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The Apartment

by Jeesun Choi

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I.

Lenn clutched the pen. It cracked and bled ink onto her fingers, creating a net of blue veins on her skin. The landlord, his thumbs hooked on the pocket and his toes hooked into his flip flops, waits for her to sign on the line. She looked around the apartment one last time. The papers were coming off the walls like desiccated bark and the place smelled acidic with a persisting strain of moth balls. Thai letters were punched across the four-page lease, pheu pheung, nu nua, due duek, and Lenn could not remember how to put the string of letters together to make any meaning. She only understood the line at the end of the document. She never wanted to stay, but she was going to. And she did.

Bangkok was the final leg of the two-week long trip with David, whom she met in Chicago between lecture halls and circles of friends and when she was still known as Glenda. They lingered near each other for two years before they started talking and when

they did, they couldn't stop. One day, as they were riding the loop through the buildings, David mentioned that they could go on a trip. They could go anywhere in the world. He wanted to take a backpack through Southeast Asia, live off of nothing, see the world through a different lens and maybe see what it was like for Lenn to live in Thailand. She never talked about it and when he prodded her, she assured him that there was nothing to see. All that was left was a shell of a city, maybe it was interesting at one point in time, but now it was a place where people came because their companies rejected their application for Europe where it was a better place for their kids to grow up. Instead, they had to settle for Thailand.

In Chicago, she had sorted herself away from the expats, the global citizens of liberal arts institutions and the unwitting dual citizens. All the time she had known David, she wasn't sure if he knew that. Maybe this trip to Bangkok will help him see. What she wanted him to see, she wasn't sure, but she wanted him to see that there was a difference between her and the rest of the farangs that drifted in and out of Thailand.

As soon as the possibility of going back to Thailand entered her head, it proliferated in her mind until it consumed her thoughts as she walked to work, ate lunch and waited to fall asleep. When David planned a route across Laos and Cambodia, to all those places that even Lenn hasn't been to, she insisted on making a quick pit stop in Bangkok. "It's the cheapest airport to fly out of."

But when they got to Thailand, things changed quickly. David turned into the monstrous farangs that Lenn knew only too well. He bought and wore shirts with fat

people trying to have sex and let the vendors dupe him over and over again. Every time he was swindled his face got redder as he sputtered. He had this strong sense of right and wrong and, god damn it, he was going to have it the right way. He couldn't stand the fact that they were taking advantage of him. Holding close to the legacy of superiority and entitlement, he was going to make his place known to these people.

He knew that this perturbed Lenn, but the more he acted out, the harder it became to hold back. It was like pouring oil into a burning fire. Soon enough, Lenn felt the flames licking at her arms and they left scarlet swatches on her skin, the ultimate symbol of farangness, the crude and unkempt skin tone of the whites. She had never been this red before, outside the Grand Palace shouting for reasons that even she did not know. A significant crowd gathered around them, sipping their sweet drinks and goggling at the two farangs losing control.

She couldn't stand him. She couldn't stand the person that he was forcing her to become. She left him on the streets and went back to the hostel that afternoon. She was no farang and couldn't be around anyone who, like David, couldn't see the blaring difference between ignorance and stupidity. Ten years of Bangkok under her belt, Lenn knew when to leap across the equals sign and how to position herself. Every foreigner had to learn this dance of delicate positioning, knowing when to traverse the double hyphen and flip their positive-negative signs. Some of them, after a few years in Bangkok, danced fairly well though they could not articulate what they were doing. And there were those that knew about it but could not articulate it enough to be able to learn it.

They spent their years in frustration and longed for the day they were transferred out of Thailand. But the worst kind, they were totally blind to any of these negotiations happening on the streets or in the minds. They walked around in a bubble of complete oblivion.

As the days wore on, she sorted herself away from David, the confident and edgy boy of Chicago. What she couldn't let go was that she didn't see it coming at all. She failed to see that he carried the thoughts and understanding of an old-world colonialism, which proliferated in the heat of Thailand. Lenn witnessed the dance, knew the dance and aimed for that perfect balance. But she fell short, every time and she couldn't stand to see herself continuing to fail something she knew so well. It was her defeat. She had come short and she couldn't forgive herself.

But another thought crawled itself out of her head. Was she any different from David? The same screaming farang, stumbling through the streets of Bangkok, clutching the sour legacy of foreigners and diplomacy. Was she that different?

She made up her mind. She was going to stay. "You are crazy," David stuffed his suitcases with plastic elephants, key chains and bamboo whistles, "You are absolutely crazy." She left him in the hostel room and caught a taxi to Sukhumvit Soi 83. As the flight time neared, she wondered what they would have been like if they never came to Bangkok and lived in an enclosure of the U.S. They could have been fine. They could have been better than fine. The taxi pulled up in front of the Rose Garden and she shook the thought out of her head.

Lenn found a routine by the end of the month, a series of destinations and jobs that established her new life. With the ticket refund, she bought a mat and blankets, which she laid out in the corner of the living room, and stocked the fridge. She found a school that needed a teacher, a small market and bought dress shirts for work. Like other people in the building, she does the laundry by hand and hangs them up on the balcony. Some days the paint chips from the peeling building walls fly onto her clothes and she picks them off one with her fingers.

A month into the routine, she recognizes the seven thirty bus driver and the old ladies in paisley button ups curled up against the window. At school, only a few students gather around her when she comes through the gates, her farang novelty wearing off like cheap paint.

She promised herself not to go beyond the Ekkamai station, what she believed to be the start of expat enclave as she knew it. She stayed in soi 65 and above, the sparse part of Bangkok where people lived and didn't just filter through. She wanted to test her farangness against the part of Bangkok that had no desire to be lenient, forgiving or understanding. She wanted to know if she can live in a community that didn't care about her or her money.

One evening, Lenn shared five flights of stairs with a woman wearing a tight pink

skirt and a tube top. Lenn said “Sawatdee kha”, but the woman ignored her. She had difficulty climbing the stairs with plat-formed shoes and tight skirt and often paused on the landings, shaking out her cramped feet and muttering to herself. Lenn felt as though she should wait for her. When she did, the woman looked up from her shoes and fired words at her, words that Lenn did not know, but understood it to be threatening. She kept stepping up the stairs, her feet dully sounding the concrete and the cursing wafting through the stairwell.

When the sun completely sets, she lies on the mat and hears the whirr of insects and evening birds. She opens the windows to allow some air, but all that circulates is humidity. Every night, she tries to fall asleep to the sounds before the grunting starts and the English words that only she can understand seeps through the ceiling. Lenn has seen the man, a fat white man always in a stained singlet, dragging himself along the soi.

At first it was hard, but now, it is as almost too easy. She is picking up Thai quickly, and the hours she logged in Thai language classes as a sixteen-year-old during the summer, in between pool parties and brunches, is finally paying off. The teachers at the school like her, the students like her and she now nods greetings to the people that lived in her building. The only rude awakening in her new life is the visa run that she had to do the end of every month. Without it, she was a natural resident of the eastern stretch of Bangkok.

II.

The land rushes past her. The pull of the bus nails her to her seat. The sheet on her headrest stinks of narcotic naps. Not a soul present outside, but on this dusty stretch that carves its way from Bangkok to Poipet, visa runners pack themselves in the eighty-seater. In a moment, multiple vans pass in swift succession, one silver bullet after another, vroom, vroom, vroom, vroom. The wrinkled drivers glance at the bus speeding on the next lane. Lenn picks at the white tips of her nails, turning it translucent. No bathroom or smoke break. They go on.

“Is this seat free?”

Lenn blinks and looks up. A twenty-something-year-old with a rough auburn cut. Eye shadows in baby blue shimmer and glossy lips, tell-tale signs of MBK mall. Her eyes spark with the question.

“Yes.”

Though it shouldn't, from time to time English catches her off guard. It creeps up on her like a good prank, the pail full of water tottering at the ledge of a door. The sudden douse never cold and always expected, but it trips her up nonetheless. Especially now because no one, except the driver on this bus, is Thai.

“Thanks,” Baby Blue says, “The man I was sitting next to kept drooling on my shoulder.”

She settles down. From her plastic sack of miscellany she pulls out a bunch of

bananas, “Want one?”

“No, I’m good.”

Usually, bananas have this pungency that explodes as soon as it is peeled, but this one in Baby Blue’s hand doesn’t smell like anything. A banana khai, she deduces. Speech soon becomes yet another stranger on the bus as she polishes one banana khai after another. The peels go straight back into the plastic bag, which soon is also dropped on the floor with the rest of her belongings.

“I’m Masha by the way.”

“I’m Lenn.”

“My seventh time,” Masha says, “How about you?”

“About twentieth. Around there.”

Masha raises her eyebrows, in awe, respect and perplexity. Lenn sees her frown, trying to process a quick course of arithmetic, twenty divided by twelve months in a year, which yields two wholesome integers and a crap load of remainders.

“Two whole years in Bangkok,” Masha nods, “What do you do?”

“I teach.”

“Where?”

“Ramkangheang area.”

“I’m in Ruamrudee. Not the international school out far, that is.”

“Elementary?”

“Yes, you too?”

“Yep.”

“How did you manage that? Can’t get a contract that’s longer than a year.”

“As long as I look white, right?”

Masha cracks up laughing, but it ends weakly. Her lips start to twitch as if she’s trying to come up with a joke in response, but all that scuttles out is her last strand of laughter scuttles out of her throat. She sighs. She can't find anything more to say.

Lenn turns to the window and let the parched fields knock her in a stupor, the rattle becoming a rocking and rocking turning into routine and routine into knowledge that she can last in Thailand as long as she wants to. Lenn continues to look out the window for something interesting, but the land remains unyielding to her gaze. The rampant dry season bores down on all things crawling below.

The bus pulls to the border and the visa runners stumble out. Lenn takes a quick scan of the crowd. Most of the visa runners are backpackers with singlets and flip flops, but a few are expats who have never been to the border before. They don bug-eyed sunglasses and linen trousers, frowning at the pick-up trucks sputtering into life and street children running in figure eights. A tree stands observing all, its branch wiping its forehead. Fruit vendors scatter the sound of bells ringing all over the dusty lot and dry coughs fill the air. Soon Lenn spots Khun Noy weaving through the cars and people. When Khun Noy spots

Lenn, she maniacally waves her hands.

“Sawadee Lenn!”

Khun Noy slaps Lenn’s forearm with her gloved hands and says her name in pitched excitement. *Lenn!* When Lenn arrived on the border for her first visa run two years ago, Khun Noy was working that afternoon shift. With her gloved hands, Khun Noy snatched up Lenn's passport and screwed her eyes to read her name. Her tongue twisted and rolled, but soon clicked into a sound that made sense to her: *Lenn!* From then on, that became her name. The expats that she has known for years absolutely loved her new locally flavored name. And she has been in Thailand for twelve years, she had a right to a Thai name.

Khun Noy glances at her watch and starts announcing the immigration procedures in Tenglish. The visa runners stare back at her with parted mouths. She points to the line stemming from the concrete shack with a Thai flag limply hanging down its pole. They latch onto the end of the line.

When the sun reaches the zenith, the immigration officers break for lunch. They pull a metal grate across the counter and lock the border gate. The backpackers squat on the concrete floor. Lenn stretches her hamstrings. Trucks transporting pigs halt in front of the gates and soon the entire place stinks like feces. An expat couple complains, their handkerchief brought to their noses and the pigs grunt like phlegm-choked men. At around two p.m., the officers open the gate and the counters. The pigs drive away. The line inches forward.

Masha sits next to Lenn on their way back to Bangkok, not because she should or could, but because she actually wants to. Lenn tries to come up with a good enough excuse, maybe say that she is feeling nauseous, but she can't fake throwing up at all, the heaving sounding like an awkward string of vowels in her head. But Masha isn't all that bad. She can be worse, considering the I'm-finding-myself type tourist that she is. Lenn moves her bag again to make room.

“I had a friend from Vancouver that ended up staying for more than a month. But after the visa run,” she sighs, “She swore that she’ll never do that again.”

It has been a while since the last passenger boarded, but the driver is still nowhere in sight. All of a sudden, it gets dark and the faraway rumbles punctures gaps in their speech. The fruit sellers out in the parking lot linger without the intention of seeking shelter. They take their time as if their nonchalance and the power of “may pen ray” can delay the storm.

“It won’t actually rain, would it?” Masha asks.

“No. It’s not quite Songkran yet.”

“Oh I know. If it was, I’d be out of this town the first day.”

A token Canadian out of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan who has opened up to a life of cosmopolitan self-esteem. Lenn has seen this type of long-term tourists too many times,

those bright-eyed young things that can go back whenever they choose to, as a changed or an unchanged person who has seen a lot, experienced a lot and now will forever treasure the memory of hot, steamy Bangkok. To them, Bangkok is a good distraction from the real world, its inhabitants as real as the good parts of their daydream.

“Where do you want to go?” Lenn asks.

“Probably up north this time, to Luang Prabang.”

“That’s far.”

“So how long have you lived here? Three, four years?”

It’s the milestone question again, asked in a particular time in an expat’s life, relationship, in a bar, on a street, on a bus, the name. The nth year that they should all toast to.

Depends when the stopwatch starts. The moment the immigration officer hands back your passport, when you get your first water adjustment diarrhea, when you learn how to swim and to perch on the back of the motorcycle. Or further back when your dad got the corporate call and couldn’t say no, or way way before all that. Do what you want, trace yourself all the way back, thinking to yourself that you can make sense, that you are the harbinger of the future. Mark the moment when you were born, when you were conceived because it seems like something. Something monumental. Or maybe just

mental.

But to conceive yourself, to incubate the if-so and can-it-be. If you can insert that sliver of a document into the no man's zone, the strip of guarded land, the catch-all and be-all, you just may be able to slip through the cracks and escape all that madness by the borderline of who are you and who are you really.

Unfortunately Lenn has already killed the stopwatch. It had stopped running a long, long time ago.

The bus pulls in front of Sukhumvit Plaza, a glass complex of Korean hairdressers, restaurants and porn comic bookstores. The visa runners exit the bus and disperse into the evening streets. A pang of dizziness circles Lenn's head as she steps onto the pavement. Her throat scratches. She hasn't drunken anything in hours.

“Hey,” Masha speaks as she gets off the bus. “Do you want to get something to eat here? Or are you too tired, you know, we could...”

“No, let's do it.” Lenn says. Masha's face brightens up immediately.

They go into a small Korean restaurant with Christmas decorations still dangling around its shopfront. They order a bowl of Kimchi soup, rice and two bottles of Chang beer. The food arrives quickly. Lenn downs half the beer in a second. The bitterness tames her head. They efficiently empty the bowl of rice and the side dishes. The soup

arrives and they spoon the contents on the rice, washing down the salt with the beer. As they eat, they get to know a little about each other, the transient likes and dislikes, anecdotes and the bewildering moments that questioned their motives.

“What brought you to Thailand?” Masha asks as she spoons in the soup.

Lenn senses the twelve-year narrative clawing its way up her throat, but she pushes it down with powerful contractions of her throat and washes it down with the soup, swallowing one story after another until they settle down on the bottom of her stomach like indigestible fiber. She pulls out a phrase that makes sense to newcomers, something that sounds shallow enough for others to lose interest in her. She masks all the years she lived in Bangkok with a shrug and a cough. “I just felt like it.”

Lenn hasn't spoken in English for a while and it feels good to speak without thinking too hard. Korean men with ratty beards soaked in cigarette stench look over to their table. Masha lowers her voice. When they polish off their beers, weariness hits them. The kitchen maid brings out the bill and they try to get moving again. Masha takes a corner off of a brochure and writes something down, “Here's my number,” she smiles, “We should do something.”

Lenn stashes the piece of paper into her back pocket. They step out and see that the night has completely descended onto the streets. A motorcycle driver honks at Masha and mimes out her big breasts. Masha flicks them off and walks on. The drivers cackle behind them. Her abruptness surprises Lenn. As they part ways, Masha reminds Lenn of her phone number. Lenn takes a deep breath in, finally alone, finally without the farang

with red-hair obviousness. But she wants to look back to see if Masha is still there. Something is different about her. She turns her head. But Masha has moved on completely.

The only person that knew that Lenn was back in Bangkok was Ella. Lenn thought it would be safe to tell her as she was tucked away in downtown Sydney, basking in her new job, beach life and the prospects of settling into an upper middle class lifestyle. But last week, reasons not completely known to Lenn, Ella came back to Bangkok. Lenn guessed that Ella may have been fired, but she showed no sign of remorse. She arrived with three suitcases, her convivial mother and a mission to “live it up.” She revived the expat life she had in Bangkok, oh how she missed it, going out for drinks, brunches, workout sessions and coffee dates.

Lenn used her school job as an excuse to avoid seeing her, but as days passed, it got harder to hold her off. “It's been three days, is everything okay?” Lenn could hear that Ella didn't understand why Lenn was acting odd. It didn't make sense and she didn't have time to sit down and think too deeply. “Well, it's Friday tomorrow. You don't have school in the evenings, right? Let's do dinner at MK.” Lenn heard the tone in Ella's voice, the one that she heard often back when they were in school, when Lenn often relapsed into this self-destructive mode, refusing party invitations and sinking into silence. To Ella, this

wasn't the first time Ella encountered Lenn at her oddest. It was Ella that saved Lenn from her brooding self. She was very proud of her accomplishments.

