

Thai Fiction

rart's flight rart eikkatheit's three worlds

WIN LYOVARIN

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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## THE ARTIST

~~Last night he slept soundly, didn't have a nightmare as usual. When he woke up, he felt free as never before in his life. He'd do some shopping and go to the pictures.~~ Last night he dreamt about it again. His first impression was strange. It began as he looked at the news on TV, had dinner and went to bed. His subconscious smouldered like a volcano exploding after being dormant for a long time. The drawer of his memory opened when his mood was most sensitive. In the dream he saw a row of men in uniform standing abreast in the foreground. The blades at the end of the

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weapons in their hands reflected the sunlight in sharp glints that dabbled at the ground. Drops of sweat glittered on their faces even though the air was chilly. The sky above was entirely dark. All the gun barrels were pointing at the chest of a convict blindfolded with a black cloth. On the ground bodies lay in pools of blood. Not far away a ring of people stood watching the event. Suddenly the men in uniform pulled the triggers. All the bullets flew out and shattered the heart of the convict as in a grainy 16mm black-and-white silent film. He saw one bullet fly past him in slow motion and mangle the chest of the convict, saw every drop of blood spurting out ever so slowly and clearly. He looked more intently until he had a close-up picture of it. The red of each drop of blood came from a visual combination of colours in neo-impressionist style, a mixture of red, pink, orange, yellow, brown and black dots. The convict collapsed over bodies already dead. The black blindfold fell off, revealing his own face. The totally dark background gradually lit up and turned into a white house. That's when he started awake, his back drenched in cold sweat. He opened his eyes and with his hand felt his heart. It was still beating hard, but the picture didn't fade away.

When the curtain of his eyes pulled open, what he saw before him was an expanse of red. As his eyesight adjusted he saw it was a partition wall painted the vivid red of blood. On the wall hung the picture of his own dream – Goya's contrasted painting entitled *El tres*

*de mayo de 1808 en Madrid*, depicting the execution of Spaniards by French soldiers after French troops had taken over Madrid in May 1808. The scene took place at night. The sky was totally black. The light in the picture came from a lantern on the ground. The convict standing to the left of the picture stretched out his arms, terror in his face. To the right of the picture stood a row of French soldiers, all gun barrels trained on the chest of the convict. To the back a group of people watched the execution in dismay. On the ground bodies lay in pools of blood. The atmosphere of the scene was unsettling, depressing. It was a copy costing four hundred and twenty baht he had bought at Chatuchak market. He didn't think that any other painter could render the cruelty of war on canvas better than Goya had, a realist artist who had depicted human cravings, passions, lust, greed and terror so revealingly.

His eyes left the red wall to survey the room. This house used to be a warehouse turned into a brothel. When it was closed down, he bought it to use as his house. This old warehouse sat in a small compound. The whole length of the fence had Indian almond trees which stood basking in the sun despondently. He could feel the steam of hot air wafting into the room. It was a month of May so torrid it bode ill. Dried up leaves and branches died on the trees. Bark flaked like cracked earth after a jungle fire. He shifted his gaze to the nearby steel cage under the eaves. There was a panther in it. He had bought it at

Chatuchak market only a few days after it was born. Every time he looked at the cage he saw the listless eyes. He got out of bed and staggered to the chest of faded brown afzelia wood in a corner of the room and pulled the bottom drawer open with difficulty. In it there were a dozen sketches, two or three photographs, five or six casings of M-16 bullets and a revolver. He didn't know why he had kept these things for so long, but they were all things that had changed his life. He took out several of the sketches to have a look at them first. They were pictures of his childhood he had drawn while he was still a pupil.

His childhood had been unlike that of other children. A child growing up in a brothel upcountry must be different in some ways from others. He remembered that the place had been divided into twelve rooms, each large enough to squeeze in a shabby old bed, with a span-wide skylight bright enough for guests to see the faces and bodies of the girls they slept with, a mirror so old it hardly reflected anything, a spittoon and a bottle of water. Those scenes he had rendered into the dozen or so black-and-white sketches now in his hands. He put them down, picked up a photograph. It was a picture of him and four friends taken in 1973 at Thung Yai, when they followed the news about a group of military officers hunting big game with war weapons. • His friends were dead now. He was the only

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• A scandal that shortly preceded if not triggered the October 14, 1973 events evoked here

one left – the only hero still alive. He put the photograph down beside the casings, picked up the .38 Smith & Wesson revolver and shook it up and down. His left hand pulled bullets out of his trouser pocket, fed the cylinder with a single bullet and turned the cylinder. Would he use this bullet or not?

He went over to the large mirror which reflected the image of a man of medium build in his early forties with bent shoulders, weary eyes and dark bags under them bearing evidence of insomnia. Those eyes had no glint. He wasn't sure whether this was due to having been unable to sleep for years or a reflection of some inner mood. 'You are Rart Eikkatheit<sup>••</sup>, an artist who has never been successful in life, and all this because of the fear you have generated yourself.' He saw himself raising the gun in his hand to point it at his head and held the eyes of the reflection in the mirror. He had been closer to death than this before. He closed his eyes as his forefinger touched the trigger.

~~The shot deafened him. A smile appeared at the corner of his mouth as his body collapsed in a pile on the floor. Blood spurted out as off a broken pipe. Death was a most trivial pursuit, he thought as the curtain of his eyes came down.~~

Rart Eikkatheit withdrew his finger from the trigger, put the gun back in the drawer. It wasn't yet

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<sup>••</sup> *Rart*: short for *rartsadorn*, 'population', 'people', 'citizen'; *eikkatheit* means 'discrete', 'independent', 'specific'.

time to die. He wasn't too sure why the thought had just come to him to play Russian roulette. Was it because the news from television and newspapers in the last few days had dragged him back to the past or because the drawer of his memory had never been shut tight? Try to analyse yourself: 1) you want to die but dare not kill yourself; 2) you feel guilty and think the way to erase the guilt is to die but you don't want to die yet; 3) you are not sure: sometimes you want to die, sometimes you don't want to die; 4) all of the above; 5) none of the above.



Win Lyovarin [pr. Liao.wa.rin], born in 1956 in southern Thailand, is one of the most gifted, experimental and versatile Thai writers. He shares with Chart Korbjitti the distinction of having won twice the prestigious SEA Write Award – for a 1999 collection of short stories and a 1995 novel (*Democracy, Shaken & Stirred* – English and Thai versions on sale at [winbookclub.com](http://winbookclub.com)).

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