

Anak Sastra, Issue 11

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[Khaing Sithuu](#) is a New York Free Spirit writer. Her favorite genres are poetry and short stories, both fiction and nonfiction. She considers her voice as unconventional yet brutally honest. Originally from Yangon, Myanmar, she has been living in New York for the past 9 years.

[Sean Jones](#) has traveled to Japan, Thailand, Tahiti, Mexico, France, England, and Germany. He is a member of the Northern Colorado Writers' Workshop, the Nerdercyclists Riding Club, and the Boy Scouts of America.

John McMahon is a writer, part-time antiques exporter and occasional educator who lives on the banks of the River Kwai. His work, both fiction and reportage, can be read in many publications. He is also the author of the novel [*The Black Gentlemen Of Trong Suan*](#).

Agnieszka Stachura is a recent graduate of the Liberal Studies program at Duke University whose work has appeared in *Passages North*, *The Sun*, and *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, among other publications.

Elinor Davis grew up all over the U.S., lived in Turkey, and traveled throughout Europe before settling in the San Francisco Bay Area. A mom, former nurse, freelance journalist, academic editor, and healthcare writer, she has treasured her too-brief visits to Southeast

Asia, Latin America, and New Zealand. Her fiction has appeared in Big Muddy, Bellowing Ark, and Thema, and her nonfiction in various newspapers, magazines, and newsletters.

Thomas Lee is a writer living in the San Francisco Bay area. His writing has received widespread recognition, including a 2011 Pushcart Prize nomination, honorable mention in the 2011 Glimmer Train Fiction Open, a StorySouth Million Writers Award nomination, and winning the 2011 Ploughshares Emerging Writers Competition. Thomas has been published in several literary journals, such as the *Asia Literary Review*, *American Literary Review*, *Eclectica*, *Kartika Review*, and the *Asian Pacific American Journal*.

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April 2013 featured author interview with Khaing Sithuu

Q. What is it that you enjoy about writing? What are some of your motivations?

I have simply loved writing since I was little. It gives me freedom, dares me to dream, and motivates me to follow my dreams. Motivations: it's a mix. Sometimes, it's happiness, joy, and memories from travels of course, but sometimes, sadness--especially from homesickness. It helps me drive away sadness and bring good memories and lift my spirit!

Q. Please describe your writing process. Do you have any writing habits that could be considered odd or unique?

I usually go with the flow: which has ups and downs. For example, it really helps me to capture the heat of the moment and get some really good poems, but at the same time, I am having a tough time finishing my book. I am working on it.

Q. In addition to fiction, you write poetry. How do you approach the difference between your creative writing and your poems?

They usually come together. I see my poems as short stories. They always have something to say. It's just the different approach to showcase what I am feeling.

Q. You grew up in Myanmar but have lived in New York for nearly a decade. How do the contrasts between your present and past life experiences help you become a better writer? Or does it provide an obstacle instead?

I miss Asia; I am not going to lie. I am pretty excited to go back and see what has changed in 10 years. Everything was so natural, crisp, and fresh. I enjoy living in the fast-paced city like New York where everything is easily accessible. But from time to time, I miss the fresh smell of rainforests, the beautiful natural smiles, and you know that kind of free-spirited life with no cellphones, no Internet, etc.

Q. What is your most memorable experience about having lived or traveled in Southeast Asia?

Like I previously said it, I truly miss the honesty, freshness, and the natural beauty of Asia. I love how everything is so simple and pure yet it holds the thousand years of golden history and culture values.

* * * * *

"The Stolen Rain"

January 12th, 2012. Brooklyn, New York.

It was 9:30am, a few snowy Sundays ago in Brooklyn. I got off at the 9th Avenue Stop on the D train. I walked at the fastest speed since I was running late as always, plus I hate the cold. Here I was, at the front door of the pre-war building number 313 on 42nd Street. I looked for the resident's name because I never remembered the apartment number. *Gonsiewsky!* There it was! I pressed the bell right next to the name, the door buzzed and I entered. Immediately I felt the warmth, walked up to the fourth floor to see my dear friend. There he was, by the door waiting for me with a half smile on his face and a cup full of Verona.

"Come on in, Khaing. Nice to see you again! How is it out there?!" he greeted.

"Cold and nasty. I hate winter", I replied.

Once I walked into the room, I read the line written on the wall: *"My rain was stolen and it never came back"*. He offered me a cup of berry white tea, we sat down and started talking about the love of his life, his poems.

August 2nd, 1992. Gdansk, Poland.

He remembered that evening vividly. He was drying his hair from the rain on his way back from school. His father was a Polish runaway, or some like to call it "political activist against the government" and exiled to the U.S. when he was only six.

"We are going to New York next year, Andre."

"Do you think he's going to remember us?," a silly question he asked.

"Of course, honey. Why? Are you nervous to meet papa?"

She answered with the smile full of hopes and dreams. He didn't respond as if he didn't have the answer for that. In fact, he didn't. He went to bed with endless thoughts, looking out of his window. The sky was pitch black and it was pouring outside.

It was extremely exciting for a family reunion after almost nine years but also was full of fears and worries because they were going to New York--one of the biggest cities in the world. Especially for Andrezej, who had never traveled anywhere before, it was a major change in his life. He remembered not being able to sleep well since that day. He dreamed a lot of things, but always ended up waking up scared and feeling unready for a big move.

September 15th 1993. New York City.

From Gdańsk to New York City, Andrezej had the longest twenty hours of his life, fearing how he would be able to dream of becoming a poet in the city that never sleeps.

They arrived. While waiting for his father filling out the immigration paperwork, Andrezej sat down on one of those nervous chairs at American Airlines Gate 22A in the international arrivals hall. His sweaty, scared hands were moving as he was looking around. Between meeting his "new" father and smelling his very first "American" Mc Donald's, he wrote his first poem in the United States, which was the combination of tiredness, confusion, and of course full of fears.

*The entrance to my new home,
Or is it home, really?
welcomes me quite in the dark, yet
hundreds of people moving
under these very bright lights on.
Cold confused fingers, silent. (Summer 1993)*

The first few years in the Big Apple were rough for this Polish teen. He had to face unexpected changes, and not very friendly challenges. He grew up believing his mother was a devoted, self-sacrificing wife for his father for all these years while his father was this caring, loving, responsible husband for the family, as well as the national hero for his people. After twenty-two months and two apartments later, he was introduced to the new member of the family--the word "divorce." He walked away from his Lower East Side apartment that evening and spent his time wandering in Union Square Park. He couldn't remember exactly what happened that night except that it was raining heavily.

*Today, my rain was stolen
Even the stream on my cheeks becomes a drought
The wind scorns at me by saying this
I took away your rain. (Spring 1995)*

Two weeks later, Andezej and his mom moved out to an apartment in the Upper East Side.

October 18th 1996. New York.

In the Fall of 1996, he got acceptance to New York University where he met Lauren--a green-eyed, brunette, 5-foot-tall native New Yorker.

"Hi, I am Andre, I write poems."

"Hi, Lauren, I major in rebellious painting."

It was all that he needed. He felt connected. After spending almost two months of his first semester in college, he finally felt accepted.

Andrezej left his Upper East Side apartment and moved to Astoria with Lauren. They shared the laughs and created wonderful memories together: her listening to his poems and him enjoying her color theories. Four years at NYU were the best time in his life. She was always at his side supporting him and believed in his dreams. For their fifth anniversary, he wrote a poem and read it to her in Astoria Park.

*Good morning my beautiful!
I feel like it just sings my life's soundtrack
The first song is so rocking good: 'bout you
You've killed the revolutionary
But the revolution they can never bury! (Summer 2001)*

February 5th, 2003. Brooklyn Bridge, New York.

"I am moving to Paris, babe", Lauren broke the silence.

"I'm sorry. What?!" He responded, shocked.

"Yes, I need to be somewhere I can paint freely. You know, where no one can stop you from anything. Nothing's holding you back. Clearly, it's not here."

"But you love it here. You have "us" here. This is our home."

"Home is where your heart is, love."

"Yes, exactly. Again, we have 'us' here, remember!"

"No, I spent my whole life here. It's time for me to explore, time for me to grow. You are coming with me!"

A long silence took over.

Lauren left for Paris. The reality hit him that his love for this city was strong enough to let her go. They said goodbye. It was a mean, stormy night on the Brooklyn Bridge. Lauren and Andrezej both cried. If you could read what their tears had to say, you would hear:

*My sky does not have grey clouds
Neither the rainbow
Suddenly, the light of my day is shut down
The brightness of the sun is gone.
We were always alone. (Winter 2000)*

Throughout the past decade in this city, he learned that people were not aware of where they belonged to until they had to leave somewhere for good.

Andrezej Gonsiewsky is the most interesting person I have met so far. He is a talented poet who does not call himself one. He sees himself as someone who was born to love poems. He has called New York home for more than a decade. He has visited several places but has never forgotten to return home. He never remembers to keep in contact with anyone after he leaves. I asked him why he never tried to give them and other places a chance. He simply smiled and whispered:

"My rain was already stolen."

* * * * *

"I Go Home"

A funeral in Phoenix, Arizona, is nothing like the ceremonies in my village in Kaset Sombun Number Three, Chaiyaphum, Thailand. When my husband, my Michael, passes away and we take him home from this hospital, people may come from Minnesota and say nice things about him for a while, and we will eat in a restaurant and in a few hours, they will be done with the memorial.

#

Stephanie Kohler-Jackson got the Skype ring-up from her stepmother the night before. Ratchada called her, crying, and Stephanie grabbed clothes, photo albums and a digital camera and booked a flight from O'Hare to Phoenix. Her father, Michael Kohler, was not expected to last more than forty-eight hours.

#

The sun rises quickly in low latitudes, the brightness coming like an electric light switched on. White-haired, dark-skinned, tattooed Somchair has been awake for an hour in his one-room house built by his son-in-law, Michael, a man six years older than Somchair. The Thai farmer switches off the house's air conditioning and goes outside to begin his day. He will catch tilapia from his pond, using balls of rice grown last year on this farm, rice cooked by his former and once-again wife, Kanya, the woman sleeping inside the farmhouse built by their daughter's American husband. *Songkran*, the water festival, comes in two days, and Somchair wants to add fish to the field crabs and freshwater eels he keeps alive in a white plastic bucket on the side of his two-year-old house. Kob Sook may come today to help pick peanuts.

