWONGSA

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Siriworn Kaewkan, Tak Wong-rat Estate, Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa

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# ARIYA'S FIRST VOYAGE

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## SIRIWORN KAEWKAN

“In times of high winds,  
when a high wind blows,  
it is natural for the waters to rise;  
when waters rise, it is natural for the earth to quake.”  
*Tripitaka*

The Indian Ocean is heaving, exhausted, after sending a tide of demented waves lashing at seaside resorts and towns in Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives and, beyond, along the eastern shores of Africa, on the morning of the last Sunday five days only before the end of the year 2004.

Saturday morning, 1st of January 2005...

Ariya dreams she is floating on the Dead Sea, the sea with the saltiest waters in the world – at least ten times the salt concentration of the Mediterranean, so that swimming is out of the question, hence no human life will ever be lost here.

The Dead Sea in Ariya's dream is full of marine animals of all kinds swimming about all around her – whole shoals of sharks, whales, tunas, giant squids, sea slugs, lobsters, oysters, crabs, turtles, seals, sea lions and tangles of nagas – even though in reality hardly any living organism can survive in the Dead Sea, apart from bacteria and a few species of salt-inured marine plants along its shores.

Besides those sea creatures, all around Ariya tourists from all over the world are swarming about, floating here, floating there, children and adults alike. Some lie smoking cigars in the middle of lucent blue-green seawater; others lie reading the morning papers in Arabic. Some are singing songs of praise of Bedouin

shepherds, others writing electronic epistles to their lovers. Some yell and thrash about and make a fuss; others lie caked in black mud in health spas.

A gag of children shouts *al-Bahir al-Mayyit!* Another shouts back *Yam HaMelach!*

Ariya knows that the first expression is Arabic for “dead sea”. As for the latter, it is Hebrew and means “salt sea”. From there, Ariya sinks into a reverie, squints at the sky and tries to find the borderline between Israel and Jordan, but what is moving in the sky over the Dead Sea turns out to be a flock of thousands of migrant birds. She knows that these birds have flown from Europe.

But how odd! Instead of veering towards Africa, the birds are all heading for Southeast Asia.

Absorbed in sky, clouds and birds, Ariya starts humming a song, the song of a widow on an island in the middle of the Andaman Sea endeavouring to raise her daughter by herself after her fisherman husband took his boat out to sea one evening and vanished into the horizon.

And it is that song that sets Ariya thinking of her mother.

The widow on the island in the middle of the Andaman Sea is the same person as the mother in the song Ariya is singing. She wonders what her mother is doing at the moment and where, and how come she finds herself in this sea, given that her fondest dream has always been to travel to the Maldives, paradise in the middle of the Indian Ocean, not to this Dead Sea here.

As she tries to find an answer to herself, a giant shark suddenly pounces and snaps at her ribs with full might.

Pain and shock yank her out of her dream.

But as soon as she opens her eyes, she finds that the shark of her dream is the corner of a table or, if not, the corner of a sofa, or something like that, which the force of a wave has thrust into her side.

Ariya tries to push that object away from her, but as soon as it is shunted aside other debris move in instead.

For something like an hour she fights off drifting debris that come whirling at her from all sides, leaving her aching and bruised all over.

The more she tries to swim away from them the more they harass her as if endowed with a life of their own – divers' oxygen cylinders, fishermen's floats, bulbs, slabs of foam, boat planks, sofas, house partitions, window frames, bamboo hut roofs, fridges, car tyres and countless other objects.

In all the twenty-two years of her life, Ariya has never felt as exhausted as this, exhausted and lonely in the middle of surrounding danger. Besides, the morning rays that glitter on the surface of the waves blur her vision all the more.

To regain some of her strength, she merely stays still, protecting herself just above the water, squinting at the flock of sea-birds swimming in the open space of the deep-blue morning sky.

Ariya knows how terrible these birds can be, because three days earlier some of these oh so beautiful birds dived and pecked at the eyes of a young Japanese girl. Ariya is sorry that she was unable to help her little friend because at the time she was fighting off a column of crabs that were storming her.

As she broods over the little Japanese girl, a clamour works its way through the surrounding wreckage and reaches her.

Sometimes it sounds like weeping, sometimes it sounds like laughter; sometimes it fades out as if that rumour had travelled all the way from the far-flung horizon; sometimes it is so clear it seems to buzz right inside her ear.

