

๗

๒

๐

๑

๔

14

Thai
Short
Stories



14 Thai Short Stories – 2014

TRANSLATED BY MARCEL BARANG

- 2 – Another day of 1984 happiness – WIWAT LERTWIWATWONGSA
56 – Sensitive and delicate – WIRAPHORN NITHIPRAPHA
64 – Dusk on Charoen Pradit Road – RATTANACHAI MANABUTRA
77 – Approach to paradise – NOK PAKSANAVIN
88 – Strangling integration – UTHIS HAEMAMOOL
110 – The rattan chair – MAHANNOP CHOMCHALAO
132 – It's in here – PHICHETSAK PHOPHAYAK
156 – Rainstorm over the kuti – RACHASAK JIRAWAT
175 – Dancing to the end of love – NIWAT PHUTTHAPRASART
195 – The time trader who worships love – LAWENG PANJASUNTHORN
213 – Memory – THAN YUTTHACHAIBADIN
223 – The memory clinic – NOTTHEE SASIWIMON
234 – The shattered dream – SANEH SANGSUK
249 – A poem should not mean but be – SANEH SANGSUK
-

© Laweng Panjasunthorn, Mahannop Chomchalao, Niwat Phutthaprasart, Nok Paksanavin
Notthee Sasiwimon, Phichetsak Pho-phayak, Rachasak Jirawat, Rattanachai Manabutra
Saneh Sangsuk, Than Yuthachaibadin, Uthis Haemamool, Wiraphorn Nithirapha
Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa

© Marcel Barang for the translations

Another day of 1984 happiness

WIWAT LERTWIWATWONGSA

1

This year is the first year Malee must live alone since Suree died. Suree died eight years ago but this is the first year that she is no longer here. The New Year is coming, slow and bleak. Malee doesn't know what she wants, of a lover, a journey far away or a chat with her dead friend, but she has none of these. There is only a mysterious emptiness of some kind which sticks to her like a spot on a shirt that won't fade in the wash or the stains of time on pillows, on curtains or in tile grooves on the floor. As days pass the stains grow darker while the material fades, just as life fades away while loneliness takes shape in her.

Loneliness is an incurable disease, Suree told Malee. She said so on New Year's Day seven years after she died. Suree lay on the bed beside Malee. Her flesh had long ceased to be warm. Only Malee could see Suree. Suree spoke to Malee in the morning then kissed her lightly on the forehead. Early sunlight slanted into the room. Malee didn't want to go to work. She wanted to lie with Suree, cold as she was. As soon as Suree kissed her, she knew that Suree was fading out, like the colour of the ceiling slowly fading. Suree would fade out while she would grow darker in the manner of indelible stains. Eventually Suree would turn translucent and evaporate into thin air.

‘How about drawing lots for the New Year?’ Malee was the one to broach the idea to her friends in the office without much enthusiasm. The people in the office agreed without much enthusiasm. The New Year was coming and when there were signs of celebration everywhere, she should celebrate. Malee had worked in this office for two years, but this year was the first year she would be without Suree. After that day, Malee would only speak about the presents she thought she and the others would buy. She asked the others what they wanted but they would only answer with jokes. For them Malee didn’t quite matter, she was just a distant colleague to chat with about last night’s play on TV or the latest horrid crime report or to have her join them for lunch, but she wasn’t someone they’d invite to a discreet party, a meal at home or a karaoke session, that sort of thing. The New Year was coming. The man she covertly liked invited her to join the rally. Malee accepted right away, hardly aware of what the rally was about, what people were gathering for, but she learned afterwards that he had invited other people as well. In any case, she’d go, since she no longer had Suree with her.

If Suree was still alive she’d be upset. Aem – that was that man’s name – bought Malee a whistle. It had a lovely tricoloured-national-flag strap to hang it round the neck. There were so many people demonstrating that walking was a struggle. How many there were Malee only found out when she watched the news that night. Oodles of people took to the streets to oppose an unjust law. The moment they linked hands and walked on together, Malee’s tears flew irresistibly as if she was coming close to something sublime she couldn’t

explain either. Unwittingly, she was searching for Suree in the crowd but then remembered that Suree was no longer. She stayed with her office friends until late afternoon. They elected to sit down as if for a picnic. From where she sat Malee could not hear what was being said on the stage. Then she merely closely followed Aem in the crowd. Her other colleagues were having a great time. They talked about politics as if they had followed such things all their lives, even though Malee had never seen them read anything but entertainment news on the internet. Malee joined her voice to theirs. In reality, she too could talk about these matters. Suree read everything she came across. Even though she was dead, she kept reading. The newspaper Malee bought, it was Suree who read it. She wore her high school uniform, the uniform she was wearing when she died, sat on the bed, read the newspaper, the weekly magazines, read the news on the net. The websites she had consulted last were still on Mary's computer screen, but now it was Malee who was in the crowd of demonstrators, blowing her whistle loudly. Aem grabbed her hand unwittingly and she flushed, thought of the present she'd buy for the New Year drawing of lots.

There was excitement everywhere. People had woken up to politics. The crowd looked ebullient and warm. Malee made new acquaintances. They talked of things she couldn't hear, but it made her forget that she missed Suree. She endeavoured to listen to what was said on the stage. She wanted Aem to explain things to her but she didn't understand and thought they were a little contradictory. Actually, the contradictions were stupendous but she blew her whistle along with

Aem. She did everything with him, thought of how good it would be if they entered the New Year together, a New Year without Suree.

Suree's death in the last semester was a mystery. She died as she walked home on a late afternoon in September. She had parted from Malee at the school gate. That day the two of them were a little cross with each other. The next day Suree was dead. She had been killed and her murderer was never caught. She was killed at night and nobody knew. When you thought about it, it was so sad. Suree died on her way home. Her body was found in a deserted building that had burnt down. There was no evidence of rape or theft. She had only been killed, killed without reason, gutted like a fish or a vegetable. After her death she disappeared from people's memories. Only Malee remembered, only she had taken over the burden of memory and the wounds from being flailed by those who had forgotten how much it hurt when someone disappeared from your life. Suree's parents lived upcountry. Malee didn't meet them after Suree's death. Suree had stayed in the same dormitory as Malee. The two of them had become close but Malee had never gone to Suree's home. She didn't attend the funeral either; Suree lived too far away for Malee's parents to allow her to go there. Suree never told her anything at all about her death but on the day of the cremation she appeared and stood there in Malee's room. The two of them were together on the last term of secondary, were together as university students. Malee's periodic heartaches were soothed by Suree. Malee grew into a young woman but Suree didn't age, she still wore the same school uniform, she didn't have the warmth of human beings and she slowly faded away.

After she found work, Malee moved to a new dormitory close to her place of work.

...

Sensitive and delicate

WIRAPHORN NITTHIPRAPHA

Forty-five-year-old Kamol Duangphasuk aka Mai Nueng Kor Kunthee, a prominent poet and Red Shirt political activist, was killed by an unidentified gunman on April 23, 2014 in Bangkok. (MB)

The murderer must have followed his trail since the first poem he published, or longer even, since an incoherent piece he wrote while he was still a boy, and that man must also be a consummate reader to be able to sort out that he wasn't merely a versifier, a language juggler or one of those alchemists of the word that come a dime a dozen ...

... but a true poet.