When the sky train arrives at Ekkamai, the crowd changes. The bagless tourists fumble over the railings and at Phrom Phong and a deluge of shoppers with cellphones tightly bound to their ears rush in. For over a decade, this was her way home. She thought she may have forgotten, but the path is still familiar. She can navigate her way through without a second thought and only when she doubts is when she loses her sense of bearing.

Lenn walks into the restaurant. As soon as Ella spots her, she lets out a squeal and attacks her with an embrace. Whatever unwillingness that lingered in Lenn is gone when she sees Ella's hair, flaming red with the ends pooling in curls around her shoulders. "Yeah I know. Surprise!" Lenn can see that she is ready to talk a lot tonight.

Throughout the dinner, Ella's phone buzzes and she responds by furiously punching in a text.

"Who is that?" Lenn asks.

Ella's fingers fumble, "Oh, nothing. Some friends."

Lenn presses for an answer.

"Sneha is asking where the hell we are," Ella pauses, "I promised we'd meet them at the shisha bar. And," she points her finger at Lenn, "Don't even think about trying to get out of it. You are coming."

Separate from the throng of bellied men dangling their shoes off their barstools

with an arm of a Thai girl around their necks, the shisha bar they are going to nestles itself in a forest of lush trees. Smokers erect chimneys of shisha on their tables, watching the smoke come out from their mouths. Sneha, the girl that never spoke to Lenn in high school, stands up and the other two boys next to her follow suit. They all laugh at Ella's Aussie mannerisms. "Don't you call McDonalds Mackers there?" Sneha flips her thick waves and twirls the locks with her fingers. When she studied abroad in Sydney, she met a guy. He wasn't like any other guys that she has dated before. She was drawn to the fact that he didn't seem to have that paranoia that so many Thai-Indian boys had, constantly looking over their shoulders in fear of their cousins that were spying on them on behalf of their mothers and aunts. This guy though, has never left Australia before. If he only knew about her crazy Sikh family. He was sweet and all, but after a little while he got boring. A good white distraction, Sneha laughs.

They take turns puffing smoke. "This one," she points, "is grape mint and that one orange beer." Lenn tries each one and nods at Sneha's rave reviews. The gang starts to look more relaxed as they exhale. "Ashwin, Ben, do you know Ella and Lenn?" They extend their hands. Lenn remembers Ashwin from the high school talent show, plucking his bass and bobbing his head to the music. He still has the sleepy eyes and chubby lips. "You guys should all come out tonight. Khao San."

"I am not in the clothes to go," Sneha says.

"You live two streets down. Go change."

"Why are you going to Khao San on a Tuesday night?"

Ashwin and Ben glance at each other.

“Because. We slept till three and worked out.”

Ben looks around for a waitress, “I’m starving man. Can we order?”

“Dude, drink first. Empty stomach, take advantage of it.” Ashwin shoves a beer in Ben’s hands.

Ben takes a swig and looks around, “Where the hell is the waitress.”

The bartender turns up the music. They shout to get themselves heard. After fifteen minutes, Ben finally gets the waitress’ attention. But she holds out her palm and takes order from another table first. “What is wrong with her?” Ella cracks up laughing. The coal on the hookah gets changed and Ella volunteers to open it up. But she can’t stop laughing, the smoke escaping from the corner of her lips and the charcoal getting hotter and hotter. She almost knocks over the shisha, but Ashwin catches it with his free hand. “Sneha, take this away from this girl. She has too much smoke in her head.”

“I hate Khao San,” Sneha speaks, “I don’t know why you guys go there.”

“It’s wild. Why don’t you like Khao San, that’s the real question.”

“Okay,” she sits up, folding her legs below her, “I don’t hate Khao San. I just hate Diamond and Blue Grass. Those are the only places we ever go to.”

Ben snatches the pipe from Sneha’s hands, “We always make it fun. Don’t worry about it.”

“I miss high school. I really do,” Sneha twists a lock of hair near her temple, “I just miss everyone being here in one place.”

Pizza that the boys managed to order arrives. It is the size of a dinner plate.

“Seriously?” Ben says, but he digs in right away. They finish it in a blink and sips shisha to digest. Ashwin looks thoughtful before he turns to Lenn.

“You know, I don’t remember you at all from high school.”

Suddenly all the attention is on Lenn. She breathes out the smoke and tries to obscure their faces, but they just become more intent through all the haze. To Ashwin, Lenn was just another expat kid that moved. He has seen her a number of times, but didn’t feel the need to register her face. These kids never lasted long in Thailand so why bother about them? She shrugs the question off like he once shrugged her off. Then she feels a strange compulsion to lie.

“I don’t remember you either.”

“I’ve been at that school all my life. K through thirteen. How long were you there.”

“Ten years.”

He holds the smoke in his lungs, caught off guard by her answer. He blows out the smoke in a thin controlled way. He nods and sucks in a little more. “Okay, we better get going.” He calls over a waiter to split the bill. The waitress takes over. Ashwin explains again what to include in his bill. She listens intently and heads towards the kitchen.

Egged on by the boys and with a silent permission from Sneha, Ella tells Sneha’s long-kept secret of the night when she hooked up with the white boy. Sneha leans into the back cushion with a smirk. She listens like she is hearing someone else’s story. “He still

thinks she's from India." Sneha blows out a ring, "he really was sweet and good looking, but," she taps her head, "Not much going on here."

Ben rubs his arm, "What happened to Ricky? I thought you guys were still together from high school?"

Everyone goes quiet. Ashwin laughs to cover it up, "Dude, sore topic," he cranes his neck, "Where the hell is our bill?"

A waiter brings a pizza over. "What's this?" Ben says. Another waiter brings three opened bottles of San Miguel. "Wait, hold up," Ashwin looks around, "They frigging reordered everything I asked to put on the bill." He asks for the waitress to come over. "This is so dumb." Ashwin explains that he told her to split the bill. She glares at him and throws down her hands. "Oh hoy," she grabs the pizza and the beer bottles. "A very big mistake," she yells, "A very big mistake." Ella blinks with a smile, as she often does when she wants to avoid a confrontation, as the waitress wipes down the table.

Ashwin leans back, "If she keeps this up, she better go back to the village."

"Or start prostituting."

Ben picks up the pipe, "What's the qualification for this job anyway?"

"Must speak Thai," Sneha quips. Everyone laughs. It's a good one, good delivery, just about borderline offensive enough to keep the protests at bay, just right on. They mimic the waitress, stuttering in bad Thai and worse English and when they finish imitating, they slap the table, laughing at how messed up this world is and how they are forced to take part.

“What do you guys know about her?”

They all turn their head, trying to figure out who just spoke. Lenn speaks up again.

“I don't think we are in a position to make statements like that.”

Ashwin rolls his eyes, “Okay.”

“It was a joke, Glenda,” Sneha says warmly.

Ella shoots her a look. Did Lenn have to kill the buzz? Lenn merely looks back and shrugs. She didn't need an admittance to whatever group that they had going on.

The waitress brings the bill over. “Man, she didn't even split it. You know what, whatever,” Ashwin throws down some banknotes, “I got the bill.

Sneha stands up, “We should get going anyways.”

The waitress stands a little way from them and laughs, covering her mouth with her hands. Sneha says, “Khao mao laew. She's drinking on the job dude.”

Ashwin shakes his head, “Better wake up. She shouldn't feel so comfortable just because she knows a few English words. Back to the village if she's not too careful.”

“You are just like your dad,” Sneha says.

Ashwin buckles, “How am I like him? Not even close, man. He would have fired her sorry ass.”

They split their ways at the mouth of the soi. Cars rush by on Sukhumvit Road. “See you on Songkran?” Ashwin gives Ella a hug, “No, I'm leaving before then.” He looks sorry, “Dude, that sucks. But Sneha, you are definitely coming out to Khao San on

Songkran. What do they say in Chapel Hill, YOLO, right?"

"Dude it sounds all wrong when you say it." Sneha laughs. "But yeah, I'll see."

The others all head home, but Ella is still buzzing. "The night's not over, but everyone's gone."

"Why don't you go with Ashwin and Ben? They are still waiting for a taxi."

Ella looks coy, "Should I?"

"Yeah why not?"

"See you tomorrow, okay?" Ella skips over to the boys. They bring Ella in and she laughs again. Lenn feels suddenly very heavy. She crosses the road for a taxi. Three police officers still sit around the stall where they bring in suspicious looking individuals to check their immigration status. Their iced drinks sweat all over the foldout table. One of them stops an Arab looking man and asks him to have a seat. The other officers pace around the chair. The Arab fumbles in his pockets for his passport. Lenn quickly gets into an empty taxi that pulls right in front of her.

The last note of 'Advance Australia Fair' fade as the choir singers close their mouths. Soon the ballroom fills with the sounds of people dragging their chairs. Ella yanks her bodice up before she sits down and whispers to Lenn, "Isn't this fun?" The drunk gentleman, who has been trying to chat Lenn up the entire evening, taps her shoulders

again. She pretends not to have felt it, but he insists on it.

“So how long have you been in Bangkok?”

Lenn glances back to Ella for help, but she is not paying attention.

“I've been here eleven years.”

The gentleman frowns, “Are you half Thai?”

She shakes her head.

“You are American.” He stabs his nose with his finger, “The words get all caught up in there.”

He reaches for his wine glass, but he realizes that it's empty. He signals for more.

“Cheers,” he takes a gulp and wipes his mouth, “Third glass is the charm.”

“Should you be drinking this much?”

“You can't live in Bangkok with all these expats without wine.”

“You are an expat.”

He smirks, “You are too, darling. Better drink up.” He takes another swig and sinks in his chair. Lenn wants to ask him something, but Ella stops her.

“He sits at my parents' table every year,” she shakes her head, “and always gets trashed.”

“Well thanks a lot for giving me this seat.”

“It was a free ticket, so.”

Lenn laughs, “I didn't know I meant that much to you.”

“You'll thank me later.” She clinks Lenn's glass.

Ella guilt tripped her into coming, saying that her family was in Bangkok for only four more days and if Lenn was a good friend, she would come with her. And, Ella added, it would be fun to see all those old farts.

Laughter erupts on the opposite side of the table. Ella's mother throws back her head. Her rich drawls inspire laughs around the table. She has been enjoying every moment back in Bangkok, the past six years at Taree having sucked out everything that made her interesting. Moving to middle of nowhere Australia was a silent deal that she struck with her husband, something that she promised to do if he continued to turn a blind eye to her late nights, late mornings and unexplained absences. She threw parties with Lenn's mother on their apartment rooftop. Ella and Lenn spent countless evenings preparing, mingling and looking for the perfect time to slip out to Red Wagon, a Volkswagen van converted into a road-side bar. When they graduated high school, their mothers threw a huge goodbye party inviting everyone they knew, both Australian and American. It was a goodbye for the mothers too, as all the families were moving back home after graduation. The two mothers got extremely inebriated and sang Abba songs all night. As par tradition, Ella and Lenn slipped out of the party and ended up at the Red Wagon, where they took shots, got bitten by mosquitoes and pondered if Chicago and Sydney would be anything like Bangkok.

As the years passed, Bangkok became the pristine place of happiness and carefree teen years. Lenn's classmates always came back during holidays, reliving memories, hookups and friendships. They gnashed their teeth at the idea of ever leaving Bangkok,

but at the end of the day, they all went back to their real lives.

Whenever Ella says, “I love Bangkok”, “I want to live here forever”, her voice warps to a string of high squeaky notes. A week ago, Lenn pointed this out to Ella. “I don't know what you are talking about,” Ella wrinkled her nose, “You don't even vaguely like Bangkok. Why are *you* living here?” Lenn couldn't answer her question then and she doesn't think she can answer it now. All she knows is that she is different from everyone else.

When they are done with the dessert, Ella gets up to “have a turnabout the room”. Ever since returning to Sydney to attend university, Ella has transformed into an anglophile, appropriating mannerisms and styles of speech from BBC adaptation of Charles Dickens' novels and gritty television shows that portray the “true lives of working-class Brits”. All this is enough to offend the least culturally sensitive person, but Ella's wide blue eyes coupled with cosmopolitanism suggested in “I lived in Thailand for eight years” throws people off.

They walk around the ballroom and check out other tables. Women flaunt their self-designed dresses tailored in materials too thick and too shiny. Back home, they were nobodies, the ones that were trampled over by the urbanites. But now, they are not afraid of their provincial roots. They are proud of the Koalas, Didgeridoos and the Outback. A man takes off his waistcoat and flings it onto the back of his chair. His sweat stains the polyester. His wife reprimands a waitress, articulating English words like they are precious stones in her mouth, each word costing her valuable time.

“Lenn, Ella!”

A women's voice calls out to them. They spot their ex-science teacher. She came to teach when they were in year eight. During her second year of teaching, she became the center of a marital scandal involving an American couple that recently moved to Bangkok. She ended up with the guy. The ex-wife moved back to the States with the kids.

“Lenn, look at you. You are so mature.” She strokes Lenn’s arms, “Come meet my son, Mark. He is visiting me over the summer.”

A guy, wedged in between all of his mother's acquaintances, stands up and shakes Lenn and Ella’s hands. Unlike his polished mother, his hair and tie are in a mess. “He smells like he tripped over the cologne counter at Suvannabhumi,” Ella snickers. Lenn nudges her in the ribs. His shoulders cave in and he is not really sure how to act or speak.

Lenn immediately feels for him and asks Mark if he wants to join them. Ella grimaces, “We are not an orphanage, you know,” but Lenn doesn't change her mind. He may actually make the evening more bearable for all of them.

As they leave the table, Ella scans him from head to toe.

“Do you like Bangkok?” Lenn asks. She tries to sound friendly, but the question sounds empty even to her.

He warbles for a bit, intimidated by Ella's glare, “I, uh, yeah. It’s great.”

They circle the ballroom a couple more times, watching the drunkest few stumble onto the dance floor. Lenn feels as though someone is cramming her body into a zipper. A shot of pain runs through her head. “Let's get out of this mess,” she says. They head out

to the lobby.

They pass an unmanned alcohol table and Ella grabs two bottles of Pinot Grigio. She finds an unfrequented corner with a window that overlooks Chao Praya river and its glittering banks. She punches the cork in and starts passing the bottle.

They make fun of the pompousness and the patriots who know the lyrics to the second verse of the Australian Anthem. "I thought there was only one!" Ella squeals. Mark strips off his necktie and starts to make knots of all sorts. Lenn makes a joke about how he can work as a sailor. "I am actually," he says. He works on sailboats all along the Gold Coast. He tells them about the ocean. If he weren't visiting his mother this month, he'd be out in the open sea.

"The winds are crazy good this time of the year."

He tells them a story about the one time when an unexpected storm hit the boat. He thought he was going to die. "I don't think I've ever faced death," Ella says. They fall into silence. The wine dwindles down and Ella polishes it off. They try to get Mark to steal another bottle. He comes back red handed. They toy with the idea of leaving the hotel and sneaking off to Red Wagon. The idea alone is exciting enough to tame their boredom. They stand up, dust themselves off and walk back into the ballroom.

Inside, the management has turned off the chandeliers to start the dance party. Disco lights flicker in the darkness. Lenn and Ella exchange their numbers with Mark and say bye. He walks back to his table. Suddenly, everything seems incredibly small. Lenn's throat constricts. It's the people all around her, she is slowly becoming one of them again.

She tastes the acid at her uvula. Ella beckoned to Lenn, but she can't move forward. Lenn backtracks, one step at a time, and runs out of the ballroom.

The next morning, Lenn wakes up with a headache and arrives at the school and hour late. All the Thai teachers have to check in by seven thirty, but because Lenn is farang, she doesn't have to arrive that early.

When she first started working, she wanted to be held by the same standards, arriving two hours before classes started and leaving two hours after school ended. But when she kept to the schedule, the teachers in the office gave her funny looks. They kept saying, *pai dai Khun Lenn*. If she could leave early, why wasn't she? After two weeks of insisting, Lenn started going home early. A month into her job, she also started to come in late.

Lenn bumps into the first-grade teacher on her way out for a class. "Sawatdee Khun Lenn!" She enunciates each word like she does for her students. Lenn smiles, embarrassed. She looks around the office and sighs. All the teachers are out.

Lenn sits down and starts reading her lesson plan. Today will be a game day, maybe a few rounds of Duck Duck Goose and maybe Red Light Green Light. It's a balance of not overloading the kids with too many English words, but slipping in just enough advance vocabulary to keep the grin on the patrolling headmistress.

Out on the schoolyard, the third-year class arranges themselves in straight lines. The teacher, Khun Fah, shouts instructions from the steps with a bullhorn. She turns up the music and demonstrates the dance routine. Lenn watches the students follow the steps.

Suddenly, she hears the door creak. She turns around. Mali, the third-year girl, stands in the office doorway. She is in her pressed gym clothes. Her wide blue eyes blink.

“Mali,” Lenn speaks from her desk, “Tam aray nah? Rien kangnuuk, chai mai?”

“Mai yaak.”

Lenn runs out of Thai words. “What do you mean you don’t want to?”

“Mai yaak.”

“Mali, you have to. Thung pay.”

“I’m tired.”

Mali first came in during the middle of the winter semester. When her grandmother presented her in the office, all the teachers fawned over her. She looked like the ideal *luuk krueng*, her silky hair, light skin and green eyes being the stuff of all Thai girls’ envy. One of the teachers nudged Lenn, “*du meuan na khun*”. Soon all teachers became obsessed with the idea that Mali was Lenn’s long-lost child. They had the same green eyes and the same hair texture. Lenn laughed it off, but admitted that their resemblance was uncanny.