Mingled in that clamour is what Ariya perceives as a young woman's shout calling for her mother, and the language is neither Arabic nor Hebrew but Thai.

'Mummy, hold fast to my hand, mummy.'

At this very second, Ariya realises that actually she is not

floating in the Dead Sea, but she can't think what part of the world it is she is in.

'Mummy, hold fast to my hand, mummy.'

The call sounds scared and doleful; it is weak and comes in waves.

After listening attentively for a while, the young woman is both excited and happy when she realises that it is her own voice.

It is she shouting on this late morning of Sunday the 26th of December 2004.

When it started, the first giant wave hurled Ariya onto a red mangrove bush. Her mother had tumbled into the water, but the young woman caught hold of her in time, so that her mother's body dangled between the roaring wave and the clear late-morning air.

As Ariya snatched away her mother's body from the paws of the gigantic wave, a new wave swept through the top of the coconut trees just as she felt a heavy object of some kind crash into her side.

So the clasped hands of mother and child were prised apart and each went tumbling under the might of the wave.

Later, Ariya found herself lying icy-numb and sore under the belly of the sea amid the wrecks of so many fishing boats, houses, shops, and fellow human beings by the hundreds, by the thousands, people from all corners of the world.

Unable to stand the numbness and harassment from sea animals any longer, she heaved her thoroughly battered body towards the surface.

That was on the night of the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 2004. The late-evening waning moon lit up the whole expanse of sky and sea.

That night should have been a beautiful night had not the surface of the mighty sea been ridden with dark splotches of human beings and wreckage brought on by its fury all the way from the shores of Sumatra. [MORE]

# GENEROSITY

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## TAK WONG-RAT

The elderly man has lived in this single-floor wooden house for more than thirty years, since a time when it had no running water and used rain and well water instead. This being the suburb's very outskirts, a provincial bus connection is needed to reach it from downtown.

Two years ago he was persuaded and gently pressed to voluntarily resign from his work, which is only natural when a factory owner insists on cutting back on expenses.

Like when you're a police colonel and volunteer (under orders) to resign you're upgraded to police major general.

He very seldom goes into town.

Today: He goes to the cremation of an old schoolmate of the same age. His friend was tall and lanky, didn't smoke, didn't drink, graduated in science from Kasetsart University, entered civil service at the Pharmaceutical Organisation, ended as head of its chemical and drug production department and died from acute drug poisoning.

Last year a younger friend went to sleep and never woke up.

For many years now he hasn't attended weddings and instead confides an envelope with money to friends, but he attends cremations.

Many people don't have true friends.

These days as soon as he wakes up, it's half happiness half sorrow.

Breath he still has, which is half-good, half-bad.

Friends from the old school at the foot of Memorial Bridge:

Many have died of cancer who never smoked, but that's not the reason why he doesn't quit.

He lives alone.

There's no kitchen in the house.

He relies mostly on the food shops in his street.

Some days, he makes do with just one meal.

He's been eating all his life – enough.

The elderly:

In the past year, whenever he's taken the overpass to cross the road, he's had to stop and stand resting at intervals; now he must use a cane.

He's not afraid of dying.

Only to have to sit in a wheelchair...

Something unexpected:

One afternoon, he takes the overpass to go to the newsstand across the road and stops to buy a bag of iced coffee from a handcart with a board saying "Coffee the ol'-fashioned way".

As he hands over the money the young coffee seller grins.

"No – no – no charge for you, uncle."

What's this about? Am I looking that decrepit? No need for an alms collection yet.

Thinking thus, he feels like crying.

"PLEASE BE CONSIDERATE OF CHILDREN, PREGNANT WOMEN AND THE ELDERLY." The notice pinned over the windows in buses has no meaning at all, as if people couldn't read. City dwellers only care for number one. No one gets up from his seat for a pregnant woman. Even those seats with stickers saying "FOR MONKS AND NOVICES ONLY" are occupied with a straight face.

One day he has to go into town.

Hands over the right fare. The conductor returns him half of it. To qualify for half-fare you have to show your ID.

He hasn't shown any ID.

There are still bus conductors like this one? he wonders in his heart.

Almost all of the hundred red back-benched three-wheelers of the suburbs are the same: they pick up passengers in the middle of the road, shoot off at top speed, as if they have no time for schoolchildren and the elderly and speed away to take ailing relatives to hospital.

In the morning, all seats are taken from the start of the line; hardly any standing room either.

He gets up and stands with his cane.

