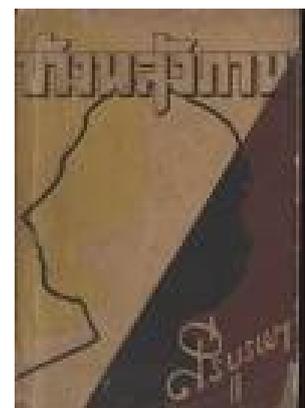


behind the picture

SEEBOORAPHA

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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Three days after I hung the picture in my study, Pree notices it. She is not overly enthusiastic, and merely stands looking at it closely for a while, then turns to me and asks, 'Where is this scene, this Mitaké?'

I start a little, but Pree does not notice.

'It's a lovely spot of country outside Tokyo. People living in Tokyo like to spend their Sundays there.'

'Oh, so you bought it in Tokyo, then?'

I lower my face over the book I was reading when she entered the room.

'No, a friend of mine did it for me.'

I feel uneasy hearing my voice, as I sound like an actor speaking guardedly on stage.

'I thought as much. It would have been a bit strange if you had bought it, because it looks most ordinary, and for all I can see, there is no particular artistry in its execution, but it may well be that my eyes are blind to its merits.'

'If you stand too close to a watercolour like this, you may not see its beauty, but if you step back a little, maybe you'll get a different impression.'

Pree does not feel like doing what I suggest, nor does she feel like asking any further question, which suits me fine.

The picture is set in a jet-black frame and hangs on the partition wall opposite my desk. When I sit down to work, it is behind me. At first I thought of displaying it in front of me, so that I might see it every time I look up; but then I changed my mind, being quite certain that if I did as I first thought, the picture would unsettle me very much.

Actually, there is a good deal of truth in what Pree says. The painting is indeed ordinary. It has nothing striking and, compared to those I have decorated the living room and bedroom with, some of which cost as much as forty to fifty yen, the difference is obvious. It depicts a stream flowing by the foot of a mountain densely covered with tall trees. On the other side of the stream a small path climbs past an overhanging rock, winding up and down amidst a scree of boulders and stones, with creepers and wild flowers of various colours forming a line of low bushes along the rock. Far away, on a boulder so low it almost touches the water, sit two figures. They are viewed from a distance and it is not clear if they are a man and a woman or two men, although one of them is definitely a man. The top of the picture bears the words '*By the stream*', which the artist must have intended as the painting's title. In the bottom corner, in small letters, is the word '*Mitaké*' and, below it, the date, indicating that the work was done six years ago.

The painting is, yes, ordinary and has nothing to hold one's attention. The talent behind the brush is modest, the

result pleasant enough but unlikely to draw cries of admiration from viewers. Anyone enamoured with the beauty of nature would be interested and appreciative, but Pree has no such inclination, which is a pity, because in this matter we differ.

In any case, it is perfectly understandable that Pree and others would show no interest in such a picture because it looks, as Pree says, 'most ordinary'. But I – and I alone – think the opposite, as I know all too well that behind that picture there is a life, and it is a life forever deeply etched into my heart. For anyone else, behind that picture there is a sheet of cardboard and behind that, the wall: how else could it be seen other than as an ordinary picture?

I look at the picture when I am alone and I see the water in the stream flowing lazily but at times wildly as it rushes down a slope. I see even the soft autumn sunlight. The two figures sitting on the boulder, apparently daubed in carelessly by the painter, I can also see, and even the long curved eyelashes of one of the figures, and even the three bright red triangles drawn over the thin lips, giving the thinness of those lips amazing appeal. I know perfectly well that the picture was painted with the artist's life, and not at all cursorily. I see every movement in that tranquil and seemingly most ordinary picture, every scene and every part, from the very first to the final act, on which the curtain has fallen so tragically only recently.

When Lord Athikarnbordee* took his new wife, Princess** Keerati, to Japan for their honeymoon, I was a student at Rikkyo University and just twenty-two years of age at the time.

