THAILAND'S NATIONAL ARTIST IN LITERATURE

SEKSAN PRASERTKUL

ESSAYS

RIVERS AND ELEPHANT TRAILS

Foreword

"Sometimes, to find peace, we need to journey. And sometimes, to draw closer to the world, we must step back from it."

Each of the 17 essays in *Rivers and Elephant Trails* delineates part of a journey. From fishing trips during doctoral studies in upstate New York to wilderness and archaeological destinations in China, Myanmar, Cambodia or all over Thailand, Seksan's restlessness begins to take on a comforting rhythm. In covering a lot of terrain he also takes the time to step back and ponder the context of present travels against lifelong twists and turns as well as the journey of human existence.

Toward the end of the collection, lost in a leech- and tick-filled jungle at night, drenched and ill in a ceaseless dark downpour, Seksan comments that such discomforts might be the price of reaching destinations we didn't know existed. For he has made a life's journey out of leaving behind the known and comfortable in search of the difficult and unknown, and the unknowable can be fraught with dangers.

Rivers and Elephant Trails follows this decades-long journey along rivers of thought, trails of observations. We are his companions through the jungles, into the ruins of lost civilizations, into unexplored caverns of the mind – fishing the lakes for clues or tramping into leech pits, or riding an elephant alongside as Seksan observes both the natural world and the world of human behavior.

For at the core of every journey lies a slice of life. If the story is about a fishing trip, he will point out how fishing and life resemble each other – we must find our own spot and

method for each. If driving, we can't get too comfortable lest we let our guard down, as in life. In travel as in life, the beginning is rough, demanding and slow; in the end the path is smoother but rushes forward ever more quickly until the cliff.

Travel also involves a human element. No matter how far you roam, you must bring yourself along. This means there are inner and outer landscapes; a heavy heart makes it hard to find joy, while convoluted topography is no match for courage. As he puts it, no truth is arrived at in unlikely places without first making the journey to discover it. And the most memorable impressions come from experiences along the way, especially when the journey is outside our comfort zone.

"Following a path familiar to ourselves, we feel safe and secure," Seksan writes. "But for a traveler like me, walking a familiar path holds little value." Seeking out the unfamiliar may be one small way to slow down time, and to greater appreciate the turns along the way. What is our purpose? he wonders at times, and in the stars or the waters or the mountains looks for an answer.

Seksan's restlessness is the reader's gain. The personal elements that helped forged that restlessness, though, are mostly only mentioned in passing. The fisherman father, ever absent. The student activism at Thammasat, resisting the military governments of the 1970s, then joining the rebels in the mountains following the 1976 student massacre. The 1980 amnesty for insurgents that offered him a path back into society.

The political activism helped forge the person but is not a main character in this book. Nevertheless, years of early rebel life channel many of Seksan's later impressions, making appearances in unexpected contexts. Such as when he is able to estimate the weight of a barracuda based on its similarity to a loaded AK-47. Or when crossing the Mae Chan on a jungle trek reminds him of times he came to the same river to hide his lonely rebel tears. One list of extreme hardships includes scaling

mountain slopes, braving ocean swells ... or surviving a hail of gunfire.

On one trip to China, he is fascinated by the political shift, how quickly and seamlessly revolutionary thought has been discarded in favor of capitalist pursuits. He doesn't judge the changes, knowing every path has its rewards and pitfalls, and it may be folly to conclusively say which is right.

When Bangkok erupts once again into protests, he is reluctant to intervene, having found his own peace and stability, unconvinced that violence will provide a solution to deep-rooted problems. Yet his reputation leads many to seek out his advice and support, and when some protesters find his suggestions too moderate, they end up rejecting them, with bloody consequences.

"There are many things in the universe, even things more important than politics," he says at one point in China. Politics are fickle and transient, while the universe is deep, ancient and capable of offering more answers, or at least questions that reverberate. He explains that no matter what we cling to in order to magnify our importance, in the end it is meaningless in the eyes of nature.

In an age that values bucket lists, shortcuts and efficiency, of consumerist hoarding and the corporate rat race – perhaps of more lasting value is simply sitting on the river bank and looking up at the stars. For life is complex and ambiguous and some of its messages are hidden in the margins. Time is needed to unravel the threads and revisit our impressions.

Rather than luxuriate in a nonexistent purity of purpose, Seksan admits even his own early motivations may have been conflicted. "Five years earlier, as I had climbed those hills, my innermost dream wasn't victory of the underprivileged or achieving fame in my name. It was finding a meaning of existence, and in my passing through." And his later motivations may be layered with hints of *timor mortis*: a fear of the body deteriorating, a fear the strength of the heart might fade.

These inner perturbations become fuel for outer journeys. Outer journeys become fuel for the soul. All of us are granted the same 24 hours each day, he points out, so the question becomes how we choose to use that time, and a more noble focus includes nature, continuity, connectedness, being and beauty. Life for him, he explains, is more or less a journey in search of hidden, mysterious beauty.

Some of this beauty he describes in personal imagery. Freezing winds blow along the flesh like a knife blade or disappointment. The sea is the place where depth meets width, whose vastness makes you feel you've entered a sacred temple, a sinner come to seek redemption.

He also finds peace in the companionship of good friends, or again in reflective solitude, in the surmounting of natural and mechanical obstacles, in the resilience and longevity of love, in a good cup of liquor. Since life is a journey to an hour we don't know, it's important to keep a hold of the minutes.

Another key joy is reading. At one point Seksan writes with awe of the moment you can escape all your constraints and lose yourself in a book you adore.

Perhaps this collection is one such book, where as a reader you can lose yourself on the elephant trail or river raft and emerge hours later, having forgotten dinner but having remembered an important dream, or a longing from youth, or a once burning question you had stopped asking.

So we travel with Seksan on his journeys into the unknown, and may come through the twists and cliff edges with a little greater appreciation for the beauty along the way – in expected or unlikely places – and for the impermanence at life's core. And we travel to rediscover the value of ordinary things and moments, and the great overarching value in simply being alive.

Ezra Kyrill Erker
Editor

A Summer's Solitude

[1]

The thin layer of fog that skims the green expanse of water reminds me of the film that forms on the skin of ash gourds left behind in fallow lands. The morning wind pushes moon crescents of rippling wavelets toward the bank. With urgent steps I go and stand beside the cluster of seaweed by the water's edge – feeling as if in the embrace of someone.

For many days I have woken before the first glow of dawn to find myself lying alone in a small corner of a very large house. After shaking off the weariness of the nightmares that seem to hide under my pillow every night, I cautiously pull the window curtain slightly open to take a peek at my visitors, two deer – a doe and her cub – who consider the bushes growing against my bedroom wall as their private smorgasbord. A little later I usually find myself by this pond, which is not far from town.

I come and slip into the embrace of wavelets for them to soothe away my feelings.

When I announced that we were to take our four- month-old youngest son abroad with us, some people didn't hide their

surprise. Both the child's mother and I had heavy study schedules. Our time and our resources were limited. The weather in America can be downright inhumane. I had no reason to take away with us an infant whose feet were no bigger than jujube leaves. His grandparents were most willing to bring him up.

"I don't know if I can make it through my studies," my wife remarked with worry.

"Let him stay here with me. Don't worry, I'll raise him well," my mother-in-law offered.

But I wouldn't listen to anyone. When it was time to fly back to America, I tied my son to my back and stepped jauntily into the plane. Father, mother and son flew overnight across the ocean skyline to rejoin Ithaca, the small town where Cornell University is located. The plane landed in New York on December 24, 1984. Christmas Eve, as it was.

No one understood why I had to take my son with me. Or why I had exiled myself to Cornell years earlier.

We reached Ithaca in the middle of winter and soon enough found all roads and all trees white with powdery snow. The first order of the day was to find thick clothing for the latest member of our family, Singh, to protect him from the cold. Then we purchased a child car seat so that we could take him with us anywhere.

Several of the students at master's and PhD levels had started families. Some had teenage children, but the dads still took their satchels along to school every day. A number were civil servants in developing countries; before their hard-up governments could find funds to send them to pursue their studies abroad, the poor guys were in their forties. Some landed without two cents to rub together, but then found love amid stacks of textbooks and, before their studies were done, an offspring or two had cropped up, damn demanding too.

There were also some who didn't want to go back to their homelands. As soon as they found suitable mates, they sired

away in order to obtain permanent visas on the strength of their children's US citizenship.

We were close to one particular student family. The husband was American; the wife, Singaporean Chinese. They had two young children whose babysitter was a young woman from Taiwan. She was one of those who had followed their husbands without taking on studies themselves. The main work of young women in that position was to hire themselves out as babysitters in families where both parents were students.