The grandmother explained that Mali lives in London with her Thai mother and English father, but was visiting Thailand while her parents took a vacation. She thought it

would be great for her granddaughter to get to know Thai kids her age. The headmistress agreed wholeheartedly. She started rambling about the importance of mother tongue and being rooted in a proper culture. The grandmother nodded, patiently waiting for the lecture to end. When the headmistress paused to take a breath, the grandmother took the opportunity to ask how much of the tuition she should pay.

When Lenn introduced Mali to the class, Pair, a third-year social climber, volunteered to show her around. That same day, Pair made an announcement that she is Mali's official best friend and that others needed permission from her to play with them. Pair made tricky social decisions on Mali's behalf and guided her through the jungle of uncivilized third-year boys. For Pair's loyal service, Mali smiled from time to time, said a few Thai words and let her hold her hand. It amazed Lenn that Mali, like the older expats, knew the value of her exotic foreignness and knew exactly to appropriate it to her advantage. While the teachers made extra effort to make Mali feel at home, Lenn treated her like other students.

But now that the school year is coming to an end, Pair and the rest of the students have started to realize that Mali won't be around forever. When the school breaks for holidays, she will go back to her life in London. As they grew more aware of Mali's short shelf life, they began to lose interest in her. Pair forgot to save a sit for Mali at the lunch table. The teachers stopped fawning. Mali started to fade, her green eyes first, then her hair, skin and much improved, but still stilted Thai.

And now, she stands in front of Lenn, asking for an intervention. She is standing

up for herself, that she won't be ignored anymore. But Lenn had little sympathy for her.

“Mali, this won't do. I'm taking you outside.”

Lenn drags Mali by her hand to the field. Outside, the sun is a sticky ball of yellow. The gym teacher sees them from a mile away. She drops her demonstration and hurries over.

“Mali, tam aray?” the teacher asks, glancing up at Lenn. She takes Mali and puts her front and center of the kids lined up for gymnastics. With her eyes, Mali follows Lenn heading back to the office. Lenn feels guilt clawing up her chest. Maybe she was a little harsh, maybe Mali needed some words of comfort. At a loss as to what to do, Lenn gives her a wave. Mali stares back at her through the sun.

Lenn hasn't talked to Ella since the Australian Day Ball, but she had kept track of. Ever since the date for their high school reunion has been fixed to April 4th, a day before her flight back to Sydney, Ella has been updating her Facebook status twice a day. She triggers enormous chain posting, the comments growing long down her News Feed.

On the day of the reunion, Lenn finds a message in her inbox from Ella. She immediately clicks on the red notification. 'You coming to reunion?' The message is curt, as if Lenn passed through Ella's head as she was getting her pedicure. Lenn tests out a few replies in the message box, but exits the window without actually sending any.

She goes on the event page for the reunion and clicks through profiles of people she has not seen in years. After spending hours in the internet cafe, she forces herself to get out. She ends up at Queen Sirikit Park and she walks around the pond until the soles of her trainers harden. Back at home, she takes a shower, splashing water on herself using a bucket. The water from the tap, neither cold nor hot, frustrates her. She throws down the bucket and the plastic cracks against the tiles.

She remembers how she left Ella at the ball. She needed to apologize, do something before it got worse. Of all the people she knew from Thailand, Ella was the few that Lenn had left and wanted to keep. Lenn dries herself, locks all the windows and gets changed.

Outside, the darkness clings to her face. She barely makes out a motorcy driver by a street lamp. Lenn mounts the bike and says, "Soi sixty-three."

The motorcy hooks around the corners and arrives in front of Sky Light club. The driver breaks and extends his hand for the fare. The people lingering in front of Sky Light are busy texting. The screens illuminate the dull, concentrated faces. Lenn look for Ella.

In the club, the throbbing crowd is almost entirely Thai. A mob of girls rush out in giggles. Their platformed shoes and backcombed hair overwhelms Lenn. She steadies herself against a chair in the corner and forces her way towards the bar. A few farangs lean against the counter, but no one has the shocking blonde like Ella. She changes her course to the upstairs balcony.

When she arrives on the landing, she is flooded with the familiar faces. The

members of the Class of 2002 of International School of Bangkok spread themselves all around the VIP balcony lounge. Instinctively, Lenn tries not to make eye contacts and goes over to the bar. When she orders a drink, a girl in front of her snaps around. “Glenda?” she asks. Lenn tries to remember the girl’s name. She gives Lenn a squeeze and speaks excitedly. It’s Vanessa. From the pictures on Facebook, Vanessa is now a muse of some emerging painter in Denmark. Or in Netherlands. “I am so glad to see you!” Vanessa exclaims. After short exchanges, Vanessa plunges Lenn in her current romantic dilemma. Her lover is insisting that they move to the countryside for six whole months. What should she do? Lenn recommends that she should break up with him. Vanessa puckers her lips. That isn’t what she wants to hear. When she finds someone else that she can latch onto, she excuses herself and leaves Lenn.

Lenn takes small sips of her drink as she looks around. Out of the chaos of bodies Ella emerges by the balcony railing. Lenn leaves her drink on the bar and walks over. Ella turns around. Her eyes are slightly out of focus. A smile fizzles on her mouth.

“I didn't think you'd come.”

Lenn stuffs her hands into her pocket, “Well yeah I did.”

“You sure you aren't going to make a mad dash?”

The thought of apology flees Lenn's mind.

“Don't make fun of me.”

Ella smirks, “Oh why, because you are so special?”

Lenn doesn't want to argue, but she can't hold herself back, “I thought you

understood me. But you are just like the rest. I thought you were different.”

Ella squeals with laughter. “Oh Glenda. You are so funny. You think you are too good for everyone. Do you know that you are an expat too?”

Lenn shakes her head, “You're drunk.”

“I'm not drunk. I'm saying what is obvious. But can you answer me just one thing?” Ella takes a leisurely sip, “Why do you live in Bangkok if you hate it so much?”

Lenn feels heat in her throat. She keeps her mouth closed. She is not going to answer.

“Let me have a guess. You *like* it here, don't you. Like really, more than I do, more than the rest of us. Sticking out here like you have something to prove, like you want to scream, hey! I have the right. The sad thing is, and of course you know this don't you, you live in a bubble that's surged shut from inside. The expat bubble is nothing compared to the vacuum you live in. If you want to clarify where you stand so much, I'd suggest dropping that disdain first. But that would mean that you'd have to start seeing people as they are, right? And in your position, you can't afford to do that. You are too poor, you are too burned out, you can't handle it anymore. So there your highness. Thanks for coming out tonight. It means so much to me.”

Ella cuts the air like daggers. She looks at Lenn for a while, waiting for her to respond. When Lenn doesn't, she turns back around.

Lenn looks. Everyone is talking around her. The lights in the club bear down on her face. She shades with her hands to find her way out. Dancers part as she comes

through. She feels very bare. She sits down on a parking block just outside the building.

Suddenly she hears a sigh. She looks around. A guy leans against a dented wall. She has walked passed him without noticing. He is backlit by the florescent lights of the club entrance. They exchange stealthy glances as he toys with a cigarette, flipping it around with the tips of his fingers.

“Luuk kreung chai mai?”

His words are so heavily accented that she doesn’t immediately catch what he said. As she replays the words in her head, she realizes that he is asking if she is mixed.

When Lenn got her first yearbook of International School of Bangkok, she flipped through the class lists for a sliver of text noting the student’s countries of origin. This one girl, she forgets her name now, was Japanese-Swede. She had a deep tan and a brilliant smile. Lenn earmarked this page and flipped back to it whenever people asked if she was mixed. No, I just look that way. I’m just American. Nothing more.

“Oh,” he says, “Well you certainly fooled me.”

“You are luuk kreung.”

“Good job,” he coughs, “Though anyone here can spot one a mile away. So don’t congratulate yourself with that.”

“I won’t.”

The unexpected answer makes his head turn away from his cigarette. The light floods onto his face and reveals his slight eyes and tight curls. He is a strange combination of dominant genes, the clashing patterns, the complementary colors that

makes people look again. He looks like he shouldn't exist, but he does. He is more than the Japanese-Swede's brilliant smile or Mali's silky hair. He is something that she has never seen before. When she can't look away, he raises a corner of his mouth.

“You can look for as long as you like,” he says, “Pretty well done huh?”

Someone screams a name. Lenn turns and sees a group of girls around the corner, “Jon! What the hell are you doing there?”

He whips his head around and looks at the girls, “I'm smoking. I'll be there in a sec.”

The brunette with heavy eyeliner cackles. Tiny cross-body bags dangle against her hips as she laughs. One of them spots Lenn standing to the side and points. They try to place her. Maybe they saw her at the Bangkok Patana School reunion? Or at Levels Club the other night when a bunch of international school kids were hanging out. Either way, they've definitely seen her before so she's not just some tramp prostitute. They smile at her.

“Well,” the brunette slurs, “Hurry up. We are about to do another shot board. You can't back out of this one.”

They scamper off, but Lenn can't shake off their polite smiles, the I-know-you winks and a quick brush-off. Even after two years of weaning herself off of expats, she still smells and acts like an expat. Her leg itches and sees three big mosquito bites lining her calf. The smiles, the slurring, the bites, they drive her delirious.

“So you are luuk krueng,” Lenn starts.

Jon looks up from his cigarette, “What?”

“Your mother is from Isaan, right,” the words spill out from her mouth, “Your dad from the Midwest. He works for Shell, met your mom when he moved here in the eighties. It was a love at first sight and they got married in three months.”

His mouth lets out a thin line of smoke. It looks like Lenn got everything correct. Not a hard thing to guess, after all it’s the same story, the same people and the same money, ending up in the same expat watering hole where lifestyle is the key word and time zone a petty bother. He begins to look like the rest, his slack jaws, the disappointing rest.

She went too far. She didn't think she could hurt him, but she did and now he has to watch him unravel right in front of her. She regrets her words, but her pride stands in her way. She turns around and runs back into the club.

“Wait,” he calls out.

Lenn makes her way into the club. But before she can get lost in the crowd, he catches her hand. She slaps away, but he reaches again and this time grabs onto her shirt. He yanks and she jolts back. Then she hears her shirt rip, the air creating a gap between his hand and her back.

Jon stands by the entrance, his hand clutching her ripped shirt.

Suddenly, something crackles above. A flame drops from the rafters. Lenn looks up, but her eyes sting. Another flame drops and a panic shoot through the crowd. The music stops. Screams pierce the air. Her eyes water and the scene blurs. She tries to turn

back, but gets trapped in the crowd, clawing and gripping its way out the door. Lenn shrieks. She turns again, but now she has totally lost her bearing. Then, out of nowhere, a hand grabs her arm. Lenn tries to shake it away, but it steadily pulls her out. She follows it through the impossible gaps.

Jon's face comes into focus. He is holding onto her arm. She latches onto him and, holding each other, they squeeze past the exit. The bouncers abandon their post. Lenn briefly turns and sees fire catching onto the stairs and the walls, dribbling down to the floor.

They just run out in time. In the front lot, people gather in clumps. Fights break out. Wails fill the air. In a far corner of the front lot, Lenn sees Ella and the rest of the reunion group with phones against their ears. Lenn slows down, but Jon yanks her forward. He waves down a taxi. The driver spins the wheel.

The car pulls up in front of a gate closed shut for the night. Jon pays and they push themselves out. They pass the guard asleep in the stall. They skim past the lobby and into an elevator. He fumbles with the keys. The door opens into an apartment and another opens to a room with bed. They walk around the room, their legs locked straight, but unsteady like first timers on the ice rink, holding onto the sides and each other and when they fall, falling together and unable to get back up, lying on the bed with eyes as opaque as frosted ice. If she spoke, she would have to confront this ice spanning thirty feet below them and not even her desire or her overwhelming pride can face it. He feels the same way, his mouth opening and closing like a fish trapped her the sheet, waiting for

spring.

Hours later, her eyes open. She must have fallen asleep. The city lights seep into the room. She tries to stretch her legs, but they have completely stiffened overnight. She turns and sees Jon, his clothes snagged by the bed, twisting this way and that. The ripples of light turn him into a foreign landscape with slopes, dunes and forests. Millions of years have passed and the cold gave into a global spring. With the rising and falling of his breath, she begins to soften. His skin glows white one moment and amber the next. The high hill slips under the lowest pit and the white of the frosty skin turns lush brown.

She realizes she has made a mistake back in the empty lot. The contempt that has been harboring her mind boils away and the silt left at the bottom becomes her embarrassment.

She starts searching. She traces down his nose to his chin, along his chest and shoulder and all the way down to his hips and around the back and front, as far as her arm can stretch. Then she travels back up and collects his pool of perspiration with her fingers. Up and down again, pushing skin against skin, she feels the landscape.

He wakes and tension grows in his body. She travels down to his groin and he stiffens, his lips starting to twitch. She thumbs the curve on his mouth. His eyes flutter open and circles in the sockets. She pauses. It takes a while for his eyes to come to focus.

He can't seem to find her eyes and instead, look resolutely down her body. He traces her fingers.

He turns over and comes on top. He props himself up on his elbows, his curls falling around his face. For the first time in a long while, she is not alone and there is another person who may have been floating all his life. She brings his head closer. His elbows buckle and the seams of their bubbles explode, the cross stitch, nylon threads pulling into fatal thinness. When he is about to come, he pulls himself out. And when it ends, they feel their bareness in the stalling heat. The sun begins to climb up their bodies in the deadlock of incomprehensible understanding.

The morning drags on. Lenn wakes up to the sound of the television. A commercial is on. In it, a shirtless man is running away from a crash of rhinoceroses. He hooks his pants to a crane and it lifts him up. The rhinoceroses look at him with eyes fluttering and lips pouting. Then a picture of a deodorant pops up on screen. He smelled so good that a whole herd of female rhinos were irresistibly attracted to him.

Lenn twists her body around. Jon is sitting up right beside her, watching the television.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” He gathers the blanket around his legs.

She shakes her head and looks for her shirt. She finds it tangled in the sheets.

The morning news comes back on and the anchor speaks in crisp Thai. A fuzzy, telephoned voice interrupts her from time to time. Then the camera makes a cut to a burned down building and traces the corpses lined up on the ground. Lenn looks away in shock. When she looks back, it zooms in on a face with blood congealed over the gashes.

Jon keeps the remote control in his fingers. The shots on the screen change as rapidly, to one pulped limb to hardened black tar on the walls. Heaps of corpses overrun by the fire-crazed mob, faces pierced with stilettos, fingers snapped in odd angles fill the screen and a halting voice narrates. Police guards hold back crying mothers.

Lenn steps out of the bed and finds her way to the bathroom. She looks in the mirror. Her hair clings on her high forehead. She pats her cheeks with water. They are warm. She feels for bruises and sprains, but finds none. The contours of her body shows through her shirt. Her hands remain on her torso and she presses on her nipple.

The television goes off in the room. She takes a breath in and steps out. Jon is up, naked, drawing the curtains close. The light thins and disappears.

“That’s terrible,” he speaks, “What happened last night.”

“Yeah,” she says. She pulls her legs onto the bed. They sit still for a while, gauging what the next best thing that they could say.

“Do you have to be somewhere?” He speaks.

“No.”

They meet back. They butcher their way through the hand hold, the descent and all the tiny shifts and alignments. They both get as embarrassed as five year olds when

they dawn upon the endless possibility of lasting impressions and snickering behind the backs. First he tries and then Lenn tries, but at the end they end up lying back on the bed, their faces to the ceiling. She wishes that they didn't try so hard. He runs his hand over her stomach. The mosquito bites on her calf acts up and she pulls away. He picks up a Zippo from the bedside table, flicking it on and off and on and off.

Lenn gets up and collects her things. He puts down the lighter.

“Don't go yet,” Jon says.

Lenn looks up at him.

“We could go get lunch,” he continues, “We could go to Vanilla.”

She stops herself before she speaks.

“Vanilla at Siam Paragon?”

“Yeah,” he sits up. His face gets animated, “It just opened. They have the best crepes and caramelized pears.”

He has been there a few times, ordering brunch and mimosas with his friends, pretending that they were in Paris. He liked Vanilla though it was like all the new places cropping up all over Thonglor and Sukhumvit, those European places with frilly décor. In these mini palaces, they could play pretend all day long, pay the bill in baht and walk out into the humidity.

But as soon as he spoke about crepes and pears, he wishes he could take them back. He only brought them up because they were acceptable and recognizable signs of intimacy and care. He wanted to buy her a nice lunch and talk to her for a while outside

of this dark apartment. Vanilla is just a placeholder, just means to an end, nothing more. Lenn knows this, but it only revealed how much he is comfortable in his clean shoes, the air-conditioned malls and the sky trains. She buttons her pants and gets ready to leave. She opens the bedroom door.

“Wait, what is your name?” he calls out.

She turns around. The sunlight bathes Jon’s body. His vulnerability captivates her. He ingests his own mistakes and waits for her empathy. The thought that he may be different strikes her. But the sun blares through the drapes. Lenn remembers that Ella is leaving for Sydney today. She turns around and quickens her steps home.

Lenn opens the door at the first bell. Ella yelps and gives Lenn a stifling hug.

“Where have you been?”

Lenn tries to explain, but sees that Ella is livid.

“I was so worried. At first I thought you didn’t make it out of Sky Light and then the police never identified you in the corpses. But then who trusts the police? I checked into the hospitals and all the patients were claimed and really, I didn’t think you would have *died*.”

“I’m sorry,” Lenn speaks.