'No ... not a poet! There's nowhere in the world they kill poets,' she finally mumbled after hearing the news that a poet had been shot dead, and that made you bow your head even further, so low you seemed to be whispering to the tips of your feet.

'Killed, of course. Everywhere people get killed, be they poets or priests.' In barbarity, in deranged craziness, in fits of madness every-

body gets killed, and you didn't want to speak to her like this.

'But not him!' Her voice shook. What made them different? Him or whoever else? You didn't speak, you were only thinking, and actually she didn't ask who did it and why. She was well aware of the answers.

No, you two didn't know the poet. She and you were just distant readers who would engross yourselves in a discussion of his poetry once in a long while ... on some nights, having reached oddly mixed moods, the rhythm of the periods cut painfully deep before the reader was aware of it, rolls of ordinary words unfurled smoothly, the prosody flowed ... with unpalatable bitterness, astringent, foul-tasting, shapeless, tucked away.

And she liked his poems more than anyone else's, especially those he wrote before the storm. They were pure poetry, she said. They spoke of life, love, lonesomeness, contemporary people with sensitive and delicate hearts. That was how he defined his own heart before his poems spoke only of the storm, the storm and the growing wrath, sour and murky, eating him up. But you understood ... In darkness fraught with shivers, he or anyone getting up to make a fire wouldn't help.

And then you came to wonder whether they had taken the bullets out of the poet's heart or not ... Will they take them out, leaving holes there? Or will they leave them like that inside his heart so that no empty cavity remains ... at least?

After that you wondered further if it was true ... You'd heard that we don't feel pain at all when we're shot right through the heart. No, you didn't wonder: you hoped, as you would hope if he was one of

your friends. You didn't know why you hoped so, but you hoped the poet wouldn't have had to be hurt again, at least not in that extremely short second ... when an entire life flashes past.

You'd simply like to think he wouldn't have to suffer again because you know very well that those who write like that must have gone through grievous pain innumerable times.

And then you went back to thinking about the bullets again. Would they be pulled out of that heart with a grip, one bullet at a time, so heavy? Would they all be pulled out and empty holes be left there?

There are not many true poets. Nobody sees them in person. People only read them and have the opportunity to read only the few works that they allow the world to savour. The murderer must be a reader. He must have read many poems, enough to understand that these people are not the same as doctors, lawyers, housewives, soldiers, ordinary folk ... He must have read a lot, enough to know how difficult it is to kill a true poet.

Because these people have died innumerable times already.

Again and again ... time after time, in secret places ordinary people never reach or don't even know exist, in the rhythm of the lines, the stanza, in the glittering outlines, brilliant in bitterness, in dull black darkness. They draw their own blood and sift it into words, words that may not even be written down, words that are disguised within other words, sad, deep, hopeless, banished and forgotten within the beauty of the language.

It isn't at all easy to kill someone who dies every night.

...

Dusk on Charoen Pradit Road

RATTANACHAI MANABUTRA

I have fallen in love with a young woman...

Some people say love is great, it makes us deaf, blind and crazy. Some poets retort that love makes the blind see and the deaf hear...

From the first time we met I found she brought beauty and cheerfulness. I don't want to hide that I love her more than life. She has beautiful eyes, curved eyelashes, teeth as white as pearls, and her fingers...

This much to imply how much I love this young woman. Whatever she asks I never refuse.

Lately she called to ask me to help her by transferring some money onto her account.

'I've just sent you the account number. It's urgent. I love you.'

I wrote down the number on a small piece of paper I inserted in my bank book.

Charoen Pradit Road, the front road of Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani, is a road congested with vehicles and shops. Sometimes there is almost no room for people to walk across. At times

herds of cows take over the duty of regulating traffic so that vehicles of all kinds must stop and give them right of way.

It is said that Charoen Pradit is a short road that has many kinds of superlative things, for instance the most delicious *roti mataba* shops; cars brush past and crash into one another all the time, so often it has become something ordinary.

‘Another car crash!’

I have a car, but I leave it in the garage. If not necessary I don’t take it out on this road. Many cars have their wing mirrors gone without their owners being aware of it. It’s mostly motorcycles that brush past and then dodge and disappear without leaving a trace. I take the car out when I go back home on days off only.

The telephone in my pocket vibrated as I wormed my way along Charoen Pradit Road. I rummaged for it and brought it to my ear while steering with my other hand with no concern for traffic regulations because I made as though I was scratching my ear. Maybe a close-circuit camera would catch me at it, but believe me, in this town only a few cameras are working properly. I once went to the police station to make a deposition and asked the police to check on CCTV about a teenager forcing the saddle of my motorcycle. The lieutenant on duty waved his hand and told me, Please, that camera’s out of order.

As soon as I raised the phone to my ear, my motorcycle bumped into a soldier, who took a tumble and his M-16 flew out of his hand.

I exclaimed, ‘Soldiers!’

‘What did you say?’

‘Soldiers, soldiers, that car in the middle of the road, overturned,

weapon...’ I remember that was how I stuttered.

The car speeding in the other direction bumped into the M-16 and sent it flying. The weapon darted away under the strength of the impact. Another motorcycle ran over it.

Suddenly there was a burst of firing. I was so dumbfounded I shook and didn’t know what to do. Two soldiers on the roadside instinctively threw themselves to the ground even though they didn’t know where the shots came from and where the bullets went. The agitation suddenly stopped. I was still holding the phone to my ear. The motorcycle had fallen sideways, the handlebar was out of kilter but the engine was still running.

That soldier was still baffled about what had happened and couldn’t make head or tail of it. He was still flat out on the ground. When the gunshots stopped I hastily put the bike back up, straightened the handlebar and left from there without further ado.

The woman I love called me again.

‘Why did you hang up? Are you listening? Why don’t you say anything?’ She sounded peeved.

‘Soldiers...’ I tried to explain.

‘Oh come on! I never get involved with soldiers. They just stopped my car to check as is their duty, that’s all.’

Before that she had told me soldiers asked to check her car and then kept wooing her while the other cars were checked only perfunctorily.

I tried to tell her what had happened but she wouldn't let me get a word in edgeways.

‘Who did you think it was again? You’re the only one now, you

know. So no need to feel insecure.'

I entered a small shop to calm my nerves, ordered a coffee and enjoyed the air-conditioned air.

Two girls sat eating ice-creams. A third one joined them and they chatted.

'Over there there's a crowd.'

'Where?'

'What crowd? About what? Where?'

'When?'

'At T 2.'

'What happened there? If it's yet another car crash, forget it.'

'It wasn't.'

'A brawl?'

'No.'

'A car kissing a cow?'

'An explosion?'

'Getting warm.'

'All right, I'd better tell you. You haven't got a clue ...'

Approach to paradise

NOK PAKSANAVIN

And after that, I came here at last – Firdaus’s birthplace, a place whose name is the word for water in Malay, a place which begins a new day after sunset, night preceding day, a place which is very distant not in terms of distance but as an abstraction whose name I do not know.

Several months later, my kitten and Firdaus’s pup had grown up. I considered Firdaus’s old books on the shelves and began to read them one after the other. The old characters from those faded yellow books irritated my eyes, which began to water non-stop. For all that I couldn’t give up my attempt to read all of those books.