We arranged for Singh to join John and Ming Fong's children.

The babysitter was named Lan Lan. She spoke only a few words of English and communicated with Ming Fong's children mainly in Chinese. She took care of the children of both families three days a week. The other two days I had to take Singh to another babysitter, also a Taiwanese woman.

A week hadn't gone by when Lan Lan told us through Ming Fong that she couldn't cope with three children and we should make other arrangements for Singh. Ming Fong and I tried to figure out why she didn't want to take care of Singh, and concluded that it must be because she wasn't happy that we had raised her wages by only one dollar per hour whereas John and Ming Fong gave her three dollars per hour for their two children.

But Lan Lan protested that wasn't the issue, so we grew quiet, lest she think we were judging her for chasing money, which more than a few Asians find demeaning. In any case, after several rounds of discussion in Mandarin with Ming Fong, Lan Lan relented. She would go on babysitting Singh. Ming Fong and I agreed that on payday I would give her $1.50 per hour, as a token of our gratitude.

I did as agreed and as soon as Lan Lan looked at the check, she sputtered out, "Money no ploblem ... money no ploblem ... one dollar one hour, no moll, no moll." She tried to return the check. Luckily Ming Fong wasn't there at the time, so I launched

into a lengthy speech in English to which she couldn't reply and thus had to accept the new wage rate for the time being.

That day I drove back to the house with Singh feeling thoroughly confused, half ashamed to have undervalued someone, half elated to have encountered warmth of some kind in this cruelly cold weather. From then on, Singh became Sing Sing to the young woman from Taiwan and Ti Ti to the two Singaporean-American children.

Ming Fong told us that Sing Sing meant "star" and Ti Ti "little brother."

[2]

Singh's mother was a doctoral student in her first term. As a newcomer and scholarship recipient at Cornell, she had to devote as much time as she could to attending lectures and doing the work that went with it. Usually the two babysitters handed our child back to us at three in the afternoon. I would go and fetch him and took care of him for the next two hours to allow his mother more time to study.

What I would normally do was ask the babysitter to prepare a bottle I then slipped in a pocket of my overcoat. Then I placed Singh snugly in my backpack and plodded along window shopping. Sometimes I roamed around one of Ithaca's two or three shopping malls. When I grew tired, father and son sat down in some corner of a shopping arcade to rest. Passers-by would smile benignly when they saw me settling the plump baby on my lap while bringing the bottle of milk to his mouth.

We had nowhere else to go but this sort of place. Going out for a stroll in the streets or parks would be tantamount to suicide. With temperatures well below freezing, it might have taken less than half an hour for both of us to breathe our last.

At five, I strapped my son to his seat in the car and went

to pick up his mother at the university. Once home, my wife bathed and diapered our big baby. For my part, I went into the kitchen to rustle up a meal.

Initially, when Singh was still very young, I ate first, wolfing down food like a famished man at death's door. As soon as I finished, I took our son in my arms so his mother could eat in turn. After a month or two, when Singh began to stand up using whatever he could lay his hands on, we found him a seat on wheels, which delighted our fat little man. With frantic kicks, he would zoom in and out of the kitchen, his face smeared with boiled rice or crushed banana and sometimes peach or prune, whatever he could find.

If his parents took advantage of this freedom to eat at leisure, a little hand as chubby as a bear cub's paw would appear over the table and grab the nearest item. If we didn't intervene promptly enough, an entire plateful of rice would end up on the floor.

Usually I was the one who did the dishes after dinner, and then I sat smoking a cigarette or looking at the news on television for a while. Singh's mother left us to do her work. If the little man wasn't sleeping by then, it was left to me to play with him or take him to bed. The nook my son preferred was the bed where he slept with his mother, which was too narrow to accommodate me as well. Before he fell asleep, he would turn over restlessly. At times he would mumble garbled words. As soon as I saw that he was drowsy enough to sleep, I had him lean against my arm while hugging him with my other arm. When I heard him breathe deeply and regularly, I figured I could go ahead. I flipped him over, cautiously withdrew my arm, then covered him with a blanket, and that was that done.

While I sat looking at him curled up asleep, all sorts of dreams came to me.

I dreamed that the world of my sons would be a world of friendship and peace, better than the world that confronted me.

I dreamed of two young men who would know a wider and deeper love than love for the opposite sex or close friends and relatives, who would know how to breathe in the same breath that makes birds sing and streams flow without forgetting that man has more dignity and a higher value than any other animal.

In a little corner of those dreams, I saw an old man looking at them with rapture in his eyes, even though those eyes were marked with the toils of a lifetime.

[3]

The three of us went to live in a large house some three miles from town and the university. Actually, I'd rather call it a residence, as it was truly stupendous. Although only one story, it was made of marble like a palace, surrounded by a vast compound. There was a swimming pool, a lawn and a grove at the back. It sat on a hill northeast of Ithaca. From the living room windows you could see the deep blue spread of Cayuga Lake not far away.

The house owners were Professor George Kahin and his wife. He was one of three professors who supervised my studies. They had to spend eight months in Singapore and Indonesia for research purposes and when they knew that we were coming back to resume our studies, they offered for us stay and look after their property and their old dog, who to them was like an adopted son.

Both of them loved animals and were very kind to them. In winter they prepared birdseed for all sorts of birds hardly able to forage for food in the bitterly cold weather. They also stocked bags of grain to feed wild deer in the vicinity, whose welfare they thus ensured until snow melted and grass grew anew.

After their departure, all those duties fell to me. The birds came on time at the break of day. They hopped in and out of

the small trays we had hung in the trees around the house. They were mostly sparrows, which had fattened in anticipation of winter so that they were as round as tennis balls. There were also blue jays, with sky blue crests and plumage, and unavoidably red-crested, black-cropped cardinals. The latter had more problems than other birds did, because they were enamored with their garish colors and liked to gaze at their reflections in windows. On some days it did happen that one would hit a pane and die from excessive self-love.

"I even saw one making love to its reflection!" Mrs Kahin told me.

Before the Kahins had left Ithaca, a young female cardinal killed herself by smashing into a window pane. It fell to me to dispose of the dead bird. Treading through snow, I entered the naked grove, and sadness overtook me. I placed the body on a branch and arranged it so one might think it was asleep. The icy wind from the world's end might keep the little body in state for two or three months.

As I walked away, I couldn't help but wonder why so many young women left this world for similar reasons.

It was almost always the does that came to eat the corn. As for the stags, I've no idea where they were. Maybe they were diffident because they knew they had something men coveted, but I am convinced they were watching, hidden nearby, and perhaps came out to eat at night when they felt more secure. Usually I gave corn to the deer a little before nightfall. On days my occupations delayed me, they all presented themselves to remind me. In such cases, I had to drop everything and go out and feed them.

Sometimes the provider is like a slave; if he doesn't provide, he is the one to feel bad. The dog entrusted to us was called Chook or, more fondly, Chooky. At 13, he was getting on in years – 70 to 80 years old in human terms, as some have it. He was a Samoyed, with a head almost as big as a calf's, a

long thick white coat of fur and features as dainty as a doll's.

Chook was old but his mental age was that of a little child. He held himself as the man of the house and deserving of attention. In the absence of his lifelong masters, he turned to Singh's mother and me. My main duty was to feed him twice a day and take him out for walks so that he got some exercise. My wife took care of his grooming, which meant a thorough brushing about once a week.

But this care wasn't enough for him. He wanted to be hugged and tossed and played with as when his masters were there. Each time we played with Singh or held him in our arms as we paced back and forth in the house, Chook showed his displeasure, at first by whimpering or by rushing out to fetch the rubber ring he presented for us to play with him. When we paid no attention – for mere lack of time – he started to bark on and on, looking sideways at us to see when we would turn to him. Only once he was certain we weren't going to play would he fall silent.

When our son was old enough to crawl everywhere or ride his chair into every corner of the house, there went what remained of Master Chook's happiness. Singh became the one he dreaded most, because as soon as he saw Chooky lying somewhere, our little monster would tear along toward him with all the speed of his wheels, grab him by the tail with both hands and pull with all his strength. If we didn't intervene in time, a hilarious spectacle followed, of the huge old dog running sluggishly away from our Singh.

As time passed, he showed his jealousy less frequently.

[4]

Most Americans don't need a doctorate because their economic system is open to a variety of professions. A

mechanic may earn as much as a university professor, a truck driver more than a librarian and quite a few state officials less than plumbers. Manual labor or intellectual labor is less of an issue than competence or lack thereof.

