To the Temple

By Tsutomu Igarashi

A hill came into view in the east. On its peak a stone spire was bathed in the morning sunlight. The temple spire thrusting into the blue sky of the Asian tropics floated there distinctly visible, as if isolating itself from this war-torn area around the Cambodian border. To Ono, it seemed very like the mountains of his native Yamanashi, on which he had so often gazed.

Five minutes after crossing the Thai Inspection Point Number Three he still had the impression that the muzzles of their machine guns were trained on him. A Jeep carrying a Thai officer bore down from behind with violent speed, forcing its way past the pickup truck in which Ono was riding. A car of the UNBRO followed after it, its engine loud. An armoured car scraped past from the opposite direction, butting into the wind. Military vehicles and UN vehicles were the kings of the roads near the front.

Rice fields from which the crops had now been harvested lay on both sides of their route. A herd of water buffalo advanced slowly along the shoulder of the asphalt road. A barelegged girl flourishing a grass switch was astride the shining black back of one beast, a little bigger than the rest.

The South Asian scene now leaped to Ono’s attention, banishing the day-to-day life of Japan in he had been immersed up to now. All the sights of Thailand: the water buffaloes and the yellow-clad mendicant monks and the three-wheeled taxis called *samuro* appeared fresh and vivid before him. Besides that, his eyes were caught by the rifles and machine guns and armoured cars that he now saw for the first time. He had arrived in the border town of Aranyaprathet, 250 kilometres east of Bangkok the evening

before, and ever since had been feeling the tension and the excitement of a region at war.

Yet, amongst the various sites of this foreign country, it was only the shape of this hill that he remembered and felt close to. It was only this that seemed to have a link with the mountains of his homeland and to open a door into a world that he had seen before.

From the backseat Ono put a question in English to the Thai driver: “That hill is right about where the border is, right?”

“That’s right.” Replied the driver glancing towards the temple, his hands on the wheel. “That’s is Wat Phnom. “*Phnom*” means hill in Khmer, and “*wat*” means temple. It’s the same word in Thai.”

“It’s only that spot that seems different somehow. They must have been slugging it out around there I suppose.”

“You’re right about that! Two years ago it was heavily shelled by the Thai army, and the main buildings of the temple were in ruins. Somehow, by a miracle, that pagoda has survived.

His driver, born and bred in this region, ran on as if feeling obliged to pander to Ono’s interest. His smile, shakily reflected in the rearview mirror, invited his passenger to ask anything about the border region. He had served in the Thai army and his eyes moved with the same assured rapidity as his hands on steering wheel. When he referred to the Cambodians as “Khmers”, one could detect in his words a nuance of that contempt which his fellow Thais felt towards the people of that country.

“The Khmers think that hills are holy places. So of course that temple has a sacred significance for them. All the same that’s where Pol Pot set up his final defensive position; there was fierce fighting there when the Vietnamese army attacked two years ago. Around here it is the only area of high ground, so that temple became strategically very important.”

“They fired a ton of shells at Pol Pot’s army, and then three divisions of the Vietnamese army thrust in and crushed Pol Pot’s men. The Vietnamese army occupied it for a while, but they were afraid their supply lines would be cut from behind so they soon withdrew again. Now there's no one there. It’s a ruin.”

2

Before the barrier at the gate of the Khao-i-dang refugee camp the tyres of countless lorries had made curved tracks in the bright red earth. When the water trucks and food supply trucks braked, thick clouds of dust billowed up and drifted to the far side of the roadblock. All around, the grass was covered with a layer of this dust.

After he had shown his permit to the Thai soldiers the white and red pole of the barrier jumped up, and the thirty thousand dwellings of the refugee camp suddenly opened themselves to view. Both sides of the road were lined with little houses made of bamboo and nipa palm. As the red UN water trucks drove along, women carrying buckets ran towards the water supply station. Half naked and barefoot children came to wave at Ono’s car.

The Rehabilitation Centre of the JIRV (Japan International Rehabilitation Volunteers) was at the end of the road next to the Red Cross hospital. Across the square to the west the English name could be seen written in large letters, together with its logo of a crutch. It was a large single-story building made, naturally, of the same bamboo and palm.