The sunrise was brief but beautiful this morning, clouds painted pink and orange between Kaset Sombun Number Three's short, jagged hill-mountains. Kanya joins Somchair outside and says, "I go home," meaning she will return to the house Michael renovated for her where her--but not Somchair's--son, Kob Sook and Kob Sook's wife, Ooe, and their children live. She will not stay with her former and once-again husband at his farmhouse keeping vigil over their farm and its tools, tractor, equipment and pump. Their affair is being switched off for the eighty-ninth time. In Thai, three words can carry much context.

#

In the Phoenix hospital, a blanket covers Michael, exposing his grey-haired head and his small-for-a-large-man right hand. He sighs in his sleep. In Ratchada Kohler's native land, people close to the departed, people from the village, people from villages nearby, many, many people would pour jasmine-scented water on the deceased's hand and would speak nice things about the person and would ask for forgiveness for any bad words between themselves and the departed. Ratchada holds Michael's wrinkled hand, a hand exactly twice as old as hers when they wed a decade earlier. A hand now in its mid-seventies.

#

A girl of twenty, Ratchada, a girl whose name means "Beauty," a girl whose glossy brown hair and bright brown eyes fit her name, leaves her village to go to Bangkok to join her Aunt Mali to build fishing nets in a factory and to live in a communal urban village. She will also learn German like another aunt, Samorn, who told her it would help her meet a nice Austrian like Samorn's husband, Klaus. Ratchada is leaving fond memories of Kaset Sombun and Kittti, a boy who almost became the father of her child, though they never learned whether it would have been a boy or a girl. Ratchada, who bought ice cream nearly every day from her aunt's store--which they joked is Kaset Sombun's *jet sip-et* (7-Eleven), Ratchada will miss the smells of her village, the jasmine blooming at night, the invigorating scent of the Bird's Eye chilies villagers wear gloves to pick, the pungent punch of her neighbors' cattle that they pen next to their house across the red dirt street from her mother's house. Bangkok smells like diesel and heat and sweat and closeness and, from what Ratchada's aunts have told her, like opportunity.

Before Ratchada has learned much German and before she has forgotten Kittti, she has built countless fishnets and has met Luk. Before a year has passed, she is pregnant and Luk is gone and "Beauty" is riding with many aunts in the bed of an Isuzu diesel pickup driven by one of many uncles to their village. The three-hundred-kilometer drive northeast takes eight hours.

#

My husband's daughter is on a plane to Phoenix to be with him before he passes. I remember the first time I met my new daughter, Stephanie. It was the first time I went to Chicago, and it was the first time I saw snow and also my first Christmas with my two granddaughters.

Michael and Stephanie argued on the patio of the cold house because my new daughter would not let my husband smoke inside. My English was not as good then as my English or my Spanish is now.

"I'm not calling her 'Mom,' Dad. She's seven years younger than I am, for Christ's sake."

"Give her a chance. She helped me when your mother was passing away. She came to the nursing home every day. I know you were busy with your own kids, but ... Steph, she took care of your mother for nine months, every day. I couldn't do it on my own."

“Whatever, Dad.”

“Did you know she never had a toy growing up? In her village, they have nothing. She never even had a doll.”

“She's got plenty now.”

“I probably would have killed myself without her, watching your mother die.”

“And now, Dad, you're buying an entire Thai village with Mom's money.”

#

Larry from Phoenix tells Pen that his wife at home is dying, and he cannot bear to see her decline. So he has traveled to Bangkok to clear his head and to get his mind off things and to have a change of scenery and to enjoy a new culture and, perhaps, to meet a nice girl. Larry comes to Bangkok as often as six times a year and sees Pen. Pen likes Larry better than men she sees from Australia and England and Wales. Larry is more mature, and he takes care of her better than the other *falang* she sees.

Pen works in a factory making fishing nets, and she has a lifelong friend named Ratchada who has come back to the factory after raising her son for seven years in the village they both come from. Ratchada has been studying English and massage for the eighteen months she's been back in the capital city.

Larry comes to Bangkok with a friend named Michael, and they return together two more times. Then Michael comes to Bangkok alone and gets a condo where Ratchada and he spend their time while he is in Bangkok and where she lives and works at her English lessons when Michael is not in Bangkok. She no longer works in the fishing-net factory, though Pen does.

Larry's wife is tough, and Larry keeps coming to Bangkok to clear his head. Larry has bought a cell phone so he can call Pen from Phoenix any time his wife isn't listening. Briefly, Ratchada also has a cell phone Larry bought so he can talk to her but Michael splashes that cell phone in the Chao Praya River.

#

A funeral in Thailand can last two years. After the first day when the body's right hand is doused and people have cleared all debts with the dead person, four monks may pray over the departed for a week and there will be a procession to the temple. This is the only time we walk around the temple counter-clockwise, and we do so three times. When it comes time for the cremation, we want the memories to be sweet, not bitter. We bring sweet flowers and pour sweet coconut milk over the deceased's body. If we are in a rural area, we may launch rockets.

In my village, we keep the person's ashes in a vase in a shrine on the first floor of the house. Michael raised my mother's house above the ground and made it two stories, but we kept our shrine on the new first floor. We took my grandfather's ashes to the temple four times, the last being two years after we cremated him.

Michael has always been a Lutheran. He never took me to his church, but I know the story of the phoenix that comes from a different Western tale, not from the Lutherans. I do not know if a person can rise from the cremation ashes like the phoenix. I have odd thoughts in this hospital.

#

Passersby in the O'Hare airport could hear half a cell phone conversation carried on by a tall, heavy redhead in her early forties if they cared to eavesdrop.

"We'll have him cremated.

"... no chance he'll pull through ... a couple of days at most ...

"... she's forty-two ... I know ... turning fifty this year. I can't believe it.

"Have you heard of Velvet Dreamery? ... Phoenix ice cream franchise ... own three of them.

"... still haven't done anything with my mother's ashes after ... years it's been ...

"... in the nineties in the shade ...

"She has nothing to worry about ...

"... Dad still has Mom's ashes.

"... been years now since she ...

"... since she ...

"Plane's here. I have to go."

#

You dream.

You dream of your first wife, the girl you married when she was pregnant at seventeen, the mother of your daughter. You dream of the lean times together at first, and you dream of the trips you took around the world after she became a flight attendant and then a vice

president of Delta Airlines. You once dreamt together about a nice, large house, and now you dream of the reality, the mansion the two of you built on the golf course in Scottsdale.

You sigh in your sleep.

You dream of your second wife, the beautiful one from the Land of Smiles. You dream of the trips you took all over Southeast Asia before she was granted a better visa, then the journey to Austria to visit her aunt. You fondly remember the times spent in her rural village and the days spent in the condo in Bangkok.

You dream of the daughter you raised and the mistakes you made, and you dream you were closer to her but you're proud of what she's accomplished. You dream of the son who was your Mulligan, your chance to raise a child when you had more wisdom. You're proud of your adopted son in ways different from how you're proud of your daughter.

You dream of things you wish you could change and what you're glad came your way by serendipity. You wish you could speak with the many people you met in life, and you wish you could erase harsh words between you; you dream you could wash away bad history or sin or karma.

#

To Kill a Mockingbird is a classic of American literature. When I was in high school in Phoenix, my tutor nearly quit over that assignment. It was difficult for her to write the paper and I got a C on it, but I passed that class and graduated and, down the road, became a captain in the United States Army.

I was thirteen when I came to America. I never knew my real dad, and my mom left our village to work in Bangkok when I started school at age seven. She met Dad when I was nine, and she married him when I was eleven. Dad is dying and Stephanie is flying to Phoenix. I want to assemble my thoughts during the drive from Fort Huachuca.

I mostly want to remember to say, "Thanks, Dad."

Mom always made me say that to him, and it took years until I meant it. But I do.

"Paid and made." That's how I used to think of his methods. He paid for boarding school in Chaiyaphum, the city south of our village. He made me go.

He made me get braces at the orthodontist in the hospital in the Arab quarter in Bangkok and paid for them.

I resented his forcefulness. I had to conform to his dreams for me. Made and paid.

Dad paid a private investigator to find my real dad, Luk, in Bangkok and hired a lawyer to process the paperwork for me to leave Thailand so I could be adopted in the United States.

Dad paid Luk to sign the papers. I hope he paid him and didn't make him. Maybe paid a random Luk.

Dad made me play soccer and my coach made me play goalie. That paid for college, though Dad could have funded my education.

Made and paid.

Thanks, Dad.

I have read *To Kill a Mockingbird* once per year since high school. I still don't and probably won't ever get the book completely, but I know what it's like to leave a small town but never really leave it. Dad has taken *ma* and me back to Kaset Sombun four times.

#

In the parlor of the Glendale, Arizona Velvet Dreamery, Consuela told Maria, "*Mai ben rai.*"

Maria was eating a waffle cone of chocolate gelato with rainbow sprinkles. She worried that with Michael's passing, Ratchada would sell her three ice cream stores, and Maria and her two daughters and her mother and her husband and her husband's two brothers and her cousins and her husband's cousins would be out of work.

"You believe *Ma* will take care of us?" asked Maria. *Ma* could mean any of five words in Thai, depending on inflection; context made it "mother."

"*Mai ben rai,*" Consuela reiterated. In Spanish, she might have said, "*Que sera, sera,*" or in English, the words could have been, "Do not worry." Consuela had come to trust Ratchada and had picked up the universal Thai phrase that could also translate to, "It is not bad" or "Everything will be okay." In some cases it could mean, "All is forgiven."

"*Mai ben rai,* Maria. Trust. *Confiar.* *Ma* will take care of us."

#

I have to find the boy our village nicknames *Ma*, "Horse." He hides in the fields to avoid going to school because he is afraid to learn English and be taken away from Kaset Sombun.

Ma knows how to work Skype. I want Skype to ring-up my daughter, Ratchada, to tell her the news here.

Kob Sook's wife, Ooee, had a baby girl and they will nickname her "Nok Eeung," the oxpecker bird that always tends to others. Ratchada will laugh because that is her nickname.

Her uncle, Mark, won the numbers again this week. Many *baht*. He is getting braces.