“Where were you?”

Lenn hesitates, “I was staying at a friend’s house.”

Ella throws down her hands, “You didn’t think I might have been dying in Bangkok Hospital?”

“I knew you got out. I saw you outside.”

Ella stands, mouth opened, “And you didn’t check in with me?”

“Well,” Lenn doesn’t have much to say, “I was okay. I thought you knew”

“I delayed my flight for you.”

Lenn remains quiet and the room spins with silence. Ella grips her handbag, “Well it seems like I did that for nothing.”

Ella has hit a limit. It’s the stalemate that they have been in for years, the dead space among the circles of expatriates and Lenn’s decision to fall into the cracks. Ella reached out, but Lenn has been resolute. Lenn always wanted to show that she wasn’t an expat, even when she was in school, but that meant she never let herself too comfortable with people or places. Ella knows that there is nothing she can do. She turns to leave.

“Wait, come in,” Lenn opens the door wide, “Come in for a while.”

Ella steps into the apartment. It’s her first time in Lenn’s ramshackle apartment building off the beaten tracks of Sukhumvit. They walk into the bedroom. After a few awkward steps around the room, they collapse on the mat. They start rambling about khlongs, politics and what Songkran will look like this year. Ella asks if she has any nail polish and Lenn digs out an old pot from the dregs of her drawer. The polish is so dry that the brush catches against Ella’s toenail. When she is done, her nails look like talons. Ella

laughs and rubs her toes all over Lenn's bed sheets.

Around four, Ella checks her phone. She zips and unzips her purse. She checks her itinerary online and makes sure that the flight time is still eight p.m.

“Have a good flight back. Keep me updated.”

“Yeah.”

Ella trembles. Lenn brings her in deeper. Then as quickly as she came in, Ella breaks away. She brushes back her blonde hair and resumes composure.

“I’ll see you, okay?”

They wave. Lenn watches her turn the corner and disappear. Back in her room, her sheets are spangled with rose pink flakes. Ella has to leave a mark wherever she goes. The flakes of nail polish inch into the folds of Lenn’s skin and start prickling. Three weeks with Ella has pushed Lenn so far away from what she has established for herself, the routine and the ignoble life that she envisioned. She was in Bangkok and goddamn it if she can’t have it her way. But now Ella is gone for good and she can now resume. Lenn takes a breath in. She remembers how abruptly she left Jon, the odd numbness in her arms as she walked out the soi. She now has a choice to make: go back to her routine or take a hard left turn into her own desire to indulge, to see what lies beyond Jon. It’s all to come, but for now she picks the nail polish flakes off her sheets, one by one, in meditative renunciation.

III.

Lenn cleans her apartment, trying to get back in the routine. She moves the table, mat, and chairs so that they look new, but the rearranging only reveals the sides of furniture eaten away and warped by the humidity. Lenn keeps the television running as she goes through her desk and purges the piles of bills and papers. She puts the bag of recycling outside her door. Her apartment gets emptier as she goes through the nooks that have accumulated with debris and Songkran approaches like a drunken man, staggering down the soi. Her phone lasts five full days without needing recharging. She hasn't heard back from Ella, but after all no news is good news. At the school as the students and the teachers move around absently, thinking about the mornings they can sleep in and the spread of food and family in the provinces, the jangwat, and Lenn often finds her mind fleeting back to Jon, recalling the expression on his face as she walked out of the room. She tries to remember his soi number, but she gets lost in the alley turns and lights of the oncoming cars.

Not having rained in over two months, the dust and fumes cling onto the air. The commuters on the bus bury their noses in handkerchiefs and the markets stop stocking fresh vegetables. The vendors glue themselves in front of their the boxy televisions and shops only half open their grates, the lock still hanging on the hook. Unwillingly, Lenn goes to Gourmet Market in Emporium to get food for the week.

As the sky train pulls up to Phrom Phong station, she catches a glimpse of a white

building peeking above the trees. It is the apartment. Her breath quickens. Instead of entering the department store, she takes the stairs to the mouth of soi-twenty four. She scans the street for a motorcy, but the wooden bench where drivers typically drink, play mak-hot and swat flies stands empty. Stray cats lie underneath the planks of wood. With an eye on the white building, Lenn walks into the soi, glancing up every few footsteps to make sure she does not lose it.

Nomadic carts, trash bins and people in pajamas crowd around her and a little girl with a power ranger shirt weaves through her legs. A boy chases with a toy airplane. The father, in preparation for the Songkran weekend, rolls out a blue barrel and feeds a hose into its opening. He catches Lenn's eyes when he looks up. He smiles. Then he jerks his hose up. She flinches, but she doesn't feel the water. There isn't any coming out. It gives him a good laugh and he yells, "Mai yak pen Songkran." She laughs it off, but her heart thumps underneath her ribs.

She checks that the gate in front of her now leads to the white building she has been following like a wanderer tracing the moon. She walks in. The guard on duty eyes at her. When she gets into the lobby, the receptionist pops up from his chair.

"Sawadee krap."

She hesitantly greets him back.

"Chan aray krap? Which floor?" The receptionist translates himself automatically and flashes a proud smile.

She thinks back for a moment, "Chan eesip ha."

He scans his book, “O Khun Wichasak.”

She nods.

He shakes his head, “Khun mai yu krap.”

Of course he's out. She pulls the skin under her nail and her mind runs through the apartment she saw at night, sparked with the city. The receptionist continues to smile, expecting an answer from her.

“Khun... Wichasak, klap baan ti nai kha?”

The receptionist flushes with his round face creasing in whirlpools, “Oh, pom mai sap krap. I... I don't know.”

Lenn starts to head out the door, but his answer catches her back.

“Oh... phom kit waa neung toom. Seven pee am.”

She walks back to the reception desk. She pulls out her pen and grabs a take out flier from the table stands. Quickly, she scrawls her address and phone number on the corner and hands it to him. He receives with both hands.

“Hai Khun Wichasak kha,” she says.

He smiles crookedly and reads the number back to her in Thai. “Dai krap,” he responds and folds the flier and slips it into his breast pocket.

She runs out and hits the pavement. A car swerves. She recoils. Above her, pigeons tangle on the telephone wires. When she looks down, she sees that the soi has cleared out, a stage before the show in reined-in anticipation. First time in a long while, she doesn't know where she should go.

Lenn hears a loud crash out in the corridor. She has kept the front door open to let air through. Lenn springs up and walks into the living room. A little boy has pushed himself against her screen door and fell on his backside. But instead of crying, he smiles up at Lenn. To her surprise, he picks himself up and does it again. This time it's louder. He giggles and does it again. She opens the door. She picks him up under his arms. He bounces.

“Nong!”

A girl rushes down the corridor. She looks about thirteen with her hair in a clean school cut. Lenn lowers him to the ground. The girl pulls her brother away. She picks him up on her way, though she is far too skinny and the boy too chubby for his age. Before she turns a corner, she looks back at Lenn. She gathers her mouth and spits out “taehaongu”. Lenn is an organ-peddling foreigner in disguise of an English teacher, a merciful farang gone sour in the drug dens of Khao San. She smiles back at the girl, but she disappears into the turn, tossing her shiny hair all over.

She ruffles the newspaper aside. The second day of Songkran, she has been in the house

for two full days. It is too hot to sleep, read or think and the humidity brings out the sour smell in her apartment. On the street level people roam in their pick-up trucks with gallons of water at the back, spraying other passerbys and fancy cars. Lenn has done Songkran only once in school when Ella organized this trip down to Khao San with eight other kids. In the first minutes of being there, Lenn got splashed in the face with water that smelt like rotting fish and oil. Others teased that she got a mouthful of khleng water, the thick channel water that coasts through the city. She coughed it out as best as she could, but the taste lingered at the back of her throat. Though the city officials had banned the use of paeng, a flour-water mix that people plastered on each other's faces and arms to keep cool, people walked around with their fingers dipped in the concoction poised to smother an unsuspecting person.

Suddenly, something rings. She doesn't register it right away. Only at the third ring, she realizes that it's her phone, sitting on the floor next to the mat. She answers.

The voice on the other end hesitates. She sits upright.

“Is your name Lenn?”

She swallows, “Yeah.”

He hangs onto the phone. She hears the floors, ceiling and walls whisper.

“I'll be over in thirty.”

“Okay.”

The hour hand on her watch points to nine. Lenn laundered her towels, mopped the floor, plucked her eye brows, marked all of the students' workbooks, beat the dust from the couch cushions and aired out her apartment, but there hasn't been any knocking on her door. She turns up the volume on the television on to the local news channel. The sound crackles, but the words are just audible. The afternoon news starts and men in army uniforms wait to each other as the camera flashes burst. The camera zooms into one general, his gathered hands in front of his nose, bowing all around. Then the scene cuts to him leaning into a microphone. He stops in between every four words and Lenn finds herself listening though she does not get a word. When he moves away from the microphone, the press goes up in an uproar.

She opens up her balcony window and front door. She hears patter of kids' footsteps up and down the corridor. She changes her sweat-soaked shirt. The air gets thicker with traffic whir and water and the reflection from the building casts sharp rays into her apartment. Her shirt clings to her again. She strips and goes into the shower.

When she comes out, she lies very still on the floor. A thread of warm breeze heats up the apartment. The layer of dust beneath her sucks in the moisture from her skin. She counts her breaths.

Suddenly she hears a crash on her screen door. Someone is standing by the door. She props herself up and sees him. Jon's head hangs and the hand that struck limply clings onto the grid on her screen door.

She slowly gets herself into standing. Light sweat breaks out again. When she slides the bar out of the lock, he pushes in. He stumbles around the living room. He is wet to his socks and imprints rims of water under his feet, slipping in his own refuse. His eyes focus on a million things. He stares at the television, replaying the interview with the general. He gropes around for the remote control and clicks it off. The apartment falls into another shade of evening. He cocks his head back.

“Do you have any music?” He asks.

“No.”

“Damn it.” He mutters and jerks his shoulders. He shakes off his limbs. He turns into a boy who is used to getting exactly what he wants, but this time, it evades him. He throws his foot down and his face distorts. He collapses on the floor and curls into himself. He is not crying though, he is too strong for that. When it passes, it will be bearable again. Lenn sits by the kitchen and watches him play it out.

He falls asleep on her mat. She sleeps on the couch. When she wakes up tomorrow morning, he is gone. The mat smells stale.

“Lenn!”

She turns around and mangles the two-way traffic. A middle-age secretary on her way home shoots her a glare. Lenn cranes her neck the other way, but does not see

anyone. More people bump into her.

“Lenn!”

Someone grabs her shoulders. Masha stands behind her, smiling from ear to ear and out of breath. She wears a hefty backpack with ease. It surprises Lenn to see Masha, let alone a farang, in this part of Bangkok where the only thing to see is a never ending line of eroding concrete buildings. Phra Khanong has successfully kept farangs out with its unattractiveness and Lenn has been confident that she is the only one to fade away from the center of Bangkok. But Masha has also found her way in through the pipes of tourism that drains people as soon as they don't have the money or reason to stay.

Even after months in Thailand, Masha hasn't mastered the art of assimilation. Her eyelids are dusted with the familiar baby blue shadow and her red pigtailed buns bounce near her temples. It looks like she made peace with the undeniable fact that she will always look white and therefore need not to hide anything. Masha stands in front of Lenn sweating through the shirt and grinning at the coincidence of them ever meeting again in the city of seven million. They exchange a few words back and forth and Lenn finds herself broadening into a smile as she talks. They talk more and soon Masha reveals her recent troubles in missing the departure time for a group tour to Laos and not being successful in getting refund from the agency. “I can get it back, but I just need a few more days, you know, trying to get the money back.” The option then is to go back to Vancouver. The trip that Masha envisioned has come to a not-so-ideal end, but it doesn't seem to bother her much. Things go wrong and up to this point, she had a great run in

Thailand. She just needs to figure out the next few days.

A motorcy speeds towards them. The driver blares his horn and they dodge.

Masha smiles helplessly. “Yeah, my time here is done. I need to go back home.”

It feels like eons ago, but it was only two years ago that Lenn herself ran out of the hostel with nothing more than a backpack. Lenn hesitates, but decides to speak up. “If you need a place to stay, you can stay with me for a while.”

Masha looks up. She blinks hard. “Are you sure?”

Lenn nods. “You were going to find a temp place here, right?” Masha smiles again. “I’m going home now actually. I don’t have a spare bed, but I do have a couch.”

They catch motorcys into the apartment. Masha pays for the ride. They walk up three flights of stairs and Lenn leads her past a dozen doors.

A few of the front doors are flung open, letting the air right through the rooms. In one apartment a group of women sit in a circle picking at pomelos. Their necks crane as Lenn and Masha pass. In the next apartment a man with a distended belly watches the news. The television buzzes with pitched voices. Toddlers scamper around in the next, rolling on the towels spread on the floor. A woman beckons them back into the plastic tub with soap water. She looks tired.

Lenn unlocks her door. Masha peels herself away from looking through the apartments and walks into the apartment. She runs her fingers over the yellowing walls and turns the cushions on the couch over as if she is looking for bugs. She lets herself into Lenn's room, looks into the closet, taps the floor tile coming loose in the corner and

sniffs. The bathroom is clean, but dilapidated, the chips on the edges revealing the cement. Masha has prepared for this, but is a little let down by how similar the hostel and Lenn's apartment look.

Lenn brings out an extra pillow and a blanket. Masha unties a plastic bag of trash. “Do you have a place where I can throw this out?” Lenn takes it and squeezes it into the bin. She decides to take it out and pick up some extra bags at the convenient store. Masha puts down her backpack by the foot of the couch and takes out her passport, notebooks and papers. “I better give the agent another call.”

With the trash bags in her hand, Lenn walks down the corridor. Her eyes meet with the man with the belly. He folds his hands around a bottle of lao khao and narrows his eyes. Without taking his eyes off of Lenn, he takes a quick swig and swivels his head. Then he begins to speak, low grumble rising to a croak. She can't understand what he is saying. His slurring words sound Thai, but they lose meaning in his nasal cavity. He talks at her. The bottle slips out of his hand and spills.

He grabs his shirt from the floor and throws it down on the puddle. Then he looks up and waves Lenn in. She hesitates, but obeys. He tosses the drenched shirt to the side and grabs another cup, the inside stained like the sedimentary rocks on the side of a cliff. He pours the rest of the liquor he saved from the fall and thrusts the cup to her. She takes it. He clinks his glass against hers and downs it whole. He turns his head to the television. He chuckles and drums his fingers on the hide of his belly. She takes a breath and empties the glass. It's like swallowing shrapnel. She coughs and coughs.

When Lenn comes back home from school, the smell of frying butter overpowers her.

Masha shouts from the kitchen.

“Your phone rang like crazy all day.”

Lenn forgot to take her phone with her today, not accustomed to waking up early again after a week-long Songkran break. She checks her phone, still connected to the charger next to her mat.

Masha stands by the door frame rubbing her hands together. “I answered it, but he kept hanging up,” Lenn sits on the edge of her mat, “He came over actually. He was really confused and kept asking if you moved out. I kept explaining that I'm living here temporarily, but I don't think he got what I said. Anyway, he left almost as soon as he came.”

“Did he say,” Lenn says, “if he'll drop by later?”

“Um,” Masha thinks for a second, “I don't think so.”

Masha takes this pause to add that she washed Lenn's sheets with her load of clothes. Everything is hanging outside in the balcony, clipped together at the edges.

“I'm so excited for this garlic bread,” Masha exclaims as she goes back to the kitchen, “I haven't had it in such a long, long time. Do you want a piece?”

On the bus Lenn scrolls the missed calls on her phone, her thumb hovering over the green call button. The bus conductor clinks the cylindrical can at her. Lenn stashes the phone back into her pocket thumbs fourteen baht out. The conductor shuffles away. The woman in front nurses her head trying to scrape the migraine off the forehead. Lenn flips open the phone, snaps it shut and opens it again. The woman's head turns and Lenn sees a milky eye peeking out of the wiry hair. Quietly, Lenn tucks the phone away.

The phone rings. It's his number. Lenn tells Masha she'll be out for couple of hours. Masha looks up. "Is it the guy?" Lenn mumbles something quickly and closes the door behind her. She tucks in her shirt at the bottom of the stairs before she walks out of the gate.

In the noon glare, his eyes appear smaller and his curls tighter. He stands by a car, too big for the soi. Unlike the night he came crashing into her apartment, this time he is a little more prepared. He says hello and opens the passenger door.

"Do you want to go for a ride?"

Their car finds itself alone on the streets. The Bangkok dwellers plan to stay in this steaming day and take a quick nap which turns into dreamless sleep. He speeds

through the traffic lights and they reach the Chao Praya River before one. The water laps the moss concrete walls. He parks at the Shangri-La and figures out a way to get on a barge going anywhere. While he negotiates the price and schedule in Thai, Lenn leans on the railings and lets her feet dangle above the river.

They have the whole barge to themselves, save for a German couple in the back corner. The captain allows them to sit on the roof. The engine roar and the midday sun blinds them and all they can perceive is the sky above and its horizon far out in front of them. She plays with his fingers. He takes off his shirt. "I'm luuk krueng, I don't get burned."

She tries to note the uniqueness of the houses on stilts along the banks: the one with a woman bathing, the other with a boy fishing off his porch. But eventually they all blend and there is no sane way for her to remember the hundreds of houses passing by. Just then, a tourist banana boat overtakes their barge. The tourists wave and take pictures of them. "Maybe I should put my shirt back on," he says. They laugh.