For this reason, few American students go for PhDs and those that go for master's degrees can be counted. At Cornell's Faculty of Political Science, PhD candidates numbered little more than ten each year and master's students less than 30 or 40, and almost all of these were foreigners, since Americans didn't believe a master of arts diploma was a big feather in your cap.

Those who came for doctoral studies, especially in political science and the humanities, had the same objective, which was to forge a career in teaching. The university made this the main objective and forced each student to train for at least one term, but even those in the sciences in most cases ended up spending their lives teaching or doing research in school laboratories.

Universities – at least from what I could see at Cornell – consider doctoral studies as an investment in prestige, because whenever they publish books, their graduates cannot avoid mentioning their university credentials in their biographies. If they are scientists making discoveries, their alma maters will share in the credit.

Therefore doctoral candidates receive financial support in one form or another. I have yet to see students having to pay for their studies from start to finish. At most they will pay for the first year, when the university isn't certain if they will do well or not, and with that kind of capital invested, students are pushed to the limit to achieve excellence in their chosen field.

If they can't keep up, they have to leave.

The rule of the Faculty of Political Science to which we both belonged was that the body of teachers had to meet to assess each student once a year. Doctoral students with a B average would be asked to leave the program or allowed to study only for a master's. Those who had better grades would

be allowed to sit for a comprehensive exam at the end of their second or third year, after which, if they passed, they would have to write a PhD thesis.

If they failed the exam twice, they would be invited to leave the university altogether.

This state of affairs had Singh's mother studying like crazy because, besides fearing the shame of a dismissal, she had to make sure she got top marks to secure her position as a scholarship recipient. If her grades were too low, she would forfeit money as well as dignity.

A father cannot replace a mother in all cases. Even though I had practically stopped writing my thesis, our plump kid was refusing to defer to our timetable. When Singh cried for his mother, neither I nor Chook had the power to shut him up. At times, as his mother and I studied late into the night, we heard muttering in some dark corner and turned around only to see our little darling, who had crawled out of the bedroom heaven knows when. His mother couldn't help but take him into her arms and it was a few hours before she could get back to work.

On Saturdays and Sundays, we had no one to babysit, so took turns caring for our child until Monday came around again. Sometimes we did so one hour at a time until everyone fell asleep, and when one of us looked after him it didn't necessarily mean the other could read or write in peace, what with finding time to cook, wash the dishes, tidy up the place or attend to private needs.

The result was that, on her first dissertation, Singh's mother got a C. Studies at doctorate level leave little room for mothers.

That day, spring wasn't far away. Once our chubby child was asleep, my life companion stole back and silently rested her head on my shoulder. Before I could say anything, she broke into irrepressible sobs.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked softly.

"No," she answered in a muffled voice and went on sobbing.

I frowned, thinking hard. The problem wasn't the trifle of a student upset over a low grade. Before me was a young woman who believed herself as capable as any man yet found herself defeated on a narrow battlefield because of her condition as a mother. The two who hugged each other in the corner of an ice-cold room were not like the other students, but humans who had ignominiously come down from the mountain in a quest for the missing part of our lives.

Were we going to lose once again?

"Do you want me to decide for you?" I finally said.

"Decide what?" Singh's mother looked up.

"Let's send Singh back." That was all I could manage; I couldn't utter another word.

"Aren't you going to miss him? You were the one who wanted him to come."

I looked away while the silence thickened around us.

The next day, I went to fetch Singh at the babysitter's at the usual time. I didn't feel like taking him to a shopping mall but brought him back to the house, playing with him as we waited for his mother to emerge from her lectures. After bathing and changing him, I gave him an apple. He tried to bite into but couldn't, its skin too elastic. I had to nibble on it and then hold it out to him. He used his three or four milk teeth to bite off a piece he then crunched, cheeks bulging, while smiling happily at his father.

I hugged my child tighter than on any other day.

[5]

It was the same emotion I had felt some six months earlier, when we took the train to go see his big brother, Chang, and his maternal grandparents in Trang province. The day we

were due to go back to Bangkok, Chang came into my bedroom at dawn. His six-year-old mind informed him that today we were to part again.

He sat down beside me while his mother was busy with Singh in another room. I had a feeling that something was bothering my elder son, so I prodded.

"You know, don't you, that today Dad and Mom are going back to Bangkok."

"It's sad, isn't it, Dad?" Chang said, as if rehearsing a play repartee, but without his usual cheekiness.

We stayed silent for quite a while. My mind drifted to jungle scenes. In one of them a little baby sat all coiled up in my lap in a hut at the foot of the Elephant Cliff in Phayao province. He was gazing almost without blinking at the newly lit torch. I didn't know what his three-month-old brain was thinking. I only saw his chubby face, amazed to find out that light can pierce the night.

A few days later, the same child found himself tied to my back, diving through a thick bamboo grove to reach a mountain chain to the west. It was one of the toughest treks of my life in the jungle. When we stopped in leech-infested areas, untying Chang from my back was out of the question. I had to rest standing up, keeping my eyes peeled for scores of land leeches blindly wriggling their sticky bodies toward us from every direction. As we crossed a patch of jungle thick with chest-high bamboo, I had to hide my son under a plastic sheet to prevent bamboo thorns from irritating his sensitive skin. Chang took it in stride, remaining in his plastic bell for over an hour without uttering a cry.

At one point on the trail leading to the main road where a car was due to pick us up, we had to walk around foothills and skirt a military camp. We could clearly see the tin roofs of the camp and stood within range of all kinds of weapons.

While we crouched and dashed from tree to tree, the man

in the lead suddenly froze and whispered that someone was coming. Everybody in the column turned and ran for cover.

It was then that Chang uttered a loud cry for the first time since the beginning of the march.

In this crisis situation, the child's cry put everyone's nerves on edge.

"Wait! Stop!" the comrade walking behind me whispered urgently.

"What happened? What's the matter with you, Chang?" I asked without breaking stride, which only made things worse. My son was crying because a twig had cut into his face, a dry thorn embedding itself in his forehead. In my haste, the thorn sank deeper and the twig snapped.

No one dared pull a thorn out of the face of a bawling three-month-old. So it was up to me. I pulled sharply on the cloth holding Chang that I had wrapped around my waist. I grabbed my son, held him in the crook of my arm and with my free hand tore off the twig and thorn in a single sharp pull. The thorn broke. I promptly took out the splinter and put my hand over the screaming mouth.

Chang, unable to cry, hiccuped. On his little forehead a spot of blood spread in every direction. He stared at me with a tormented, dismayed, reproachful look in his eyes. He didn't understand why his dad was so cruel. Chang's mom and all my comrades looked away, but no one had a mind to stop me from acting like this under the circumstances.

"Come, don't cry. You are my son, you must hold out," I whispered to my son's ear while my hand clamped his mouth shut. Chang stared at his dad for a moment and then grew quiet as if he understood. Father, mother and child got into the car and went without a hitch through the various military checkpoints on our way to the western part of Thailand and, before the sun had left the sky, Chang found himself on my back once again. The trail leading to the Mae Sot mountain

range was unobstructed and Master Chang's good mood was back. His plump little hands grabbed at twigs and leaves along the way.

We arranged for Chang to leave the jungle when he was nine months old, after which the three of us never truly found ourselves together again.

More than five years had gone by.

"Dad!" My son's voice rose when he saw me silent for a long time.

"What is it?" I turned to my eldest son and ran my hand over his forehead, now covered with a thick growth of black hair. The thorn had left no scar other than in his subconscious.

"Would you mind writing a poem for me?"

Astonished, I stared at my son. I would never have thought he would ask that, and there and then my astonishment turned into a much deeper feeling... I saw the mark of the thorn in those sad round eyes.

"You will, won't you, Dad?"

I turned away, trying hard to control my breathing. "Chang... Bring me a cigarette, will you."

He went to get one and slipped it between my lips, using both hands to light it with the lighter. I raised my head as I blew a jet of dull gray smoke and drew my son to me. I was feeling guilty for having taught him once that real men don't cry.

Shedding tears is everyone's right.

[6]

Spring was over and summer was here but Singh had gone back to Thailand with his mother at the end of June to stay with his grandmother and big brother.

Just like my son Chang, he was nine months old when we parted. And like my elder son, the first word he would learn to

pronounce would not be “dad” nor “mom” but some word other people’s children do not have to use.

I slowly gathered my son’s toys into a box. I selected some to put on my headboard, including the backpack in which I had taken Singh everywhere during the six months the three of us were together.

The entire house was shrouded in silence, without even a bark from Chook.