I had known His Lordship back home, as he and my father were friends, and he had always treated me kindly every time we met. I had met *Khunying**** Athikarnbordee as well. About a year after I had gone to study in Japan, I was saddened to hear that *Khunying* Athikarnbordee had died of influenza, after which, for two years, I had no further news of His Lordship until I heard from him again recently.

His Lordship had written to me that he would be travelling to Japan with his new wife, Princess Keerati, and had asked me to help find accommodation for him and make any other arrangements required of foreign visitors. He intended to stay in Tokyo for two months.

When I say that he was taking his new wife to Japan on their honeymoon, these are my own words. He said in his letter that he wanted a change of scenery and he

* University president or rector; here used as a family name

** Strictly speaking, Keerati is no princess but a *Morm Rarchawong* or MR, that is the granddaughter of a prince's commoner wife or consort, hence of partly royal lineage. For the ease of reading, and at the risk of shocking purists, the translator is offering her an upgrade.

*** Nobility title, equivalent to Dame

wanted to go on a long trip to rest and relax for a while. The main reason for coming to Japan was to offer his new wife the opportunity to enjoy herself. Regarding Princess Keerati he had written, *'I both love her and feel compassion for her. She does not quite know the outside world, despite her age. I wish to make her familiar with the world outside, not just our Thai land, and I wish her to be happy and enjoy herself and at least feel that being married to someone of my age is not entirely meaningless. I believe, Nopporn, that you will like Keerati just as you did my dear deceased wife. But Keerati is rather reserved with those she does not know well; yet she is warm-hearted, without any doubt. Given your disposition, I expect her to be very taken with you. I have told her so, too.'*

I had never met Princess Keerati and the little Lord Athikarnbordee had written about her in his letter was not very enlightening. I assumed that she must be about forty or possibly a little younger, was probably haughty or at least aloof, in keeping with her royal lineage, and certainly did not like boisterous, restless youngsters, as that was not my nature. She was probably a rather demure person little inclined to enjoy herself in the ways most people did and probably rather set in her ways as well, all of which called for caution in my dealings with Her Ladyship.

His Lordship had written in his letter that he had no intention of staying in a hotel, even a luxurious one like The Imperial. He was tired of having to mix with strangers in his leisure time and of having to dress formally

whenever he left his rooms or took his meals. He wanted to rent a house in which he would be free to live as he pleased and the expenses involved were of no concern to him.

Of the latter I was well aware, as His Lordship was reputed to be among the well off of Siam, and he was as generous as he was kind-hearted. I arranged for him to rent a house in Aoyamachi district, an outer suburb. It was not far from the railway, and travel into the city was convenient in every respect. The house was not very large but it was one of the finest and loveliest in the district. Seen from the outside it had a Western appearance, but inside, the rooms' layout, decoration and furniture were typically Japanese. The house stood on a mound surrounded by a wall about two and a half feet high made of big stones. Behind the wall was an embankment about three feet high covered with verdant grass and topped with evenly spaced rows of small bushes. Within the house grounds there was a garden, with a dense green spread of large and small plants, as well as two big trees in front of the house, whose branches and thick foliage covered almost all of the grounds, making the house appear all the fresher and more pleasing to the eye. I liked it very much and even though the owner wanted two hundred yen a month for rent, I did not think it was expensive for a nicely appointed house which would demand being well looked after.

I hired a comely servant girl to look after the house in

the Japanese manner. In choosing a fine-looking servant, I did not mean that she was to please His Lordship in any other way than through the performance of her normal duties. I am of the opinion that if there is a choice between a servant with the face of an ogress and one with a fine, bright mien, we should choose the latter, as the company of brightness and beauty, whether in a person or in an object, helps to cheer us up proportionately. I was well aware that Lord Athikarnbordee was in a position to be choosy. I had to hire the servant at more than the usual rate, not because of her pleasant looks but because I had to find a Japanese girl who could speak English well enough, otherwise both His Lordship and his wife would have been much inconvenienced.

The first day I met Lord Athikarnbordee and his travel companions at Tokyo Station, I was to experience utter bewilderment upon encountering his wife. ...



Kularp Saipradit,
alias Seeboorapha,
1905-1974