A young pupil with a big satchel heavy with schoolbooks gets up at once and offers him his seat.

The evening of the cremation:

The dozen or so friends who've stayed throughout the real cremation invite him to dinner in the air-conditioned eatery next to the temple. This eatery is famous for its roast duck menu.

His friends are generals, deputy director generals and businessmen.

It's been a long time since he drank imported liquor.

He's quietly glad there are still friends that don't ignore a friend.

Fully aware he has no high social position.

"What do you do these days?"

An old friend from high school days, a native of Bangkok who's gone to do business as a foreign trade advisor in Phuket. They haven't met for more than twenty years. He's flown over especially for the cremation.

"I make pictures for sale."

His friend is silent for a while. Pours him a whisky.

"I'll buy your pictures.

"Take half of the money now. Tomorrow in late morning I'll go and get the pictures." [MORE]

# FRESH KILLS

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## KANTORN AKSORNNAM

I intend to go to Fresh Kills presently. I've been eager to do so ever since I read a short article about the New York garbage dump in *National Geographic*. First off, I merely want to point out that the reason I want to go there isn't just because the place has become hallowed ground, but because I believe Fresh Kills will be a prime source of raw material in my line of work and will earn me huge amounts of money.

About five years ago, I became passionate about the creation of body ornaments – not ornaments of the kind you can find for sale ten a penny in jewellery shops, display stalls, open markets or sundry luxury shops, but special ornaments designed by a select group of people. Each design, each piece is unique in the world. And most important, each must have a history, a legend, interesting origins, or even a secret, making its price so high as to be bid through auction.

These very special ornaments are sought after by collectors that keep in touch through websites only. It is a kind of private world for those who are mad about the narratives or exploits behind body ornaments, be they necklaces, earrings, bracelets or piercings of every description. Age-old ornaments are interesting of course, but they are not popular among us, because what we crave is strictly contemporary ornaments created by a group of young designers passionate about the details involved in the production of each piece.

Allow me to take the example of one particular recent item which had us all talking in our group and whose possession was fiercely disputed. It was a pendant made from the ear of a baboon which had bitten the right ear of the president of a

western superpower. The monkey was instantly killed by the president's bodyguards even as it still held to the presidential ear after jumping off a tree where it had been enjoying the view in the company of a dozen other fellow creatures.

At the time the president was touring a forest reserve in a valley west of the country which, a couple hundred years before, had been the theatre of the greatest battle in history between its native dwellers and invaders from Europe intent on settling there, and it was on that battleground that the famous general who led the invading army lost his life in a horrendous way and even had tribe warriors scalp him as was the immemorial custom of victors.

It was lucky that the monkey died before the president's right ear was completely severed. It was later reported that eighteen stitches had been needed to get it back on. The other monkeys panicked and scattered. Though they wanted to go and help their comrade, they were no match to firepower.

The news spread around the world, and was grain to the mills of television and other media for quite a while, and it so happened that when the "monkey gets the ear of the president" incident took place a friend from our group was strolling through the forest reserve. Let's call him "Steve".

As soon as he heard the gunfire, Steve, who was looking around for "fodder" in the vicinity, dashed to the scene, as did the other tourists nearby, but once there, all were prevented by the bodyguards from getting near as the blood-shedding president was being hustled into a helicopter and rushed back to town to urgently fix the almost severed ear.

This is the story Steve told us on the web board. He said that after the presidential escort had left, he saw the body of the baboon lying in a pool of blood. It had been shot dead with Glock pistols within a hair's breadth of the president's ear.

Three 9mm bullets had pierced the unlucky creature's heart, lungs and spleen.

When they felt sure that the other baboons wouldn't act up, the two or three remaining bodyguards also left, and the heroic baboon became legendary for untold generations of baboons yet to come (that's how Steve put it).

Wasting no time, while everybody's attention was on the president, faster than a revolving fan blade Steve made up his mind and went into action. Using his bush knife he slashed his way to the body, daintily severed its right ear, slipped it in a plastic box and then sauntered off as if nothing had happened. Afterwards, an army of reporters from all over the world scrambled for news and features on baboons in this forest reserve. The world thus had the opportunity to admire the heroic deed of the ear-chomping baboon time and time again from all sorts of angles, and the surviving baboons gained much face in the process.

The carcass of the slain hero was taken away to go through as painstaking forensic analysis as the latest instruments of a superpower could devise to determine whether or not it was the latest killing machine specifically programmed for an assassination attempt.

