

a scattered world

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TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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The very second Abdul Hamid came to, the blackbird call from the town's clock tower resounded.

On cue, the pack of dogs curled up around the old man barked and howled to one another in succession and that volley of sounds spread all over the small town.

When the blackbird call from the town's clock tower had resounded for the twelfth time, a train blew its whistle as it sped across the lake to enter Andaman. When the noise from the station subsided, the old man whistled imitating the zebra dove.

As soon as they heard the signal, all the dogs fell silent.

Then Abdul Hamid sat up, joined his hands together and mumbled a prayer in Pali until the train again blew its whistle and moved off towards the Malaysian border to the south.

One minute later he slowly opened his eyes and looked at all the dogs in turn. They wagged their tails invitingly and barked all together in a tone matching the song of utter loneliness that went on in Abdul Hamid's soul.

Fifteen minutes later, the whole flow of sounds poured over the surface of the lake and coated it like fog at dawn before stretching past the deep-sea port to reach the Gulf of Thailand and slowly scatter and dissipate over the waves of the South China Sea.

Abdul Hamid grabbed the shabby blanket lying in a heap on the cement floor and draped himself in it. He felt feverish. *Or is it that I am dying?* He had a fleeting glimpse of a ray of light across a curtain of dim hope and almost limitless expanse of emptiness.

The old man fumbled about in the dark, displacing a shard of pottery he fingered lightly for a moment before putting it back where it was before.

A moment later he grabbed a bottle of forty-degree local spirit, brought it to his lips, heaved himself upright and moved his filthy body away from the shadow of the shrine to the town's tutelary spirit. The whole pack of dogs trotted right behind him in a moon-crescent cipher.

Abdul Hamid limped along Heavenly Street past the national museum which stood drowsing discretely right across from commercial buildings full of the life and colour of early-twenty-first-century civilisation.

A gust of wind from the sea blew past him. Abdul Hamid felt chilled to the marrow. The old man raised the bottle to his lips. Warmth coursed through his body. He wasn't sure why sudden pain shot up his left leg again as if the bones were drilling through the flesh.

'You'll help me get rid of the pain, won't you, grandpa?'

The child spoke with his eyes closed, his face and breath gnawed by pain.

‘You’ve come to help me, haven’t you, grandpa?’  
The child’s voice was hoarse.

The old man stretched out a hand and touched the sick child’s forehead.

The child opened his eyes. ‘Your incantations will help relieve the pain in my leg, won’t they, grandpa?’

‘Nobody can help you, Abdul Hamid, except Allah.’

Grandpa Jan Kaeo looked up and held the eyes of the man who had just spoken.

‘Thong In...’

‘My name is Muhammad!’

‘I only know you as Thong In, my son,’ grandpa said evenly.

‘That’s the name I was stuck with,’ pa said. ‘Like all other babies are force-fed with when they don’t know any better.’

‘What is it with you this time, Thong In?’

‘I hate that name.’

Grandpa sniggered. ‘You really have changed a lot, son.’

‘What did you come here for, father?’

‘Who do you think the child lying here is?’

‘Grandpa...’ The sick child’s voice was tremulous.

‘Why do you have to come and mess around here, father?’ Pa was trying to control his temper.

‘Have you forgotten who this child is?’

‘For Allah’s sake, leave us alone!’

‘But you can see our child wants his grandpa.’ Aminah’s patience had run out.

Muhammad shot Aminah a forbidding glance. For the first time she wasn’t afraid of those eyes.

‘You have no business messing around with my family, father!’ Pa shouted.

‘Grandpa, I don’t want to stay here...’

That morning, nobody in Andaman village would have thought there would be a freak storm, because only minutes before, all Andaman people had said in the same voice, ‘What an unusually fresh and clear morning!’

In the morning wind, everyone could smell the fragrance of the cat’s-tits flowers of the fences surrounding the village that still filled the sky from the night just ended, mixed with the scent of dew-drops on leaves and blades of grass, and in the river that ran through the village runs of fish from the lake swam up to listen to the songs of bird bands in the bushes along the banks.

When a group of Andaman children shouted to their friends ‘Let’s go and smell the sunshine’, that’s when Thong In raised his head to look at the southern sky and saw clouds gathering as if drawn together by some mysterious suction power. In the wink of an eye that clutter of clouds turned into a gigantic turtle but Thong In saw in it the shape of a goat.

Before he could shout at Aminah, who was coming

out of the flower garden at the back of the house, to look at that strange happening in the sky, the clutter of clouds dissolved and scattered in a hurry before reforming, this time as the face of a baby, and it sent an innocent smile to him.

Something told Thong In that this was the face of a new life about to be born in this village.

After that, the omen of a storm formed itself at the end of the Malay Peninsula. The sky grew dark as during monsoon season. Before everyone in Andaman village heard the rumble of thunder, Aminah was the only one to see the flash of lightning in mid-air. It was right then that the wind from the Pacific sent the clouds scattering, blowing them beyond the maze of the Sankalakhiri mountain range towards the peninsula.

Amid those gusts of wind something appeared above the mountain range, like a cloud of black dust falling into the centre of the storm. Before long the cloud of dust began to move and it revolved above Andaman village twenty-five times. The villagers watched this strange phenomenon with dread, but as soon as the cloud of dust moved down to treetop level, everyone was astonished to find it was a swarm of millions of multicoloured butterflies.

The draught force from the flapping of their wings gave rise to a musical sound wave that had the hens of Andaman village, which laid eggs three times a day, starting to squawk all at once. The zebra doves in the cages under all house awnings spread out

their wings and danced in cheerful welcome. Wilted flowers turned fresh once again.

When the whole swarm of butterflies whirled around Aminah, who stood with her eyes closed in the middle of the flower garden, the whole village froze into momentary silence.

'Where you startled then, Ma?' the child asked about the strange event in Andaman village of five years earlier.

'I knew what was going to happen.' Aminah laughed. 'That's why I walked back to the flower garden.'

'What flowers did you have there?' the child's younger sister asked.

'What flour... ' the last born echoed his elder sister.

'Oh, several kinds.'

'Pa and Ma's house in Andaman, right?' the child who was born with the visiting butterflies asked.

Aminah felt a shiver course through her chest when she caught a glance of Muhammad who stood listening behind them.

He was getting ready to go to the mosque.

'Today's Friday.' He was glaring at Aminah. 'I don't want my heart to be overcast.'

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