On first entering the Centre, he was introduced to the overseer Muon, who was the only one in the centre who could speak English. He had an artificial leg made of teak attached below his right knee.

The handles of his crutches were and shiny and black with grime from his hands. He turned his upper body to face Ono, without adjusting the position of his crutches. The double fold on the eyelid of his left eye was perfect, and his long eyelashes made the pupil seem all the larger. In one breath he shifted his crutches and his body which had been half turned away and now faced Ono fully. Ono was taken aback by the eye. The right eye socket was sunken, the flesh closed over it.

Smiling to disarm Ono's surprise he offered his hand, announcing in his heavily-accented English "How are you. I'm Muon". When responding to his strong clasp Ono encountered a lump like a tumour in the centre of the other's dry palm. "You've had a long trip from Japan. Welcome Mr Ono" he went on with his speech of welcome showing his white teeth in a smile and continuing to ignore Ono's surprise.

He immediately began a tour of the workplace. His shoulders were canted far over to the left, and they rose and fell as he walked in front of Ono. "At the moment there are 52 people here, but if there is fighting on the border the number goes up a lot. Once they have received treatment at the ICRC they come here, usually about month later. This is the furnace; and this is the rehabilitation treatment room. . . ." The joints of his artificial leg made a creaking sound, as if some insect was chirping from within. "This is the room where we take the measurements. We make the moulds here too. This is the workroom where we make the prosthetic devices. We're having problems at the moment because one piece of equipment is broken."

After he had shown him round everything Muon added with warmth: "Its thanks to support from all the kind people in Japan that we can make artificial limbs like this. My one was made here too. We are all grateful to the people in Japan." Once again he squeezed Ono's hand hard with his own scarred hand.

On that day, April 1st, Ono's work at Khao-i-dang refugee camp began. He took up his duties as a long-term JIRV volunteer from Japan, aiding the rehabilitation of Cambodian refugees. As he had been warned, his predecessor was already gone—in haste to make preparations for his wedding in Tokyo. All he had to rely on were his driver and the local overseer. Now the fundamentals of the work had been completely established, the refugees were largely running things themselves. At his final briefing at the JIRV Tokyo office the representative had said: "All you have to do is look after the money, keep in close contact with Japan and generally keep an eye on things. The local overseer and driver have been well instructed, so listen carefully to them and learn the ropes. Someone like you should soon pick it up." Thus encouraged, he had left Japan. He remembered again the extraordinary insouciance on the representative's face as he said this, and his somewhat irresponsible smile.

Although Muon was, in all but name, the head of the centre, technically a refugee could not be in the top position so Ono, though without any experience, had to become head. He was also unfamiliar with any part of Asia other than his home country; and since this was a responsible job he was in a state of continual anxiety, but having come this far there was nothing for it but to tough it out. Through the rough feel of the star-shaped scar on Muon's palm Ono he felt that he was now face to face with the work of helping refugees from the war zone.

Outside, the white heat of the sun's rays was baking the surface of the red laterite soil. April was when the dry season was at its height—the hottest time of the year in Thailand.

Next, after the rehabilitation centre, he went to make himself known at the UNHCR office. A turbaned Indian staff member emerged and smilingly explained the NGO structure at Khao-i-dang. He handed Ono a printed sheet and, after finishing his general explanation he instructed him, in a slightly sharper voice, in the different levels of evacuation in a war situation.

It was the UNBRO who had the most detailed grasp of the situation in the border regions and they issued warning bulletins depending on the state of hostilities. The level of danger was expressed by figures on a scale of Zero to Four. From Zero, a state of calm Situation One meant be on the alert, Situation Two meant prepare to evacuate; Situation Three meant evacuate immediately and Situation Four, the final level, designated the worst situation when there was fighting very nearby and the United Nations could no longer take any responsibility, so that everyone should flee as best they could. The Sikh handed him a number of other documents, maps of the whole of Khao-i-dang and of evacuation areas. The friendly Indian added “I don’t think there will be any fighting for a while, but let’s both take good care of ourselves.” Patting him familiarly on the shoulder he showed him to the entrance.