While I waited for the return of the mother of my children, I usually woke before the first glow of dawn, only to find that I had slept alone in a small corner of a very large house. Once I had shaken off the weariness due to the nightmares of the previous night, I cautiously lifted a corner of the curtain to spy on mother doe and daughter who came every morning to graze on leaves and blades of grass by my bedroom. A little later, I went out to stand by the pond.

The thin layer of fog skimming the green expanse of water reminded me of the film that grows on the skin of ash gourds left behind in fallow lands. The morning wind pushed moon crescents of rippling wavelets toward the bank. With urgency I went and stood beside the cluster of seaweed by the water’s edge and felt as if compassionate arms wrapped tightly around me.

I had discovered this pond five years ago and dreamed that I would take a child by the hand and bring him here.

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Yellow Barracudas

Billions of stars twinkled like diamond flakes strewn across a black cloth. The Milky Way curved from one side of the sky to the other. It was like a heavenly bridge inviting you to cross over into eternity ... mysterious, brilliant and haunting, just like the very existence of life.

The tip of my fishing rod bent drastically. I grabbed it by the handle as I changed my position from lying down to look at the stars. Now I sat dangling my feet from the end of the pier. The current was quite strong for freshwater bait casting with a 14-pound line. "What kind of fish could it be?" I thought to myself as I glanced at my watch. It was ten past seven in the evening, and the fish had taken the bait.

It hadn't jumped, but pulled my line left and right until I dragged it closer. Then it began to float toward the surface, large black spots evident on its body toward the tail. I thought it was quite a large sea bass. From the light at the end of the pier I estimated it was about a meter long and probably weighed close to a kilogram. My fishing buddy grabbed a long-handled

net and prepared to scoop it up. I then sat back and admired the first fish of the night. But in that second, it snatched it's opportunity as I let the line go slack. Shaking the hook free, the fish swam away.

Victory comes to those who refuse to give up ... I thought.

On July 4, 1986, Americans across the country were preparing to celebrate their Independence Day on the other side of the world. A battered pickup truck took us, limping, to Ban Phra Mueang at 7 p.m. The sun had only recently set, leaving warmth in the dim darkness. Most Phra Mueang people are Muslims, living together as a small community next to the mouth of the Kantang River. Electricity, a symbol of city life, had not yet reached this village, but the deadline to connect Roi Phra Mueang to the chain of eras was drawing closer.

My fishing friends were two young electricians who liked to spend their holidays away from the bright lights of civilization. Somsak, or See, owned a small shop and took on jobs to install transformers near Thap Thiang Market. Chawalit was stationed at the Electricity Generating Authority at Lamphura. We had quickly become friends as we each sought solitude fishing by the water... When hearts match, it's easy to become close.

We left the Trang market around 5:30 p.m. See's pickup took us slowly along the road to Sikao district, which appeared so green with its rubber plantations. Soon we turned left onto the dirt road leading to Hat Yao and then turned again toward Ban Phra Mueang.

Go Cheng produced charcoal to sell. He was one of the few non-Muslim villagers. As soon as our group arrived, Go Cheng quickly set up a small generator and dragged a large spotlight to the end of the pier where we prepared supper, leaving one duck for a later meal. As he was a close friend of See, our dinner was free of charge. Go Cheng also seemed

quite happy not to have to think about making money.

Near the end of Ban Ko Cheng Pier, rocks lined the shore stretching down into the water. The three of us quickly moved our equipment to the small hut at the end of the pier. We then quickly cast our lines into the water at the same time. See and Chawalit had spinning reels while I had a bait-casting reel and pole. We used live squid for bait.

An hour later, I had lost my bait. At the same time, Chawalit shouted loudly and shook his fishing rod back and forth like a warlord entering battle. His 90-kilo body stood tall on the dilapidated wooden pier. His face looked like he was struggling with an equal weight on the other end of the line. I hurriedly rewound my own line to give him a chance to show off his skills. He then pulled a small red snapper out of the water. It was only 20 cm long. Everyone sighed, but Chawalit smiled with joy.

Under the hut's roof, we sat watching over our fishing rods. Two old men with us carefully turned the roast duck on its spit. Another three or four young men sat lined up on bamboo mats, teasing each other with stories, talking in Southern dialect. Tonight, the end of Ban Ko Cheng Pier was like a warm village with many happy people.

Over time, the stars disappeared one by one like a procession of lanterns disappearing behind the edge of the horizon. The sky soon turned completely black, and rain fell gently. The wind sounded like the wailing of a lonely soul. When the rain stopped, the sky again filled with twinkling stars...

When my wife and I were on summer break from university, we flew back from the U.S. to visit our two sons living in Trang. It was the rainy season, and the whole country was in the throes of an election.

Wave after wave of the monsoon rains blew across the Malay Peninsula, which in the upper region includes Trang

province. The rain kept me inside where it was dry. Like a deep pain in my heart that keeps me tied to the past, I felt a sense of imprisonment, of bondage.

"Father comes to see me, but why doesn't he talk to Tan?" my eldest son whispered to his mother one evening.

"Go ask him and learn for yourself," my wife answered in an equally sad tone. For many days, I often sat and stared at the rain without speaking to anyone.

I understood my child's feelings, because when I was young I used to wait for my father to return home, waiting for the full moon when Tang Kae's boat would stop fishing. In the bag my father usually carried were beautiful seashells, strange crayfish with colorful patterns, sea fans and seahorses that had been dried. These souvenirs were very meaningful to me. But nothing was as precious as the familiar smell of the lake and the smiles that came from seeing each other.

My son didn't get all that he deserved... And it would be a long time before he could understand the history.

Go Cheng turned off the generator at two in the morning. Three hours later, we all got up at almost the same time. Everyone was in the same clothes they had been wearing since the previous evening. Aside from a few small errands, all I had to do was grab my fishing pole and step into the boat moored next to the hut since last night. The sound of the long-tail boat's engine roared to life at 5:30 a.m. A small boat took us across a sheet of dark water out into the wide open sea ... and a new day.

The crescent moon lingered pale on the dull brick-colored sky. The cool wind carried water from the bow that hit our faces. Dark rain clouds still hung in the sky above the mouth of Kantang Bay. I stared at the birth of a new day with almost unblinking eyes. The view was similar to the birth of some people's lives, dull, gloomy and miserable... Soon, the old

brick-colored strip of light changed into a shimmering flame.

The person who took us fishing was the old man who had helped cook the roast duck the night before. Uncle Ngob came from Pong to live in Phra Mueang 30 years ago. In his fifties, almost 60, his white hair contrasted with his dark, dark skin. His eyebrows were thick as a bundle. Responsible for the engine, he also took the helm. The person sitting up in the bow was Uncle Tae. When looking at both, one could see that Buddhist faces and complexions differed little from those of Phra Mueang Muslims. Uncle Tae was older than Uncle Hong. He was an old friend of Chawalit's father. Both were skilled hand-line anglers and made their living that way.

Our boat passed Ko Nok, an island with a naval base. We then cut straight to Ko Libong, a big island with a settled population. The trip only took an hour from Ban Phra Mueang to the first destination, which was just a pile of rocks. As we set our hooks, I could see Ko Lao Liang not too far away.

We moved our fishing spot about five or six times; each place had a pile of rocks under the water. I couldn't imagine how the two old men could remember these locations, because from the surface of the water they all looked the same.

Two years ago, I used to go night fishing around the back of Ko Chang. Our boatman could guide the boat precisely even though the sky was completely dark.

In the sea of life, we all have to find our own destination. You have to go through the waves and against the wind. By reading Nam Cham Fa, you can learn how to reach your desired destination. But until that point, it can be a lonely journey with the risk of a shipwreck. Not everyone can be a good helmsman.

Most of the fish we caught were betel grouper, no more than half a kilo in size. In addition, there were parrot fish, panfish and other small species. See always seemed to be the one catching the most. As for Chawalit, he seemed to focus on quality over quantity. Every time he hooked a fish, he acted

like he was fighting a giant shark. We couldn't help but laugh when Chawalit discovered that each fish he caught was no more than 30 cm long, but he was pleased enough, which was the only real concern.

I had not gone to sea in many years. Moreover, we had not slept for most of the night. When sitting in a small boat floating in the middle of the wind and waves, I started to feel dizzy, seasick. When my hook got caught in the rocks and broke off, I took the opportunity to lie down and stretch out. The fish hadn't taken my bait as often as I had hoped.

"If there's no pile of rocks, you won't find any fish," Uncle Ta comforted while jerking his fishing line free from the rocks. As he snatched up his line, the hook's tendril sunk deep into his palm.