Firdaus’s death dug a river in my face no bridge could span and I had no way to cross. Firdaus had gone over to the other bank. I was no longer involved except only in my mind, which in truth was like a whirlpool swallowing everything ceaselessly.

Two days earlier, I had stood in front of the counter of an old hotel in Pattani which bore the propitious name of Peace Hotel. A young woman carrying a bundle of things walked in. What did you get, the old man who stood behind the counter asked by way of greeting. She answered with a few words I didn’t quite catch. She took a look at me and then went up the stairs.

I walked out to breathe the air outside and strolled aimlessly until I came to the bridge across the river. A man tried to talk to me in Malay when he saw the emerald-set ring I wore on my left hand. I told him I couldn't speak Malay, so he left looking a little baffled.

When it grew dark I returned to the hotel. At the bottom of the wooden stairs I again met the woman, who stood still as if she was waiting for someone. She wore clothes so flimsy you could almost see her underwear.

As if it wasn't important whether to begin the day at sunrise or sunset, the waste left behind by time was the same. I found that book gathering dust on the stand by the bed.

I switched the ceiling fan on, peeled off my t-shirt and then reclined on the hard bed, my eyes on that book. The cover had been torn off. The edges of the blank endpaper had turned yellowish-brown. Finally, even though I knew the dust on the pages would trigger my allergy, curiosity made me pick it up.

*And as for those who believe and do good deeds,
We will make them enter gardens beneath which rivers flow,
to abide in them for ever;
they shall have therein pure mates,
and We shall make them enter a dense shade.*

Al-Quran 4:57

I was born in a district a river ran through which on a Friday, in the third quarter of the waning moon of the third month of the Year of

the Snake, as the lunar calendar has it.

Mother used to tell me that shortly after giving birth to me, the umbilical cord still attached to my navel grew loose and fell into the water. According to a belief she had heard from her folks this event was to determine my life: I would lose my life in water.

Mother's heart was bound to old legends and it seemed this was to apply to me as well. When I was three months old, I cried for no reason from dusk to dawn three nights running. Mother had to take me back to her home district to hold a ceremony for the spirits of our ancestors to accept me as a new member of the clan. Mother was born in another kind of world, where there were tigers and deer in the jungle, crocodiles in the streams, flocks of parrots nested in the ancient durian tree of the front yard at home, flowers of Robusta coffee exhaling a strong fragrance during the rainy season – a world where tigers were able to turn themselves into human beings.

As children, the only world for us is our friends and our games, and for children whose dwellings are by a river, the river regulates our games. All of my friends swam like fish. In little to no time they were able to swim across the river, but I never could manage that much. Old beliefs really made my life miserable. Swimming across demanded strong mental power but my being at the mercy of a prediction was something I couldn't dismiss. Before long I gave up playing in that river and later that included all kinds of water games.

During the hot season break at the end of the first year of university, when we were almost nineteen, Firdaus and I took our vacation

on an island. The sea was emerald green. During the hot season, the hormones in our bodies were ready to burst and they were ferment in this first love for the two of us.

It was then that I went back to challenging myself again.

Our bungalow was right on the beach. Further out, not far, there was another small island. At low tide you could walk to that island. Actually if there had been no water in between, the two islands would have been linked by the same strip of earth.

The indigo blue sky and the bright sunshine roused life. Firdaus had already swum to that island. I followed her, swimming slowly.

...

Strangulating integration

UTHIS HAEMAMOOL

I stand on the podium in the middle of the stage, light flooding my face, look at the people filing in to listen to the speech, hundreds of them, sitting down in rows filling the assembly hall. I only see rough silhouettes, I could not describe the faces of those who enter to listen, too difficult for me to describe them, too many of them for me to remember. I am not sure either whether these people have read what I write. It is just that I have received a prestigious literary award, my name has been widely circulated, I trigger interest. I understand that many people in this assembly hall have been invited and urged to attend by the public

relations side of the literary organisation that awarded me the prestigious prize. Someone on the working team even told me before the day the award was bestowed to 'please invite any guest you wish' and iterated that 'the assembly hall is huge, there will be lots of empty seats', but I didn't invite many guests on my own. Older and younger fellow writers volunteered to come and show their friendly support. Actually, I hardly invited anyone at all, letting the public relations side of the organisation deal with it, including the various mass media that would spread the news of today's event. It can be noticed that the ten rows at the back of the assembly hall are students, because they dress in student uniforms, a pen in one hand and a notebook in front of almost all of them. How pitiful, I think, being conscripted to listen to something so boring and then having to write a report to send to the professor, perhaps even having to deal with it as an exam question. The students have to listen to my speech, catch the symbols, look for what might come out as an exam question.

The front rows are only for luminaries in literary circles, the president of the literary organisation, as well as the chairman of the integrated food industry corporation that doles out the fund that backs the art and culture organisation. These people must have been the ones that selected me for this yearly prize.

Two weeks ago, the event organisers informed me that I would have forty-five minutes for my speech. I thought they were giving me too much time, I didn't know what I could say to show what was important during all the time of writing that had gone on and to extract it to last forty-five minutes, so I began to write about what I

meant to tell the audience, and now I am looking at my fellow writers in the assembly hall and feel I'll be carrying coals to Newcastle. Looking at the ten back rows of students, the lot of them don't want anything except the probability of answers to exam quizzes, but for all that I have written down what I must speak about, to have a few catch phrases to be of use in the writing of news and public relation releases after the event.

Three days ago I gave a talk in a course for would-be writers. I told those that attended the course that a writer must have a keen ear, the ear signals must be good and the ear of the writer must be open to all surrounding sounds, to sort and synthesise them. When writing about villagers and the words they use in conversation, the writer must write dialogues that sound true, with words villagers really use, not words of the writer loaded with idealism of some kind put in the mouths of characters that are villagers, something the writer must not do. That way of writing is outdated. A teenage girl in the training course raised her hand and asked me, 'How do we know the words villagers really use?' She paused and then went on, 'Because villagers these days almost all of them speak like politicians, like freelance experts.' She marked time to let me think for a moment and then said, 'Isn't what you're saying a cliché, that the villagers must speak like villagers from now on? Then how exactly do villagers speak?'

I was rendered speechless for a moment. I agreed with her observation. It was not for people from the mainstream, from the centre of knowledge, to lend those words to the villagers to use in 'holistic' or 'integrative' public relations. Having people from the working unit

repeat those words until they slowly seeped through, getting used to the words for a start, then using them in context and gradually they would be understood more clearly. I told that young girl, ‘What a writer must remember to do is express the way villagers think. If the writer writes about villagers, no matter how the villagers’ way of speaking changes, the writer must understand how villagers think and then express it in his or her work.’ The young woman kept nodding. I knew that I was dodging her question. She stopped grilling me.

Now her voice and her observation are still in my head. The words ‘holistic’ and ‘integration’ spring up.

...

The rattan chair

MAHANNOP CHOMCHALAO

He sat still in the rattan chair. That rattan chair placed on the front porch looked at odds with the rest of his stylish house, like a country bumpkin gawping at the modern buildings of the capital. It was so rundown that his wife and children looked away, no one wanted to sit down or even get close to it, everyone wondered that he had carted it all the way here and even more so that he sat in it all day long.