The barge makes a quick stop and a few more people come on board. Lenn descends to the main floor of the barge, orders three cans of manao soda and brings it up to the roof. She hands one to the captain who accepts it with a smile.

They close their eyes and face the sun. They talk about America for a while, but when they get tangled with the politics, they quit. So he talks about his family's country house in Huahin. Recently, his parents moved there for good. Now that their kids are all grown up, they have sworn off traveling for at least for the next twenty years. Their

houses in Minnesota, Berlin and Milan have stood empty for years now, accumulating dust, junk mail and property value. "I keep telling them to sell it. They don't need them any more." But they aren't about to sell their homes for any sum of money. Putting them up to sale means breaking ties with these countries that they once called home.

His mother bought the apartment in soi twenty-four when they had a lot of visitors cycling through Bangkok. When they had a new group every weekend for four months, she decided to make the purchase. It was easier to keep up a small apartment staffed with a maebaan near their house instead of trying to get hotel reservations . When he came back to work after college, he quickly settled into the apartment before his mother decided to sell it, telling her that he was going to find a job here. "They were going to sell it because they didn't live in it. I don't know how their mind works sometimes."

After a pause, he turns his head. "So what are you in Bangkok for?"

It's a phrasing of a question that Lenn has answered a thousand times before, but his words make it seem interrogative. They seem to suggest that there is a good reason and a bad reason and that too many of the answers that he has heard before were atrocious.

"I had no plans for staying," Lenn starts.

He interrupts, "But you fell in love with Bangkok. Or excuse me," he clears his throat, "you remembered how much you loved it here."

"No," she says, "I never did."

"Is it like a self-punishment thing?"

Suddenly, the engine shuts off and the incessant whirring disappears. Silence falls like a drape. She looks around, seeing the Thai flag fall limp and people getting off. With his arms propped under him, he still expects an answer.

“I just need to know that I'm not a farang.”

A laugh escapes through his lips, “But you are.”

“I lived here for eleven years. That's most of my conscious life.”

“Yeah,” he mutters, “that's what everyone says.”

Lenn stands up. She climbs down from the roof and sits on one of the tables at the edge of the barge. The coolness of the shade stings her. A waitress swiftly drops off menus. She scans it, her eyes not leaving the laminated piece of paper. Soon, she hears the chair drag out in front of her and he sits and fingers the menu, picking at the corner where the plastic sheets are separating from each other. She orders yamunsen and khao neaw. He gets somtam.

“Hey, I'm sorry.”

He wears a benign smile on his face that squints his eyes to a sliver of light. He spurts out a laugh again. Whatever he finds so funny, he can't hold it in. She throws the cloth napkin to his side of the table. He throws it back. She digs a cube of ice from her cup and tosses it to his chest. He yelps and shakes his shirt out.

The food arrives and they behave themselves. They feel like teenagers first-time at a serious adult function. The aroma of cilantro, lime and fish sauce pricks their noses. Not bothering to wash their hands, they roll the khao neaw into small balls and shovel

glass noodles into their mouths.

When the barge arrives at Ayutthaya, they order mu ping and taro balls. The captain shouts, “Uok pay dai!” But they are content where they are, eating like guilty children and letting the shade soak up the heat from their skin. As the boat staff realizes that these farangs aren't going anywhere, they gather in the far corner of the boat to eat their dinners. When they are done, they play a round of bottle cap mak hok.

Lenn finds ripped paper at the bottom of the bin. She picks them out and sees that they are ripped up business cards of a travel agency, itineraries and tickets. She wonders if Masha gave up on trying to get the refund. A slight panic shoots through her head as she imagines Masha staying at her apartment indefinitely, getting desperate for money. Lenn never thought she would ever be in this position. She glances at her watch and hurries out the door, late for school.

When she enters her classroom, the third-year students are running around and screaming. As soon as they see the farang teacher, they settle down immediately. Lenn puts down her bag by the table, but she realizes that a group in the corner hasn't returned to their tables. Pair and a few others clump around a small girl,. When Lenn gets closer, she realizes that the small girl is Mali, crying. Lenn squats near her and ask her to look up. But Mali keeps her head tucked in her arms. Lenn asks Pair what happened. Pair

shakes her head. The other kids start talking again. She asks Mali what happened again, but she doesn't speak up. She smooths her back and asks her to stand up. Mali stays still.

At that moment the headmistress, who has been patrolling the classrooms, comes in. The students fall into hushed silence. She hands the girls over to her and the headmistress tries to figure out in Thai what went wrong. She picks up Mali by the hand and all the girls follow her out the classroom. When Lenn is done with classes for the day, she checks in with the headmistress to inquire what had happened. The headmistress waves her hand and says “mai mee panha, Khun Lenn.” Lenn asks again, but she remains oblique.

She is about to exit the office when she remembers the question she had. Does the school need one more English teacher? The headmistress looks confused and asks when she is planning to leave. Oh no, not her, for another person. The headmistress shakes her head with her lipsticked smile. No, they don't.

Back at home, Masha is sitting on the couch flipping through a Glamour magazine. “It's so weird that the biggest English bookstore in Bangkok is a Japanese bookstore,” Masha says, “I usually don't read this shit, but things are so boring around here.”

Lenn thinks about how she should bring up the ripped tickets in the bin. They talk around for a while, about what they should eat for dinner, but she eventually brings the topic up.

“So did you end up getting the refund?”

“Oh,” Masha pauses, “Were you worried? My parents are mailing a traveler's cheque over so I can buy the return ticket. That was one humiliating call.”

Lenn laughs it off and says it doesn't matter. Masha looks at her oddly, but continues talking.

“So, what happened with Jon?”

It's Lenn's turn now. “Not much. We just drove around.”

“Hopefully the traffic wasn't bad.”

“No, not that bad,” Lenn says. She avoids making eye contact with Masha because she probably has those eyes, expecting more from Lenn, maybe a good chance to bond and whatnot. But it's her turf and she wants things to go her way. They sit next to each other on the couch and Lenn looks over Masha's shoulders as she continues flipping the pages.

On Friday, she goes directly from school to Jon's house. Getting swarmed by expats on the Phrom Phong station unnerves her a little bit, but she gets out of the station as quickly as she can. The receptionist flashes a gap tooth smile as he holds the elevator for her.

Jon opens the door almost right away, his wet curls drooping around his face which makes him look like a mop hung out to dry. The marble floor cools her feet as she crosses into the living room. He brings two glasses of pineapple juice and downs his in a

gulp before realizing that Lenn has barely taken a sip out of it. She's allergic to pineapple. "I should have asked," he frowns and switches it to water with ice cubes clinking against the glass.

They sit back in the sofa. He has lived in Thailand all his life, but before that, he lived in Prior Lake, Minnesota. He inclines his head underneath his arms and talks about the flatness of Midwestern plains and the summer dullness tinged blue with icy lake water. He didn't like or dislike living there, just as nobody has strong attachment to bread. It's necessarily a given. To Jon, places are better left unvisited and even better unvisited. He hasn't been back since he left. That's why it's his favorite place on earth.

"We should go."

He cocks his head back, "Where?"

She sits up on the sofa, "Prior Lake. Minnesota. I've never been to Minnesota."

"Why would you have?"

"I don't know. Change of scene."

"You don't seem like the type that likes to shake things up."

She grabs his laptop sitting on top of the coffee table and opens up a new window. The attached mouse rolls on the floor. BKK to MSP. The page loads. He leans in to see. The cheapest is \$1,899, round trip including tax. They can leave next Wednesday.

"God I hate flying." He falls back on the sofa, his head rolling on her thighs.

She turns off the air conditioner and the smell of their bodies smokes the innards of the apartment out. He lies so close to her that she wonders if he is cold and if he is,

when he won't need the warmth anymore. She wants him, deeply, deeply enclosed in the snare that he cannot break.

She inches up his body. He stays still. She cups in his joints and bulges. Hair appears in patches on his chest, armpit, back and groin, but the rest of his body is porcelain smooth. He wonders at her touch. Her limbs feel heavier than they ever did before and he bears their weight as much as he can. She cradles his neck and his neck rolls. She opens his mouth, sees the descending tunnel and finds his underside dry. She runs her finger through her hair. As he shivers, she turns him around and around. His arms hold onto her waist. When she turns him on his back, she catches her reflection on the window. It lures her. He breathes heavy under her body. She rests her cheek on his and meets her eyes on the window. In that instant, she captures herself and locks it away safe.

He moves under her and emerges on top. She blithely looks up. He works efficiently and rolls. As her fingers lock behind his head, she thinks how free they are from the pollution of the outside, the love for farangs and currency exchange. Here, there is no protesting or polite refusals. They can say yes to everything and there are no repercussions.

Lenn makes sure that she returns home at least once a day. Masha isn't at home as she

decides to “carpe diem” and explore “the city” until her check arrives. But when she is at home, she is usually passed out on the couch or on the floor. She sleeps with her mouth opened, the blanket stashed by her feet and doesn't even hear the door open. Used to seeing Masha's face energized, it surprises Lenn to see her face completely drained. Her mouth sags in wrinkled folds near her chin. She looks so worn out, exhausted. As Lenn heads out to go back to Jon's apartment, she drops her keys on the floor. They crash on the kitchen tiles. But Masha doesn't even budge, her face still tilted upwards, mouth open as if gasping for air. Lenn locks the door behind her.

They watch a lot of movies together. He picks out well-crafted mega-production films with clear five-step plotline that run for no less than 170 minutes. Sometimes the trailer and reviews are misleading and the films turn out to be artsier than they hoped in which character development drags, dialogue goes nowhere and the movie ends in the same humdrum tempo it began. But the more films they watch, the fewer they actually see till the credits roll. The DVD jackets of 'The Godfather', 'Doctor Zhivago', 'The Empire Strikes Back' and 'The Aviator' stack on top of each other. “We should finish these them before we return them,” Jon says. It's like throwing away food, it's morally wrong. As a solution, they let the DVD player run as they have sex.

His lips part and close like he is talking and it's sweet, sweeter than linked arms,

cooler than a strand of wind through the humidity and a yawn in the concrete. It is so sweet that water circles in her sinus like an infection. He keeps talking and she talks back in response, her answer somewhat warbled and complicated and she doubts he can understand. Her lips start to palpitate. She is desperate to make herself understood. But they hardly listen to each other. They talk all afternoon.

The sweetness continues through the week. One afternoon after sex, Jon plays with his zippo and Lenn closes her eyes and lengthens her spine. They order pasty Italian food from a brochure and smack their lips at its texture.

“What a waste of money,” Jon pushes the plastic container away, “Let's go to Emporium food court. It's cheaper and they make much better mock Italian dishes anyways.”

“That's so far,” Lenn says.

“It's on the same street,” he laughs, “A ten minute walk.”

“I'm really not in the mood to go out,” she pushes her hair back, “The heat just drains me.”

“Yeah I don't know,” his eyes narrow, “Whatever. Whatever you want.”

Silent falls on them like wet blanket thrown over oil fire. Since yesterday, he has been pushing the idea of going out. He suggested they go out to a club opening in Thonglor, get dinner at L'Opera or go to the gym. When he goes out for his training sessions, she takes the opportunity to check back at her apartment. It still hasn't rained since Songkran ended. Three months of no rain has taken a toll on her, the sun cooking

up the smog into a blanket of thick fume over the city.

Jon develops a migraine towards the evening and though he expected it to be gone next morning, it still envelops his head. Jon washes down some ibuprofen with a bottle of water, but they don't seem to be working. "You should go lie down," Len says. He closes the bedroom door behind him.

He sleeps for hours and the morning melts into the afternoon. She sits up. The blood rushes to her head. Her throat feels dry. She gets up for a glass of water.

Off to the corner of her eyes, Lenn detects movement. She leaps back. An old woman smiles as she closes the front door. Her severely bent back and bulging stomach make a perfect curvature from back to front. She looks like a beetle, balanced on her hind legs, but she is extremely precise in her movements. She crosses the living room and heads into the kitchen carrying bags of grocery.

Lenn follows her. The kitchen glows in early twilight. The woman sifts through the bags and pulls out bagged rice, shrimps and leeks. She smiles at Lenn again and this time Lenn sees missing teeth in the smile. She says something in Thai. Lenn effaces herself with a shake and shallow laughs.

"O hoy," the woman smiles.

She turns on the stove. She chops up the leek and empties the rice and shrimp into

a pot. She smiles and nods every time she makes eye contact with Lenn. The rice boils and she divides the contents into two bowls. She pushes one of them towards Lenn.

“Kin, kin.”

Lenn stutters, “Chan kin laew kha.”

The woman bursts into an uproar of laughter. Her back swings back and forth. She points a finger at Lenn and sputters something in Thai. She shuffles to get a spoon and hoists herself up on a stool. She stirs the rice and begins to eat.

“Kin, kin,” the woman insists as she spoons food into Lenn’s mouth, “Kin. Kin dai. Kao yang kaung raun.”

With polite smiles, Lenn steps out of the kitchen. She turns around and sees him by the room. The ripples of lights are gone. When she looks back, the porridge still steams in the bowl, but she is gone.

“Who was that?” Lenn asks.

“Who?” His eyes squint with sleep, “What are you doing out here?”

“I was just getting,” she looks down and sees the porridge, “Didn't you see her?”

“Who?” He asks again, annoyed. He comes into the kitchen and looks around, “I don't see anyone.” He spots the cooling pot and the bowl by her side, “Did you cook?”

“There was a woman cooking here,” she insists.

He raises his eyebrows.

“Okay,” he rubs his eyes, “Let's go back to sleep.”

He still looks like he has the migraine. He waits for her, but only because it's the

polite thing to do.

“Go ahead. I'm going to eat.”

When he goes back into the room, she walks around the corner of the kitchen. A narrow corridor appears in front of her. There are no lights here and it's hard to see where it leads. With a hand on the wall, Lenn walks slowly through until she hits a door. It opens into the building corridor. Back on the kitchen counter, she hesitantly picks up the spoon, dips it in and brings it up to her lips.

Masha got the check and booked her flights ten days from now. “Where have you been all this time?” She asks as she hangs up the laundry. The light is low with smog clouds and Lenn notices bags under Masha's eyes. Her shoulders slump every time she drops her arms, which looks as though they have thinned. Lenn says that she has been staying at her friend's house. Masha pauses as she reaches for a shirt in the basket, “I hope that's not because of me.” Assuring that it's not, Lenn asks her if she is feeling alright. “No, I'm okay,” Masha says as she repositions her basket, “I just haven't been sleeping that well.”

Lenn notices new clothes on the line. A bright blue sweetheart top and a pink miniskirt hangs sideways. “They are for my sister,” Masha says, “She wanted some cheap clubbing clothes.”

Lenn offers to cook khao pad for dinner. Masha brightens. They top the rice with

fried eggs and lime spritzes. Masha digs in, only coming up for water, like a person who hasn't eaten for days. "This is so good," she says as she bites into the egg, "You should cook more often." They laugh. Lenn wants to ask if she is okay again, but doesn't want to seem nosy. And she is leaving soon, Canada will do her good. Bangkok hasn't exactly been a ride for her. Lenn squeezes leftover lime into their water. Masha smiles.

When the day becomes unbearably hot, the school and the bus rides a white noise and Masha's thinning presence oppressive, Lenn goes over to his apartment. She realizes that bus 48 goes the same direction, but chooses to take the sky train. The sun throws itself all over the train platform and the other afternoon dwellers dot themselves along the stretch of the station, a man hovering over the yellow line with the security guard idly looking on.

Jon opens the door and she circles the living room while he watches her from the counter. They don't rush. They talk for a couple of minutes, eat half a bag of mandarine and see the sun set on the balcony. They dodge the shirts hung outside to dry. They talk about the small things and count the cars passing below and pigeons on the phone line. When her hands feel cold, she holds it against his cheeks or his neck. He yelps when she catches him off guard. "That's mean," he says. She laughs and does it again. "Why is your hand so cold?" She plays at it as the sun sets.

In the bed, he turns away. She latches onto his hips. He sits up.

“We should get out.”

His voice seems foreign. Her ears travel from the traffic below to his words.

“We never go out. Let’s get out.”

“We go out,” she says.

“No we don’t,” he gets up and paces around the bed. He finds his jeans and shirt.

“What are you doing?”

He picks up her shirt and throws it on the bed, “We always stay in here. I want to get out. It’s like, like we are hiding or escaping or something. I want to feel real.”

His words get tangled up in the nasal cavity and comes out as a school boy whine. Lenn tries to suppress her grin. She drops her head, but he catches it.

“You think it’s funny?”

She shakes her head, but her smile does not go away. The muscles on his face twitch. A different shadow paints his face. His mouth thins. “My friend is throwing a party tonight. I would like to go. You can come if you'd like.”

The offer is on the table. She reaches for her shirt at the foot of the bed. It is so pedestrian, cheap, old.

“I’m not dressed to go out,” she says.

He faintly smiles. “I didn’t think you were one of the people that cared about those kinds of things.”

With the lights changing from red to green, their taxi glides on the road. The

driver turns onto Sathorn. Jon leans in and points the driver into the right soi. They pull up to a stuccoed gate. In the lobby, Lenn tests out the echoes like a child.

The party is happening on the rooftop. The first few that spot Jon shout out to the rest of the group. They hold themselves in this particular way that Lenn immediately knows that they have been here a long time. Through the people appears a woman with limbs as straight as her hair. Her eyes wing outwards and she smiles with her cheeks.