Uncle Tae's words gave me something to think about while lying alone in the bow of the boat.

Uncle Tae was probably getting bored as the fish rarely took his bait. Finally he lay down and curled up next to me. Now only See, Uncle Ngob and Chawalit were left fishing, hoping for a ten-kilo grouper or two-meter barracuda to bite their hooks.

The sunlight was now getting brighter and brighter. I peered through the vent of the fishing hat pulled over my face. Tiny rays of light flickered on the black fabric. The day got warmer as it got closer to noon.

The monsoon rain came in another big wave. After returning, I sat near where I was staying by the Trang market. Almost every evening, we three would sit and discuss things. Why had we caught so few fish the other day? Why didn't the big fish go for the bait? But no conclusions were drawn. It was just nice to talk about fishing.

Each passing day of life is like changing a bandage on your heart... Japanese author Yukio Mishima wrote about this

in one of his last novels before deciding to end his life. This was an idea that left me depressed for many days after I read it the first time.

Election day was approaching... All the candidates' posters had been torn or defaced, with none left intact. Illegal leaflets attacking other candidates were distributed almost every day. And if these flyers told the truth, Trang people would have had no reason to vote for anyone.

A retired general who owned the slogan "the right kills the left" came to speak in support of his party in front of the city hall. A young man also brought to speak was a life insurance broker trained as a public speaker.

Election season makes many people turn to fishing. They hurry to get in a boat to go to a fishing spot that's been hidden for some time. They want to get away and don't hesitate to head out to sea.

After two weeks of just sitting and talking about fishing, the rain stopped, and we agreed to go out to the mouth of Khlong Meng, leaving in the morning and returning on Saturday. When the appointed day actually arrived, it turned out that Chawalit couldn't go. So See and I went together, just the two of us.

We left Trang at half past six. We used the same road as last time, but this time we turned away from Sikao a few kilometers before reaching the district. The road to Pak Meng was much better than the road to Ban Phra Mueang and took less than an hour. The wide open sea and small islands appeared in front of us just past the mouth of the canal. Some parts of the beach road were still gravel bordered by dark sand. The water was rising, and we could see waves bursting with white foam toward the shore. Pak Meng was still as pure as a forest girl.

We stopped the car in front of a fisherman's house. There were two or three houses nearby. It appeared to have rained

earlier, but now the wind and waves were relatively calm. So all the boats had gone out to lay out their nets. By the time our fisherman had returned, it was almost noon, too late for us to go out. So See and I drove to the charcoal factory on the bank of Khlong Meng where it met the Andaman Sea. We decided to fish for small fish at the end of the charcoal factory pier.

I used a Fenwick freshwater casting rod. I had cut off the old handle and replaced it with a longer handle that I could cast with two hands. It was the only fishing rod I'd brought with me from Bangkok, or, in truth, from the United States. As for the reel, this time I used a smaller baitcaster, an Abu 4600 CB with only eight-pound line. I felt it was ideal for saltwater fishing around rock piles and shorelines. As for See, he still used the same large spinning rod and reel.

Not ten meters beyond the end of the pier was a wooden fence the harbormaster put up to prevent ships from coming near the riverbank. There were four or five sampans and rowboats moored nearby. The shadows of the boats and mooring stakes blocked the soft morning light on the gently rolling water. It was a lonely beauty I glanced at from time to time. Beyond the mouth of the canal to the west was a peninsula extending into the wide expanse of water. White foam waves splashed against the rocks in the distance.

"I don't know why I like to look at the sea," See said with a smile. "When I'm lonely and I come out and see the sky and the water, my feelings immediately improve."

It was now a quarter to nine. I caught the first grouper of the day. It was a grouper with a betel flower pattern, not more than 30 cm long. Half an hour later, the tide rose to its highest point. Then, as the tide began to ebb, See caught his first fish, a red-spotted grouper. The fish seemed to be biting more frequently, but like before they were small, under half a kilo. Sampans from the opposite bank passed by from time to

time carrying wood from the mangrove forest to the charcoal factory. We set our fishing rods so we could eat around 11 o'clock. By then, some fishing boats had begun to return to shore.

A young man clad in a single loincloth stepped into the lunch crowd. He was the owner of the long-tail boat we had been waiting for since morning.

Chien's boat was even smaller than Uncle Hong's. In the bow lay a pile of nets and two embroidered flags made from plastic fiber cloth. A child of about ten years old sat there as a helper. The boat cut out through the strait between Laem Pak Meng and Ko To Ngai. I sat in the bow as always. My fishing rod was draped across my lap like a trusted weapon, while the plastic flags used to mark fishing nets fluttered to either side of me. For a moment, I had a strange thought that I was on my way to war... I thought of a four-line poem I had written long ago.

The sea, brave people, open sky
Alone, but together ... I see
The mountain, sun, full moon
Encapsulating but ... alone

See looked toward the horizon with a feeling that only he could fathom. Our little boat was full of burdens.

Chien talked about the morning's events. While we ate ... he baited his line using a plastic squid as a lure. He quickly hooked a big, black barracuda, but it was so big he couldn't pull it up. After a long tug of war, he tied his line to a five-gallon water jug and some loose planks in the boat. Chien hoped this would wear down the fish's strength, but that wasn't the case. The fish continued to pull on the line until it broke free. Chien watched as the fish took the water bucket and planks with it.

He had thought that when they floated to the surface it would be a sign for him to go and fetch the fish. Hours passed. Even now, Chien doesn't know where the bucket went.

We agreed to go to the area where the black barracuda caught Chien's hook, and within half an hour we arrived at Ko Ya, which is just two large rocks leaning against each other in the middle of the sea. Its total size is probably about the same as a four-story shophouse. There were some trees scattered about and a hole where the water splashed up and made a loud sound. The water here was probably ten meters deep. The surrounding sky was transparent, as if it were not the monsoon season. There were only small clouds scattered like feathers in some corners of the sky. The wind blew slowly, making the sea surface ripple. Our boat bobbed along like it was floating on a small wave that moved up and down.

Because Ko Ya is rather small and the water around it quite deep, we trolled, dragging our artificial bait behind the boat and circled the island. I experimented with a 30-gram lure, but it was constantly bouncing on top of the water, too light for this method of fishing. So we were left with only one rod to troll, which See held.

It was the lamest trolling device I'd ever seen. The dark fishing rod was made of fiberglass and under two meters in length. Some of the guide wires were frayed, and there was rust on some corners of some guides. The reel's clamp was also damaged from past battles. Only the lower wooden handle looked good, because See had fixed it with a lathe two days previously. I assumed a three-ounce trolling reel would go with this rod, which was at least 15 years old. It was a Mitchell 622 model reel, which they had probably stopped producing long ago. The line was unbranded, 25 pound, and the lure a 20-cm white plastic squid, which See had smeared with red house paint.

See, like many anglers, refused to abandon his first set of equipment.

We left the shore at half past noon. When the clock showed five past one, the alarm rang out with a long scream. See shouted for the helmsman to turn off the engine while he fought to pull in the fish. As for me, I sat and watched excitedly with a slight feeling of jealousy mixed in.

"There's another one, there's another one!" Chien's young crew member shouted. When the fish came to the side of the boat, I saw it was a yellow barracuda, about a meter long, and one of its friends swam close behind. Confused, not sure what to do, I quickly grabbed my fishing rod and dropped my 30-gram Cordell lure into the water. I moved my rod like a puppeteer. The second fish rammed into my fake bait, and just as it was about to snatch it, it decided to turn its head away. In the blink of an eye, it disappeared into the dark green depths.

The boat continued to circle Ko Ya, having not yet completed its full circle. As the fishing line passed the cliff where the waves were crashing, it sank. The second yellow fish snatched up the messy red plastic squid. The sound of the reel was like a creaking, broken ball bearing on a car wheel. While See waited for the next pull of the fish, I felt like a hungry person watching others eat large plates of food in front of me. Ten minutes later, See caught a third fish. I looked at his messy gear as if it were a gold-plated fishing rod.

"Please, please, let me catch you," I said lustfully.

At 1:30 p.m., I pulled in the first yellow barracuda of my life. Its drag was stronger than most freshwater fish I'd caught near Cornell. An instant later, the line felt so light I thought the fish had gotten away. But then I realized the fish might have swum under the boat. I rewound my line rapidly to compete with its speed. Less than three meters from the side of the boat, the yellow barracuda floated up to the surface. Then it plunged down using all its remaining strength. I let it carry the line a little further, then raised the fishing rod according to the rhythm

of the fish's surges. Soon it floated up beside the boat again. I was sure it had completely exhausted its strength. So I moved the rod to my left hand and used my right to lift the fish into the boat. The fish struggled so hard that the lead wire cut through the flesh of my finger like a knife. Saltwater splashed on the fresh wound, making it sting, but having reached this point, how could I give in? There was no choice but to grit my teeth and pull the fish into the boat.