To further embellish the story and thus push up the price of his handiwork, Steve wantonly called the baboon Bin Laden. We spread the details among ourselves through the web board faster than we could bite our nails. When linked to the big news in the various media, the story had the calling price of the ornament go through the roof and such was the demand that there had to be an auction for the possession of the eardrop of Bin Laden the baboon who had heroically chewed on the ear of a superpower's chief executive.

Actually, it was an ordinary eardrop, well proportioned and set in a triangular silver frame, with the Bin Laden ear inside properly stuffed, but that it did reach the staggering price of five million US dollars was due purely to its legend.

It made me wonder how much it would have fetched, and how much hoopla, had it held the president's ear instead.

There was a great variety of opinions on our web board. For instance:

“This Laden baboon must have been waiting for a long time before he got news of the presidential visit.” (Musharraf)

“We have no way of knowing how that Laden baboon knew who the president was.” (Blair)

“We are deeply sorry for what happened and full of the deepest admiration and respect for this invaluable ornament.” (Karzai)

“That baboon had a divine intimation of who the real enemy of God is. O, may Allah forgive that act of carefully considered bravery!” (Ahmadinejad)

“It must have been seized by the spirit of native warriors.” (Ruamruedee)

And so on.

We were able to establish the authenticity of Steve's ornament with the news that the right ear of the unfortunate monkey had gone missing, and heated debate followed on whether or not the whole thing had been premeditated as a way to discredit the president's right ear.

Our group has friends in many countries worldwide and this is the source of ornaments with the latest and oddest backgrounds, including many instances of distressing narratives, such as necklaces made out of bones from Hutus decimated by the Tutsis in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, or bracelets derived from bits of the rope used in the hanging of Iraq president Saddam Hussein in 2006.

In case you wonder how we manage to lay our hands on such “fodder”, we each have our methods and connections – and that's what we call trade secrets. [MORE]

# THAT CRAZY STORY

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## JARAN YANG-YUEN

It is afternoon and the sky is transparent. The sun radiates so fiercely you can see heat waves shimmering. This must be the kind of weather they call terminally hot. It can make sane people go crazy. It sends me fleeing outdoors, unable to sustain the closeness of the low-roofed house.

On a day off – a day of immeasurable value for city dwellers – what I crave for most is lying down at ease to happily absorb myself in reading. I'm careful not to forget to take along things to read every time. Today is no exception. I hold a morning paper, a weekly magazine and a pocket book as I go out.

I squat my bottom on the marble bench by the two jackfruit trees that stand side by side. They have a rather wholesome life, their thick foliage providing pleasant shade. Besides, they are flaunting fruit the size of little watermelons. I'll soon be eating their soft flesh. Before, there used to be a parachute cloth hammock slung from their trunks, but my naughty nephew thought it was a foe from outer space that had to be annihilated before it could harm the world, so he used his magic sword to slash it to pieces.

The hot wind of the end of the month of love blows on and off. The thick leaves of the jackfruit trees quiver. Some which have turned dark brown come off the branches and fall to the ground, piling up on the earth. Change is what nature is all about: whatever has run its course must leave for new things to be born instead.

A couple of bulbuls dash to a swaying jackfruit branch. As soon as they've firmed up their hold, they set about snogging openly while uttering resounding bulbul! bulbul! calls. Not only that: I don't know which of the ruddy male or ruddy female lets go of a glob that lands right on the back of my hand. The white

and grey gooey stuff smears the junction of the index and middle finger of my right hand. Yuck! I shout and instantly give up reading the newspaper, hurriedly scoop a tissue out of my miniskirt pocket and wipe and wipe and wipe, feeling utterly disgusted, while shivers run down my spine because the avian flu virus is still skulking about these days biding its time, but with their constant holding back for fear of treading on the wrong toes officials may not be able to eradicate it and it may stay around as a disease of our society for a long time to come.

I raise my head and look at the birds with resentful eyes. Before dropping their loads, they could at least look if there's anyone below!

I try to rein in my irritation at being interrupted. I usually buy this newspaper to read on my day off. It's a politics and business daily paper with a literary insert. Lately I've been increasingly interested in what's going on in writing circles. I'm getting fed up with my marketing job, a job that turns you crazy collecting statistics and data on the double all the time.