“A stranger!” She gives him a pat of a hug. He laughs, “You owe me five hundred baht. Jake, Pat and I were betting on whether you were going to show up tonight. Pat had much more faith in you than I did. Knowing your track record, I don’t know if I should be the one punished.”

“Sophie, you always lose your bets. It’s more of your problem than mine.”

Sophie says something that Lenn doesn’t quite catch, but her sentence ends when her eyes land on Lenn. Jon introduces her. Sophie gives her an airy hug.

“Have we met before?”

Lenn shakes her head, “I don’t believe we had.”

“No we have,” Sophie says, “You were at Olivia’s party. Last Friday?”

“I don’t know Olivia.”

“Not at Olivia’s, the other place, the,”

“You always have to know everyone, don’t you?” Jon stops her there. Sophie gives him the cheeky smile again.

“I do. Especially at my party. You know, Jon,” she takes his hand, “You’ve been

meaning to meet Gio for a while. He's here tonight. I'll introduce you." Jon's face switches from intent listening to manic grinning in split seconds. As he is being pulled away, he shoots a wide-eyed look at Lenn. She doesn't know what to do with it.

The rooftop has European street lamps on every corner and people gather in between them like they are on a cruise ship. The silver streamers flutter over her head. The party guests kick the deflated balloons around. The high heels avoid them at all cost. They are all kids that graduated from international schools, but Lenn recognizes none of them. She goes up to a side table and picks up a flute of Champaign. Jon talks to a slick Italian guy on the opposite side of the rooftop, his hands flying everywhere as he speaks. He leans in and cocks back repeatedly like an over-charged automaton. In this party, surrounded by his people, Lenn sees that he is the guy who ditches his own parties, cuts his own hair and bums around the world in business-class flights and drinks on forbidden islands.

The tempo of the crowd quickens when the music comes on. The spur-of-the-moment DJ abandons his iPhone to join a rave near the Champaign table. A few girls join. They titter in their micro minis and platformed shoes. Their tiny bags fling around as they hop on the spot. The guys bob with their arms way up and they strike poses even though no one is taking a picture.

These kinds of people fit anywhere in the world, not a hair out of place. Their looks deceive. The only thing matters is the way they cross their legs as hair falls on the other side, the fitted shirt into khakis and the youth revealed in cut-out shirts and

vagabond feet. They all know how to drop to the beat, and their small talks and small thoughts can please all and connects all the wandering minds. In their ethnic discernibility, they become like everyone else. They can make anyone talk, think and smile like they do. They are invincible at night and impenetrable in the daylight.

Lenn finishes her Champaign. Jon walks through the rooftop looking for her. She stays by the railing. Someone jacks up the volume and screaming starts. A guy in a ripped shirt grabs Jon, but he pulls away. The music ends too soon and the rave staggers. Jon grabs a drink and maneuvers through the crowd. He finds her and slips next to her.

“Do you feel real now?” Lenn asks.

His smile fades, “Don’t mock me.”

Lenn feels cruel, but she can’t stop it now, “ I can see where you’re coming from. Look at this, this is real life. All the pretty things in one place.”

She wants him to crumble with her words. But he doesn’t. Instead his hand tightens around the glass and his eyes turn opaque. Still she can’t stop, like a magic trick, the string of scarves regurgitating out of her throat.

She stops herself. All around her are signs of life and, as the seconds pass, the sound of the shot gets folded into the overlapping tracks. She turns and turns on the spot until she can see something that resembles chaos. The kicked-up dust in Poipet cloud her vision. It rushes up like a storm and she suffocates in the blindness. She sways as if she is on a bus, walking up and down the aisle waiting for the sleep to go away.

The cloud clears. Jon is no longer standing next to her. Her wrists lock and her

knees buckle. People are dancing like nothing has happened. She wades through the dancers to see where he went, behind the potted palm trees, beneath the fairy lights and through the girls' spidery legs. Her fingernails click against each other. She looks down and sees a shattered glass by her feet. The shards catch the night and shoot it back to her. It stings. Her nails pull away from the skin.

She makes her way to the elevators, but a guy dancing in the periphery latch onto her wrist. He drawls and fixes his hat. When she snatches back her hand, he slinks back into the group. Only one of the elevators are working. The lighted number above the door countdown in a mesmerizing speed and it falls as if it is never going to stop.

She makes it to his apartment again. The door isn't locked. She weaves through all the rooms and kitchen. She tries to catch the sand slipping through her fingers. Suddenly, she hears the door open. She runs out into the living room. It is the woman carrying a bag of mandarins, freshly purchased from the morning peddlers. Only then does Lenn see the morning light seeping into the apartment. The woman waddles over to the sink. She turns on the tap and the water runs. She washes a few mandarines, puts them on the plate and slides it over to Lenn. With that, she opens the door to the kitchen. Before she closes the door behind her, she speaks in a low gravelly voice of a grandmother soothing a baby back to sleep. The door closes. Lenn stuffs the mandarines in her pocket and exit the apartment.

IV.

Lenn comes back to the house and finds Masha gone. She double checks the date on her phone. The screen flickers on and reads April 29th. The living room stands spotless. The only sign of Masha's month-long stay is a stack of dirty plates cascading soap water and a thank-you note on the couch. She reads it carefully, but it doesn't tell her where she went. A week passes and Lenn decides to quit the useless worrying and throws out the note, washes the stack of dishes and fixed her apartment back to how it was.

School, commute, and back to her apartment, the same repeats. Whenever the what-ifs and low-lying clouds roll in her mind, she walks the streets and tries to blend with the tourists. She travels to the Grand Palace area, to the place where she fought with David. She wonders what he's doing now. By the front gates, she snoops around the sides to see if the pagodas and the pop-eyed yaks have changed at all from the last time she came. The pedestrians step around her as if she is a pup locked out of the house. By the steps of three-star hotel, she counts the loose coins in her pocket. She speaks broken English to vendors selling pirated DVDs and they haggle back. A blond boy, walking up stream towards the traveling pack, bumps into her and mutters "excuse me". She buys a pair of plastic sunglasses and picks off the UV Protection sticker.

She catches a taxi back into the Sukhumvit and walks the Asok junction. She weaves into the closed market. The storekeepers shoo her away. She sees a couple decked in sarongs and braided hair walking into Soi Cowboy. Lenn follows them in. The wires

and bulbs of neon signs web along the storefronts. Bar girls hang their arms over the counter and their legs dangle from the stool. They disperse themselves through the mid-afternoon drinkers that clutch their glasses and look down at their coasters. The couple that Lenn followed is stopped every few shops, but no one stops her. She wishes someone does, even a taunting “hello” shouted across the street, but no one bothers her. At the end of the soi, a man leans out of his tuk tuk and shoves a booklet of naked women in the couple's way. They giggle and run away. When Lenn comes by, the driver sticks his finger in his nostril.

Outside the soi, a griller stands by his case of fish balls, squid and flaps of meat skewered on sticks. Lenn asks for two sticks of fish balls. The vendor throws them down on the charcoal grill. He massages his face and sips a bag of ice coffee stashed under his cart. Lenn points at the thick chili sauce and he drowns the balls in the sauce. He snatches the twenty baht note from her hands and it disappears in his apron pocket.

She finds a bus stop with a bench and sits down. Her legs strain to stretch. She pokes around in the plastic bag with the skewer. The fish balls slide around against each other. She aims and stabs. But instead, she punctures a hole in the bag. When she pulls the skewer out, the sauce drips. In desperation, she squeezes the bag. The sauce runs down her leg.

An old woman passes, her feet dragging worn out slippers. The cars steeped in traffic jam crawl by on the road. Her mouth chews like she is about to talk, but no sound comes out of her mouth. When she spots Lenn, she stops. After scanning her from top to

bottom, she tuts.

Lenn tries to wipe the sauce off , but instead spreads the stickiness all over her legs. She throws out the uneaten fish balls. Her fingers stick to each other.

A train passes above her. The traffic thins. She jaywalks over to the other side. Suddenly, a heavy drop of water hits her head. Lenn looks up and senses the air tremble. The stray bullets of rain spot the concrete sidewalk. She smiles, the first rain of the season. The banyan trees relax their branches as the rain gains momentum. The heavy drops pummel her. She walks faster than the rain, faster than the wind carrying a single leaf ducking for shelter. With each drop cracking over her head, her parched thoughts begins to soften. She should apologize. If that is the only way she will see Jon again, she will do it. They have weathered the winds that blew them across the Pacific and continents. Whatever she thought was the right thing to say, right thing to do to make him realize his despicable actions, it doesn't matter now, not with the rain and the days folding into the heart of summer. They all had to cope with their stroke of luck, the chime of the hour, becoming the chosen ones thrown into sudden wealth, sudden experience, sudden entitlement. They couldn't complain, they couldn't take advantage, all they could really do was secretly enjoy. She walks as quickly as her can towards soi 24.

She approaches his door. Her legs shake slightly from all the walking. She squeezes the

water from her shirt and hair. The apartment sounds empty. She wants to ring the doorbell again, but her fingers curve back. The splashes from the swimming pool downstairs and patter of feet reverberate up the concrete walls. She turns and walks back to the elevator.

“Hello.”

A voice stops Lenn. The old woman stands in the doorframe. Her wiry hair grabs the air around her and her slumped breasts broaden her shoulders. She invites her into the apartment. Lenn squeezes by her with modesty. The woman shuts the door and makes back into the kitchen. Lenn follows her.

The steam hits her hard. All the stoves are lit. A large pot in the corner boil vigorously. The smell of bone marrow and animal fat clamber at Lenn. The woman chops the green onions on the counter and swipes it into a growing bowl of shredded stalk. She goes over to the sink, turns off the tap and tosses the sift full of bean sprouts. The woman's shuffling steps take her to each item in meticulous precision.

Lenn breathes in the steam and speaks the words that she had been grasping for, “Jon yuu tii nai kha?”

The woman does not look up from the cutting board. She grabs another bunch of green onions and starts to cut. Lenn repeats the question once more. The woman looks up like she has rung the doorbell.

“Jon yuu tii nai kha?”

She takes some salt and shakes it into the pot, “Jon luh? Jon yuu tii baan.”

Lenn laughs. Jon is at home. Home in his many houses, prime real estate, prime

upbringing where he can receive guests all his life. Then she realizes, was she just another guest? Her laugh turns sour and her throat coats with bitter aftertaste.

But the woman laughs along with her in a low chuckle mimicking the soup on the stove. Even when Lenn stops, she continues.

Lenn wants to ask her for the name, but she can't think of a polite way to ask. Even if she knew what her name was, she would never call her by it. Names always play dirty with her, pretending to be wholesome and then turning their backs when she needed them. Even her own name, she never placed an importance. Did it derive from her birth name, the clean and good Glenda which she eroded to Lenn, the Thai word for 'play', but also just a preposition of other action verbs, becoming as an arrow pointing nowhere.

Then, as Thai words often appear and disappear from her head, the word yai comes into her mind. Grandmother, yai.

As Yai moves to the stove to turn down the flames, Lenn picks up the knife and starts cutting the onions. Yai sees her and chuckles again. She says something in Thai, but Lenn can't quite catch it. Yai grabs the sieve and tosses the bean sprouts to repel the water.

At any moment, Jon can walk in through the door and find her here. But the hours wear on and the soup boils down to a thick gravy sauce. After turning off the stove, Yai opens all the windows to let the heat and the smell out. The apartment becomes a pass through for the construction noise, the orphaned footsteps along the corridor and the quiver of the elevator cables. A breeze tickles the walls. Yai and Lenn sit in the middle of

the living room floor, their backs against the couch.

The motorcy pulls up and Lenn runs to the school gate. The phone charger for some reason was unplugged and the phone died before her alarm was due to go off. When she woke up, it was already five minutes into her first lesson of the day.

She makes her way through a bunch of kids too busy with their skipping ropes and tag games to notice her. She prepares for consequences.

“Ooy Khru Lenn.”

She smiles at Khru Nampeung, but she just stares back at her. Lenn passes her and goes into the classroom at the end of the corridor. As expected, it's emptied. She wonders which of the teachers discovered that Lenn was not here. She wonders if the headmistress knows yet. She walks back to the office and Khru Nampeung looks up when Lenn enters. Lenn shrugs and apologetically smiles again, but it looks like Nampeung has more to say.

“Khru Lenn, klap maa?” Khru Nampeung asks softly. Lenn looks around for her chair, but she can't seem to spot it anywhere in the office. Khru Kung's chair is already piled with her sweaters and bags. All the teachers in the office look at her. Khru Chompoo peeks over her desk shelves while pretending to work.

Lenn stops. “Thammay?” The teachers shift on their seats. They scratch their ankles and pull at their split ends. No one speaks up. The silence descends in the room

like an afternoon smog. Khru Chompoo retreats into her self-imposed cubicle. Khru Nampeung keeps clasping her hands and pulling them apart. Her smile stretches out and becomes blinding.

Just then, the headmistress enters the room. Her lips are still wine-red and her eyebrows fan out all the way to her temples. She enters talking as usual and calling for Khru Chompoo's name, but she comes to a stop when she notices Lenn. The corners of her mouth flare up. Then she remembers to smile and her lips ease.

"Lenn," she starts in English, "Are you coming to visit kids?"

She enunciates the words, but the rising and falling tones penetrate her English. All the teachers peer over their books.

"Chan kit waa," Lenn starts, but she finds no words to continue. Whatever she thought, whatever she thought she understood is now crashing all around her. The headmistress nods and smiles, the unconditional yeses and of courses. She takes scissors to a Möbius strip that Lenn has been walking on, through time and heat, and the band unfurls flat on the floor. Its beginning and the end looks painfully alike, the fraying ends symmetrical to each other.

"We already have English teacher. She very nice."

The headmistress smiles again politely. Her lipstick cracks. Now, there is nothing left to knock down. All around them are remnants of relationship that used to exist. Now it is all smiles.

Lenn throws the schoolbooks and folder in the metal barrel as she enters her soi. The clanking makes a stray dog jump. It growls at the barrel, its eyes barely opened and caked with yellow pus. When it sees Lenn, it follows her as she passes by, tapping its tail on her bare leg. She freezes, but does her best to keep moving. The dog soon turns around and goes back to its spot. She hears it growl from behind.

She passes the security guard with his legs propped up and watching television. Usually he doesn't give her a second glance, but this time, he calls her from his counter.

“Pu khao paak tii mai.”

The guard repeats, but she just doesn't know the words he is saying. He twists his cap and licks his lips.

“Farang lek lek. Ruu mai?”

The small foreigner. It can only be Masha.

“Khao maa.”

Lenn's breath halts as she walks down the corridor. The front door is slightly ajar. Her footsteps catch up to her breath and she pushes the door open.

It is as if a mole had dug through her entire apartment. The cushions on the sofa has been pulled out and unzipped, the books in a heap by the window and all the doors opened. The cabinets in the kitchen are all opened and shards of a plate on the tiled floor. The sheets were pulled out from her bed and pillows on the floor, on top of the pile of

clothes.

She quickly checks the freezer. The stash of thousand baht bills, her savings. It's gone. She digs through the built-up ice, but the zip lock back is nowhere to be found. She retracts her fingers and holds it in her hands. The freezer door closes by itself. When her finger thaws a little, she searches again, for the tightly bound, paper wrapped and sealed bag. It is not there.

There are no cracks that Lenn can squeeze through, to start a scene, to lay it all out because she never had it together to begin with. She saw autonomy in her crumbling apartment where no self-aggrandizing expat can ever breach. She wanted to make choices that were mutually exclusive to each other, from the city and its people. But now the world she constructed in pure vacuum starts to cave in. She stands in the middle, helpless.

When she turns around, she spots a dark notebook on her counter. It's her passport. She grabs her handbag and fumbles through the inner pocket. She could have sworn that it has been in her bag all along. She flips the pages and finds her picture. All the pages are intact.

Masha. She never returned the spare key. But Lenn doesn't know how the bags under her eyes, thinning body and the sudden disappearance makes any sense. But it does, it does many times, the white girls gone wrong in Bangkok when they tried to find themselves. Masha was different though, she was the cleanest of them all.

She walks through the house. The oddest parts are bare. She hasn't seen the cheap wooden panels at the back of her wardrobe since she has moved in. The couch frame

looks like the scoop of a front loader. Lenn picks up the cushion from the ground. The passport grows damp in her hands.

Lenn wakes up next morning with a plan. She gets rid of most of her possessions. As Lenn takes out the last bag to the dumpster, she sees the building janitors crowded around and pulling out her clothes and inspecting them against the light. One of them tries on a jacket for size and others give their honest opinion.

All she owns now fits into a backpack. She cuts up her bed sheets and uses it to clean the surfaces with bleach. She can't remember what it used to smell like. She returns the key with the rent. She quickly exits the office hoping that the lady won't notice that it is a thousand baht short.

She takes the motorcy out. The streets are lit with naked florescent rods. Her hand clench the back seat handle and she hopes that Jon will be at home.

V.

The front door opens with ease. She holds her breath. Her eyes dot around but no one's in the house.

“Jon?”

She braces herself with explanations as she opens the door. But the apartment is as quiet as a lunchtime construction site, the churning machines hit on pause and the ground empty. She realizes she has never been alone in the apartment and she never was interested in it. The furnishings and objects rearranged around her and Jon when they spent time here. The objects were just noise around them and she didn't care to listen to them. But now, with the apartment empty, they talk to her. The delftware plates rest behind the kitchen cupboard, far too many to have intended Jon to use alone. When she opens the front door closet, a broom falls out on her, the dust pan and a mop pushed to the back amongst toilet rolls in plastic bags.

