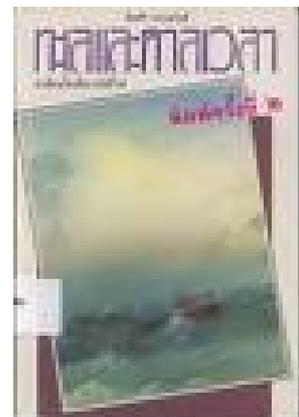


of time and tide

ATSIRI THAMMACHOAT

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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Noi

Mother, I brought you some flowers. They are the kind of cannas you liked so much and used to plant behind the house. I'll prop them up by the niche in the wall that bears your name. It has been exactly ten years since you left us and it is only now that I have come to visit you. Nothing much of you is left, but it is the only memento I have to remember you by, so I have come to see you here.

Will you accept these flowers, Mother? The wind blowing from the sea will wither them before long.

Ten years is a long time. Your name was coated with dust and I had to wipe and wipe again with my fingers to clear the dust away. The pavilion by the temple entrance where I sit has a sweeping view of the sea. The old wooden structure with stairs on two sides that was here on the day we brought your relics has now been rebuilt, like the buildings beside the joss house*. The large dormitory for monks that was shaded by mango trees and surrounded with discarded spirit houses was completely dismantled

* Chinese temple

and new quarters have been built in long rows which look like the shophouses at the marketplace.

Everything has changed, Mother, and changed fast, too.

Yesterday I met Noi; she is a woman now.

You remember Noi, the young girl with a dirty face who told you the winning number of the under-ground lottery more than ten years ago and you bought her a doll to play with? She remembered me and greeted me even before she switched off the engine of her motorcycle. She got down and stood talking to me.

‘This your daughter?’ I said, casting a glance at the child who had come with her on the bike and looked exactly like her.

‘From my first husband,’ she said with a self-conscious smile. ‘I’ve gone through three hubbies already. They’re all dead, even the one who’s made me pregnant again.’ She pretended to laugh as she pointed to her belly. ‘They say I eat them up. Do you think it’s true?’

Noi is just past nineteen. Her skin is brown and burnished, her eyes are as clear as the sea over a cove of rocks, her face is pretty and innocent-looking, and she has already had three husbands, she has one child and is pregnant again.

Noi put the relics of her three husbands all in a row in niches on the western wall of the monastery, across from yours – each of them the age of your children or nephews. Life is uncertain indeed and goes up and down like the tides of the sea.

And so it was for our family as well, which once had been so happy together but fell on hard times which made your life so full of sadness, Mother.

The sea swallowed all our wealth away – all the gold and ornaments, and even the land we were born on sank into it without a trace. Our family went through many losses. What was it you lost, Mother? Necklaces, bracelets, even ancient gold rings and jewellery acquired since the time of your grandparents left your strongbox until none was left, and gone too were several plots of land and, what hurt you most, our last home, where you gave birth to all of us your children.

The last part of your life was steeped in pain and sickness and in remembering old hopes which had all vanished, as if you were looking at a rainbow faded away by the fog.

Noi wore jewellery all over, from her thin wrists to her slender neck. She invited me to her house, which is built like a small bungalow. She opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of ice-cold water for me, switched on a huge fan which blew strongly ever after and turned on her colour TV for me to admire. A widow as young as Noi should be happy, all things considered. She is still in the early stages of her pregnancy and raises her three-year-old without any problems, together with Granny Chaem, her old mother, who is as nimble and sharp-tongued as ever.

But Noi lives burrowed in the past like an old anchor deeply sunk in sand. She lost three husbands over a

very short span of time. The sea claimed the first two, who were sailors and departed amidst cries of sympathy and words of consolation. As for the last, he died ostracised by Noi's neighbours and relatives.

'After I lost the first two, I gave up any work that had to do with the sea. When I moved in with this last one, I thought I was doing fine and we'd stay together forever.' Noi still cries a lot when she mentions this much beloved husband.

'He was so good to me in every respect. He gave me everything you see here. He said it was for me and the child, but the people in the village hated him.' She was sobbing.

She didn't just lose a beloved husband, but also almost all of her relatives and neighbours by the sea. Yet she may have a long life ahead of her and still be the owner of many valuable things – unlike you, Mother, who lost everything.

Noi or you – I'm not really sure who is the worse off.

Mother, we sea folk live with the wind, the waves and the vagaries of the weather. We are used to seeing the wind still and the waves gentle, and then the sky rumbling, the rain falling hard, the wind blowing fierce and the vicious monsoon throwing wave after wave to the shore – all in a very short time. This kind of uncertainty is frightening and daunting. But are the swift transformations that come to the life of the people of the sea these days any less scary than the wind and waves and thunderstorms?

The picture of Noi's last husband, who died only two months ago, smiled cheerfully in its wooden frame on top of the television set. He was a very handsome young man indeed in his beautiful khaki uniform.

Noi's third husband was a police officer!