On the way home Ono also received a briefing from Chang Chai.

“Basically what happened in this area was a battle between the Vietnamese army and the anti Vietnamese Cambodian guerillas” he said, his face serious. “In the background the Chinese, who are opposed to the Vietnamese, were supporting the guerillas—sending them weapons and ammunition and other supplies. So behind it is a conflict between China and Vietnam. The Thais, who are also nervous of the Vietnamese, were also assisting the guerillas. It was through the Thai army that the Chinese were sending arms.” Ono saw that, indeed, the trucks passing back and forth along the road were Chinese-made

The fighting around the border differed according to whether the season was wet or dry. From December to April, when they were well supplied, the Vietnams Army attacked the anti-Vietnamese alliance made up of Pol Pot’s Army, the Sihanouk faction and the Son Sann faction known as the KPNLF (Korean Peoples’ National Liberation Front) in their base camps and refugee camps which had become their supply bases, and conducted mopping-up operations. Conversely, during the rainy season—from the

middle of May until November—the clayey laterite soil became like a bog, tanks and trucks could not move and it was very difficult to maintain supplies. So then the Vietnamese went on the defensive, and the guerilla forces of Pol Pot's army with their local knowledge went on the attack into Cambodia.

The fighting had been particularly intense two years ago when the Vietnamese had attacked Pol Pot's military bases and the refugee camps which had become the supply bases of the guerilla army and had crossed over the border into Thailand. Then the Thai army had been in direct conflict with the Vietnamese and the whole region had been thrown into turmoil.

A year and a half before, despite the rain, the Vietnamese army had thrust forward and taken the refugee camps by storm. The Nong Chan camp with its fifty thousand inhabitants had been destroyed, while Kok Tahan and Phnom Chat—both Pol-Pot faction camps—had also been razed. After this offensive, which had radically redrawn the map of the border region refugee zone, large-scale battles had apparently died out. Although there had been some minor skirmishing, in general a mood of calm had descended on the region.

Chang Chai went on urgently "Recently things have been quiet-—rather strangely so. Still you'd best look out, the fighting could start again at any time. The Vietnamese are a tough lot, and they specialize in surprise attacks. There is no saying things won't happen the same way they did two years ago. At any rate, this is the front, and it's a border."

The war, the fact of being a solitary Japanese working on his own, an unfamiliar setting and language—when he was there on the ground he was assailed again with doubts as to his ability to actually manage it all. But then the thought rose up once more that, if he made up his mind to it and got stuck in, he would get by somehow.

If he could get away from the life he had lead in Japan . . . life here couldn't be worse than

that constant harassment that he had undergone until recently. He remembered the words of the representative in Tokyo: “Leave things up to me while you’re away.”

3

A sound of hammering rang through the workshop. The high, shrill whine of a motor mixed with the smell of sawdust, the abrasive action of the drill brought an odour of charred plastic to the nose. Completed plastic limbs and the shapes for moulds were hanging in the window, blocking the rays of the morning sun.

The backs of the men seated at their work rose and fell with the sounds. The dark swellings of muscle in their shoulders and arms were lustrous with sweat, which added to the damp of the earth beneath; so sweat and breath and dust, swelled the fumes of heat generated by their labour.

Here and there, voices greeted Ono as he entered: “*Ono san, Ohayo Gozaimasu*”,[1] He greeted them in return, using the Khmer phrases that he and learned. “*Chum reab sour”, soksabay che te”* [2].

The patients’ beds were lined up at the far end of the room. The refugees who had lost their limbs to mines or shells were sitting up idly in their beds in the gloom of the hospital section. Since they could not yet move around freely they were undergoing rehabilitation training while waiting for their prosthetic arms and legs to be made.

In the treatment room in front of the workshop there was a row of camp beds where patients

1 “Good morning Mr Ono.” In Japanese in the original.