Ratchada's father, Somchair, and I are back together. Maybe that's not news.

#

A dozen rockets launch from a golf-course suburban home in Scottsdale, violating neighborhood covenants.

It is mid-April, *sonkran*, time of the water festival, the new year in Thailand, but a typical dry desert Spring week in Arizona.

Three people leave the balcony from which the fiery rockets have flown and go inside the sprawling house. In front of a shrine on the first floor, Stephanie Kohler-Jackson, her stepmother, Ratchada Kohler, and her stepbrother, Captain Sunti Chailanmalee pay respects to two urns of ashes.

"Thank you, Ratchada," says Stephanie, "for ...". She chokes up.

Ratchada smiles and tilts her head. "For taking care of your dad?"

"For ..."

Sunti puts an arm around the American he's still trying to think of as his sister as she cries. Sunti smiles at his mother.

Ratchada reaches with her right hand and brushes the tears from Stephanie's eyes.

"In Thailand, one person puts water on another person's right hand to wash away the problems they may have had."

Stephanie sobs and smiles and says, "We have something like that in the Lutherans, too."

Sunti extends an arm, and his mother joins the group hug.

Stephanie says, "No, what I wanted to say was, not so much thanks for helping Dad these last few years, but, yes, thank you for that. No, I wanted to say thank you for adding a spot for Mom, too. It means a lot to me to have them together again."

"*Mai ben rai*," says Ratchada.

In Thai, three words can carry much context.

* * * * *

"Kayaking Tales"

First Descent; The Sangre Ponge - Sangklaburi, Thailand - 2008

Rain was falling lightly on the road, gathering into streams, eddying down the steep hill washing into the massive lake below us. The kid in the sunglasses was shaking his head. "Four hundred" he repeated holding up four fingers. "But can you get me there?" "Four hundred," he replied. I had no problem with paying the four hundred baht but little confidence that he would be able to drive the little motorcycle with me and my kayak up the mud slick mountain trails to the Karen village where I could get into the river.

This is Sangklaburi, Thailand. A border town where Burmese and Mon language is heard more often than Thai and the restaurants are as likely to serve sambosa as green curry. Women cross the span of the Mon Bridge--the longest free standing wooden bridge in Thailand--wearing bright-print sarongs, their long black hair braided neatly, their faces decorated with designs in turmeric paste, with heavy baskets of goods balanced on their heads. This is the end of the road; Myanmar is off limits. To go anywhere else you must back track two hundred and twenty kilometers to Kanchanaburi. I wanted to be there though I was there to kayak the Sangre Ponge.

The Songre Ponge is a smallish river that sources high in the hills. It runs a steep course through dense jungle for thirty kilometers until it combines with the Sangklia which then flows into the Kao Laem reservoir, which in turn empties into the famous river Kwai--sight of the fictional *Bridge Over the River Kwai* and home to the real hell fire pass where tens of thousands of allied POWs and indentured Asian laborers died during the Japanese effort to build a rail connection to Burma during the latter part of World War II.

These are seasonal rivers. During the dry season from late January to early July they're slow, shallow and tepid with hardly enough current to move a twig downstream. When the rainy season starts, daily deluges flood the valleys, and the rivers swell and roar. The Songre Ponge grows from a timid stream to a raucous river filled with white water, tangles of vines and treacherous bowls formed over log tangles. The river engorges, rising five feet a day as the width expands from ten or fifteen feet to more than sixty by late September.

The problem is getting to the Songre Pong. There's only one way to access it, following what starts as a concrete road off the main highway but after a couple of kilometers degenerates to a double track motorcycle trail which climbs over steep foot hills for ten

kilometers before ending at a wooden suspension bridge leading to a small Karen village near the river.

I find a driver who seems confident on making it there--a Karen who lives in the village--so we set off with him driving, me riding pillion, and my Advanced Elements Dragon Fly 2 inflatable in its carry bag resting on my lap between us. We're on an old Honda Dream motor-bike that's been customized with higher suspension and knobby tires to deal with the terrain.

As soon as we leave the stone and oil road and hit the dirt path, it seems impassible. It is rutted deeply from both motorcycles and the off season four-wheel-drive trucks that menace this part of the country in the dry season. The only way to negotiate the road is by driving on the ribs that crisscross the trail. The driver must watch carefully ahead figuring on how to hop from high spot to high spot, like selecting a run through a tangled rapid. The rear end of the bike fish tails uncontrollably in the silt that lies above a foot of set up mud beneath. We teeter on the edge of crashing constantly as we descend the steep hillsides whining in first gear as the driver feathers the brakes.

The road climbs, poor houses of bamboo and corrugated fiberglass appear on the fringe of jungle that runs deep on either side of us. In the distance, blue mountains fade in and out of the early morning mist and smoke from burning fields. Local Karen people are walking on the sides of the road in a slow, single-file line smoking homemade cigars, carrying curved knives for cutting and stripping bamboo. Several hail the driver in the local dialect, and he nods or shouts back laughing as the bike slides beneath us.

When I reach the river after abandoning the driver and bike two kilometers back, I plunge in to wash the mud that's set up like concrete on my legs and arms. Carrying the heavy bag over the last two hills, I fell and tumbled through the deep, silky mud.

Sitting at the edge of the river, I could feel the powerful suck of the current. It was a calm and tranquil-looking stretch of water, the surface flat as it glided beneath the suspension bridge to the village. The sun was breaking through the shroud of tattered clouds. The jungle was deep and vibrant green. The air was hot and alive. I was sure I was about to be the first person to get a kayak into this water.

I unpacked the boat from its bag and attached the foot pump to begin breathing life into the thing. Some children stood silently on the swaying bridge in the drizzle watching as the flat wrinkled material took form. I could hear them murmuring as I snapped the four piece paddle together. Once I had all of my gear secured to the splash deck and my camera and flashlight stuffed into the dry bag fixed on the side, I pushed into the current. The boat was quickly swept up, and I sped under the bridge. I caught the excited look on the two boys' faces as I paddled off into the green.

According to my calculations, I should have about seventeen kilometers on the Sangre Pong until it meets with the Sangkha River. Then I would have four more kilometers until I reached Sangkha village, where I could get out of the river, have some lunch at one of the

riverside Salas where locals lounge on the weekends--eating, drinking and floating on inter-tubes around the wide slow pool that forms above the main road bridge. From there I can hail a passing local taxi back to town. Twenty-one kilometers of unknown jungle river between now and then.

The river twisted and the boat was caught up in the thread of the current, hugging it like it was on rails. The water snapped with life, the boat caught in its grip. All I could do was hang on for the ride. Inflatable kayaks are less agile than hard shells. There is no rolling, no quick deft tucks and turns. Much like rafting, you pick your run and guide the boat as best you can to avoid being stuck on a rock or pulled into a snag.

Though I needed to be paying attention, I was constantly distracted by the scene I was traveling through. Virgin jungle, thickets of bamboo towered arcing over the river. Animals fled as I paddled by, crashing through the canopy, hooting and calling insults at me. Along the bank, walking paths of the Karen momentarily emerge from the thick green vegetation. Delicate foot bridges spanned the river made of bamboo poles tied together with grass and vines leading from tree branch to tree branch high over the water.

Ten minutes into the run, I heard the first rumbling of serious water. The river was pushing through a narrow cut of rock that also acted as a tangle which was spiked with viscous looking sections of cut bamboo poles, remnants of the rafts the Karen pole through here in the dry season. I couldn't see the far side of the tangle, but I could see where I wanted to be as I approached the mess. The run started at the left bank and cut diagonally into the current so that the front of the boat would be pushed clear of the out-facing bamboo. When I hit the white water I pushed in on the diagonal and paddled into the current until I was sure I was clear, then let the front end swing around. By the time I was facing forward, I knew I was getting wet. There was a small cataract no more than three feet, a hard shell boat would have taken it with ease, but the inflatable folded under my weight and filled with water from the rear, expelling me as it bucked in the down pour, and we both tumbled into the pool of green water at the bottom.

The crush of water pouring through the split rock powered this deep, jade colored, pool. The water turned slowly clockwise forming a natural whirlpool. The yearly spinning of the water had cut deep into the stone banks on all sides creating a smooth continuous shelf of rock over hung with finger like plant tendrils. I wrangled the boat which floated around upside down, drained the water, set my gear right, and hoisted myself in. I noticed that my shoes had been sucked out of the secure net that I had taken the time to tie them in.

I leaned back in the boat dripping wet while the water spun me around on the sun-lit pool thinking about the next twenty or so kilometers.

I was in a transcendent mood after an hour of sporadic paddling and sudden rapids punctuated with bristling snags of driftwood like the constructions of some giant water rodent, woven through with bright plastic remnants of flotsam. The quick action and strain of negotiating fast drops and jagged rocks interspersed with quiet, tranquil paddling on the

mineral-rich, gray-blue water through vibrant green valleys made me feel at once alone in the world and attached to my surroundings.

It was around this time--roughly half way into the run when I had come out of a series of rapids, pushing the half flooded boat around in the back flow of a wide left turn and thinking of myself as a true adventurer and surely the first to kayak this river--that I noticed a man sitting on a log in a pair of BVDs and a snorkeling mask. He was lean and dark, smiling at me holding a bottle of Chang beer aloft. At his feet was a homemade spear gun, little more than a sling shot that fired a sharpened steel rod. "Hello" he yelled, shattering my illusion of intrepidness. I raised my paddle and addressed him in Thai; he smiled and shook his head. He was Karen and either didn't speak Thai or didn't care to deal with mine. He lifted his bottle of beer again and I nodded. What the hell; I was a day tripper and this was his fishing hole. I paddled on.

I was coming to the end; the Sangre Ponge had joined the Sangkha, and it became a wider, smoother river. In ugly contrast with the pristine jungle, the banks were littered with the debris of the modern world: styrofoam containers, plastic bags, cans and bottles. I didn't want to stop. It had been too good; there must be more ahead. I had been going for maybe three hours. My thighs, lower back and ass had been bashed by rocks, and I was cold from sitting in a half foot of river water. But I wanted more.

The river swirled around me with increased speed from the joining of the two bodies of swollen water as it opened up. Here was the bridge; the food stalls the Salas hugging the shallows. I paddled a few strokes towards the middle of the river to avoid a saddle of large rocks. People on the banks were pointing and shouting at me.