Sommaï

When I was a little boy, I remember, the little canal north of the village ran with thick, cloudy waters and it was in this turbid yet clean flow that my friends and I would play from dawn until dusk. The more boats bobbed there sheltering from the wind, the more we liked it. We turned the canal into a deep-sea battlefield by pretending to be pirates ransacking ships, and punched and shot at one another till we fell into the water and it was great fun.

Those days are gone like funnel smoke puffed away by the wind ...

You said, Mother, that Anchor Row Canal Village or Eekueng Canal village was where, when the wind fell in the morning, the fishing boats came to shore to drop their anchors in the sand in long lines. During the cool season, when the sea was cold, you could see shoals of *eekueng* fish swimming about in the little canal. They stung like hell. They were small and tough, and had barbs like catfish. Some people who

were allergic to their sting would lie groaning and moaning in pain for three days or more. You did threaten me with them, didn't you, Mother, when you forbade me to go and play in the canal.

By the time Noi ripened into adolescence, the little canal in front of her house had long turned murky and almost dry as the wind of time had brought in sand from the seashore and all kinds of rubbish from the vegetable market joined forces to fill up the canal and make its waters shallow and putrid. It is the largest breeding ground for mosquitoes in the village now.

'I often went to play around your house and still remember Grandma.' Noi meant you, Mother. 'She was small and plump, and white-skinned all over, and wore silver-rimmed glasses. She liked to sit by her betel tray. She was to be pitied, you know – she had lost everything.' That's what Noi said to me, and it was clear from her attitude that she really felt for our family.

The wind from the sea doesn't reach Noi's bungalow, which was built recently behind the railway line. The smell of brine seems to stop at the main district road, which goes by the market and the movie house. This road looks like it has split our district into two halves and into two worlds since its inception. It goes up west to the railway line and then abuts the hills, lined with dwellings of people who have no dealings with seawater fish, quite unlike the eastern side where all houses and people seem to be steeped in salt.

This reminds me of you, Mother, when you had to move the family and rent a shophouse behind the road, far away from the sound of waves and wind, a most disheartening letdown before you left us.

I can understand the feelings of those who, like you, had to go and forsake their roots to live far away from the sea, just as I can understand why Noi came here to build a house away from it as soon as she hooked a cop for a husband. Noi didn't want to be close to anything that would remind her of the past and the deep wounds she twice sustained.

Noi thought it was an auspicious new start and in order to forget past evils launched on a new course, like when the waning moon goes waxing, and she turned from fisherman's wife into the spouse of a police officer.

'My 'Mai was from Turtle Mountain.' Noi meant Police Officer Sommai, her much beloved third husband.

Turtle Mountain Village, which is located some thirty kilometres away from the district town, is set amidst pomegranate orchards. When Sommai was in his third year of secondary school, he saw no way of studying further beyond watching over pomegranate trees like his father.

In a tiny, old, much bruised notebook which Noi preciously keeps, he had scribbled a record of a short time in his life. After reading it, I felt utterly nostalgic and forlorn.

'Took the police entrance exam, don't know yet whether

I'll pass, but chances are good because they take many students.

'Hope I do make it. To be a cop would be great and I like to box and fight as well. Am afraid of no one.

'Poor dad! Plantation work is such hard work. The money he gave me for the fare to go take the exam, he had saved up over a long time. If can't make it into the police academy, don't think can study anywhere else. Will have to hire myself out as caretaker on pomegranate plantation like dad.

'If I pass and graduate and he sees me in police uniform, dad will be very happy.

'Everybody is afraid of cops. When am one of them, will be able to rake in quite a lot, I'm sure. Dad will get some much deserved rest. Won't allow him to break his back in the plantation no more.'

Police Cadet Sommai did graduate and he did put on a uniform for his dad to see for only three days – a landslide smothered the pomegranate plants and his dad's life as well.

I cast a glance at him again in his plywood frame and felt sorry about all the valuable possessions in this house he should have been allowed to enjoy much, much longer than he did.

Life is uncertain, Mother. As I said, Police Officer Sommai, instead of dying like his father amidst orange pomegranate blossoms in the caretaker's hut on the Turtle Mountain plantation, died on the beach bordering the long dried-up little canal, his face buried in sand, blood oozing from his brain.

He died of a gunshot.

Siu

Siu was a naughty boy in your eyes, Mother, a dour little rascal and a mean rogue to boot. You once chased him out of the house and forbade me to see him, but I was his friend, and unknown to you I would sneak out to hang around with him.

He was two years older than I was, so he was both my friend and my senior, which I could never have made you understand.

See there! The kite wind has begun to blow. The sea is all soft waves. High in the sky the wind blows strong. Siu comes to see me at home.

'Have you got enough to buy paper? I want to make a bird kite,' he whispers. ...



Atsiri Thammachot is regarded as one of the leading journalists of his generation and was until recently director of and columnist for *Sayarm Rat* [Siam Rath], one of the better, if ailing, national dailies, yet chances are he will be best remembered as a poetic writer with a conscience, author of bittersweet short stories and novels focusing on the plight of the common man.