2 “Hello” “How are you?” In Cambodian in the original

were being given massage treatment by specialists. The latter, clad in their white uniforms, were refugees who had been trained by Ono's NGO. They carried out their treatment while exchanging gentle smiles. Slowly they bent joints and muscles that had become hardened after enclosure in plaster and the patients yelled out as they were manipulated.

At the back a young man who had just been fitted with his artificial leg was being shown how to walk. He grimaced, seemingly the part the attachment for the knee joint was pressing on the amputated surface. The technician squatted down, pencil in hand to investigate the cause of the irritation.

As he looked at their injured limbs the state of things at the front appeared before him in all its reality.

These refugees had been caught up in the fighting near the border between the Vietnamese army and Pol Pot's forces. If they trod on a mine they were carried to the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) or the JMT inside the Khao-i-dang refugee camp where they were operated on. After a certain amount of treatment, those with amputated limbs were moved across to the rehabilitation section.

According to Chang Chai, many of those who had enough of communism and of warfare had escaped in the direction of Thailand and built a number of villages on the Thai/Cambodian border. He said that the settlements that had appeared of themselves in the forests and grasslands were refugee villages. It was certainly true that, according to the maps he had received from the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and UNBRO (United Nations Border Relief Operation) if one included the small settlements there were as many as thirty refugee villages in the border area.

The camps were constantly on the move, and shifted ground a lot when the Vietnamese army attacked. A year and a half previously the Nong Chan camp with its fifty thousand inhabitants had been wiped out when the Vietnamese army attacked, this had now become Site Number Six, and still held

some 20,000 people. The 60,000 inhabitants of Nong Samet had been reduced to 50,000 and become Site Number Seven. While constantly dissolving and reforming Ban Sa Ngae held 20,000, Sok Sann 15,000 . . . all told there were some 600,000 refugees in the border region.

Since the refugee camps were right next to the minefields some inhabitants had their legs blown off by mines just through going out to find firewood and other fuel. Some got caught up in the fighting and had their houses blown to powder by shells. In this region you never knew when the Vietnamese might suddenly attack.

However the Khao-i-dang refugee camp was some 10 kilometres into Thai territory from the border, and had a secure source of food supplies. It was a transitional camp where people went in order to be able to leave for third countries such as America, Canada, Australia or Japan. As a place to live it was incomparably better than the refugee settlements. It was under the supervision of UN and Thai troops. Thai Army regulations were particularly strict and refugees could not go outside the barbed-wire perimeter so that, in that sense, freedom was restricted; on the other hand there was drinking water, a supply of basic necessities and a basic level of medical care, all provided by the UN and the NGOs working under it.

Khao-i-dang camp spread over a large area. It would take you nearly an hour to walk between its two most distant points, so the normal thing was to get about inside the camp by pick-up.

Surrounding this wide area was a double strand of barbed wire, with watchtowers at its four corners. Thai soldiers kept watch above the camp, while more armed troops patrolled along the fence at a distance of a hundred meters. Not only the refugees but ordinary Thais and foreigners could not enter without permission of the Thai military. For the Thais, the refugees were simply illegal immigrants from a neighbouring country, nothing more than a threat to the peace and order of their state.

Without being asked, Muon went on guiding him around the camp's facilities. He must have his own responsibilities as overseer, it was hot out in the direct sunlight and it would have been much more relaxing to be seated in front of his desk, but when Ono went out he immediately stood up, took his crutches and joined him.

He gave Ono a good deal of detailed information about the camp's residents. He rattled away, but what underlay his garrulity were weightier words: the desire that Ono should understand more about refugees like himself.

"It was after all the reports in the world media that the UN moved to create this camp. It was set up with aid from the UN and developed countries. It's Japan that is giving the most money you know. The UN effort is headed by the UNHCR; underneath them a number of practical aid organizations are promoting the aid work. UNBRO provides emergency aid for the most endangered areas and information about the border region, the FAO and the WFP deliver food and water supplies, the IRC and the JMT provide medical treatment; and on top of that are a whole lot of private aid organizations and volunteer organizations working on hygiene, safety and education. Apart from your group we have other organizations from Japan like the JVC (Japan Volunteer Corps) the SVA (Shanti Volunteer Organisation), CYR (Caring for Young Refugees)."