He drove the four-wheel Caribbean along red earth stagnant water

turned into orange-red mud. It was surprising how well he remembered the way, perhaps because the state of the road hadn't changed very much. Once in front of the temple with the same name as the village and turning into this road, the mountain over yonder was the destination. The afternoon was turning into dusk under a sprinkling of rain.

Even though he was driving fast, he was too late – by how many days? Four? Five? Ten days? Before that he had worked in front of his computer. His aunt had phoned, he had taken the call but his mind was still on his work. He had to hurry to send it to the client. He didn't want to lose his reputation as a professional. A deadline was sacred. He had listened silently to the voice at the other end for several minutes, answering tersely 'Yes ... Not sure yet ... But then ... Yes' and then hung up and gone on with his work.

'Must finish the design on time,' he had berated himself, taken his work to do at home, finished it and sent it off in the nick of time. He had gathered a few sets of clothes into a suitcase, read the note he had written and placed on his desk: *'Father dead 29th April*.

To his wife he said, 'No need. You don't have to ask for leave. He'll be going to school anyway.' He left the house in the morning, took a plane to Chiang Mai, rented the Caribbean there, and then drove out. It rained all the way almost without a break as if big clouds clad the whole country.

The road on both sides didn't seem to have changed at all. He had left the place when he was a child, had never come back until now. The frozen time of his life here was dripping because of the rain. He went on driving by waterlogged fields.

...The boy ran. In the irrigation channel by the roadside muddy water flowed fast. A small boat made of a chunk of wood was caught in that watercourse. He ran after it. A few ants made up the crew. They scuttled around like crewmen on urgent work when the boat faces a big storm and huge rapids lie ahead. It was the mouth of a pipe diverting water into a field. The wooden boat swirling disappeared into it. The child went to wait at the other end of the pipe, to wait for the surviving crew ants to come out but then there were none left on the boat. He was a little sad at the fate of the crew. The boy picked up the wooden boat. Right there it was the front of his house. 'Out in the rain like that you'll catch a cold. Come inside. Come and have dinner. No need to wait for your father.' His mother's voice cutting through the rain came out from under the roof of the house. He turned round to smile at his mother. She stood right by the concertina door in front of the house, looking pale, faded, when seen through the rain. The boy had had enough with eating. He claimed he'd wait to eat with his father because his father would come back very late or maybe wouldn't even come back...

He turned on the headlights. Even though it wasn't dark yet, he couldn't see anything clearly any longer. He had bought simple food from a shop in town. Up there, he wouldn't find anything to eat for sure. He thought of many things in the past, rather vague at first but increasingly clear when he dwelled on them, so that he began to feel unwilling to think about them. If there was something to be dealt with, he'd do it quickly and go back home as fast as he could. And

then the car reached the front of the house, so suddenly he wasn't ready for it. He stayed still in the car for a long moment before opening the door and stepping out to look at the entrance.

He walked under the drizzle to the old white champaka in front of the house. The car's headlights grew brighter as the sky darkened. He stopped and stood at the barbed wire fence doubled up with a row of tamarind trees looking unkempt like a man unshaven. They had been left to grow wild. Reddish brown shoots sprung out of small twigs. The path to the house was wild with grass. He wondered that there were no footsteps from the house to the front road at all. He felt like turning round and going back. Had he made the wrong decision to come? It was too late, far too late. Everything had been swept flat. The watercourse had swept the crew ants away. The deck had been swept bare, leaving nothing, no ant footprints, ant smell, ant shit – all so flimsy; the fear the ants felt flimsier still. He looked at the trunk of the white champaka he had hurled the wooden boat at more than twenty years earlier, the boat that had run aground, the boat he'd prised out of the water body. It must have rotted long ago; its spirit must have rotted. The white champaka tree was flowering under the rain, overtaken by weeds.

...Moist dusk, raindrops clip-clopping on the roof, swishing branches shaking forth the wind in the forest that covered the mountain at the back of the house. The boy ate two mouthfuls of rice with his mother, a cold and tasteless meal. Even the taste of the food had been washed away by the rain. His mother sat across from him, her plate of rice

untouched. The boy tried to swallow a last mouthful, thinking that on mother's cheeks it was drops of the rain that slanted inside through the window...

He thought of the house beam. How high was it from the floor? For a child everything looks tall and big. He didn't remember but it would be the first thing he'd stare at when he opened the house door and entered, as on that evening more than twenty years ago, when the chauffeur drove him back from school in the district.

His mother didn't mean for him to see at all. ...

It's in here

PHICHETSAK PHO-PHAYAK

The dew saturated the entire hill and the fog seemed to be hiding the morning from the knowledge of humankind. The sun during the cold season came out later than usual, especially in this, the country's northernmost province, but this was no problem for Wiwatchai: waking up at dawn had become second nature to him.

Once he was past primary school age, by two in the morning he had to be at the morning market with his faithful pushcart to carry everything he was hired for, mostly vegetables and fruit that arrived at the market at that time.

When that was over around four in the morning, he had two hours to

rest and sleep in a corner next to Aunt Chia's vegetable stall. He'd wake up again at six, scramble onto his antediluvian motorcycle and go to Hia¹ Tee's garage to open shop and clean up the place. No particle of dust escaped his broom in this garage the size of two shop houses. And then he tackled the pending work. At eight, three other mechanics came in. Before the heavy work began, they sat in a circle eating breakfast together.

That was during the first years after primary school. Wiwatchai no longer had to be hired to transport vegetables at the market. The monthly salary from Hia Tee's garage was enough for him and his mother to live on, except that on some days he felt like going to help some female vendors he was close to just for the sake of it.

Wiwatchai was only sixteen but he was well respected by his co-workers of the same age. He inspired trust beyond his age by working hard, harder than anyone else in the garage, and never opened his mouth to complain. The important thing that made everyone accept him was his expertise riding his motorcycle motocross-style.

Hia Tee himself was a former motocross rider who had never reached the stars. As a young man the best he did was third place in the B-Grade 125cc national competition one year. After that it was downhill, so he no longer had any ground to stand on in the top national field. Wiwatchai was the substitute of his youth, a young competitor who collected victories in splendid fashion in the urban tracks of the North.

¹ 'Hia' (flat tone) is dialect for 'elder brother', used to feign or reflect friendship; also 'boss', 'big guy'.

This year he had won five of them, so much so that the Thai branch of the Sowa motor oil company had sounded him out to represent it.

About this, Hia Tee, who had begun to train Wiwatchai when he didn't even know how to ride a motorcycle yet, felt prouder than the boy himself – Hia Tee who once had been named world-class rider of his time, except that his career had ended faster than it should.

Wiwatchai kept his hesitation about joining the Thai Sowa team to himself. Every rider in the country dreamed of making it to the Sowa team, because it meant big money every month in your pocket and, if you were good enough, competing at world level wasn't beyond dream, even though for Thai people this was still a Herculean undertaking.

He was the only one to know what he thought. He had never been really happy with motocross riding, but since that was what Hia Tee wanted, how could he refuse – Hia Tee who had supported him since he finished primary six two years after his father died.

Many people said Hia Tee should have gone much farther than he did if only he'd been a little more ambitious given his expertise in fine-tuning engines. He had earned several awards at national level which he hung as decorations on the walls. 'I'm showing them to attract customers, that's all,' he'd say, a first-class mechanic who had to skulk in a small repair shop. 'I'm fine here,' he'd say whenever someone mentioned the days when he was a well-paid top mechanic in repair centres in the capital.