She finds a stack of coffee table books below the television. The top one is about Tuscan architecture, interior design and landscape. The book spine gives in to the thick pages, the threads pulling as she turns. All the houses, flowers and table arrangements look the same to her. She grabs a wad of pages and starts flipping. Abruptly, they stop in the middle of the book. A photograph slides down the glossy page. She picks it up and sees a small face caught in a camera flash. The eyes are closed and the curls whip the air. He grabs his hands together as if he can't hang onto anything else. His lips bear teeth,

stretching into either a grin or a grimace. The night is impenetrable in the picture and Lenn can't see where he is.

Holding onto the picture, she goes into the bedroom. His closet at first reveals a few pieces of his shirts and pants, but when she looks deeper she spots a heap of items in the corner. Quickly, she rolls open the other side.

Novels with shredded spine, toy cars, orphaned socks, jackets, bag tags, broken sunglasses, pacifiers, panties and sneakers mass into a mound that has not been touched in years. A lost and found of items that the guests never came back to claim, those negligible items that were forgotten as soon as they were replaced. Somethings like the bag tags lost their purpose as soon as they were delivered to the hands of their owners. And others were only bought to be discarded like the books that once spun in rotation bookshelves in Dutyfree shops by countless hands that needed to kill time. When these hands brought the book to the cashier, it was only because they couldn't withstand the maddening seven-hour layover and the book in their hands was cheaper than the airport's wireless pin. Travelers held onto these items, maybe this was the souvenir that they were looking for, maybe this book will be something that they will treasure for the rest of their lives. They wanted to make meanings out of every object they encountered, the places they stayed in, the air they breathed. When they paid attention, anything could change their lives and they travelled, wanting these fifteen-dollar books to shatter the way they saw the world, the bag tags to help them keep faith. But these things fell short. The expectations were too high and the objects and the places were just that, frail, short-lived

moments that had no value beyond their worth. When the travelers saw the limitations, they did not hesitate to leave them behind, relegate them as a “phase”, yet another souvenir that would clutter their house.

When the items were left behind, they created their own ecosystem, keeping each other company and sustaining themselves through the years in the closet. When Jon moved in, he could have thrown them out. But for some reason, he didn't. Maybe he realized that they are the true inhabitants of the apartment. They had been around for longer and Jon had no right to discard them. In this apartment, he lived under their rules and their allowance, he had his space and they had theirs. With his absence, they thrived. Lenn brings her hand up to reach for a bag tag, but something stops her. She isn't sure if she has the right to.

Lenn looks back at the picture, the boy captured by the insistence of his parents, surrounded by guests that poke and tease and do not want to be shortchanged of the fun they could have, smile Jon, smile now, why won't you smile.

A crash wakes her up. She jolts up, her mind not in sync with the bright noon rays and the commotion in the living room. With her hands, she smooths out her shirt and hair before stepping out.

Around the corner, she sees pots of bean sprouts, fish and spinach in bundles.

Then a figure appears through the kitchen door, a person she has seen before. After setting down long Chinese cabbages, Yai straightens herself. From her body topped with the scoliosis, her thin arms wave about. She looks at Lenn with eyes engulfed in wrinkles. Her expression stays the same, hands on hips, expecting Lenn to do something. Lenn feels like a seven year old all squirmy and twisty, asking an adult if so-and-so can come out and play. Is Jon at home? “Jon!” Yai exclaims as though she read Lenn's mind, then bursts into laughter. Lenn waits for her to catch her breath, but when she does, she shakes her head and goes back to the pots.

“Khun kha,” Lenn starts though she doesn't know how to end. Yai turns around and gives her a quizzical look. Why speak when you don't know what you are going to say? Yai hands her a knife and points to the bundles of spinach. Work on that for a while. Maybe you'll find what you are looking for.

They don't say much to each other, but sometimes Yai just starts to talk in Thai, her vowels stretching wide into the Northeast pronunciation. At first, Lenn thought Yai was talking to her, but soon realized how self-centered that thought was. Yai talks to talk. She doesn't expect anything out of anyone when she talks. Just hearing herself seems to be enough.

They take breaks for food and bathroom, but other than that, they do not rest. Yai works as if she has a deadline to meet. At first Lenn struggled to keep up with her, but her fingers find its way to wrap around the knife handle for the blade to slide itself between the root and the stem. She learns to tuck the knife between her fingers when she

finds a wilted leaf to pluck. It's a way for her to earn her keep. To make herself not only useful but also needed, necessary, irreplaceable. It's her only way to stay. She needs to see Jon again.

When the trimming is done Lenn lies on the linoleum floor to cool her back pain. The woman shuffles back into the living room, her back bent in a sweet crook, and hands Lenn a bag of trash.

Lenn takes the stairs all twenty-five floors down. At the dumpster, Lenn swings the bag. It hurtles through the air, collides into the wall and falls with a splat. A strand of spinach crawls out of the bag. She picks it up and lowers it on the other side of the wall. The discolored concrete that lines the bottom of the dumpster moves with the flies and pieces of fluttering plastic.

Before she falls asleep, she picks up the photograph of Jon from the bedside table. The squint, the outstretched lips, hands clinging onto each other. Of all the pleasant family vacation photograph, why did this one end up wedged in the coffee table book? Did he want to keep it for himself, hoping that no one else will see it or was it a part of childhood articles that mysteriously disappeared? Where did that funny picture of Jon go? It's not in the velvet or the green leather photo book. We have to find it, we have to save it, it's a classic Jon expression. Then years passed, they went on another trip and took more pictures. As long as Jon was still there, it was replaceable.

Lenn puts the picture down on the pillow next to her and closes her eyes. She composes the words she will say when he walks through the front door. She repeats the

words on her lips, silently. But as she repeats, she begins to lose why she wanted to apologize and why she wanted him to see her side. But vulnerability attracts the most stoic and the most angry, maybe keeping herself open will make him come back. She wants to be prepared for the moment when he appears in the apartment and she needs to defend herself.

The next day, Yai comes in around noon. She props herself against the sofa and sews in the shirt hems by hand. When she sees Lenn, her smile finds its familiar way into the contours of her face. Lenn walks up to her and points to herself.

“Lenn,” she says. The smile sinks into the grooves of Yai’s face. Either she remembers her or she accepts the apparition she has to now daily deal with. To each other, they are apparitions tied to this apartment, each disappearing and reappearing like the smog.

She can’t stand the smell of oil and sweat emanating from her clothes so she changes into something she finds in her backpack. What she really needs is a shower. She makes do with the single bar of soap next to the basin.

When she comes out of the shower, she goes to work. Yai hands her a spare needle and thread. They take stitches into the evening.

Today, Yai brings in strips of off-white cloth in four garbage bags. With her bent back and twiggy limbs, Lenn can't imagine her hauling them alone through Bangkok and into the apartment.

Yai turns on the stove. The apartment starts to smell like bleach, durian and mothballs. After she let it cool, she takes the pot into the living room and set it on top of a layer of newspapers. Red dye simmers in the pot. As it cools, it turns into a shade of blood red. Lenn manages the task of treading the cloth in the pot with the wooden stick. She adds the strips gradually. They swarmed saturated. Yai fishes the strips out one by one and hangs them on the dry line out on the balcony. She has already lined the porch with newspapers and plastic sheets so that red splatters won't make their permanent mark. Lenn puts on the gloves and carries the pot out. They tease apart one strip, squeeze it hard and gently straighten to hang it up. Lenn finds herself engrossed in the task, no matter how dull or monotonous it is.

Faraway a siren wails. As they near the end of this batch of red cloth, a column of smoke arises just beyond Lenn's line of vision. She ducks underneath the dry line to see where it is coming from. It is curling out beneath the newly constructed sky train station. Soon, the smoke grows and swallows the platform. But against the backdrop of the rest of the city, the smoke looks like a mirage, something that is not quite there.

“Lenn.”

She hears someone call her name. Her heart starts to beat. She turns around too

quickly and knocks off the pot of red dye that she placed at the edge of the air-conditioning machine. When it topples, her instinct tells her to reach out her arm. The pot bounces and red dye splashes up towards her face. The metallic taste fills her mouth. When she opens her eyes, the bucket is on the ground, the red dye all over the balcony floor.

Behind the balcony window, Yai starts to laugh. Her laugh claws out of her throat and hurtles forward like chicken cop unfastened on top of a breaking truck. Her face starts to crack and her wrinkles splinter her eyes. Her laugh fills the entire balcony. Lenn feel as though she has been incriminated, singled out among the millions. Shame and anger makes her body hot.

Inside the bathroom, Lenn tries to wash the dye off. She turns the tap on vicious blasts. It chokes on itself before it starts to roar into full stream. She grabs the bar of soap and attacks the blotches. The water starts to run red, but the stains are darker than ever. They retreat farther into her skin the more she scrubs.

She turns off the tap. The roar disappears into the faucet and the apartment becomes quiet. She wonders why she is doing this, why she ever needed to feel like she is irreplaceable. She drips water as she walks back into the living room.

They try to put the accident behind them. Lenn's face and arms are still tinged red, but a

shade washes off with every shower. Yai has pushed all the furniture out of the way to make room for more dry lines. She coated the floor and the walls with clear plastic.

Whichever way Lenn stands, the sunlight always bounces back into her eyes. She spends the days squinting, perpetually blinded by the rays. But Yai works steadily as though the sun does not bother her. The sunsets that Lenn used to enjoy strains her eyes the most.

The only furniture that has not been moved is the television. It wears a newspaper hat to protect itself from the drips of dye. Yai turns it on when she comes in and the news blears as loudly as the sun. The news turns into talk shows, talk shows into commercials, commercials into the farcical soap dramas, which all feeds back to the news. Lenn tries turning the volume down, but Yai comes out from the kitchen and hikes it back up. The dye fumes and television chatter makes Lenn feel like she is stuck in Sukhumvit road in a mid-day traffic jam, the time when she knew she shouldn't have gotten into a taxi, but something in her insisted to climb into the car. The more she stayed in the taxi, the more curses the driver spat out. She ignored him as she sat looking out the window. "Oh hoy," the driver muttered at the traffic. Lenn kept her head craned towards the window as he started cursing and shouting. She could tell that he blamed her for dragging him into this deadlock and the last thing he wanted to do was play whims of an ignorant farang. The light turned green, but the cars didn't budge. When it turned back to red, the driver screamed. "Uok pay," he thrust his forefinger towards the door, "uok pay." His face crumbled to a gargoyle grimace. Then she remembered something that an old expat said to her. "All these taxi drivers have a coconut knife under their seats. They will slash you

if you aren't too careful." She got out the taxi as soon as she could.

She feels someone holding her steady. She fainted and Yai is supporting her body up. Yai tells her to stop. When Lenn comes to her own two feet, Yai starts to take away the pots. Lenn follows her to the balcony. She picks out the red strips and hang them on the line. Yai points towards the bedroom. But Lenn insists. If she can't bear through this, she is a lost cause. In the menial tasks, she has found the true monotony that she has been trying to emulate since the time she walked out of the hostel. The work feels pure, the state of penance in which she is unaware of its monotonousness, the kind that sweeps her off her feet. To even think of breaking the pattern will bring the carefully expanded structure down, its potency lost in the unnecessary reality. But once in it, it is impossible to think a thought beyond the confines and it is fine to play it safe, to be nice to yourself if you are in a foreign place, a place that you never wanted to live in the first place. You make it as bearable as you possibly can. Decorate and make frivolous, a nice international switch-up, a global citizen-building opportunity in which you can glorify in the world that you have created for yourself and for your like-minded commune.

When Lenn was twelve she bugged her mother to take her to a drawing competition hosted by the board of Swiss Tourism. In the ballroom, tables with crayons and postcards of Switzerland dotted the floor. The only guideline of the competition was that you had to use the images in the board's promotional materials. The kids with name tags pinned to their chests were already working away on their drawings. Lenn circled the ballroom multiple times looking for the registration table, but all she found were

volunteers giving out instructions in Thai. So she just slipped into a seat with a plain white paper laid out on the table. Only a few promo booklets remained unclaimed and Lenn chose a picture of three men playing a Swiss Alpine Horn. She drew a rolling green hill and placed them on the slopes with the horn and using her imagination added a log cabin to the left. When she stepped back after drawing it in, the house looked so small that it came across as a dog house rather than a cabin. Nonetheless, she submitted it and waited in the hotel lobby for the competition results to come out. She circled the centerpiece that stood in front of the spiral staircases, an autumnal vine with coloring trees bearing oranges. A thin film of dust coated the fruits. In fear of being escorted out by the hotel security, she tried to act like a hotel dweller, dragging her flip-flops across the floor, looking lost and sleepy at the same time. Three hours later, the results were announced. About fifty pictures lined the wall. She didn't place, not even in the age division. In the taxi home, she realized that she has never registered and her drawing probably got lost in the pile of scratch papers and rough drafts. She had spent the whole day and nothing had come out of it.

“Lenn?”

Jon stands by the front door, his hair swept to the side, his shirt pressed and his shoes clean. He looks so out of place that she can't even place him in the forest of strips hung out to dry and the stench of the dye.

Suddenly, glass shatters. Lenn turns around and sees Yai standing by the kitchen door, her arms shaking. Glass shards and fragments scatter around her feet. She starts to

shout at Jon, her finger pointed to his face and her feet stippling on the floor glistening with broken glass. Lenn tells her to stop, but Yai yells and it's nothing like Lenn has heard before. Her voice covered in cankers and sores hurtle out of her mouth, filling the apartment with misery. When Lenn looks back to Jon, she sees that his face has drained of color. He swallows a few times, trying to gain back some self-control.

“She has dementia,” he says, “Her family contacted me to send her back to Buriram.”

Jon talks over Yai's shouting, trying to calm her down. Lenn grabs the broom and scrapes the glass into the dust pan. Drops of blood lines across the floor. Jon get Yai to sit on the couch and Lenn takes the chance to wipe down the floor.

“Who is she?” Lenn asks.

She sees bags under his eyes. He rubs his eyes hard. “She raised me and my brothers. And took care of this apartment.”

Yai starts to cry, grabbing her knees. Lenn brings a bowl of water and white cloth strips from the kitchen. Jon washes her feet and looks for shards in her feet.

“I've been trying to tell you,” Lenn says, “She was here when we were.”

“Yeah,” he tries to pinches out a fragment from the sole of her feet, but she cries harder. In panic, he lowers her foot back down in the bowl. “I don't know what to do.”

Lenn comes over the sees the foot. Yai's wailing subsides. Carefully, Lenn holds the shard between her finger nail. It slips, but on the second try she gets a grip and pulls it out. Jon looks relieved. Yai sobs into her shirt sleeve as Lenn wraps a fresh cloth around

her foot.

“I have to get her on the nine o'clock bus,” Jon says.

Lenn glances at the clock. It reads eight. “That's crazy. She can't go.”

He grabs his hands together, “Her family is desperate. She's been missing for over two weeks.”

He finds her shoes and slips it on her feet. Lenn feels her face heat up again, but she can't say anything. Frustration itches her throat, but his presence calms her.

“How long have you been here?” He asks.

“I don't know.”

He leads Yai to the elevator . Yai shouts in protest as Jon leads her down the corridor, her limbs thrashing about. She keeps trying to run back to the apartment, but Jon holds her down firmly. The elevator door opens and Lenn persuades Yai to get in. When the door closes, she finally recognizes who he is. “Jon,” she says. She ruffles his hair and smooths his cheek. He smiles back, uneasily. By the lobby door, a car waits for them. The driver comes out and opens the passenger door for them. Jon makes sure that Yai sits in the middle and tells the driver to go ahead. The car pulls out of the apartment complex.

When they drive onto the Sukhumvit road, the car instantly gets jammed in the traffic. The cars stall along the three-lane road, the motorcy drivers more aggressive than ever, barging in between the cars and bellowing curses through their helmet screen. Jon's driver shouts “oh ho” as he brakes to avoid a motorcy. He eventually finds his way onto the highway, but it takes thirty minutes to get up the slope. The whole of Bangkok is out

tonight, trying to get ahead of each other to the highway leading out of the city.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“Northern bus terminal,” Jon replies.

Their driver tries to accelerate once it gets on the highway, but other cars keep cutting into their lane. The driver curses and honks. He commentates on the reckless driving as he speeds up and Lenn can feel the vacuum that speeding cars in the adjacent lanes create, that stillness in the motor. Her lips open and close and try to feel out the time to utter the words she's been meaning to say for a while.

“I'm sorry.”

He looks at her blankly, counting the syllables, the meaning per line. He has forgotten about it long time ago and is now trying to remember the apologies that she owes him or the ones that he owes her, but he is not the kind to keep tally. But she is, she has kept track of everything, all the negligible things that he ever said and how she reacted to all of that. For Lenn, the apology was not just an offer to “forgive and forget”, it was her way of returning to the issues that he tried to bury. She has tossed the the lasso and now it tightens around his body. If he wants to get out, he needs to cut through her tactic as quickly as he can.

“That's alright,” he says.

The car starts to descend the highway. Jon's tone throws her off. She didn't expect to just take the apology so off-handedly, but now they are driving into a part of town that she has never been to, the billboards with politicians' faces rising like fire around her. The

car careens the corners and slips into the side streets.

Before she can gather enough words to reply, the car pulls into the Northern Bus Terminal. Travelers with luggage, kids and boxes wound with plastic ropes overwhelm the car. The vehicles slowly curve around the passenger drop-off where a moon-like clock hangs above the counters. They have twenty minutes.