I don't like reading the mass-circulation dailies. They are so full of murder reports that on some days their pages drip with the red of blood. It always boils down to love and hate and greed and hubris. It's all so depressing. Similarly, I'm sick of that political conflict that can't seem to find a resolution these days. Even though this daily reports the news consistently, I skip those pages. I'm fed up with that crazy story, as I told him last night.

But a marketing job also has its good points. At least it trains me into the habit of keeping data of all sorts, of seeking knowledge. As soon as I find a story I'm interested in, I file it away to read at leisure when time allows. But in the end I never have the time to go through all the clippings I set aside. Day after day the piles of paper in my room keep growing. At the end of the year I have to get rid of them, albeit reluctantly.

The droppings have spoiled my mood, so I decide to read something else. I take the collection of short stories and flip through to the page where I last stopped reading. This book was written by a well-known young writer who collected awards from a fairly early age. He was already determined to write when he was in his teens and so he wrote and wrote until he became a fixture of the world of letters, but alas death took him away prematurely.

Actually I bought the book months ago but only read a few pages, and that only recently. It's as I said: in this life, there are always plenty of things to do, whether related to work, to family, to love even. They eat up so much of your time there's very little of it left to be yourself.

I intend to read at least half of it, but after going through just a few pages something makes me lose my concentration: loud country music pouring across the fence from the house next door. They've pulled down the old house to build a bigger one and they've been at it for months – or is it a year already? – but it's still not finished. They told me they had to find funds for it, so it took some time, because although they'd calculated expenses very carefully they were unable to keep them under control as the cost of materials kept going up and up.

After a while the music is interrupted by the news on the hour. The announcer's rousing voice gives way at times to those of people in the news. The minister in charge of security is interviewed saying that he fears the rally demanding the ouster of the country's leader will grow out of control and a third hand might interfere. He sounds positively worried. Another voice is that of the leader of teachers, one of the protest leaders. His voice is brusque and stentorian. He proclaims that teachers nationwide will stop teaching if that politician doesn't resign.

That damn crazy story is haunting me again!

It's because of that damn crazy story that I quarrelled with my lover last night. What am I to do when I'm totally fed up?

They've been going at each other for months and there's no progress to be seen. Show some sympathy: I have to toil away to find money to pay the instalments on the house – half a lifetime's worth of debt. I only take one day off every week and you want me to waste it with this nonsense yet again?

A small band of sparrows swoop down on the jackfruit trees and then undertake to make themselves at home, so that I have to take my eyes off the book to look up at them with displeasure, but then yet another spurt of bird shit splashes on the inside of my thigh, missing the seam of my skirt by a whisker. I see red, yell an obscenity. “Not again! Here I am doing no harm. Why the hell do you keep hassling me?”

When I look up, it isn't any sparrow but a shama that shat. It's hopping about right above my head. Its business done, it spreads its black and white wings to fly from the jackfruit branch to a branch of the mango tree by the fence. I shake my head, feeling annoyed, but that's all I can do. I must get up and hurry to wash my leg at the tap in front of the house before the droppings dry up and stick to my skin. In the afternoon, it's not too bad, the running water sort of runs. So the tap can be used, unlike at noon when you can't find any water around the house.

Once I've washed, I go back to sit on the marble bench as before. Actually I'd rather lie sprawled out in the hammock, it's kinder on your back, you can read for as long as you want and when you feel drowsy just take a nap. I keep telling myself I'll go and buy a new one but I never find the time. Damn that naughty nephew of mine, I tell myself irritably.

I gaze at the street in front of the house and its streams of vehicles speeding back and forth, motorcycles and cars and pickup vans. Even though today is a holiday, many people won't take a rest. It is necessary in life to work hard, but some people, even if they stop working, don't seem to know what to do with a day off. They have to scramble to take their family out [MORE]

# A TALE WITHOUT A NAME

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## WIWAT LERTWIWATWONGSA

### Nao, grey dust

I began writing these notes on the first dawn after Nao disappeared.

Have you ever met him? A young Japanese man of twenty-nine, very tall and rather skinny, tangled black hair down to his nape he fancied wearing tangled all the time; a young man whose eyes were always looking far away, when you talked with him you felt you were speaking alone because he gazed absently into space rather than look at you. That afternoon, Nao was wearing a grey T-shirt with ‘FU\*K COUP’ printed on it, and jeans. From a distance he looked like pale ash dust a gust of wind could scatter. We were strolling in the old heart of Phuket Town. I stopped briefly to look at wedding cards in a printing shop window, amused by a red card with two cherubs kissing, groom and bride’s names in exquisite lettering, as well as place and time, very beautiful, deserving to be a model for invitation cards to weddings in fancy hotels. Nao walked on. He turned at the corner of Thalang Road and from then on disappeared for ever.