...

Rainstorm over the kuti

RACHASAK JIRAWAT

Turning right, Venerable Chat stepped through the temple gate and made for his *kuti*² at once after finishing his alms round. The sun's golden light shining through the green foliage turned his robe iridescent. The orange yellow of the robe looked august and pure as did the glowing face of its owner. His bare feet stepped forward at a slow but steady pace. His right hand held the very heavy begging bowl full of foodstuffs while from his left hand hung a jumble of plastic bags containing curries, drinkable water and various fruits and cakes. The cloth bag clinging to his right shoulder was crammed with dry and canned food also donated by the faithful.

Pom, the temple boy who helped the monk carry things every morning, walked right behind him. He carried an orange plastic container overloaded with a variety of foodstuffs. The large container contrasted with the thin body that carried it but didn't tire him too much: it was a duty he carried out every day.

Such a volume of food was in no way exceptional for Venerable Chat's alms circuit. It was well known that any route past shops and the market would have an unusual number of donators. People coming to the market took the opportunity to buy things to donate. Vendors also made merit in the hope that their businesses would pros-

² Monk's cell

per. And more important, Venerable Chat was a monk with a very large following because of his composure and glowing face, and besides he was reputed for his witty sermons which made the faithful donate freely every day almost to the point that not all could be taken back to the temple.

When he arrived in front of the kuti, Venerable Chat picked some of the bags of food out of the alms bowl and put them in Pom's orange container.

'Share all these with the others, Pom,' he said with a broad smile. Pom put the container down on the ground then, joining his hands in front of his forehead, bowed to the monk. After that he lifted the container and left. The monk watched him until he went out of sight and then he walked into his kuti.

Venerable Chat's kuti was a pale blue wooden structure on stilts. At ground level, the area between the stilts was wide and had a sink to wash the dishes and a space to do the laundry and put it to dry. Inside, the kuti was fairly wide but the muddle of things in it made it look congested. The atmosphere inside the kuti looked tranquil. There was a mat spread in the centre of the room and an old writing desk, but modernity had moved in in the form of a twenty-four-inch TV hogging pride of place against one wall and paired off with an expensive stereo with baffles. Next to them was a mid-sized refrigerator with a set of dishes and water glasses on its top. A computer was in quiet meditation on the floor of the room among a wide array of dozens of CDs.

Once inside the kuti, Venerable Chat closed the door and bolted it.

He put down the bowl, the bags of food and the shoulder bag on the mat. Then he took off his robe and spread it out to dry on the clothesline that ran from one wall to the opposite wall. Now he was left only with the singlet and the lower garment wrapped around his hips. After that he took a certain amount of money out of the shoulder bag. It was a requisite the faithful bestowed on him during his alms round. He unfolded the banknotes and separated them according to their value, one pile of twenties, one pile of fifties and one pile of hundreds. When he was finished counting he gathered all the money and went to put it in the drawer of his writing desk. This was where he kept the requisites the folk donated. He would use that money to buy things he needed, with Pom in charge of going out to buy them for him.

When he had closed the drawer and locked it, he sat down on the mat and opened the food bags for his morning meal. Right then there was a knock on the door. When he opened the door he saw Jorm standing in the doorway with an amused look on his face.

Jorm was a temple boy at the service of Venerable Father Thawee, the abbot. He had been there for a long time, so all the temple boys viewed him as their senior. He was tall, big, swarthy and had sharp features which made him look all the more dignified, especially his abundant black eyebrows and big round eyes glowering as if in anger at anyone all the time. For the others, Jorm was some sort of roguish ne'er-do-well but when he was with the abbot he became deferential and unassuming, industrious and prompt to help the abbot. Nobody knew about his background very much, only that his parents had left

him in Venerable Father Thawee's care when he wasn't even five years old because they were too poor to raise him themselves so they put their hopes in the temple. At least he would have enough to eat and a roof over his head, but after that Jorm's parents never came back to see their son and it seemed that Jorm didn't expect them to. The last fifteen years were enough for him to be certain that his parents didn't want him any longer.

'What is it, Jorm,' Venerable Chat asked.

'Nothing much, Father. I just want to have a little chat with you,' Jorm answered. Venerable Chat looked a bit surprised because, apart from Pom, he wasn't particularly close to any temple boy. He and Jorm had spoken together only a few times.

'Well, I gather from what Pom lets on that you receive money donations every day from the faithful.' Jorm marked a pause, his eyes on Venerable Chat's face, which was still impassive. With a little smile in the corner of his mouth, he went on: 'So I thought you might have the kindness to share some with a poor temple boy like me, that's all.'

Venerable Chat really wondered but still kept a poker face. 'You must have misunderstood. I don't have that much money as you think. Actually, if you want money, why don't you ask the abbot?'

'Oyo! His money, the abbot uses it to pay the water bill, the electricity bill, the upkeep of the temple. How could I get any?' Jorm's shiny black eyes stared at the monk so steadily he had to look away. 'But I don't think you have much use for the money you receive.'

'What do you mean,' the monk asked, incensed. 'If you want to pick a quarrel with me, you'd better go back.'

‘Maybe you don’t know that I go to sleep late at night.’ Venerable Chat looked at Jorm with suspicion. He was beginning to feel anxious but he kept standing there, listening. ‘And as it is, last night when I came out to go to the toilets, I saw a woman behaving stealthily in front of your kuti. It was dark but I could see she was really pretty.’ And then suddenly paleness took over from the sanguine colour of the monk’s face. Sweat from his forehead ran down to his cheeks. Jorm forced a smile out of satisfaction when he saw the change in the monk’s expression.

‘I was stunned when I saw her go inside your kuti. I don’t know what business she could have with a monk at such a late hour, so I stood there and waited for a while, but she stayed inside for a long time and didn’t come out again ... by then I was really drowsy so I thought I’d go back to sleep, but you know me, Father, I like to pry, I can’t help it, so I tried to peer through your window and I saw something I never thought I’d see in a temple.’ Venerable Chat found it hard to swallow. His hands gripped the door frame so hard their swollen veins could be seen clearly. He suddenly felt cold even though there was no wind.

‘And it so happens that my mobile phone is able to record videos as well, so I recorded that exciting happening. It sounds incredible, doesn’t it, I may be a temple boy but I’m trendy, ah-ha!’ Jorm laughed arrogantly because he knew he was holding the trump card.

‘You darned...’ Venerable Chat gnashed his teeth.

‘Oh ... don’t you worry, Father. I haven’t shown it to anyone yet, but erasing it would be a pity. So I’ve come to consult you on what

to do.' ...

Dancing to the end of love

NIWAT PHUTTHAPRASART

Tunnel of light

As the department store was about to close, music came out of the loudspeakers in the ceiling of the rest room. It was very cold in there. There was no sound of anything, as if this men's room was a sacred religious abode. Hot air blower, flushing, piped water: all sounds had disappeared forever; there was only the music, which was faint, too faint, so faint it was like silence. I touched the partition wall with my hand. Cold sweat, not from food poisoning. I had been like this before: my hands devoid of strength, feeling like vomiting. I knew it'd pass in a moment. Force myself to stand up, take a deep breath and it would return to normal.