I don't know how I didn't hear, didn't see it until I was slipping in sideways. But I suddenly realized why I was so interesting. The bowl I was sliding into was four or five feet deep with a standing wave at its lip. The boat toppled directly, and I was in the water before I fully understood what was happening. Under the surface the standing wave sucked me straight to the bottom of the tangle. The current bashed me twice against a tree branch. I caught it and worked my way back to the surface. The wave was spinning my boat like it was on a spit, sucking it under, it popped up, then sucked under again. I caught my paddle which had escaped somehow and was floating peacefully in a back flow and pulled the kayak out of the current by its leash, then swam into the current with my arms around it like a child clinging to its water wings.

I floated into the still water amongst the afternoon loungers clapping and shouting. Men held glasses of whiskey aloft and women laughed into their hands. I could pretend it was applause for a trip well made.

Down the Run Tee - 2010

The Karen people populate the entire mountainous border between Thailand and Burma. Some have always been here, and some have come as refugees fleeing the Burmese army who have raided their villages, destroyed their crops and murdered them for sport over the last 30 years. Karen refugee camps are harsh places where crime and drug abuse often take hold of the displaced seeking sanctuary. The older more established villages are throwbacks to a past where houses were built by their owners with pigs sheltering beneath and babies hung in high hammocks swung by toe ropes attached to grannies who pound rice or strip rattan for weaving in the shade.

Everyone in the village is related somehow. There's little privacy, few secrets and no strangers. Not even me. I've been coming to Tha Mon Gra to kayak the Run Tree for about five years, and since the first time I came attracting a curious crowd of villagers while putting together my travel kayak on the rivers bank, I have always been welcomed back.

The Karen are curious and friendly but compared to Thai people they are reserved, much quieter, closer to the stereotypical humble, respectful Asian in Western media. They live close to nature and work hard. They are generally short in stature but the men are lean with sinewy muscle and the women plump--always with at least one baby in tow.

I arrived this time on the back of a motorcycle taxi just after sunrise with a cold rain falling. It was barely light, yet the village was awake and fires burned in each house--cooking rice and making coffee, yes coffee everywhere. I paid my driver for making the trip that is in itself an adventure coming up and over the craggy hills on rutted trails of rock and mud. I made my way down to the river's edge to empty my bladder, wash off the mud and check the height of the water in the first strains of still cold sun. The hills all around were obscured in smoky clouds of mist that would last until late in the afternoon when the sun's rays would finally warm the deep valleys.

After I had eaten noodles off my camp stove and packed my gear, I took my kayak and returned to the river. The sun was fully up now, but the air was still cool and the river felt near to freezing. As I made my way to the bank, I saw that a few young men were laid out on a rice mat with a bottle of rice whiskey eating from open banana leaves filled with some kind of meat and steamed rice--an early morning picnic.

They called me over and offered me a drink from the cup they were passing around, but I declined, telling them my stomach was weak, which is the only acceptable excuse I've ever found to get out of drinking the rot gut they were sipping. Two of the men had worked in construction in Bangkok and could speak Thai with some fluency, and so we talked. I told them I was headed down river to the bridge on the big road, the highway where I could pick up a ride back to town and demonstrated the kayaks pump and four-piece paddle. They all agreed it seemed like good fun. I asked them if there was any way to get further up river, if someone had a boat or motorcycle or something that could take me further up.

I had heard that if you can follow the Run Tee far enough, there's a spectacular water fall and from there the river would be steeper and narrow and so the rapids would be bigger, the paddling more fierce. I had tried in the past to hike further up but my hopeless sense of

direction had gotten me lost in a palmetto grove hacked out of the jungle. After hours of carrying the heavy kayak bag, I ended up almost exactly where I had started. Two of the guys said they could take me a little way up, but not too far. They said the waterfall was a two day trip though neither had ever done it. One suggested that the next time I should rent an elephant to carry my bags so I could get there more easily.

"How much is an elephant for a day?" I asked. They consulted with each other and came to the conclusion that I could get a small one for about two hundred baht, less than ten dollars, Mahout included. While we discussed this, one of them started to piece together the rice husks that locals use to roll cigarettes and then on a folded piece of paper began mixing tobacco with a light brown powdery residue and rolled them together in a long conical joint. He lit this and passed it. When it came to me I asked, "Ganja?" They shook their heads and smiled the red black grin of betel nut chewers and answered "fin"--opium, good for a weak stomach.

As we smoked I asked them how much they wanted to guide me. The one with stronger Thai looked puzzled and so I rephrased, asking how much it would cost for them to take me up river today. I was willing to give them a hundred baht a piece. He waved it off. "Nothing," he said. "We won't go far. Just for fun."

After sitting on the veranda stairs of a house for maybe an hour waiting, I began to get frustrated. If we were going to go, I wanted to go then. The boys were drinking weak tea, smoking cigarettes and explaining in Karen to a large group that had gathered around that I wanted to go up river. I tried to speed it up. I stood and paced and held my hand out from the eaves to demonstrate the rain had nearly stopped, anxious to leave. Why? Anxious for what? It was still early in the morning, and I didn't have far to go. But I was anxious because I'm a Westerner with a goal, and we were sitting around doing nothing. Just when I was about ready to give up on my would-be guides, one slipped on a pair of rubber farm boots, the other flip-flops, and we were off. We drove along the bank of the river to a crossing of close stones that they bounced over light as a feather. I carefully negotiated the opium in my blood, making my coordination squishy, my backpack and heavy boat bag hanging over one shoulder. Now we were in the bush.

I didn't know what they meant by not too far when they described where they would take me. A couple of kilometers maybe, half of an hour, 45 minutes at the long end. An hour and a half later, we were walking waste deep through a bog of some dreary tea-colored water that I wouldn't have dipped a toe in if it weren't for the other two who took their shoes off and walked in without a second thought. Or maybe it was the opium we smoked? I could hear the river off somewhere through the impenetrable jungle to the left of us, but there had been no trail since we first crossed it, and I was beginning to wonder if these two had any idea where we were.

Not long after exiting the bog, all three of us--covered in a thin layer of putrid ooze--came to a small cascade where we fell in and bathed. The Thai-speaking guide told me we would have to climb it. It wasn't very high--ten or twelve feet at the most--but my doubts about the two guides I had met while drinking grain alcohol and smoking opium at 6 am

were increasing. After two hours carrying both bags, I was starting to feel like an ostracized cultist sentenced to drag his stone of disgrace through life. My shoulders ached from the strap, and I could feel a kink building up in my neck. So I slung the bag off and handed it to one of my guides. I climbed the cataract and reached down while he pitched the bag up to me, but when he got to the top he hefted it high on his shoulders, putting the shoulder strap against his forehead the way any smart mountaineer would carry a load.

We were back in dense jungle now, hot and tired, when the terrible understanding that these men had brought me out here to kill me and take my gear and money slapped me in the brain like a piece of frozen meat. Of course they had; they were all but savages to begin with and all banged up on bootleg whiskey and opium to boot. This may sound farfetched--a dramatic drug induced reaction--but stories of foreigners killed and robbed in Thailand are an everyday event. And why not? There was no law; we were miles from anywhere. I had shown up on my own and all but demanded they drop whatever they had planned for that day and entertain me. As usual, I hadn't told anyone where I was going. No one would be looking for me.

They didn't want any money they said, and when I had asked how they were getting back, they made some vague reference to a raft or a boat--my boat or raft. It was all falling into place in my paranoid mind. They had offered me booze to dull my senses and when that didn't take, they gave me opium to smoke, which I could still feel playing in my head. Suddenly, I realized they had bookended me, one always in front, one behind. And even if I took off now, they had my boat--had been passing it back and forth since the waterfall.

I began to strategize. To plan a defense. Escape here would be useless as they would track me down in no time. This wilderness was their home.

The jungle opened unexpectedly to an orchard of pineapple plants slashed and burnt out of the heavy vegetation and laid out in rough lines. The guide in front pointed to a bamboo hut on the far side of the field, called out something in Karen and then added in Thai "my friend's house." This is it, I thought. This is where the attack comes, the ambush may be planned on the stairs of the veranda in the village. As we approached the house, I tried to drift back, get behind the one following me, but as I slowed, so did he until we were walking abreast and he gestured for me to go ahead, smiling his stained grin.

Alright you bastard, I thought to myself. But I know what you have in mind. The other had already reached the house and called out in their language before entering the dark doorway. A second later his head shot out and he called to his friend in Thai: "Where's the big knife?" Jesus, that was bold. Why had he said it in Thai? I spun around, but the other had dropped my bag and was heading towards the house, grinning again as he passed.

I leapt to the bag, unzipped it and pieced together the center pieces of the paddle which now gave me a light weight, super strong weapon to use in my defense. I went to the front of the house and put my back against a large Malacca tree so as not to be flanked. Holding my pole loosely, I looked relaxed, like I was resting. But inside, I was coiled tight and could

strike with what I was hoping might be deadly force in any direction. Sweat was streaming down my face burning my eyes, salt and the copper taste of adrenaline seeping into the corners of my mouth. I could hear my escape, the river just to my right.

The two came out side by side, the first one held the kind of big curved knife every Karen carries for cutting rattan and the other a couple of pineapples. They nodded me over, holding the fruit aloft and headed to the river bank where they sat on a big flat rock and started to cut up the pineapple.

The water was cold, clear and delicious. From where I stood on the bank, I could see a never-ending series of white topped standing waves hopping and crashing amongst great slabs of tumble down boulders. The boys gave me their shoes to strap to my splash deck as they needed both hands. The raft--the boat they talked about--turned out to be two plastic gas cans they would use to keep them afloat as they let the current take them through all the beautifully angry water. I expressed my doubts, but they flashed me their tainted grins and said they do it all the time.

I kept back in the water watching as the two rose up and over the five and six foot waves which looked massive sitting at water level--hoping if there was trouble, I could paddle up and save one. My head had cleared in the cold water as I followed them back to their village where they emerged from the torrent exhausted and freezing, still showing their smudged teeth as I gave them back their shoes and waved off, continuing to the bridge.