Some refugees came into sight, walking along the wide red-dirt road. The dark faces of the women shone with sweat as they passed, bearing their rations. Wearing sarongs in bright, primary colours, their heads wrapped in their *kroma* they stood out vividly under the powerful rays of the dry-season sun. Their barefoot children played with skipping ropes in the road, chattering back and forth in the lively Khmer tongue. On the main roads were signs in Khmer and English, bearing names derived from the local regions: "Phnom Penh Street", "Takeo Street" "Purusat Street".

"At the moment there are 60,000 people in Khao-i-dan." Muon told him not only about the obvious things but he went on to speak, as if unable to hold back everything that welled up from within, about such things as the morgue, the refugee settlements how the refugees had escaped from Cambodia, how people came to step on mines.

"All the people who make it to here have had to risk their lives doing it. It's not just the Pol Pot faction army, there are many bandits as well. You have to get through the minefields, and then are lots of Vietnamese Army checkpoints."

The refugee huts made of nipa palms were packed on either side of the road. The camp was divided into twenty-five sections, under a section leader. Each section had more than seven hundred households, containing some two thousand and several hundreds of people. The person chosen as section leader had to report the population figures to the UN. The population determined the quantity of the rations received.

The WFP (World Food Programme) trucks came round to each section and offloaded sacks of rice. On the day when the rice ration was delivered everything became particularly lively, the roads and squares were filled with long queues.

Apart from rice, twice a week there were deliveries of other rations, such as fish and canned and dried food. From time to time there would be charcoal and other fuel, together with household goods like buckets and soap.

The water rationing took place every morning. The red UN water supply trucks circulated around the camp from morning to evening. Women and children carrying buckets and poles formed a snaking line before the row of five, box-shaped water tanks. They filled their buckets with the water that gushed powerfully from the taps. It came from nearby ponds and rivers and, although it had a faint earthy

taste, they drank it after boiling it in tin cans and aluminium washing bowls. The children played around, cupping their hands into the water that sprayed from the hoses and tanks and drank it or splashed it over each other.

"On the surface it looks peaceful," remarked Muon, "but there are lots of things going on underneath. Here money will buy you anything. The price of one refugee is about twenty or thirty thousand *baht*. Officially they have stopped any new entrants into the camp, but a lot of people are still coming in on the quiet. You can never put a stop to smuggling of people into camp, because the only way you can escape abroad is by getting into this camp, you see. If you slip the Thai guards some money they will let you in through the barbed wire. The going price is ten thousand *baht* per person. If you can't meet their terms or try to argue with them, they'll shoot you just like that. They're very unpredictable. I don't know what goes on at night. There is prostitution. There is trade in people. Basically you can buy anything. You need a Khao-i-dang ID card to receive any rations, but you can buy one of those too. One card will cost you eight thousand *baht* or 8 grammes of gold. The section leaders are also in cahoots with the Thai soldiers. It's up to each section leader whether he pads out his numbers or not, you see. They are free to sell one or two extra. My ID card? Of course I bought mine too!"

Casually waving the ID card, complete with photograph under Ono's nose, he also airily waved his hand in greeting to one of the Thai soldiers.

4

The JIRV lodging was a little outside the border town of Aranyaprathet. The organisation had rented an isolated room in a farmhouse and turned it into an office-cum-dormitory.

When he returned to his lodging there was a lot of work waiting for him. Documents for the centre and certain special items had been ordered from Bangkok. Sometimes he had to go to Bangkok

himself to buy certain things. He wouldn't be able to do anything without relying a good deal on Chang Chai's help, and came to depend on him almost completely.

The JIRV was also active in Bangkok's slums, and there was one person permanently stationed in the Bangkok office. Because communications and means of transport were all considerably better in the capital, remittance of funds and such things were almost all done via the Bangkok office. There were also the reports for Japan. Material expenses had to be entered into the account book on the basis of receipts, and daily and weekly logs of the centre had to be collated and sent as reports to Japan. He also received requests from the bureau in Japan for articles and photographs that could be used for fund-raising pamphlets.