Right then, there was a noise through a partition wall, a noise like someone in another cubicle jerking the toilet paper holder as if to break it to pieces. The noise grew increasingly loud, so loud I felt I was being threatened. I bent down to look through the empty space above the floor, saw neither shadow nor feet of someone. I did up my buttons and then left the cubicle. As soon as I came out I stood still in front of the next cubicle, stretched out my hand and pushed

the door which was slightly ajar. There was no one, only emptiness.

The faint sound of the piano was covered by the voice of an announcer. I stepped back, confused, unable to think straight. I walked over to the sink. There was no one in that rest room. There was a mirror on both sides of the sink allowing you to see yourself ad infinitum. I hurriedly washed my hands and face, couldn't say whether that noise was real or illusionary, noise stemming from my imagination or mere silence. I felt afraid, unsafe, too confused to say what had happened, all of this mixed together without direction. I looked at myself in the mirror once again. The mirror relies on light to reflect images. Countless images of myself piled deep and far, so far as to become thoroughly black.

I let myself flop down to the floor, breathing erratically, stifled as if about to pass out. I rallied all my forces to force myself to stand. By the mirror where the hot air blower was, I saw an advertising sticker saying 'Welcome to the warm house'.

Four days earlier

I stood on the balcony on the fifth floor, looking down at the parking lot, imagining a girl of sixteen lying in a pool of blood, red blood slowly spreading. Her body moved a few times after she fell. A group of Thais crowded around, their numbers increasing rapidly, no different from ants getting a whiff of something sweet. The shrill cries of first comers resounded. One man shouted for the police, another for an ambulance. After that she didn't move any longer.

Not a single cry of pain went past her lips. I guessed that she had prayed a prayer of madness, a prayer which called out for Satan to tear her soul off her body and throw that filthy soul of hers into the depths of hell as fast as could be thought.

Death – she'd been talking of nothing else in the past three months. She whispered to me, 'There's only the soul to make us fly freely'.

The moment she jumped out of the building must have been the longest span of time she had ever conceived.

...

The time trader who worships love

LAWENG PANJASUNTHORN

1

At the approach of the month of October every year it's always like this. I derive satisfaction from little things that happen in nature, ordinary little things that can be noticed by the beginning of the month. They may require some observation, but not too much, except that most people might overlook them, some even dismiss them. But then, who is really interested? On days in early October when the sky is bright, the sky is a deep blue and white cloud flakes scatter all over the deep blue sky. If you look away for only a moment, the white clouds have changed shape in a seemingly miraculous way, to say nothing of the cool morning wind blowing intima-

tions of chill as if the cold season had sent forth spies in disguise to observe people's behaviour before the last season of the year takes over in the course of time.

Tiny little things I haven't mentioned invite conversation. Most people consider them nonsensical, think it's a waste of time to sit talking about the first cold wind of the season. Aware of this, I don't mention them to anyone except my young girlfriend. I like the month of October because every time this month comes round I am a year older, life goes by slowly, I feel that time agrees with my way of life. I've always listened closely to the sound of time passing through life, up until October last year. At first sight it was like every other day. That morning, the sky was bright, the first cold wind of the season was blowing. I woke up without her beside me.

My beloved had left...

That afternoon, words from her came up on my cell phone.

'Give me some time and then I'll come back.'

2

I read those words over and over, the only words she had left me. There was nothing I could think of to explain her departure. I tried to call her back but didn't succeed. After that her phone went dead. It was clear that she still didn't want to contact me. I sat reviewing what had happened in earnest, analysing carefully the factors that might have annoyed her and made her leave me. They were mostly little things that shouldn't have mattered. Finally I gave up on what

had happened. If I had known in advance, maybe she wouldn't have left like this. The problem I still had to consider was in the second half of her sentence, 'and then I'll come back'. That meant she didn't mean to be gone for ever, but she had left and maybe she would return. Unable to think any further, I stopped thinking temporarily, showered and changed, left the condo unit where I lived and went to stroll idly around a shopping centre, my eyes sweeping the shelves crammed with goods of the supermarket section. I left without having purchased anything.

At dusk I went to my regular pub-restaurant where I like to sit with my close friend, ordered a few dishes and a bottle of cold beer and sat reviewing the thirty years of my life so far, an ordinary life with nothing special, nothing outstanding. My last steady job had lasted five years. At the time I was on the editorial team of a small magazine. One morning of an easy day I resigned from that steady job and then lived on the income derived from writing columns in two magazines. One column assessed films and songs with relevance to our way of life and ended on sharp precepts that gave plain writing an appearance of depth. The other column was in a women's magazine and featured modern-day women's lives. I wrote about how to think, how to live, fashion, love, the dreams of modern young women, in simple terms and from a man's point of view. This column of mine had quite a following. The fee for it was raised every year. One column four times a month and the other twice a month provided a steady income. Properly handled it was enough for me to live on. The rest of the time I spent writing short stories and poems

I sent to magazines for publication at times. Writing had value enough to sustain the other parts of an ordinary life. Three years ago I began instalment payments on a conveniently located medium-sized condo unit to live in. My girlfriend came over and spent the night with me often but she wasn't willing to move in with me for good. She kept saying it wasn't time yet. Three years full of happiness when she was by my side. I didn't wish for anything else in life, until now when hollowness is back in my life once again.

I met my girlfriend in the month of May shortly after I had given up my steady job.

...

Memory

THAN YUTTHACHAIBODIN

Today is Thewan's sixty-fifth birthday but he isn't thinking of taking his woman out to dinner somewhere.

'Look, it's raining hard,' he grumbles when he sees the rain in the halo of the street lamppost near Tha Phae Gate while thinking how impressive this picture always is when visiting Chiang Mai in the rainy season. Sure, this time he's come for a special occasion, but what the occasion is he can't remember. It seems to be on the tip of his tongue. Hard as he tries he can't think of it, as with some implement that can't be found when it is truly needed.

‘Where the hell are you hiding, you nasty memory?’ Thewan mutters sotto voce as he sits looking at what is happening in the street from the hotel window.

After a moment he tells his woman to call room service and have dinner brought up to the room.

‘Ann, I hope you don’t mind if we eat quietly in this room.’ Quite some time has passed before Thewan says this.

‘As you wish. I’ve just ordered Chiang Mai and Vienna sausages as well as roast duck, your favourite snacks. And stout this once.’

‘Excellent. How long has it been since I last had stout?’ the elderly man mumbles as if talking to himself.

‘If the doctor didn’t forbid it, you’d be drinking it all the time, I bet, but don’t get drunk, please, while we are together, I don’t want our dinner to be spent in drunkenness.’

‘When the doctor forbids me to leave the house, I won’t come to Chiang Mai again.’

‘If you keep strong and healthy, who would dare to forbid you?’

Thewan looks at her before nodding his head and then he says with a sad face, ‘I’m not a strong man for a young woman like you any longer, as you know very well.’

‘That’s not important. Actually I’m forty years old, I haven’t been a young woman for quite some time,’ Ann says without looking at him. She seems to be dreamingly staring in the direction of the window.

‘How can you say that? It’s not true at all. But haven’t you ever felt sorry being involved with someone old like me? Someone as beautiful as you should be doing much better than this.’

‘I like it actually, don’t worry.’