The Magic Blue Boat -2013

A unisex rabble of forgotten-looking people wrapped in blankets and old military coats shambled across the waist-high grass to stare silently as we inflated our boats. They filled out in the grass--long and blue in Vinnie's case--as he bent over his hand pump, yellow and squat as I trundled my foot bellows; both of us sweating heavily in the still cool, misty morning.

We had stayed out late the night before getting to know each other over food and beers--too many beers--and awoke late with a driver already waiting for us. We didn't have time for breakfast, not even coffee or tea. Nor did we stop to pick up water or snacks of any kind. We were running on nothing but hangover fumes.

The boats were fully formed, taugth and ready to go. The wide-eyed group that had gathered to watch us murmured as we strapped our gear onto the splash decks and snapped paddles together. I helped Vinnie into the river's inlet where fast water swirled around a choke of trees before setting myself up and pushing in. The still silent group watched as we paddled into the shadowy stream and disappeared amongst the jungle foliage.

The water was way up that late in the rainy season. Vinnie was new to kayaking and had never been on white water before. So I had taken him on the normally lively but simple lower Sangkha River the day before, but the rapids were washed out--submerged in the swollen river under several feet of water. It was a fast run for about an hour with only one big wave set before we hit flat water at the mouth of the Kao Laem Reservoir. That night we talked over the trip. I was annoyed at making the trip and getting no thrills out of it, but Vinnie was happy with the way it went and so I decided to take him down the Salawa the next day.

Though I have been kayaking in Sangklaburi for over eight years I have only been on the Salawa once before and I remembered it as a dull, thin river draped with the collective webs of fat green jumping spiders. That first trip had turned me off so I never went back. But with water levels so high, I thought it might be worth trying out again. I didn't really remember the length very well, but I told Vinnie it shouldn't be more than a couple of hours.

Only minutes into the run, Vinnie was already voicing his concern about the speed of the water and the clutter of trees and vines that make paddling it a constant slaloming act. Whitewater difficulty grades are based on the size of waves and drops in the river. According to the international system, there is no whitewater in Sangklaburi that would rate over a moderate grade-3 difficulty, but that system doesn't really apply here. The rivers during the rainy season are swollen to 6 or 7 times their low season volume and clogged with strainers, sweepers, and sifts (or in plain language, fallen and low hanging trees, clumps of bushes, piles of cut bamboo and vines spiked with three inch thorns). Running a 2-3 foot wave train is no big deal in an open river; doing it while weaving through trees and clumps of deadly snags, battling branches and vine tangle is a very different skill set.

I'm in front with Vinnie following my lead. Only ten minutes or so in, we hear the heavy sound of falling water. "That's a waterfall," Vinnie yells. "OK. We'll just pull up to shore and do a little recon," I yell back. I remembered that there were several waterfalls here--nothing big, 6 or 8 feet maybe. But I don't remember doing them the first time I ran it. Was there so little water that I had to walk down them? Today it's a smoothly-falling curtain of water that crashes down milky white into a pile of jagged rocks. There was no chance of portage. The banks of the river went straight up from the water and were thick with almost impenetrable jungle vegetation. We analyzed the waterfall. If we stayed close to the right side, the drop was smooth and it ended in a deep pool with few visible rocks. I would lead and if all was good, I would yell out to follow.

And all was good. Over the lip and down into the big splash, paddle in a high brace, the nose submerged, I came up side over, leaned left, the boat turned and righted itself. I gave a triumphant whoop as I looked up at the falls. All signs of a hangover now neutralized by adrenaline and cold river water. I back paddled, hanging in the current and watched as the front of Vinnie's boat came over the horizon of the falls. In a flash he was down the face, lost in the aerated froth and back up again, spinning but still in the boat. Alright, I thought. Now he's good to go. With that under his belt, he should be ready for the rest of the river. But

just then, he caught a snag and went over. The water was only waste high in the shallow end of the pool, so he easily caught his boat and shook off the spill.

That was the last time I would see Vinnie smile for the next three hours. We continued on, dodging trees, ducking vines and fending off tangles of all kinds with paddles and arms while running grade-3 wave trains with the occasional big dumping hole and skirting eddies where rock wall was exposed and the river sucked into potentially deadly crevices. I kept up a running stream of directions which Vinnie had almost no ability to follow. Not only was he inexperienced, but his boat wasn't as agile as mine. He sat too high and too centered for it to be any good at making the vital hair pin turns needed to weave through the jungle river, and so Vinnie ended up going in again and again.

At one point we had to stop and portage over a fallen tree that spanned the width of the river. We pushed and tripped and tore through the vegetation on the banks and made our way up and over the root system working two on a boat. But after we had crossed, we saw that there was no respite, no clearing of the main channel, waves continued breaking on the surface as far down as we could see. Vinnie sat down on his boat and shook his head. "This isn't funny," he said, and he was right. I had completely underestimated the potential of the river, and we were totally unprepared. But there was no other way; walking out was not an option.

I lost him a couple of times, once after another waterfall, and then again after a very technical rapid run through bunches of trees with branches sieving the water in all directions. I tried to get him to take the lead thinking I was better off behind if he had real trouble, but it didn't work. Finally, he struck a tree side on, came out of the boat as it wrapped around and was trapped by the current. I knew he was in the water behind me but could do nothing to help. I was battling through the same conditions and couldn't stop. I called and kept calling and searched for a place to pull in. After what seemed like a kilometer, but turned out to be only a few hundred meters, I found a wide spot in a turn with a backflow. There was a worn foot path here that led to a Karen village of a few thatched huts. I pulled up and sat paddled, calling out and searching the choppy sight line through the trees. I saw Vinnie's gear come down. First the yellow blade of his paddle like the dorsal fin of a plastic fish cutting the water, then the slick blue side of his waterproof bag and the black hand pump floated by looking jolly, bobbing upright in the river. I feared the worst.

I heard him call out, coming towards me and then saw the flare orange of his life vest caroming through the trees but then stopped just ten meters or so away. Caught in a whirlpool, he wasn't able to make the final effort to break out of the orbiting current. I paddled with the backflow against the current and brought my back end into the circling water close enough for him to grab the rear handle of my boat and pulled him to the bank where he struggled exhaustedly onto dry land.

The fact that this was the first possible exit out of the river was an ironic slap in the face, for if Vinnie could have made that last stretch he would have called it quits just here. After getting his bearings back and calming down, he went to the village to find water and

negotiate a ride back to where we had left his car, where this river joined the Sangre Pong to make up the Sangkha, our starting point the previous day. I found a foot path that paralleled the river through a makeshift field and into the jungle where after walking it to a vanishing point I saw Vinnie's boat still pinned to the tree. A couple hundred feet of dangerously-fast water separated it from the bank.

I went back to the village and brought Vinnie with me. We studied the situation and I decided to give the recovery a try. But after a couple of unsuccessful attempts at getting to the boat and being swept down river, I gave up. Vinnie wanted nothing to do with it. "20k baht," he said, "isn't worth dying over."

Back at the village he talked a reluctant villager--who probably only half understood why we were there--to take him on the back of his bike to the car where he would wait for me. This was a Karen village and stood as a remnant of the last century. There was no electricity or running water, very little in fact that hadn't been hand fashioned from the bounty of the jungle. The villagers were probably undocumented and being self sufficient, rarely went into town.

Back in the river conditions remained difficult and in light of what happened with Vinnie, for the first time, I realized how dangerous paddling these rivers alone was. I had been doing it for years with no information or planning. I wore no life jacket or helmet. I had no plan for contacting the world in case of emergency. The draw was half the challenge of the water and half the adventure of not knowing where I might end up. The idea that I was the first person to ever paddle a kayak in these places was a thrill no matter how erroneous the fact might have been.

There were two more waterfalls. The second was almost completely blocked by sweeping limbs that caught at my boat and spun me so that I went over sidelong and came out of the boat in the falls and had to scramble for it in the aerated pool as the water ran straight into a long wave chain of rapids. An hour later, I arrived at our meeting place where Vinnie and three Thai men met me looking anxious.

Vinnie had told them the tale of our river run, and they had wondered if I was going to make it out. In the meanwhile, they had gathered a posse of locals to go back to the Karen village and salvage the boat. Vinnie had put a 2,000 baht reward on it and the locals who had been sitting in *salas* on the river's edge eating and drinking whiskey all morning were mobilized and ready with coils of rope, diving masks and searchlights. The Pu Yai Ban, local village head man, had been brought in on it and, after nearly an hour of posturing and discussions amongst the potential team, Vinnie and I got on the back of two of their off-road modified motorbikes and rode off in a line like the *Searchers*.

The pitted trail to the village was roughly cleared and ran up and over steep hills and finally dropped into the low valley where the five or six handmade bamboo houses of the village crouched by the side of the river. We pulled up to the front of the first house where the man who brought Vinnie to the bridge appeared bare-chested in the doorless opening.

He was barely five feet and, though possibly 50 years old, had the taut, muscular physique of a teenager.

As the Pu Yai Ban spoke to him, the man wore a pained smile of worry. This was a problem; two foreigners showing up with a figure of authority looking for lost property. I caught parts of the conversation and heard the villager say the boat had gone down river already. I broke in, telling the Pu Yai Ban that it was impossible, and the villager was talking about my boat. "The blue one," I said, "not the yellow one. The blue one up there," pointing to the trail that tapered off into the jungle. The Pu Yai Ban continued to question the villager who stayed put in the dark doorway nodding and smiling slightly. Two of the younger guys, ready for adventure, had turned away toward the trail eager to get on with the mission when I turned back and saw the nose of Vinnie's boat nudging out from the dark interior of the house. The villager continued his pained smile as he pushed the length of it out and down the few steps to the bare ground in front of us.

The Karen man had gone up by himself and somehow wrestled the boat out of the tree snag and fought it to shore in the dangerous current. It was undoubtedly the most expensive thing in the village--a magic object, rigid yet pliable. A slick blue fetish to rival any totem or amulet he could craft or carve. When Vinnie popped the valves and deflated it, the look on the man's face was one of amazed regret. He was losing something that he probably had no use for but coveted so much that he had risked his life to pull it from the rivers grasp.