Nao was born and grew up in Nara, a town of quiet little lanes and streets.<sup>1</sup> I’ve never been there. It’s a bit like here, only quieter, with less beautiful buildings, and colder, Nao said. He had come here for two or three months on a tourist visa. I met him for the first time one morning at the Bayon, between the huge faces of King Jayavarman VII and their smiles. Nao

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<sup>1</sup> Nara, a former capital, is a big, noisy city with beautiful buildings, notoriously hot in the summer – translator’s note.

appeared in the viewfinder of the camera when I brought it to my eye, appeared as if instantly born there, tall and wan in the morning sunlight, gazing vacantly at the four-sided faces towering above our heads the morning sun was warming. Under opposite stares of the Bayon, we exchanged frosty smiles.

Nao had flown from Tokyo to Bangkok, taken a van from Khao San Road to follow the popular route to Vientiane, Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang, and then turned back to cross over to Siem Reap. We met there, met through the viewfinder of my old camera, and in the end became friends.

Three weeks after coming back from Siem Reap, Nao came and stood in front of the shop, quiet, pallid, ill at ease, uncertain. At the time I was at the counter. In the spate of sunlight the slim silhouette looked familiar. Nao had really come to see me. Few travel friends keep up relationships, but Nao had preserved the crumpled piece of paper with my address on it in a compartment of his green, yellow and red hempen clothed purse. Finally, we were meeting once again.

I kissed him for the first time in the sunlight that afternoon as the entire town slumbered in weekend-mode indolence. No one had entered the shop since morning. Indeed, hardly anyone has gone out and about in today's afternoon heat. The street in front of the shop was deserted. I put on a Nick Drake<sup>2</sup> song, the ever so sad voice of a young man who died too soon. He had things in common with Nao – Nick, I mean: gaunt, tangled hair, pensive eyes. Nao was sleeping, stretched flat on the black and white leather sofa. Actually, it was he who had introduced me to Nick and that melancholy music.

I went to sit beside him, picked up the book left open by his side, *Holden Caulfield, the hardships of growing up*, and started to read. When he opened his eyes and stared at me, the afternoon light enclosed Phuket Town in heat that evaporated even the

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<sup>2</sup> An American folk singer of the seventies who died young from an overdose of barbiturates – author's note.

tears left on the cheeks of the sorrowful. The exquisite stucco-work decorative designs exuded warm yearnings. The long overhanging electrical wires sent out a buzz that was like the tone of overdue indolence after long-distance travel. A couple of pigeons taking shelter in a building corner raised their heads left and then right. Nao stared at me. At that moment we were like two animals of the world drawn to each other. He sat up and leant forward. We kissed. Warm lips with coffee stains, bitter and sweet flavours I could feel.

Three days later, Nao disappeared. We never went beyond kissing this one time. I'm not a homosexual and I've never felt for Nao like a lover. Our nameless relationship ended within a short time. Nao disappeared at a street corner. I thought he had gone for a stroll. I waited for him all night long but he didn't come back, leaving behind only a few spurious articles in his navy-blue backpack. I left the shop open until dawn, feeling hollow in the chest as if someone had snatched my heart away, as if another me was somewhere else aching over a loss.

Or maybe it was me.

I went through his things. There was no passport. There was no clue at all to indicate that he had come here, except the clothes in his bag and a novel by Murakami in Japanese, with some wriggled handwriting I couldn't read on the cover. There was writing all over the front and inside pages and every space that could be written on. That was the only clue to Nao.

I ended the notes at that point. Six months later, no one has met Nao. No one has contacted me. I alerted the Japanese embassy, but they found no one in Nara who knew Nao. He had come and left like grey ash drifting in the wind. At a dead end, I went on with my life, slowly forgot him, remembering only the coffee-flavoured kiss, up to the day that cat came to sleep in the box where this notebook is kept.

## Shuman, like the air

Without reason, that dawn you awoke with a feeling of ice-cold hollowness in the breast as if someone had scooped out half of your heart. You felt as though, from now on, you had been left stranded all alone on an unfamiliar star forever. Your last friend had left on a long trip and would not come back.