Its weight felt the same as an AK-47 rifle with a full magazine. So I assumed it weighed around four kilos, which was quite a lot for this kind of fish. When I had a chance to measure it later, I learned it was a meter long, the largest fish of the day.

I went to hand the fishing rod to See, but he shook his head.

"I'll give you all three of the fish we caught..."

And half an hour later, I had all three fish, yellow barracuda, all about the same size. The last was the only one that jumped out of the water a total of four times. But its fight was not as fierce as the first one. That one took an hour. All told, we caught six yellow barracuda. I returned the fishing rod to See as agreed.

A nearly two-meter shark eased to the surface as our boat circled near Ko Ya. His demeanor was calm and dignified, and he swam slowly without being shaken by the sound of the engine. The prow of our boat cut through the sea, and I told myself that the beauty in front of me was the result of the battle won, and the pride I felt caused an indescribable reverberation in my heart.

Around three o'clock the wind picked up and we didn't catch any more barracudas. So we left Ko Ya and anchored to fish for grouper in the strait between Ko To Ngai and Laem Pak Meng. But I was already satisfied with the three yellow barracudas. After catching a small grouper, I stretched out

against the pile of nets in the bow and let the wind caress my face. I fell asleep to the whispers of time... Today, she held no claim on me.

In that moment ... my heart slept soundly in a time and place without a past, without a future, without painful memories or tormented dreams. Our little boat swayed back and forth on the rolling sea. As I floated on the waves, I felt a freedom beyond definition.

I brought back to my child a smile from the sea that day, feeling no need to change the bandage on my heart.

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The Lake Trout: End of the Quest

Behind the rainy backdrop of the sunset hid an isolated house. It was at the edge of a grove not far from the main road. I looked at it sadly before pulling my car over at the base of the steps.

"I've got a fish for you," I told the elderly lady who opened the door to greet me. She was a Thai teacher at Cornell University and a widow whose only son had left her to set up his own family.

"What a huge fish! I can't finish it all."

"Please take it; I've wanted to give you one for a long time. But due to my heavy workload, I hardly go outside. Today I caught two fish and I want to share one with you."

"You were caught in the rain alone?"

"Yeah, but that was fine. I enjoyed it."

Rujira looked surprised and asked me about my fishing trip for a while. Soon I begged off to leave because I still had another fish to give away.

The one I gave to Rujira was a big trout inhabiting the

lake. Generally it is a deep water fish living in freezing water. It swims to the surface only twice a year and we called it a lake trout. Unlike other trout species, lake trout do not seek food in creeks or streams.

It is the fish I tried to catch during the autumn of 1986 and spring of 1987. Almost every Thai student at Cornell received my gifts of fish; some were sliced into pieces while some were cooked. Sometimes we arranged a meal together, and steamed or deep-fried trout would be the main course.

Every time I gave people fish, I hoped my gesture of friendship would help warm the chilling weather in Ithaca, especially those lonely like Rujira...

For me, fishing for lake trout was a pleasure in itself.

As mentioned, lake trout are cold water fish, living most of the year at a depth of over 100 feet, or 30 meters, where temperatures are stable. Normally this trout is content at temperatures around 40 degrees Fahrenheit, or 4˚C. It should not go above 12˚C. If the surface temperature of the water is too high or low, the lake trout completely disappears from waters close to shore.

For this reason, the lake trout comes up to the shallow water only twice a year, in the early spring and late autumn. The former period is in the transition from April to May, and the latter from late October until November ends. The weather during these two periods is unpredictable.

One time the sky was clear as I cast the line into the water. But I had not even reeled in the lure before it quickly got dark and started to rain. To the north I saw a picture of a gray sky connecting with the lake and rushing toward me. Within seconds I had the rod in my arms, grabbed the tackle box and rushed to find shelter from the rain.

Gasping for breath under a shed by the bank, I was astonished by the shifting scenery before my eyes. The gray curtain of sky rolled up as if a play was about to begin on a

stage. Like magic, a curved rainbow appeared against the mountain range opposite me. Formed from ripples of the lake, the rainbow drew colorful lines across the range and on the other side met the water again.

This was a rare scene during my hunts for lake trout. Most of the time I faced freezing winds blowing along my flesh like a knife blade or disappointment. This is because the lake trout are particularly active when the waves and wind are strong. When waves break into white foam we are more likely to catch the fish. The wind is effective at lowering the temperature. While the weather in Ithaca might be around 10˚C, the temperature where I was standing dropped to around freezing point.

In these conditions, I usually stood and fished for three to six hours. Even though I wore a thick sweater and field jacket while my head and ears were hidden under a knitted beanie, my face and palms were bare. Every time the wind blew, I felt I was being licked by flames. The skin on the backs of my hands often cracked and bled, forming red spider webs over my hands. There were many times I had to stuff my fists into my mouth so my body heat could make them work again.

People could not understand why I referred to it as a pleasure...

Being a doctoral student at Cornell was a life I had never expected. This experience took many things from me but compensated through things I had not had before. Regarding the part I was robbed of, sometimes it gnawed on me until I nearly died.

One time I moved the piles of books surrounding me to the side and grabbed a mirror to look into my face carefully... In front of me was a middle-aged man with deep wrinkles along frowning eyebrows. Eyes were dried like those of a dead fish, and the color of the face was lifeless and pale. I now felt like he was a stranger. I did not know who he was, but looking into his condition I could tell he was withering away without any

clear purpose in life.

At the same time, it reminded me of another guy I was familiar with. I saw his sturdy body skirting through the jungle, gun snuggled beside him while his sparkling eyes scrutinized the scene. This image contradicted the guy in the mirror.

I decided to fish for lake trout as a way to search for the missing parts of my life.

During the autumn, the lake trout in Keuka Lake, not so far from Cornell, would assemble to lay eggs at a cape named in Native American as Taughannock. Next to the cape was a creek of the same name running to Keuka Lake. It originated from the tallest waterfall in New York. This creek was an assembly point of the little fish that were the main food of the lake trout and other hunting fish. That is why this was a well known fishing spot in the area. The local authorities had turned neighboring land into a public park. To facilitate the fishermen, they also built a nearby haven. At the cape, piers had been constructed and stretched toward both sides of the creek.

I first tried trout hunting in October 1986. At the time, the leaves were turning a glittering gold. The temperature was falling quickly but hadn't yet hit its lowest point. I cast the lure for about two hours but couldn't catch a single fish. I just could not recognize where the trout were. I tried to inspect the maps in fishing gear shops that indicated the water depth in each area. Then I calculated where the trout should be and cast my line out to the deepest point I could reach from the bank. No success. Not more than 50 meters away, however, an old man caught a 50-cm trout. It encouraged me to keep trying.

For the second attempt, I moved south and fished at the creek pond of Taughannock. The barometer was high that day; the fish tended to rise to the bait more actively than usual. I still used a spool, casting the rod for hours. The sky was clear but it was chilly, the wind blowing heavily the entire time. Beside me was a man who had come from a nearby town. He

was quite talkative, recommending fishing spots around Ithaca. Actually I already knew them, but I smiled back and didn't interrupt. This fishing companion could not catch any fish either. At least I had someone to chat with and hide my loneliness.

After half a day, I had still not caught anything, so I drove to another side of the pond to the north. An elderly couple were fishing there. As they saw me joining them, their faces turned sour. I cast the rod twice and then other people started arriving. That frustrated the couple. They walked away with an air of accusation that I had usurped their spot. I recognized this and tried my best to sit humbly in my spot. They might have been upset by the fact they couldn't catch any fish. I found that no one caught any trout that day.

I stopped fishing for a few days, as thesis deadlines were arriving quickly. I intended to finish the first chapter by the end of the month, so I had to work day and night to complete it.

My project was delayed for four days. On the other hand, it surpassed my expectations as my first chapter was over a hundred pages. I could separate it into two parts... The first part concerned the Ayutthaya Kingdom, while the second part was involved with Thai education in the early Rattanakosin era. I left my manuscript with my wife, as she had to run errands at the campus every day while I was arranging the tackle for trout fishing.

The next day snow fell for the first time that winter, however, so I was confined to home – randomly preparing spinners and jigs as well as oiling the reels. With sorrow, I realized fishing season would soon be over.