Vinnie packed it up and paid the villager 500 baht while the Pu Yai Ban photographed the two exchanging the money and shaking hands. We remounted and headed back to the bridge. There was an awkward moment when Vinnie tried to palm a 1,000 baht note to the Pu Yai Ban, who looked at it like it was an insult. Being a foreigner in Thailand, you learn not to expect anything for free, so we assumed this mission was to be funded. And in a way, it was as the 1,000 baht note was passed to one of the boys who bought beers and a bottle of whiskey. We spent the remainder of the afternoon sitting in a riverside *sala* thanking the locals with booze.

* * * * *

"Homecoming"

I shipped home from Saigon a couple years ago, back to Thibodaux. It's a fair bit east of New Orleans. I've got my own garage there now--I fix car engines. I know what to do if they're pulling air or if they're idling too low. You can always figure out an engine if you take the time to listen.

When I got to Saigon I was nineteen, and I didn't know anything--just engines. So the army put me in charge of the jeeps. I'd work on them all day and then walk back through the narrow streets to my quarters at night. I'd pass outdoor markets, a river, and a city wall. I watched a man getting his hair cut by the city wall once, and a long line of other men waiting. I saw an old woman in a triangle hat standing at one end of a long skiff and poling through the smooth river water. I saw whole families living on the river like they do in the swamps back home, floating in shacks built on top of rowboats with bicycle tires and hanging plants. People just living on the river, floating.

Saigon was different, but it wasn't *strange*. There's a difference. The smells were new--the lemongrass and the curry and this stinky fish sauce that was like alligator bait--but the thick rice and the vegetables and the broth were just versions of what I'd been eating all my life. Even the frog. I've eaten my share of frog back home. The riverbank was different--mangrove and fern, instead of cypress and Spanish moss--but the river water was the same flat brown as the bayou.

There are parts of Saigon that I miss. The fruit heaped in baskets in little stalls--mango and papaya and jackfruit and guava. Incense that smells like church. The language that sounds like singing. The noise of bicycle tires sloshing through the rain and the women moving like water in their long tight dresses.

I don't know why I'm in New Orleans tonight--I don't drink anymore. I don't know what I'm looking for, only that I'm looking. Then I see her, and I know without being able to tell it.

* * * * *

"Relative Merits"

An early morning ferry churns westward across the Chao Phraya River toward Wat Arun, the Temple of Dawn. The temple's soaring central spire stands about five stories high, towering over everything else along the shore. From the ferry passengers' vantage, it grows darker and taller as the sky lightens behind it and the boat comes closer. In these moments of night's retreat, limned as if by a floodlight parked just below the horizon, Bangkok is all outlines and surfaces, two-dimensional, deceptively serene. Despite whatever careless cruelty, thoughtless betrayal, and calculated exploitation the night has hidden, or whatever grime and decay the advancing daylight will reveal, just now the air shimmers with the promise of a new day.

Marlene leans over the rail into the warm breeze that skims over her face and ruffles her still damp hair. *You must see the Temple of Dawn at dawn*, an Australian woman Marlene met in the hotel lobby had insisted. She thinks of the massive cathedral she saw in Cologne years before, jutting up from an otherwise nondescript German street to dwarf and dominate its surroundings with sheer Gothic bulk. This Thai temple has a more delicate air, rising slender and elegant as if pulled skyward from above rather than thrust up from stolid earth.

Marlene breathes in the river's fishy pungency and glimpses catfish leaping out of the water to snatch chunks of stale bread from the hands of tourists in fantail boats near the pier. A few minutes later, the ferry docks and Marlene is clambering up the uneven steps of the two-hundred-year-old *wat*, past glaring guardian statues of demons, a row of golden Buddhas and green images of the god Indra riding on a three-headed elephant. Something striking everywhere she looks, but for the Berkeley environmentalist, the most delightful thing about the temple is the recycled crockery in its stucco covering. Thousands of pieces of broken Chinese porcelain dishes have been embedded throughout the whole exterior forming a mosaic of gleaming colors that have not faded over the centuries. A stunning example of reuse and recycling, the mantra of *her* religion, the movement to save the earth from humanity's excess.

Her guidebook says that the citizens of Bangkok donated the dishes from their homes, thereby gaining "merits" or Buddhist brownie points of good karma toward a favorable future reincarnation. But Marlene overhears a guide telling a group of tourists that the dishes came from a Chinese ship that ran aground, damaging its cargo. Cracked and broken dishes were salvaged and used to decorate the temple then under construction. Perhaps both explanations are true, she thinks. Maybe when people saw the shipwrecked dishes

being incorporated into the temple walls, they added their own cast-offs, to earn merits and feel a part of the magnificent edifice.

On the ferry ride back in full daylight, the spires of Wat Arun seem to glow with a pearly iridescence, in contrast to the glinting orange-gold roofs of the royal palace and temple complex on the eastern side of the river, which Marlene plans to visit after lunch. While standing at the curb of a busy boulevard to hail a *tuk-tuk* taxi, a thin girl of about 12 taps her arm and holds up a small lidded basket that contains a brown bird flailing its feathers and chirping frantically.

"Mum, hundred baht, three dollar?" the girl says with an expectant expression and beseeching tone. Marlene is confused. Is the girl trying to sell her a bird? Marlene is obviously a tourist, a Caucasian wearing a backpack and cargo pants riddled with zippered pockets for all the items tourists carry around. She could not take a live bird home on an airplane. The girl persists and Marlene shakes her head and smiles apologetically. "Sorry, no, thank you."

A bit unsettled by the encounter with the bird-girl, Marlene takes a *tuk-tuk* back to her hotel to check for e-mails from her editor and her boyfriend Brad, who will be joining her for the Thai leg of this journey. After nine hardscrabble years of freelance photography and writing, she has landed a staff job at *EastBound* magazine and convinced the editor to send her on a trip through Southeast Asia and India to research a series of articles on medical tourism. She loves teeming, steaming tropical landscapes and chaotic Asian cities and can hardly believe she is being paid to spend five weeks soaking them up. The ten days in Vietnam were spectacular, and she's already bought two more memory cards for the camera she always wears around her neck, so she doesn't need to delete any of the 800 photos she's taken. Hanoi--a city of seven million people, most of them under age 30, and four million motor scooters--bustled with optimism and entrepreneurial energy, a totalitarian society that sees no irony in its embrace of capitalism and western dollars. And her side jaunt to Halong Bay had been sublime, with its thousands of limestone islets jutting up from an ancient now-flooded plain dotted with fishing boats and traditional junks arrayed with orange accordion sails. On a hypnotic expanse of beach nearly devoid of tourists, she snapped a photo of a hand-painted sign nailed to the trunk of a palm tree at eye level. "Social evils are prohibited," it proclaimed. What social evils did they have in mind, she wondered while watching a little boy skip a rock into the surf.

The Australian woman from yesterday--a brassy bottle blonde of indeterminate age--is waiting in the queue for the hotel's only guest computer. "You were right. The temple was beautiful this morning," Marlene says. "But the oddest thing happened on the way back." She relates her bewilderment about the girl with the bird-in-a-basket.

"Oh, no, you don't *keep* the bird! The whole point is to let it *go*." The emphatic Aussie seems well-versed in Thai customs ("I come to trade shows here two or three times a year"). She explains that imprisoning a wild animal brings bad karma for Buddhists, but freeing a caged animal or bird earns good karma. So children weave little basket-traps, capture hapless birds in them and then peddle the incarcerated creatures to rich tourists, who set them free and earn merits for their souls. Impoverished people in a country with

no social safety net jeopardize their future incarnations in order to eat in this one, while wealthy strangers who aren't even Buddhists can buy merits for themselves by undoing the child's misdeed. "Sort of like those medieval Italian priests who sold tickets to heaven," Marlene says, dredging up a factoid from a college history class.

When it's her turn at the computer, Marlene logs into her e-mail account and opens a message from *EastBound.com*. "The editors of *EastBound* regretfully announce that the current issue will be our last. Due to insurmountable financial pressures, we must cease publication of both the print version of *EastBound* and the website, which will be updated through the end of this month. We thank you for your readership and support over the years; it has been a privilege to share with you our passion for all things Asian..."

Marlene feels nauseous. She can barely breathe. Regretfully announce? How could they not have foreseen these "insurmountable financial pressures" just two weeks ago, *before* dispatching a penniless writer on an expense-paid jaunt halfway around the world? How can she hope to pay the giant credit card bill she has already amassed with no reimbursement from this feckless magazine?

She stares at her ragged fingernails for a while wondering if she remembered to pack an emery board, then clicks on a message from Brad. "Hey, Marlene, I'm really sorry but some stuff has come up & I can't go to Thailand after all. We need to talk when you get back, but have a good trip. So sorry!"

If she believed in karma, she would be wondering what dreadful things she had done in past lives to bring this double dose of disappointment upon her now. There is a thanks-for-the-photos-wish-I-were-there note from her cousin Fran, in whose home Marlene rents the room vacated by Fran's now-grown daughters, and a message from her mother, which she is almost afraid to open. She cannot absorb any more bad news. But Mom's note is just the usual, "Hope you're having a good time, don't get sick, remember to take the malaria medicine, lock your luggage, don't buy food from carts in the street, don't eat raw vegetables," etc., etc.

Marlene trudges upstairs to her room, peels off her sweat-soggy clothes and flops on the bed. Her research had been going so well, visits to hospitals in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, interviews with doctors and western patients. She has appointments tomorrow at the biggest hospital in Bangkok, where foreigners flock to get state-of-the-art surgical procedures that their insurance won't cover, and for a tenth what they would pay in the U.S. This is sometimes less than their Medicare co-payment (but more, she will learn, than most Thai citizens can afford for themselves). She can't even go home yet--her non-refundable plane ticket back to San Francisco is for a flight that departs from Mumbai three weeks from now. Should she eat the cost of a new ticket and fly home immediately, or scrimp her way through Thailand and India, sleeping in hostels and overnight trains till she gets to the airport in Mumbai? Maybe she can sell some articles and photos to other publications? But even so, it will take months before she's paid for pieces submitted on spec. Meanwhile, the credit card interest keeps on compounding.