At night it was pitch dark and the voices of insects and geckoes made themselves heard. A breeze brought the faint smell of vegetation together with the heat into the room. Geckoes crawled freely on the wooden planks of the walls and the screen doors and ceilings, eating the moths and other insects that were attracted by the lamps. This atmosphere of scuttling and rustling along the walls in the darkness seemed to bring a vibrant breath into the tropical Asian night. Sometimes the large, carnivorous Tokay gecko would run heavily in the roof space above the ceiling. It's grotesque red-spotted colouring appearing abruptly in the lamplight.

These nights in Aranyaprathet were sleepless ones, forever bubbling with tension. The air itself was never still, but rather stirred with restless energy. The spirits of the trees and plants were breathing, the scent of the trees dissolving a little further into the air, rousing the vigorous strength of the dense vegetation. The feverish cries of the geckoes, frogs and insects rose up, and from all the earth arose a sense of plenitude and abundance.

In the third week of his posting, a letter arrived from his father in Fukuoka. Gazing on the

return address in his father's finicking hand he bitterly recalled the life of continual flight that had been theirs. From Five thousand kilometres away in a foreign country, the footsteps of his pursuers had reached even here. His father wrote "My life is trouble-free" but, conversely, between the lines he could read his father's anxiety. The syntax was also confused.

His father had fled from Yamanashi to Fukuoka. To conceal his whereabouts, he was now living in a newspaper delivery shop. At the age of 63 he had to endure a life of getting up in the middle of the night to prepare newspapers and folded flyers. His heart was a bit weak and he was taking a whole range of medicines for his condition. One could sense the anxiety he felt at leaving familiar surroundings to take up an itinerant lifestyle, and how it depressed him to be working for people much younger than himself.

His father's family business, manufacturing traditional Japanese bathtubs in the city of Kofu, had gone bankrupt two years previously. The spread of unit baths demanded a level of technology which his father, with his lack of formal education, could not match. Unable to keep up with these advances, his father's business could no longer sell its separate tubs, heating units and gas boilers, and customers gradually dwindled away. Electrical systems with integrated circuits and complex gas settings were too much for someone who had only a basic prewar education. He sales dropped off from year to year, and his income dwindled to nothing. His type of business was then put under the overall control of the construction industry and, not being the kind of person to jostle for position while the process of registration was taking place, he inevitably found himself left out in the cold.

Then there was the misfortune of having previously stood as a guarantor for a twenty million yen loan taken out by Ono's uncle. With the downturn in the economy the uncle was laid off and became unable to pay off the loan so the debt passed to his father. To round it all off, his hitherto healthy mother

had been hospitalized with cancer of the gall bladder, so his father had gone to a loan shark and been sucked into the vicious cycle of debt.

On top of his abandonment by friend and family alike had come his wife's death. He had sold his business, which had been in his family for three generations, but even that only covered half the principal of his rapidly-expanding debt. Debt-collectors from the Yakuza had even forced their way into his wife's funeral.

Cunning and cruel, the debt-collectors had found out where Ono worked at the Tokyo Social Service Bureau. They had traced his older sister's company and forced their way in there as well. His sister had not been able to keep her place in the company and her engagement with her boyfriend in Kyoto had been broken off. She had virtually fled to their mother's family in Sendai. Ono had also left his social service job and been forced to take part-time work.

The ferocious knocking on his door was back. Shouts and insults rained on him from outside. He felt again that sense of a family being broken apart.

Three years before, a breakers yard had opened up near his house; and the noise of the scrapped cars being pulverized in the crusher began to ring out. It was just when the breakers yard appeared that Ono's family began to descend the slippery slope. The metallic sound of the crusher beating and grinding the bodywork of each car, echoed within him like the sound of his family's destruction.

Ono had fled with his father to Fukuoka and afterwards looked for a way to get out of Japan. He had applied for this job as a volunteer aid worker in Cambodia. The single summer he had spent in the US while a student now came in useful. With a working knowledge of English and a driving license he met all the requirements for an overseas aid worker. Three days after his final interview the offer of employment arrived. He had also explained about his persecution by loan sharks, but the head of the JIRV,

by profession a lawyer, had said: “We can deal with that, so don’t worry. If necessary we’ll find a way to clear it up for good.” Thus, urged by the organization, who were in hurry, he had come here.