Jon helps Yai out of the car and Lenn catches her balance on the other side. The ticket counter line moves swiftly. With a purchased ticket, they run over to Departure Gate Number 2 at the end of the terminal. The crowd parts to make way for the hobbling woman and two farangs and the people wonder what their story is. When they reach the bus, Jon spots the bus conductor and gives him careful instructions about Yai, but he takes in Jon's stalling Thai with his arms crossed. Yai holds Jon's face in her hands. He tries to make her understand that she needs to get on the bus. The conductor belts himself into the driver's seat and looks down at them as he pops a gum into his mouth. She finally agrees to get on the bus and he helps her get a seat by the window. He comes out of the bus and stands next to Lenn, who has been watching Yai waving from her window seat. They wave back. Soon the bus revs up, honks three times and pulls out of the terminal. Four other buses follow it out of the gate.

Lenn wraps her arm around Jon. He looks at her surprised, but does not pull away. With the last bus for the night out of the terminal, the crowd dissipates and the counter grates starts to crash close. They retrace their steps through now a vacated corridor and back to the ticket counter. Their arms tangle.

When they recover from the whirlwind, Jon takes out his phone and gives the driver a ring. He doesn't pick up so Jon hangs up and tries again and again.

“What is he doing,” he mutters.

They scan the lot to spot the car. “It’s the black BMW.” Jon says. If it is here, it would take no longer than a minute to find it among all the run-down Hyundais. They grumble past Jon and Lenn and swing the jarring headlights into their eyes.

Jon walks in agitated circles, dialing his driver again and again. He hangs up again and immediately reconnects to the call.

“Let’s take a taxi.” Lenn places her hand on his shoulder. He stuffs the phone into his pocket. They walk onto the road, emptier than the terminal, a few motorcys trailing past. Lenn counts the street lamps to calm herself. They walk fast to disguise to each other, the emptiness they have never seen before in Bangkok.

In the distance, they spot a taxi. Jon shouts and waves his arm. The driver idles by his car and coughs up phlegm. He grinds it into the ground with his slippers and spits again.

Jon speaks to the man in Thai. He spits out a ball, which lands by Jon’s shoes. Jon patiently waits for an answer.

“One thousand baht,” the man barks.

Before Lenn can say anything, Jon speaks. “Okay.” The man leaps into the driver’s seat. He starts the car and Jon and Lenn slide into the backseat.

He drives manically. Along the empty streets, he doesn't stop for lights and insists

on a straight line. He avoids the highway entrance and takes Thoet Damri all the way down. Palm trees line Thoet Damri road in picturesque prettiness, unlike the Bangkok that she knows. The taxi hurtles over the small stream bridges and speed bumps. The palm trees turn into bigger, dark-barked trees that lushly spread themselves along the road.

By a big intersection, roads merge and the idle countryside look turns into a proper metropolitan. But still no one is on the road. No cars, no late night wanderers that stretch out the conscious hours of the day. Their fear melts away and they start to feel invincible in this crumbling taxi that breaks all civil laws and civil logic. Jon reaches for Lenn's hand and smiles. It's so ridiculous. They hang on tight.

Suddenly, the radio crackles. The driver twists the knobs until he can make sense out of the static noise. As more words tumble out of the box, the driver mutes his breath. A scratchy, monotonous voice announces something, but the tone is so stylized that it sounds like another language. But Jon and the driver understand. The driver immediately pulls up at the next alley, stops driving and listens with great intent. Suddenly, he kills the engine and yells.

“Finished. Get out.”

Lenn turns to Jon. He grabs the back of the driver's seat and talks fast. His tongue trips over the Thai that isn't coming to him as quickly as he needs it to. The driver repeatedly shouts the three words. “Finish get out finish get out finish get...” His voice rattles the amulets dangling from his rearview mirror. Jon gets out of the car and Lenn

follows him. The taxi spins around and speeds back up the road.

“What’s happening?” Lenn asks.

“I couldn’t,” Jon stops himself, “the words were, I’m not sure. There is a military involved, but I could have heard wrong.”

He feels for his phone, but it’s no longer there. He pats around his pants, but doesn’t find anything. “Fuck.” He mutters. It’s gone with the taxi.

They abandon the soi. The streets gleam with the Seven Eleven store sign, traffic light and working street lamps. On the road, they hesitate which way to go.

“We’re near the city center. Maybe we’ll find a taxi there.” Jon says.

It makes sense. They decide to do something that, at the very least, makes logical sense because to do anything else would be rash. Lenn hears rumbles in the distance and Jon hears it too, but they don’t talk about it. They speed up so much that they are almost running and now they can’t stop. They hear the rumbling and the traffic grow and they run towards it.

As they turn another corner, they bump into a man. A college student in his uniform, but he is missing the shiny belt with the university’s insignia. Stains on his shirt glisten in the low light. When he sees Jon and Lenn properly, he speaks in a gathered voice.

“Klap baan.”

Jon tries to talk to the guy, but he brushes them away and retreats around the corner.

“Maybe we go back,” Jon suggests, but Lenn walks up to the concrete wall lined with the Thai flags and the yellow flags of the king. Where was the student coming from and why the dark stains?

When she turns her head to the left, she sees a soldier walking back and forth at the point where the wall turns a corner. He holds a rifle in his hand. Jon yanks Lenn back, but she cranes her head around the corner. Tanks, soldiers and military vehicles are lining the walls the letting some pull through the gates. Soldiers shroud themselves in the heavy helmets and draw rifles across their chests.

Jon pulls Lenn away and retreats back into the alley. Lenn reaches out to stop him, but he is already too far. She runs to catch up. He ducks, slides and cuts through the houses and sois. She is about to lose him.

All of a sudden, a soldier appears at the end of the stretch. Jon stops, but his shoes provide no traction. He skids and falls on his back. Rifle against his chest, eyes shaded by the helmet, he takes a step towards them. Lenn pretends that she hasn't seen the soldier and helps Jon up, who scrambles up as quickly as he has fallen. The soldier comes up to them without hesitation. He shouts something to them. The sound of the engines drowns him out. He repeats as he draws in. Lenn sees that the soldier is young, right around his mid-twenties.

“No Thai,” Lenn says. The soldier comes less than two meters away. “I understand no Thai.”

The soldier's expression does not change. “Passport?”

Lenn shakes her head. Jon reaches into his pocket and takes out his wallet. He extracts his driver's license and hands it over to the soldier. He looks at it and reads the name.

“Jon Hayes Wichasak?”

Jon nods.

“American or Thai?”

Jon hesitates and says, “American.”

The soldier's eyes narrows, “Go home. Quick.” He turns around and walks off.

They start to walk, but in their disorientation, they are not sure where they are going. They hear the rumble of tanks and makes sure to keep a street or two away from the sound. Jon clenches onto his driver's license as he walks. The soi opens out onto a deserted main road, lined one side by a park. They can barely hear the rumbles now. They look around for a taxi, but give up even before they start. They walk and the night gets darker.

They walk in backward circles and hear the rumble of military vehicles converging away from them. The soldier's order, to go home, rings in their years as they push the pavement underneath their feet to propel themselves towards that home with locked doors and air conditioning. But the more they walk, the more they get tangled in the sois and the sub

sois that cut into dead ends, splice into intersections and spit them out in the same spot, two streets away from the armed soldiers ordering them home. The reality of martial law, the demands of the state and the necessary documentation bears on them as they try to walk out from the circle. But in this moment, when there isn't a map drawn in either of their minds, when the ink bleeds over the same streaks of pavement, none of them dares to disagree or disappoint. They anchor themselves in the belief that they will get home.

They come to a four-way street. The roads is like a swimming pool drained completely of it chlorine water to scrub out the bottom. The traffic light casts colored rings in their eyes. Lenn and Jon stand in the middle. They feel as rigid as the metal grates drawn across shops selling gold, motorbikes, household goods and PVC pipes. It hurts them to hold the city so bare, like a crack in the skin that bursts layers of capillaries into a mess of blisters and stings. It opens its crevice even wider and folds its skin over Lenn and then Jon, a film over their eyes wrapping them tighter into cocoons. The city, like a spider, spins them around and around.

A noise from the crowd wakes her up. Last night, after wearing themselves out on the concrete road, they sat down on the bus bench and fell asleep. But they were woken up by a soldier, who prodded them off the bench. Lenn muttered in English. Jon looked around for the license that was in his hands. But he has lost it. He looked through his

wallet again and found a membership card to California WOW Xperience. Lenn couldn't even understand why he would bother showing them a gym membership card, but it did have his face and his name. The soldier glanced at it and told them to go home. He spoke better English than the other soldier. He told them that there was a curfew in place.

They stumbled along the road and found a side street that let out onto another major road. The next bus stop they saw, they sat down. They kept telling themselves that they had to keep walking, but the bodies started crashing. She collapsed on the bus bench and Jon next to her on the floor, curled against the plastic screen of green tea advertisement.

Lenn forces herself to sit up as soon as she hears the noise, realizing how harsh the sunlight is. A group of twenty or so people in assortments of pajamas and yellow shirts walk by them. The children point their fingers and the adults shush them. Lenn shakes Jon by the shoulders. He groggily gets up.

The symbol of the king is stitched above the breast on the yellow shirts that the people are wearing. It looks like they are on an outing as a family with grandfather and grandkids in tow. More people emerge from the buildings and join the growing crowd.

Jon leans against the screen, his eyes dunking deeper behind his eyelids. He kneads his face with his hands, deep wrinkles rolling along the sides. It pains them to stand up, but they force each other to walk and they follow the crowd at a distance.

They reach an intersection in which people are creating a hubbub. As they draw closer, Lenn sees two tanks and a Humvee stationed right at the intersection with mass of

people congregating. Soldiers take pictures with the people, smiling and holding out their rifles. A soldier on the tank tries to control the crowd. After he gets the people to take a few steps back, he reaches down and helps pull up a child. He holds her steady and the cameras snap. The child sneezes and everyone laughs. The soldier speaks to the child and pinches his nose. He gets more laughs and cameras flash more rapidly. The soldier hands him over to his parents, who wait as they hug their child close. The mother checks the photo on the camera before they walk away.

The crowd passes another child over to the soldier. He cracks a joke and everyone laughs and claps. This child is a lot older, verging towards a girl. Lenn gets closer to the tank. When the soldier helps the girl turn around, Lenn immediately recognizes her. Those straight bangs and round green eyes. People coo and exclaim “narak” as they whip their cameras out. Mali smiles. She seems very composed. A lady next to Lenn nudges her, “Luuk kreung, chai mai” and giggles as she snaps more pictures. Towards the left hand side, a crew of photographers clicks their shutters for the media. Mali deepens her dimples and the crowd cheers. The soldier asks her questions. She says “kha” in her high-pitched voice. He throws back his head and laughs. Someone retrieves her from below and she disappears into the crowd again. Lenn tries to track where she went with her eyes, but she loses her very quickly.

“Who was that?” Jon says.

Lenn doesn’t know how to explain.

“People are still going crazy for luuk kreung,” he murmurs, “I’m going to ask

someone here if we could find a taxi around here.”

The crowd hangs around for the next thing exciting to happen. A teenager in her pajamas hands a rose over to a soldier by the tank and he accepts it with a perfunctory bow. Many have layered the yellow shirt over their pajamas. The king precedes over this military intervention and they seem to believe that everything is going to be fine.

“Good news. This lady’s husband is a taxi driver. He will be able to get us to Sukhumvit in no time,” Jon laughs a little. It seems out of place and he scratches his arm. “The roads are empty.”

The lady smiles at Lenn and takes them back to her house. She keeps asking Jon questions. As expected, Lenn catches “luuk kreung” somewhere in the conversation. The lady peeks at his shoes and clothes and wonders a little about him. She glances back at Lenn, trying to figure out if she was mixed as well.

She slides open a metal gate and reveals a stilted house with the taxi parked below it. She gestured them to wait in the yard. She climbed the stairs for her husband. He came out throwing the driver shirt over his white sleeveless shirt. He flashes them a smile. He turns on the car and drives up to them. They climb in and feel the hours of standing and walking in their legs.

“Four hundred baht. Dai mai?” The taxi driver asks. Lenn sighs. Jon takes out his wallet and counts the bills he has in his wallet. Jon nods. The driver chuckles, “Dai, dai dai” as he steps on the gas. Jon tells him the address and he says “Dai!” again. As he takes a left onto an empty street, he smirks.

Lenn leans against the car window the entire way to the apartment. Things keep on passing him and she is baffled by them all. The oil stations, office buildings, pedestrian bridges, heaped aluminum in the blaring heat, sans people. She fights to keep her eyes wide opened, documenting everything that they pass. The car makes a sharp turn and makes her head swing towards Jon. Jon is looking at her, his eyes mottled with confusion. “What are we doing?”

VI.

Lenn glances at the train station's clock, the hour arm pointing to one. She has been meaning to email Ella that she is coming to Australia, but never did. Now she was in Sydney with Ella's address scribbled on a piece of paper tucked in her back pocket. Lenn plans to stand in front of her apartment building and wait for her. What she will say or do, she hasn't thought of, but it'll come to her when she sees Ella.

People stroll down the Chalmer Street with flip flops and shorts, taunting the winter. Lenn's head tries to adjust to the time difference, but the sun is unrelenting. The dry warmth tinge people's faces and freckles emerge. She stood in the shade of the station wondering what she should be doing.

As soon as they got back to the apartment, Jon's phone was bombarded with calls from his friends and family. His parents called in panic and Jon walked around the living room saying, "I'm okay mom, I'm okay," and that he wasn't alone, his friend was with him. They just realized that the coup had happened when they tried to turn on the news. He asked them if they knew what happened to Khun Thongchai, the driver. They didn't know either, but he did have a tendency to disappear when they need the car the most. They should have hired someone else before the coup because now there was no way for Jon to get to Huahin. "I don't need to be in Huahin. It's safe in Bangkok." No matter how much Jon protested, his parents insisted on sending their driver up to Bangkok, pick him and his friend up and bring them down to Huahin. They didn't want their son to be in

danger. With a sigh, Jon gave in. But Lenn didn't want to go to Huahin. "My parents are nice people, just a little exacting," he said. If she went, she would be pulled into that comfort zone where she can spend days in the air-conditioner and lull herself with books and conversations until the storm passes. The storm always was an excuse to stay in, who would want to get wet in the acid rain and have their hair fall out. Staying in, soaking in pools and taking showers, Lenn had already done this. Jon saw her grow resolute on the opposite corner of the couch. This was her way of coping and the only way he could help her was, to let her be. He wished that she could see that the expat community was how he dealt with his sense of self. Of course they frustrated him and at times he would give everything to be alone, but these people gave him the backbone for him to ride that delicate line between nature and nurture and ethnicity and nationality. Without the community, he would never have been able to claim his experience as his own. Others would have seen him insincere, shallow and assuming. He knew that to change the insularity and brashness of expats, it would take time, but Lenn also knew that the only thing that expats didn't have was time. No coup or fire could ever speed up the change. They both understood this.

"What do you want to do?" Jon asked.

"I want to go to Sydney."

"Wouldn't it make more sense to go back to Chicago?"

If Lenn didn't go to Australia now, she would never be able to. She needed to see Ella before it got too late. Jon was adamant in paying for her flights, so much so it

seemed like he wanted to get rid of her. But his motive didn't matter to her now. He had enough miles to take a spin around the globe and they were expiring in a week anyways. He offered to connect the Sydney flight to Chicago, but she resisted. She will find a way alone. But she did owe him, more than she can ever say with words, because without him, she would have never been able to leave Thailand.

A breeze wafts through the Central Station. It curls up against Lenn's left cheek, beaten with the sun's rays. A thirst suddenly hits Lenn and she pops into a convenient store and buys a bottle of orange juice for two dollars. The sourness tingles her taste buds.

She has four hours to kill. Lenn picks up a bus map from a closed counter. Lines crawl all over the page. Downtown Sydney has a jagged edge with harbors and alcoves. But the eastern side is smooth, curving and meandering all the way down. A drop of water from the condensation of the bottle falls on the map. It leaves a wet stain. When she takes a close look, the stained area reads Coogee Beach. A red line crawls out of the Coogee Beach into the Central Station. Number 372. She decides to take it.

The bus pulls up and she flag it down. The bus shoots down the Anzac Parade and rides the deserted road lining the parks. Then it curbs into the suburbs, stopping for old men with windbreakers. It climbs a hill and on top, the ocean opens up in front of Lenn. She takes a breath in. The shock of blue fills the dip between the sky and the land.

The beach is deserted. Lenn traces the white sands to the dry green mound looking over the sea. At the top, the sea opens up. The water is so transparent in the sun

that Lenn sees the folds of waves upon waves. She recalls Lake Michigan, tranquil against her ankles during the summers when she was sure that was where she wanted to live. Then she remembers the water of Chao Praya river lapping the boats, houses and banks, Jon throwing ice cubes at her. She used to believe that she lived at a place she chose to live in. Not anymore. She stayed still and the land moved underneath her feet. She hardly ever did any moving. People around her rushed over and past her like water.

She reaches into her bag, takes out the bottle of orange juice and cracks open the top. The sweetness engulfs her mind. The ocean calls her a different name each time it crashes against the rocks, bringing Lenn under and completely waterlogged and this, all this spanning before and after her. What she can capture in this moment, it is hers.

Everything she sees. It is hers.