Fortunately, the sky was calm the next day, scattered with clouds. The temperature rose to 10˚C. From the morning, I followed the weather until it was right at two o'clock. I grabbed the rod and left home, hoping to catch the trout before the snow fell and the lake froze.

On the way to Taughannock Cape, I dropped by a tackle

shop and spent $2.50 on small fry. It was my first time in a year using live bait. When I arrived, two people were fishing at the south of the pond so I headed to the north end, still unoccupied. I hung the tiny live bait on the hook and threw the line into the water, waiting for the lake trout to rise. As I smoked, I saw trout and salmon jumping out of the water here and there.

In two hours not a single fish touched the line. An arm-long trout drove me wild by swimming closely past. On the opposite bank, at three o'clock, I saw a guy catch a trout. Never mind those he missed, he caught one more trout as large as the previous one. Fishing beside him was an old, squat man who looked like a dwarf from Snow White. When the guy snared a fish, he would leave his rod and grab a huge net to scoop it up. Lake trout weighed around eight or nine pounds, or four kilos. It might not be so clever to try to hoist one up by line. The trout might wriggle and throw its weight against the line until it snapped or the fish could slip off the hook and swim away.

I wondered what kind of lures the guy was using. From a distance, his rod looked like an ultralight model. I couldn't tell what the bait was exactly, but I could see it was artificial. He dragged the lure particularly slowly. Drag and stop, drag and stop, like leveling soil.

When the young man left, I gathered my gear and drove to the opposite side, asking the old man what bait the other guy had used. The answer was tiny spinners. This reminded me of a fishing theory that when fish don't bite, using a smaller lure will help. This is because when the fish are hesitant to feed, a small line slowly dragging a small lure will seem safer for the fish to nibble. This was the truth today.

Sadly I had not prepared any tiny lures. I had only large spools and spinners together with the live fry bought earlier. A trout had to be at least 15 inches, or 38 cm, long to be caught legally, so who could have imagined no fish would take the bait. I chatted with the squat old man for a while. He was

dressed as raggedly as I was. In addition, his rod had been crudely taped back together. When I asked where he came from, he told me he was from Elmira, a small town 50 km from Cornell. As he was old, I asked why he drove so far to fish. He laughed heartily.

"My wife likes to shop in Ithaca. I'm too lazy to wait for her, so fishing helps kill the time."

The sky was quickly getting dark, normal for the season. From now until the end of winter, the sun would set early, at four o'clock. I glared up at the sky accusingly, then drove my old Chevette home. Along the 11-km journey, I absorbed the bitter taste of defeat.

I pondered during the night whether I should pack away the gear and end my fishing season. I kept asking myself what I did wrong, and why I couldn't catch any fish. What was missing? We had been fishing at the same spot. The lures were almost the same. I even had live bait. Others got fish ... but not me. If no one had caught any, then maybe the fish didn't like the bait. But on a day when the rest had caught fish in front of me, was I stupid or just unfortunate?

Overcome with an unfamiliar mixture of embarrassment, pain and anger, I felt like a scrap of food in the bin. Finally I concluded that I wouldn't surrender. What had happened was not due to incompetence but continued misfortune. It was a challenge, and I would not give up. Without struggle, we would never succeed. I had to persist in my hunt for the trout, no matter how cruel the cold.

Amid this upheaval, I sensed my vitality returning.

The next day, November 7, I got up at a little past six in the morning and rushed to buy seafood from a truck from Maine that opened up shop every Friday. My wife had made a list of what she wanted and what our neighbors had asked us to buy for them. At eight o'clock, I scraped off the ice covering the windscreen to drive out of the city.

The forecast said it would rain in the late evening. The barometer had fallen and remained there for days. The sky was dark and covered with black clouds that blocked out the sun. I had prepared a few small spinners. As I drove, I kept telling myself not to return home without catching some fish.

A man was fishing in a corner of the pond. I said a few words in greeting, in line with local fishing etiquette. Then I coiled the spinner and cast away. On the second cast, the spinner caught on a rock as I tried to drag the line across the bottom and stir up as much sediment as possible. The four-pound (1.8 kg) line snapped as I pulled the spinner out. I reset the line with new bait and cast again. Less than three casts later, it caught on the rocks and snapped again. In three hours I lost half a dozen spinners and spools without catching any fish. Most of the good lures were lost in the water.

As I smoked to ease stress, the man cast his rod with all his strength and yelled that he caught a big one. I quickly grabbed the net and helped him scoop out a huge trout. It was already 11 o'clock, so I hurried to find a new spinner to tie to my line. It seemed like the right time for the lake trout to feed. The wind was strong and waves crested fiercely. The chill was squeezing my veins as I froze...

While I was yanking my hook out of the rocks, my new friend flicked his rod and another trout rose to his bait. I reeled in my empty line and got the net and scooped out his fish. Partly my heart was rejoicing at this camaraderie. At the same time, the same heart trembled at my own misfortune.

"Hey, if I get one more, I'll give it to you," the man said kindly.

Less than five minutes later, this friend's rod jerked from a third trout. I had put down my rod for a while as I had run out of good lures.

"Are you sure you want to give that to me?" I said, referring to his offer.

"Sure."

"If so, could you pass the rod to me? I want to fight it myself."

The battle was more valuable than the fish. My friend accepted, passing me his rod and preparing the net. I pulled the trout closer, feeling its strength for the first time. It was not too different from other trout species. Tugging the heavy line, my lake trout fled every time it got close to the net. As soon as it was netted, the three-barb hook of the spinner slipped from its mouth. Had the net been delayed for a second, the fish would have escaped back into deep water.

We sat down smoking my cigarettes. Seeing me searching my tackle box without finding anything, the man took out one of his spinners and handed it to me. It was a size four rusty golden Vibrex spinner from Blue Fox.

"Aren't you afraid I'll lose it?" I said, feeling he was more generous than the average American.

"Nope, I got a lot back home," he answered, as if it was a very common lure. "Let's try it. I'm not sure if it works. I haven't tried it today."

I thought it would work since its size and color fit the cloudy weather. What I was afraid of was getting it caught on the rocks again. Since I had not fished this spot before, I wasn't familiar with the lake bottom. Plus my lines were only four-pound gauge, often breaking when I tried to unsnag them from the rocks.

Tying the bait tightly, I cast it far across the pond and slowly reeled in the line, allowing the spinner propellers to spin. As it crept along the bottom and reached the middle of the pond where the stones were, I stopped reeling and let the spinner drift. Assuming there were fish there, I raised the rod, pulling up the lure slightly to make it look like injured fry.

It seemed the lure was stuck in the rocks again. Feeling sorry for the spinner's owner, I unlocked the reel and let the line flow freely in the hope the current might carry it out. I

reeled it in again three minutes later, and it worked. The lure escaped its rocky grave.

I cast the golden spinner a second time. When it glided over the same pile of rocks, again I let it drift down toward the bottom. I did not stop reeling but slowed down the pace this time.

I could sense a slight tension transmitted along the line. My wrists abruptly swung the rod. The tension at the end of the line grew heavy, accompanied by the rumbling sound of the rolling reel. I resisted until the rod bent down abruptly. I had been released from my spell of misfortune.

"Get the net!" I told my fishing companion, as if we had been friends for a long time. The trout was pulling the line away. My heart beat quickly, as there was a good chance the four-pound line would snap. I rushed to reset the drag, which had been set very light, to even lighter, and I walked along the pier to ease the fish into shallower water.

Reeling in the line when it stopped, and handling the line carefully when the fish swam away, I didn't dare pump the rod hard because the gauge was narrow and parts of the line had frayed. I had to wait until there was some slack and reel it in a bit each time.

After ten minutes, the fish was pulled along to the inner part of the creek. My new friend had prostrated himself on the pier, four feet above the water, as I brought the fish in closer. But noticing the net, the fish darted out to deep water again, until I regained control. It took three attempts. I almost had a heart attack as I prayed for the line not to break. Finally the fish got worn out and could be scooped out of the water. It was just the right size – 50 cm from tip to tail. It was a quarter past noon.

I had stood in the freezing wind for four hours. The skin on my hands had started to crack, but I stroked them contentedly...

Before I left, I opened my tackle box and asked my new friend to have a look. “You can take anything you want...”

He looked at me reluctantly and took out two lures.

“I made those. You should take something better.” I was serious, grateful for his generosity.

“I’ll take these. I like the colors.”

I could only give him an additional spinner, the best one I had left, which I had been afraid to use in case it also snagged on the rocks.

After saying goodbye, I grabbed the fish and rod, heading for the car. “Wait...” the man said.