Head throbbing, Marlene takes a tepid shower. She has no appetite now that everything she buys will add to her Visa bill, and she falls into a fitful nap. She awakens famished and realizes she cannot fast for three weeks. Out on the street near the hotel, she buys a big bowl of noodles from a vendor's cart for the equivalent of 30 cents. It's tasty and filling and she will live on this instead of restaurant fare, despite her mother's warning. She sets off walking amid the jostling crowds, along the broken pavement past vendors hawking embroidered purses, jewelry made from coconut shells, carved wooden animals, and silver amulets, eventually finding herself back at the river, north of the palace. Chunky ferry boats, slim fantail motor boats, even rowboats ply the broad arterial river in every direction carrying all manner of people and goods somewhere else. Nothing seems content to just stay where it is. Every half mile or so, temple spires poke up along the banks, each *wat* with its own little pier in front so passersby can dock and say a quick prayer or make an offering en route. Lavender water hyacinths bob lightly upon the water, dancing in the wakes behind boats or drifting about aimlessly. So pretty, yet such a nuisance. A non-native invasive species, they are the scourge of hydraulic engineers and public health officials, clogging drainage pipes and filters, getting caught in boat motors and providing habitat for mosquitoes.

Marlene walks on past market stalls piled with a rainbow of vegetables, fruits, and braided flower arrangements meant as offerings for spirit houses. Every building in Thailand, it appears, has one or two of these miniature temples sitting next to it, mounted on a post. They remind her of an elaborate rural mailbox, like the ones along farm roads in California's Central Valley where she grew up. Animist beliefs that coexist with Theravada Buddhism say that every spot of ground is home to invisible spirits and that when they are dislodged by people constructing buildings, a new house must be provided for the spirits so they will not be angry and take revenge on the occupants. Such spirit houses are also used to honor human ancestors, so many buildings have two of these structures out front. The more ornate and well tended, the wealthier the residents. (The Aussie has been quite a font of knowledge on these matters. Still, Marlene plans to do some fact-checking at the UC library when she gets home.)

Marlene is admiring stacks of batik-dyed silk scarves spread out on a blanket beside the walk, ethereal swirls of turquoise, purple, and orange. This morning she would have bought several for herself and as gifts to take home, but now she hesitates, even though the prices are quite modest and the scarves lovely. Reluctantly, she pulls herself away, still eyeing the bright floral patterns. A little boy wearing a stained t-shirt, loose shorts and worn rubber flip-flops appears beside her and taps her arm. He is holding up a basket with a fluttering bird inside, and he looks hungry.

"Mum? Hundred baht?" the boy implores. A rush of something like anguish mixed with anger floods Marlene's chest and fills her throat. She wants to scoop him up and somehow give him a different life, one in which he eats regularly and does not hustle tourists on the street when he should be in school. Instead, she pulls a folded bill from a shirt pocket. "I only have fifty. OK?" The boy shrugs and trades the trembling basket for the money. The bird chitters in panic, and Marlene starts to lift the coil of twine holding the lid down. But then she stops and stoops down to the boy's eye level. She extends the basket toward him

and gestures that he should open the lid himself. He backs away and shakes his head, but Marlene insists. With a shy smile and big eyes, the boy accepts the basket and gingerly lifts the top. The bird's wings are constricted inside the cage and it can't fly. The boy pokes at its feet to get it to climb up high enough so its wings can flap and with a hop, the sparrow-like bird rises free of its confines and flutters away. Marlene instinctively raises her camera and clicks. That photo of the boy watching the bird lift off will be her favorite souvenir of this trip, the grin on his face worth all the unreimbursed baht and rupees she will spend making her way back home.

* * * * *

"The Only Words That Matter"

Mark Oh, his white T-shirt drenched with sweat, stood precariously with his wife Janet and their Cambodian tour guide on a rocky step of a towering sandstone temple. As Janet gasped for breath, Mark looked upward at the dizzying seventy-foot stone incline between them and the top. From Manhattan, he had planned a trip to Angkor Wat, hoping the thrills and shocks of an underdeveloped country would take Janet's mind off her ill father, but the never-ending flights of uneven stairs were more treacherous than he had anticipated.

"We can go back down if you want. Don't get hurt in Cambodia. Almost no doctors," the wiry guide, who was barely perspiring, said with concern as Janet leaned her five-foot-two frame against a block of stone.

"I'm a doctor," Mark winked at Janet. "But we can stop if you want, honey."

Janet had run marathons in her twenties despite working long hours as an attorney, but her father's Alzheimer's had kept her sequestered in their Murray Hill apartment for the past two years. Though his wife still had a sprightly figure that could fit into her old wardrobe, Mark was unsure of her fitness for climbing under the brutal jungle sun.

"No, I want to keep going," she said.

The massive temples were thousand-year-old layer cakes of sandstone as wide as several city blocks with pine-cone-shaped spires that soared hundreds of feet over an ancient forest so untouched it looked like a habitat for dinosaurs. In a Cambodian landscape where the second tallest objects were the trees, Mark felt more dwarfed by the temples than he did by concrete skyscrapers in Midtown. Smiling Hindu gods with bejeweled headdresses carved into stone pillars next to the stairs seemed to beckon him upward.

"Don't look down," Mark whispered in Janet's ear.

Since each step was about three feet high and as narrow as a single brick, Mark worried Janet might stumble trying to find a foothold. Like a coach spotting a gymnast, he put his right arm under the small of her back when she hoisted herself up. Then Mark climbed each step using his upper body strength, while resting his toes on any crevice he could find, a technique he had learned during ROTC training.

"Give me a second. I need to stop," Janet said, as she tentatively turned around and took a deep breath, her feet protruding over the edge of a stone precipice. Mark followed his wife's gaze into the hilly countryside. From their vantage point about three hundred feet above the jungle, the lush trees looked like verdant clouds against an azure skyline

After a short rest, Janet said, looking toward the top of the temple, "Well, I didn't come here for an easy vacation."

As they climbed up the final ascent, Mark saw Janet's eyes focus with determination, like they did near the finish line of her first New York Marathon. When they pulled themselves up to the top step, she embraced him and said in his ear, "You didn't doubt me, did you?"

Seeing the grit that he had so admired in her return, Mark thought that Cambodia was having the effect on Janet that he had hoped for. Perhaps, if the trip continued to go well, after she continued to return to her normal self, he could ask her if she were finally ready for a child.

After her mother had passed away from a heart attack two years before, Janet had quit her job as an associate at a law firm so she could manage her father's prescriptions and keep him from wandering out onto streets. The old Korean man, barely able to dress himself most days, spent most of his time staring up at the ceiling of their closet-sized spare bedroom, which they had planned to turn into a baby room until he had become ill.

One chilly winter night after being on call in Lennox Hill's emergency room, Mark walked into the lobby of their thirty-story apartment complex in Murray Hill, to find Janet embracing her father on the black tile floor. The stocky doorman hovered uselessly around them while on his cell phone. Janet's father was in his underwear, his legs and torso, just bones wrapped by bruised skin, emanating like knobby branches out of his white briefs. He kept rubbing a bruise on his bald head with his hands.

"I shouldn't have left him alone," Janet cried. "I only stepped out to go to the pharmacy for a minute." Mark stroked her shoulder, worriedly watching the veins near her temples pulse as she clenched her jaw in between sobs.

Since Janet was Korean American like Mark, he knew her family had told her throughout her life that she must care for her parents when they were elderly, or face scorn from their community. However, he could see that she was at her breaking point after months of looking after what was quickly becoming a one hundred thirty pound newborn, and he needed to take her somewhere far away.

"I didn't see this place in *Apocalypse Now*. No heart of darkness here," Janet said when the *tuk-tuk*, a moped with a rickshaw fashioned to the back, pulled up to their Siem Reap hotel after they had finished climbing temples.

Mark was relieved. The sleek resort, with a spacious, airy design, looked more like a modern art museum than a jungle hotel. Their room, with its king-sized bed and a forty-inch television that carried a hundred channels, dwarfed their New York cubbyhole. After a long morning hiking on jagged rocks and jungle moss and with mosquito bites torturing his neck and arms, he thought this oasis for foreigners was a perfect place to take refuge.

Deciding to spend the rest of the afternoon by the Olympic-sized hotel pool, they walked out in their swimsuits to a courtyard lined by manicured bushes and palm trees. By the pool, a young dark Asian boy who couldn't be more than fifteen massaged the hairy back of an old white man lying face down on a deck chair.

"Tell me I'm a beautiful baby," the old man said smiling with his eyes closed.

"You are a beautiful baby," the Asian boy said in a thick accent. Covered only by a black speedo, the white man's body resembled a desiccated walnut that protruded white hairs in all directions.

"I didn't need to see that," Janet said as they walked with their towels to the other side of the pool.

Mark shrugged, "The guide books warned us about stuff like that."

"Brando in the delta. We just found the heart of darkness, after all," Janet said looking away.

As Janet situated herself on a deck chair next to the bamboo pool bar, she started reading a Cambodian news journal translated into English, keeping it between her eyes and the massage. Mark noticed the headline, "Three Korean Men Arrested for Raping Girl in Karaoke Bar in Siem Reap."

Seeing the Asian boy rub down the Caucasian man did not disturb Mark. Many couples that he had encountered in New York were just a degree away from the pure *quid pro quo* that was on the other side of the pool. In his Upper East Side emergency room, graying men in expensive suits often visited teenage girls he treated for drug-related injuries or anorexia, and kissed them full on the mouth without shame.

Janet was the only person in his life that he saw consistently act without selfishness, leaving her career and delaying a family of her own so she could calm her father's tantrums and clean his filth. All she seemed to require was the faintest recognition in return, as she beamed whenever her father greeted her by shouting her Korean name, "Naijin!"

"He still knows who I am," Janet proclaimed smiling whenever someone asked about her father. Since Mark had never received such unconditional devotion, he dreamed of someday making his own child that happy by merely calling her name.

A few months before the trip, Mark and Janet took her father on a short bus ride into New Jersey to a nursing home lined with pine trees that was well-reviewed online.

"There are no other Koreans here," her father said in Korean as he gazed at the other patients being wheeled around the halls of the white-walled complex. Janet cried nonstop as she signed the papers admitting her father and as they moved his belongings into a double room reeking of disinfectant. The room was already half-occupied by a skeletal Caucasian man who was lying in bed and gazing blankly at the wall when they entered.

"You're doing the right thing," Mark told her, putting his arm around her as they put the last of his clothes in the rickety dresser.