‘With a man who ... who can’t remember your birthday, like that?’

Thewan retorts in a low voice and with a blank look.

‘It’s nothing worth remembering. Just remembering who I am is enough.’

‘What will happen if I forget you,’ Thewan queries again.

‘Well, I’d disappear from your life.’ Ann’s eyes hold his then she smiles coolly.

Half an hour goes by. There is a knock on the door. Ann gets up from her chair and walks over to open the door. It’s room service. The waiter pushing a small trolley brings it to the edge of the round table by the window before lifting the dishes and a bottle of beer and two glasses he puts down on the table. The two remaining bottles of beer he places in the refrigerator (the minibar has only other beer brands Thewan doesn’t like; so the woman ordered stout for him instead). Thewan sees Ann thank the young waiter and hand him over a tip by the door and then she goes back and sits down as before.

‘Do you remember that today besides being my birthday there’s something else to remember?’ Suddenly Thewan remembers what makes today so important, so he asks after taking a swig of the stout.

‘Who would forget how America got a beating from outside by commercial airliners?’

‘Three thousand dead in two fell swoops.’ He heaves a sigh. ‘How crazy that it should happen on a day when I should have fun celebrating, but that was still more distant from us than when the tsunami struck in southern Thailand on your birthday. That’s how I feel.’

‘So you do remember my birthday.’ Ann smiles, pleased. ...

The memory clinic

NOTTHEE SASIWIMON

‘Excuse me,’ the voice of the client came out of the speakerphone. ‘I ask for permission to eat in this room.’ That voice sounded considerate.

In the control room, Jamlong and Prathana stared at each other as if in consultation for three seconds and then Jamlong nodded to the young woman. This was no big deal.

‘Go ahead, sir,’ Prathana said politely through the speakerphone in the reception room, and then the two of them sat observing the scene as before quietly without talking. This was the fourth client and the last according to the interview schedule. After that they had to attend a meeting to sum up the day’s developments with Dr Anatta once again before going back home.

Sathian, a forty-seven-year-old man, client Number 0353, sat down on the thick, soft sofa and slowly set about opening packets of food with hands that shook. The woman of about forty who sat on the opposite sofa stretched out her hand as if meaning to help, but Sathian hastened to refuse.

‘No need, Jiap, you’ve done enough for me already. Let me do something for you for a change. This is tamarind soup to eat with

gourami roe from the woman at the market behind the temple. I went out and bought it yesterday afternoon, put it in the fridge and warmed it up just now, it's still hot. This bag is skewered pork with fresh milk we liked to eat when you were pregnant, remember? And then this duck on rice from Nonthaburi Bridge you said you'd been wanting to eat for days, and there's dumplings in coconut milk too...'

'Oh dear!' the woman in casual light-blue t-shirt and baggy pants said with a smile. 'You've brought so much it's embarrassing. Eat with me then.'

The man smiled. 'Sure. Let's eat together, let's partake of the food together.'

'How is Ort? He didn't come with you, did he?'

'Ort is at school. He's fine, growing so tall he's ungainly and with a face full of pimples. You should see him. These days he's mad about football, he's always with his friends and comes back home late every day. I have to force him to study, I'm afraid he'll fail entrance to the school we wanted him to attend.'

The woman opposite laughed lightly. 'Teenagers are like that, friends come first. It's a good thing he likes sports, this way he won't be sickly as when he was little.'

'His grades this last semester aren't good, just a little over two. On top of that he failed maths as well. I'm afraid he takes much from me and not at all from you.' Sathian forced a laugh as he scooped up gourami roe and placed a spoonful of it on the rice plate in front of him. 'Eat a lot, Jiap. You haven't eaten this in a long time, though it's only round the corner.'

‘Never mind.’ She laughed. ‘You know that I like to cook. I’m glad you liked to eat the food I made.’

‘But you should be able to eat what you like,’ the man said, unskewering the chunks of broiled pork and adding them to her dish. ‘This fellow keeps making his bits of pork smaller and smaller and increasing the price as well. He now sells it ten baht per stick, you know, Jiap.’

‘That’s expensive,’ she said before using her spoon to dip one chunk of pork and putting it into her mouth, then smiling mouth closed. ‘But it’s still as soft and delicious as ever.’

The two of them ate together. Sathian stared at his wife steadily and dabbed his eyes from time to time.

‘You know what?’ he said. ‘Since you left, I’ve come to realise I’ve got plenty of things to tell you even though when you were with me we hardly said anything to each other apart from when it was necessary in daily life. I’ve written down what I want to talk about with you, what I want to tell you, in this notebook, I write every day as when I kept a diary when I was a kid.’

The woman in casual wear smiled, picked up the small notebook and opened it. ‘Well, you know how to be romantic when you want to. Let me see. *Today I found out that Ort has a girlfriend. I’d very much like to know what you’d say.*’ She laughed. ‘Ort already has a girlfriend, really? What is it like? Has he taken her to see you yet? What does she look like? Who is she?’

Sathian smiled. ‘Teenager’s love, Jiap. Easy come, easy go, nothing serious. They’ve already split.’

‘What about Moji? How is she? Still all right?’ Sathian’s wife ate as she asked.

...

The shattered dream

SANEH SANGSUK

‘I won the last two digits of the lottery just like that, Miss Phakajae-rong. Since I was born it’s the first time I’d decided to buy a lottery ticket. I had to call you to let you know.’ That was Mr Chet. He engaged in small talk on the phone with a most intimate tone of voice even though he and she had known each other for barely three months. ‘Nine five,’ he added. This time his soft voice had an inkling of mischievous fun and secretly cheerful recreation. ‘I had a feeling those digits would do it, everything considered.’ ‘Congratulations!’ Phakajaerong expressed her sympathy formally. She felt amused by and fond of his assertive-boy behaviour even though his age was surely no less than twenty-eight. ‘How did you come by such digits?’ she said as if mouthing a quatrain, and this time she giggled, amused at herself. ‘I figured them out of your measurements actually,’ Mr Chet said in a tone which was half-earnest half-casual. ‘Thirty-six plus twenty-three plus thirty-six, that’s what I figured a long time ago, and I was spot on. Thank you very much indeed, and may I take this opportunity to invite you to dinner with me ag...’ Phakajaerong

shut the mobile before he had time to speak further. Her eyes sparkled with yearning. Her beaming, pure white complexion reddened all over from shame and utter annoyance. So how long has he been imitating a judge in a beauty contest? Where did he get the idea? This was a breach of human rights. Phakajaerong flew into a noisy rage out of her own embarrassment. I shall sue him to the utmost. The DSI³ must take this as a special case for sure.

She merely thought that while he was measuring her thoroughly in theory and regaled his eyes and his mind in his imagination, she still had sufficient garments covering her tall and curvy body. ‘Phakajaerong,’ she said to herself as if in consultation, ‘this fellow Chet is superbly bonkers, don’t you think? His conduct is shameful to a classical degree. You should castigate him.’ She felt exceedingly more lenient when she recalled his shining round eyes as they surveyed her body. Even though it was only something that happened in the imagination, that conduct was unacceptable. Mr Chet’s manners were superb, a gentleman without equal, but behind that politeness of his, there was a hidden offensive meaning. The same went for his age. She shouldn’t have forgotten herself and asked because he had answered her merely with ‘Oh! I’m still of reproductive age,’ with a bland face and with his mild tone of voice. Think of it: talkative as he is, daring to speak like this to a young woman like her. She still remembered well that when they went out together the first time he had offered her a very big pink rose. She had hesitated to take it but he said to her in the voice of a grownup scolding a child, ‘Take it,

³ Department of Special Investigation

don't hesitate. It isn't an engagement ring, you know.' And then about his status concerning marriage, again she shouldn't have forgotten herself and asked because he had answered her merely with 'Don't worry about me under that heading.' What did that mean? Was he already married or wasn't he?