“Yes?” I turned back and for the first time noticed we had dressed almost the same, in jeans and a field jacket over a sweater.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Thailand. I’m studying at Cornell.”

He considered, then gave me a lonely smile. “I know Thailand. It’s next to Vietnam, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Have you been there before?” “No, not yet. I’ve only been to a war in Vietnam.”

We shook hands and said goodbye again. As I started the engine, I turned to look at the lake.

On the banks of the lake stood an isolated, stout man casting his bait. I knew why...

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Symphony of Water, Dance of Clouds

The train cut through the darkness and those slumbering along each side of the tracks, indifferent to all that passed. It was a train of life, taking tourists to dreamlands; the wicked to the final destination for evil deeds, monks to sacred lands, the weak to warm embraces and the lonely to a place of discovery. The final destination was a small province on the Andaman coast.

After a flourishing past, Trang transformed into a secluded town, rarely visited by travelers unless as a final destination. However, its seclusion is its charm, making Trang a beautiful, quiet lady awaiting discovery...

Just 18 kilometers from the town center along the route to Phatthalung lies the Kachong Waterfall and Khao Chong Hill National Park. Adorable, shaded and clean, the wildlife here is protected in its natural habitat. Meanwhile visitors plant saplings, enhancing the appeal of the environment.

Half an hour's drive from the Tubtieng fresh market is the long and gentle Pak Meng beach. At low tide, it stretches

out for over two to three hundred meters. To the right is Ko Tohngai, to the front Ko Ngai, while Ko Muk and Ko Kradan are seen slightly to the left. Then there's Ko Pling, almost reachable from the beach. If you don't want to go to sea from here, you can head toward Kantang district, just 25 kilometers from Trang town, and head out from the fishing pier. In less than an hour, you'll reach the open sea, seeing the majestic and serene Ko Libong framed by the sun.

Tuesday, the seventh day of the waxing moon in the fourth lunar month, was the scheduled day for me to meet my two friends who live in the area. Around eight in the morning, our boat left the channel under the bridge for a famous sea bass fishing spot. The water was low, exposing a clutter of branches and stumps. We navigated the edge of the soft sand beach, soon reaching the first crest of waves.

The seventh day of the waxing moon meant the water wasn't completely still, while the fourth month meant the monsoon season had not yet arrived, and Tuesday simply meant my two sons had to attend school, allowing their father a day at sea.

The sky was bright and the sea surface relatively calm, with white waves cresting only on the outer edge of the sandy beach. Beyond that, the deep blue water rippled gently. I set up a 30-pound trawl line and left it to drag on one side of the boat. Kong, a young rubber tapper from Nam Phut, set his gear on the other side. See, an electrician from Trang city market, seemed delighted with his new depth finder.

Our long-tail boat driver was a young man in black, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, which did nothing to brighten his weathered face. He steered the boat into the deep channel toward Ko Muk, eyes fixed on the destination ahead, lips tightly shut for hours.

Between Ko Muk and Ko Kradan, hammerhead sharks and other shark species often swam by our boat. On the southern

coast of Ko Muk are small beaches and steep cliffs. I used to anchor there to catch African pompano and longfin trevally. The water between these two islands is about ten meters deep but increases to over 20 or 30 meters past Ko Kradan.

My reel screeched for the first time around nine in the morning, but the fish got away before I could grab my rod. Everyone thought it was most likely a barracuda that had taken the bait as the boat passed the submerged rocks at the head of the island.

Though we didn't reel it in, it lifted our spirits considerably. It was a sign that the fish were biting, and we'd likely catch the next ones.

I rolled up my shirt sleeves and trousers, used my hat brim to shield my eyes and lie down in the bow. The sun's rays burned my exposed limbs, stinging and sticky with salty sweat. I didn't understand why I didn't just roll down my shirt sleeves and trousers to protect my skin. On our small boat there was no shade at all. I didn't act rationally but lay blistering beneath the ocean sun, letting my thoughts wander, thinking about the arching bamboo along both sides of the railway tracks.

The slender bamboo chases the sky, caressed by the wind,
Surely, it must be sorrowful...
The beautiful lotuses in the weedy pond,
Will surely wither together...

Fresh verses flowed into my consciousness at the same moment a reel screeched again. Some unknown fish was quickly pulling out the line from Kong's fishing gear. I instinctively rose into a sitting position as the boat slowed to a stop. I took the rod someone handed me.

"Let him fight it; it's definitely a mackerel," someone repeated two or three times.

I braced my feet against the side of the boat, ready to

battle the fish. When it stopped pulling and I started reeling it in, I felt strong resistance. My hands and arms, used to typing, quickly grew tired. See moved behind me to tighten my fishing belt while Kong sat beside me, giving me instructions.

"Reel it in quickly, quickly! Don't let the line go slack... Don't jerk it too hard. Don't stop. Keep reeling! There, just like that, reel faster..."

"Stop lecturing me, for heaven's sake!" I said to the young rubber plantation worker, panting and sweating through my shirt. I wasn't a novice at fishing, though most of my experience had been with freshwater fish. I knew Kong meant well, but his constant instructions were disrupting my rhythm. The main issue was that I didn't have the strength left to do everything exactly as he suggested. If I followed all his directions, I would likely pass out from exhaustion before catching anything.

It didn't jump, it didn't run against the line, and it didn't rush out again. What the Spanish mackerel did was simply lie on its side, resting in the water. That alone was enough to motivate an aging man like myself. Inch by inch, I reeled it in, feeling as if my arms would come out of their sockets. After 25 minutes, I finally got the fish on board. It was a narrow-barred Spanish mackerel with clear, beautiful, silver and lead-gray stripes. When we weighed it later, it turned out to be exactly five kilograms.

The spot where we caught the fish was colloquially known in the South as Garang Klang, actually a coral reef located in the middle of the channel between Ko Kradan and Ko Rok, about three hours further out. Our boat headed straight in that direction and anchored for ground fishing at another rocky underwater area known as Garang Lam – "Shark Coral." Around one o'clock, we turned the boat back toward the mainland.

The wind picked up to another level, causing the wave tops to break into white foam. The scorching sun burned my

limbs, turning them a deep, well-cooked color, like metal just out of a furnace. I felt that the moisture soaking my body was no longer sweat but droplets of life force swiftly flowing out from deep within, burning indescribably. Still something held me back. Even now I didn't dare roll down my trousers and shirt sleeves to cover myself.

Lightning flashed over the mainland, conjuring a threatening and blurry gray veil. I saw moist clouds transforming, seemingly dancing in the heavens. They enveloped the head of one island as if to embrace it, then surged to the peak of another, casting a spell of darkness over the area.

Around four in the afternoon, our boat was enveloped by the rain, and everything around us changed. Water and sky merged, so that we felt as if we were trespassing on the forbidden territory of some powerful entity. The rain pounded the ocean surface, creating dazzling patterns. Thunder roared around us, harmonizing with the engine's sound and waves crashing against the bow. It became a symphony that pierced the soul.

I took some packed food from a friend and sat down to eat in the rain. I felt cold, shivering, deeply uneasy about the surroundings. It wasn't due to the wind or rain in front of me but something they symbolized – my father who had recently passed away.

My father had crewed on a fishing boat, living with the waves and the wide sea for over 40 years. He experienced all types of sea conditions and seasons. While we his children followed different paths, my father died as I was writing my doctoral thesis abroad. So I never had the chance to say goodbye. I only heard that the old sea dog cried like a child once aware he had to leave the sea permanently.

I pondered this often over the past several months ... until I found myself adrift in the symphony of the water and dance of the clouds, bringing me the realization that what my father feared was not physical death.

A life spent amid storms and waves must have tested my father... And like a child forced to travel alone to an unknown land, he must have been anxious and uncertain about what he would encounter.

The sea had already forewarned my father of some mysteries.

Around five o'clock, the rain curtain cleared completely. We saw the long stretch of Pak Meng shore ahead. A rainbow arched between Ko Muk and the mountains on the mainland. The sky was bright and radiant. I felt as if I heard a sacred song from afar, which then faded away into the clouds. Behind our boat, the sun was rapidly setting.

We entered the final, deep channel before reaching the beach, still hoping to catch another fish or two. See was intently watching his depth finder while Kong sat on the side of the boat, letting his mind wander. I quietly rubbed my sunburned limbs.

The boatman still said nothing...

That train cut through the darkness, the lives on either side of the tracks indifferent. It was a separate procession of life, bringing disappointed tourists back to their dull jobs to add to their misery, returning the wicked to their punishments and carrying monks seeking fortune in the land of sinners.

And it brought me back to a life more scorching than any sun above any sea.