After they had finished moving her father in, Mark excused himself out into the hall so Janet could take a moment to say goodbye. When he stepped back into the doorway of the room after a few minutes, Mark saw her father gingerly take Janet's hand with both of his as she cried by his bedside, and run his forefinger over her knuckles. Janet always took Mark's hand in the same way to placate him whenever he was troubled, a selfless act she seemed to perform out of habit. Mark thought that little touch needed to be passed down, perhaps to a girl who would remind him of Janet with time, giving them comfort as a matter of instinct instead of for a reward.

Mark booked the trip to Cambodia in the days that followed, a gift for Janet's 37th birthday, to help her refocus on her future, one that was always supposed to include children.

"Cambodia has the only baboon boxing league in the world. I can take you to watch," the tour guide said as he drove them out of the temple park after their second day of the tour. "These baboons were trained to fight like men with gloves." He smiled toothily as he looked at them in the backseat of the compact car through the rearview mirror.

"Really? Do they bob and weave and stuff?" Mark said intrigued, thinking baboon boxing was one of those other-worldly sights that he wanted to see in Cambodia.

Janet frowned, "Sounds a little bloody?"

Instead of watching baboon boxing that night, they went to a district of Siem Reap with Western-style bars and restaurants that their guide books had recommended, so they could see what expat nightlife was like in Cambodia.

On the way into town, Mark wondered if he should bring up children over a couple of drinks. His pulse quickened, as he was nervous around his wife for the first time in years. He remembered the speech Janet's father had given during their beach wedding in Half Moon Bay, California, attended only by a couple of dozen friends and family. Mark had expected the speech to be stuttered and awkward because her father, a manager of a liquor store in Koreatown for most of his life, spoke in halting English.

Instead, Mark had been pleasantly surprised by her father's eloquence, especially when he had said at the end, "You will be different people tomorrow than you are today. The person you fell in love with will change and so will you. What matters is that you speak truthfully to one another about who you are. The only words that matter are the truth, no matter how difficult they are to say."

As they walked through the buzzing crowds of downtown Siem Reap, they saw several old Caucasian men strolling about with girls or boys who were in the early stages of puberty. Mark was indifferent, though Janet clenched his hand and looked away as they passed each couple. A billboard sponsored by an international human rights organization blared, "Cambodian Children Are Like Your Children. What is a Crime in Your Home is a Crime Here."

After strolling through a few blocks where boney men with shattered limbs begged for spare change, they entered a bar that was built to resemble an Irish pub, with dark wood panels and televisions showing soccer in a barely lit, smoky room. The place had a mix of old Western men, Cambodian teens, and a few broad-shouldered Western women carrying framed backpacks, whom Mark would have put his money on if a brawl had erupted.

Janet surprised him almost immediately after they sat down in a little booth. She reached over for his right hand and said, "Okay, I just have to say one thing that I feel like we've been avoiding."

"What?" Mark said, sensing she was about to disappoint him as she ran her forefinger over the tops of his knuckles.

She continued, "I know we discussed having a baby before this happened to my dad, and I know we have the spare room open now, but I just can't."

"You mean, never?"

"Not while my father's alive, and maybe not for a while after that." Mark looked quietly down at the ground. He hated the sound of "a while," since he knew that her father could linger for years with Alzheimer's.

"Say something, Mark," she pleaded when his silence lasted more than a few seconds. Mark wanted to tell her she was getting too old for delays, but he could not think of a way

of asking her to bear his child without sounding completely selfish. Janet's eyes bore into his forehead as he kept his head down, mulling a response.

An elderly Caucasian man limping around with a wooden cane sat down at a table for two next to their booth. He clearly was not in Cambodia to view the temples, as there was no way he could navigate the rocky stairs in his condition. A few moments later, a dark Asian woman who looked about twenty sat down across from him. In full view of the other customers, he took out his wallet and paid her a few bills. The girl smiled.

"Not again. I swear I'm gonna say something soon," Janet said.

"Why does it bother you so much? New York isn't so much different. Lot of old men with money date young people." Mark thought the only difference was that people in Cambodia didn't cover themselves with code words like "high maintenance" or "marrying up."

Janet said. "That's not the same, Mark. Those two know maybe twenty words in common." Her voice rose to a point that most people in the bar could hear her.

To Mark, three words seemed to matter most at that moment, *quid pro quo*. If he demanded a child, he asked himself, how different would he be from the old Caucasian man next to him? He would be seeking a bodily sacrifice from his wife in exchange for his unwavering support of her and her father. He couldn't do that to Janet, nor could he imagine life without her comforting touch, even if her decision left a bile-like taste in his mouth.

"Look, I didn't come here to feel superior to everyone else. Just who the hell are we anyway?" Mark said frustrated.

Janet rose and stormed off toward the restroom.

"Douche bag!" she shouted toward the old Caucasian man as she walked past his table. The old man's face instantly flushed, and the Cambodian girl hid her face with her hand.

Two white women backpackers smoking by the dartboard laughed, as one raised a pint of Guinness admiringly in Janet's direction.

After spending another hour drinking mostly in silence, Mark, a bit tipsy from his ale, walked with Janet out into a street still crowded with Caucasian tourists and hawkers. A slender, middle-aged *tuk-tuk* driver jumped in front of them. "Back to hotel?" he asked. "Three dollars!"

Mark nodded his head. As they stumbled into the carriage in the back of the *tuk-tuk*, Mark noticed a weathered picture of a ten-year-old girl taped to the left handlebar of the driver's moped, and felt a tinge of envy, wishing he had such a memento of his own. As

they rode through a dusty road that had no street lamps, they covered their mouths with their shirts as repellent fumes from the back of the moped streamed into their faces.

"Truce?" Mark asked, still a bit flustered, but wanting to put his arm around his wife.

"Yes," she said, nuzzling on his shoulder.

About two miles from the expat district, as they passed a row of outdoor tent stores and food stands for locals, Mark glimpsed Cambodians when no tourists were nearby to impress. Red-faced, boisterous men teased each other as they swilled liters of beer. Groups of women sat at large tables with their children, either chatting with each other or talking into cell phones, which Mark was surprised to see everywhere in one of the poorest countries on earth.

Suddenly, a giant black object broke across his line of sight, from left to right just a couple of feet from his face, and sent the moped flying across the road. They spun wildly in the carriage of the *tuk-tuk* until it fell on its side, jettisoning Mark into some grass at the side of the road with Janet falling on top of him.

"What was that?" Janet screamed, as she gripped Mark's torso with both her arms. The carriage twisted around like a top a few feet away and came to a rest between them and the road, blocking them from seeing what had happened to the driver.

Mark quickly glanced at Janet. She was dazed, but otherwise looked unhurt but for a few minor abrasions.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Really," she said.

Then, he checked himself. He was bleeding from both of his elbows where he had hit the ground, but was otherwise unhurt.

"Stay here, okay?" Mark said. "Don't look. He's probably very badly injured."

She nodded, her glassy eyes seeming to slowly process what was happening.

Mark rose and walked around the carriage for a good look at the road. He surveyed the scene. A pick-up truck had backed out of a blind alley between two nearby huts and hammered the moped of the *tuk-tuk* from the left side. A group of locals had run over from the outdoor stands and gathered by the body of the *tuk-tuk* driver, which had been thrown half way into the tall grass on the far side of the road.

"I'm a doctor," he said, running towards the crowd.

"No, no, no," men and women shouted at him, their hands urging him back.

"Doctor," he said pointing to himself. He made the shape of a cross with his hands, trying to convey the Red Cross symbol that he had seen on foreign aid trucks in Siem Reap. "Doctor. Help. Doctor. Help."

One of the men nodded, taking Mark by the hand and leading him to the driver. The man screamed to the crowd, "*Koat chiuh kroo pet!*"

When Mark saw the body, head twisted at an unnatural angle away from the torso, he knew that the driver's neck was broken. His skull had crumpled, like a car bumper after a crash, and blood was seeping from his face and neck.

Mark checked for a pulse to make sure, though he already knew the driver was dead. He looked at the crowd and simply shook his head with resignation. Instantly, faces that were wide-eyed with shock became overcome by a tide of mourning, with peals of grief ringing Mark's ears.

From one of the alleys, a middle-aged woman and a young girl, the one pictured on the driver's handlebar, arrived on a moped. Several people in the crowd screamed when the two approached and waved at them to stay away from the driver's body. Seeing tears stream down the girl's face, Mark felt a bulge grow in his throat.

A few men ran in front of the moped, preventing the two from getting close to the driver. Blocked from the body, the older woman stepped onto the road a few feet away from Mark, fell to her knees, and repeatedly slammed her head into the red dirt.

"Ba! Ba! Ba!" The little girl screamed as she tried to fight her way out of the arms of some women who had rushed to embrace her. "*Baaaaaaaaaaaa!*"

The girl's high-pitched scream ascended into pure agony, so pained but beautiful that Mark thought it was the truest word he'd ever heard. Hearing the girl cry for her lost father, he wanted a child of his own more than ever. To his surprise, he saw Janet approach, no longer dazed, but upright and composed amidst the full din of the crowd.

"Stay back," he said.

"It's okay. I want to help you," she replied. She could see the bottom half of the driver's body jutting out of the tall grass. Instinctively, he had asked her to stay on the sidelines, but seeing her so calm, he sensed he was wrong to have tried to protect her, and thought that he had perhaps underestimated his own wife.

"*Baaaaaaaaaaaa!*" the girl screamed again, shaking the night.

"Is he dead?" Janet asked looking at the pool of blood that darkened the brown dirt of the road.

"Ye...yes." To Mark's surprise, his voice cracked. Though he had watched numerous patients die in equally gruesome ways, this death struck him in the pit of his heart. He felt the blood run out of his face.

"Baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Mark, it's not your fault. There's nothing you could do," Janet said, as she took his hand and ran her forefinger over his knuckles. He could see that she was confused by his ashen, stricken face.

As Janet looked toward the screaming child, her eyes began to well. While several men carried the body away, the girl continued to cry while a group of women gripped her tightly, blanketing her with a layer of sympathy. Mark could no longer stand his surroundings and closed his eyes, though nothing in Cambodia or his emergency room had fazed him before.

Janet said, "It's okay. We'll get through this. I'm here for you."

Mourning for a child who would never be born, knowing that no one would ever grieve for him as that young girl did for her father, he held Janet as if she kept him from flying off the earth.