You sat up on the bed, wrapped in a thick blanket against the biting cold you felt. At the window the first rays at the edge of the sky were already showing. At this time of day only dew fell on your hair. You cried. You felt so very sensitive and vulnerable.

It was a peculiar morning. After the passing of many months you still recall that arbitrary morning. You have always felt like that since you were a child, an intense unfounded feeling as if another you was somewhere else in the world and losing the will to live. Some parts of that person had died, so you were dying as well.

Mother was already awake. You heard knocking about in the kitchen. You got out of bed and went to stand against a wall listening to mother humming an old song ever so slowly, doing this, doing that. Father was probably still asleep. There was only mother, you and the bitch. That morning the entire house belonged to the women.

After resigning from the civil service you had come back home, riding by coach in a single stretch from the Northeast to the South, not stopping anywhere for a rest as if you wanted to get away from there as far as possible and as fast as possible. Good memories would surface in due time, because, before you realised you missed that place by the Mekong river, you were already home, gazing at the Songkhla lake full of cargo boats and smelling of diesel. Suddenly you missed the unlabelled fragrance of the Mekong in the late afternoon. You decided to open a small chemist's in your hometown. Your shop was next to Rajabhat University. The rent was inexpensive, the building still

new, and the people all around were friends. In front of the shop a Muslim woman had rented a space to sell roti. Ka had a son of naughty age. You woke up in late morning, looked for something to eat around the house and then went out to the shop along the small quiet streets you grew up in. You were a part of this place. In early evening if you went out for a walk, within twenty minutes you'd meet people who knew you or your mother.

One afternoon, you sat idly in the bakery at the corner of the street, drinking crushed vanilla ice cream mixed with orange juice. Someone pushed the door and entered the shop, pallid as ash dust. That very second, the world in your head shook. He sat down at the table in front of you, facing the same direction. You peeked at the nape of his neck covered in tangled hair. All of a sudden you were sure for no reason at all that his name was Nao and you kept staring at him until he got up. You hesitated whether to follow that man or not, but you didn't do it. Nao, the stranger you knew, was about to disappear forever. He turned at the corner of a building as he walked by before you and disappeared from the windowpane. You felt as if you would vanish into thin air. The half of the heart that was left beat like a drum roll.

You still didn't love anyone apart from your mother and father. You had no one else. The woman chemist turning into the owner of an ordinary pharmacy gave no sign of excitement or dream-inspiring love pangs. Commonplace to the point of being like air – you usually complained to yourself like that –, perfectly still, waiting for the expiry date.

You met Nao once again at Samila Beach. He sat on the rocks next to the statue of the mermaid wringing her hair. It was a day when the wind blew strong, so that no one had gone to the sea. You looked at a young man with tussled hair through the car window. His shoulder-length hair floated in the wind, hiding now his face now his eyes glaring at the wet, cold edges of the sea. You stopped the car. From the other side of the road, you

gazed at that picture for a long time. You got out of the car, felt the strength of the wind on your face. Your hair ruffled. The long skirt you wore flapped in the wind. The air was dark and chilled as if the world had turned grey. As you walked against the strong wind across the road toward the statue of the mermaid, vocalising against the roar of the wind you called out a name.

‘Nao!’

### **The fog bride, adapted from the Japanese by Saenklai**

In the half-light of late morning, dimness clad her naked body as if she wore clothes made of fog. The light-blue room had a fog bride. Naked, she lay with her back to me. Thick dimness embraced her, blurring her shapes and slowly dissipating them. She vanished. The side of the mattress where she should have lain was now ice-cold. I gazed vacantly at that void and then cried.

There was only me left in the half-lit light-blue room. The same dreamy vision kept whirling around in the dimness.

Nick Drake’s melancholy guitar still lingered. Your favourite singer. You told me you met Nick after you and I met. You told me you met Nick in a second-hand CD shop. The sight of a young man, hunched, staring at his guitar on the light-blue floor made you think of me. You made me listen to Nick’s songs. I, who didn’t care for songs from the seventies, listened with half an ear to the melancholy guitar sounds of the man you told me was like me. You crammed your iPod with Nick’s songs, listened to them on and on, on buses, in the underground, in the streets, on ferries, on escalators, in lifts, and even when we slept side by side. You once told me that those melancholy songs made you feel as if I was with you everywhere. I knew Nick Drake because of you, didn’t feel intensely that I was like him until you vanished. [MORE]