She shouldn't have given him the opportunity to become close too fast because it looked as though it was what he wanted. They hardly knew each other when very early one morning he had phoned to ask: 'You're getting ready to go to work, right? Wait, I'll come and pick you up, that is, I have to drive by the Orakhaya Hospital anyway.' (She had started working at that hospital only about a month earlier.) One evening he called again while she was still at work: 'You're getting ready to go back home, right? Wait, I'll come and pick you up, that is, I have to drive through Soi Charoen Rat anyway.' (She rented a flat in that street.) And then of course he became overconfident, incessantly driving her back and forth and on top of that having the gal to speak in the manner of a professor of anthropology, saying 'According to the customs of some Polynesian tribes, when women let men take them in and out more than three times they are considered to be wedded together.' However, the relationship between him and her, which began well and developed smoothly, created unease in him, who was a man through and through, more than it created unease in her, who was a lady. 'Phaka, my going with you back and forth often like this, won't you be saying that I'm loose?' He had sought her advice in the guise of complaining seriously and with her he watched his every step. He didn't allow her to

press against him inadvertently or deliberately even a little. He was afraid he ‘would be a loser in the eyes of society’. He had complained about this with her as well. Mother always warned me, ‘Chet, if you allow yourself to set up home with an ordinary woman who doesn’t know how to keep her distance, one day you’ll cry your eyes out.’ And another time he asked with deep concern, ‘I say, Phaka, Makha Bucha’s coming up, will you go and *wian thian*⁴ with me at Phuthamonthon or not?’ He was wild and formidable indeed, but he looked gauche on some occasions, he looked childish indeed. Well then, I’ll think of him as a sweet child only.

Two nights ago, in the tiny garden enclosure of the building where she rented a flat, on the marble bench in the shade of the Indonesian ginger trees which were flowering profusely, behind a thick and verdant row of water jasmine, as he was about to take his leave, he asked her bluntly, ‘Since we’ve known each other, have you ever thought that I have objectionable traits? Please answer frankly.’

Phakajaerong wondered. ‘Why are you asking?’

He answered gravely, ‘I’ll try to correct myself as honestly as I can, of course.’

Think of that! This man trying to improve himself for her!

...

⁴ Candlelit procession three times around the ordination hall of a temple in the evening of Makha Bucha, the first full moon of the third lunar month, that is February

A poem should not mean but be

SANEH SANGSUK

‘A poem should not mean but be’: this isn’t just the best theory about writing poetry; it’s the best theory about creative writing of any other form as well. Actually, this saying by Archibald MacLeish is outdated and so well known it has become hackneyed, but Mr Chankasin Sakaekrang, a poet who must be suspected of being indifferent to this fact, is still shuffling this immortal saying back and forth in his brain, making it expand, turning it into a ball, making it taper and sharp at both ends, rubbing it without mercy and nursing it in reconciliation and concern of a kind similar to what someone with plenty of spare time does with flavourless chewing gum in his mouth. At the same time he’s trying to empty his mind and he suddenly floats out of reality according to the objective criteria surrounding him at the moment. His brain becomes a sky over a vast empty field and he sees himself standing all alone in that vast empty field with nerves tingling, waiting for the drama of clouds, lightning and breeze to turn into a mega storm in the stink of dust and the fluttering of butterflies and flowers (oh butterfly, he thinks, even your corpse is still a thing of beauty!). He always waits in such a fashion for a great poem to take shape in his thoughts but he has waited in vain many times in the past. He hasn’t come out with a poem or writing of any other form, not even a line, for almost a year.

He himself isn't complacent; he has exerted himself in search of inspiration from everything he can do with customary haste until finally it turns out that he's used to finding inspiration indefinitely without having to write at all. He isn't too happy about it. He only thinks that he should enjoy total freedom in his life and shouldn't expect too much from the world or from himself, like TS Eliot's cats (his ambition is really limited). If he still cannot write, it doesn't matter, but if he can, the poem he'll write should be the shortest, the clearest, the most powerful and encompassing, like the best haikus. Mr Chankasin Sakaekrang is well aware of his limitations. He's merely a cat, who spends his life in the present, seeking food for the imagination, killing as much as he wants to kill, and never tormented by guilt. He heaves a sigh. Even his attitude towards cats he still has to borrow from Eliot and in his eye at the moment there's no cat to be seen, no matter in which direction he looks, because in reality at the moment he's merely sitting by himself at a table on the pavement in front of a bar at the entrance to Soi 23 of Sukhumvit Road on a lonely Friday night of the month of April. He can only see an emaciated black dog clambering onto a dustbin on the footpath across the street. He considers it carefully. It's a young dog with a torn ear. Its face, mouth and body are full of traces of wounds bearing evidence to his seasoned status as a fighter. Its figure also denotes confusion in its bloodline: a touch of retriever plus a tad of pointer plus a dash of dachshund plus a jot of the garden Thai variety. He thinks of the first wild dog in the world that decided to leave its pack to stay with humans heaven knows how many hundreds of thousands of years

ago. Humans in those days were merely a small herd of lonely animals full of fear and dirty, their bodies wrapped in ragged animal skins or naked or nearly naked, with only a few simple tools, knowing how to use fire or not yet, poor of language if they had any, with no religion, with no aesthetic sense, drawing haphazardly on cave walls. No poem of any kind could have made the first wild dog decide to leave its pack to live with humans. That must have been an exciting split second in the course of eternity. Some bone from the hand of a little girl like that, maybe: the dog became man's first domestic animal because of a child for sure, not because of adults, and it should be a girl too, not a boy. He used to think that in the prehistoric world full of hunting animals there must have been many times when man risked becoming extinct yet managed to survive because dogs had an important part in providing help. And then look at what men do to dogs these days. I'm looking at the world from a dog's point of view, Mr Chankasin Sakaekrang warns himself. I've been looking at the world from a dog's point of view for a long time. Now I should try to look at the world from the point of view of a cat. The dog is too candid and is too fond of making needless noise. The cat, on the other hand, is secretive, keeps to itself, and besides is quiet, makes no needless noises and is in touch with spirits and ghosts more than dogs. But for all that, I've never written a single poem about dogs or cats. What I've learnt from these two kinds of animals is living fully without dissembling. We should learn how to live without dissembling from animals, especially cats, not learn to know men.

Mr Chankasin Sakaekrang skilfully pours a measure of alcohol into the glass over the ice cubes, closes his eyes on purpose, listens to the melodious gurgle of the liquid on the cubes, opens his eyes. He skilfully pours soda water, closes his eyes, listens to the melodious churning of the liquid splashing in the glass, opens his eyes, drinks taking his time, drinks in seventh heaven, drinks as someone who relishes the taste. The air on this April night is muggy.

...