Unfolding his father’s letter, he could picture him miserably eking out his life from day to day, and he realized that the mournful note of destruction was still echoing on. It seemed to him that the sound of rending metal was vibrating low on the tropical air, from 5,000 kilometres away.

5

Muon was also keen to accompany Ono when he had business outside the camp. Going with Ono provided him with an excuse to get out, and he could use the car. Rather than being confined in the narrow interior of the workshop, it was a release for him, to get out for a while into a slightly wider world and take himself to a variety of different places.

There was cheerfulness in him that was always turned to the world outside. His practical and energetic nature, yearned for the outer world where Khao-i-dang camp and the whole border region would come under his gaze. One could sense his desire to feel and experience things directly with his eyes and ears and on his skin, rather than relying on information supplied by his fellow refugees.

Muon was round faced, but his cheekbones were slightly prominent. His features were strongly marked, with dark eyebrows and lashes; his good left eye was large and round and directly expressed his cheerful side. In it could be found his unchangingly open, outgoing and energetic quality, full and overflowing with light and life. He had a vitality that was always willing to take a chance and also to offer a welcome to others.

However that brightness was cancelled out by his right side. Where the flesh of his eye was closed up there was something black and viscous that led deep within. There stirred the intimation of something terrible, of someone who has come through an unimaginable experience. His eye had not been

lost naturally but had been darkened by some arbitrary external action. Here was the will of something other; and the trouble and suffering he had endured had deepened those puckered lines in his flesh.

Muon had got the job as the head of the centre because of his English, but he had also been aided by that sense of power emanating from those dark depths, of which his right eye was the symbol, and by which he silently caused others to obey him. By contrast the bright impression made by his left eye of agreeableness and abundant openness to others breathed an atmosphere of reassurance. On close examination, it was actually the sense of dynamic imbalance produced by these two sides which enabled him to draw people from their deeply held positions.

When he walked his left shoulder would lift up high, so that he moved as if rolling from side to side, the joints of his artificial leg setting up a creaking noise. The right side of Muon's body with its wooden leg and screws and air of artificiality spoke of the reality of destruction. The zigzagging motion of the joints and the squeak of his articulations reverberated with the physical power of a mine and the deadly intent that lay behind it. However, when viewed from the other side, his dark muscles shone with freshness and vitality. The roundedness of the flesh filled the darkly glowing radiance of his skin with an abundant life force, taut with the will to live and thrive.

Without warning Muon would make very unguarded remarks to Ono. When put together the words that emerged from the two halves of himself had a strange kind of cadence, and a strength born of contradiction.

"I paid for the ID card with gold; but it was gold that I got hold of by chance. I took it from the body of a refugee who was blown up by a mine while he was leaving one of the refugee villages. It's ironic, because after that I was blown up by a mine myself. You never know what is lucky and what is unlucky, do you? Things like that happen all the time on the border and in Cambodia itself. I don't know

how many times I've been on the point of death myself. So many times I've nearly died. So many times I've been restored to life. The fact that I'm alive here at all is a strange. It's as if I'd come back from hell. I'll tell you about it some time."

Muon was as delighted as a child the first time Ono gave him a ride in his car. "I was a taxi driver in Phnom Penh you know. I'm a really good driver too. I'm better than you, Ono *san*. If I had both legs I would take you for a ride. I'm dreaming of the day when I can get some good artificial leg fitted that will allow me to drive. I've heard that they have legs like that in Japan." He thrust his arms in front of him as if holding a steering wheel, and made as if to step on the accelerator with his artificial leg.

After leaving the car Muon accompanied Ono from place to place. In the strong external light Muon's brown skin seemed almost to be covered with moisture. He seemed to regain strength and life by absorbing the sun's rays.

However, as they moved between the section's clinics and health facilities, his speech became notably thicker. The arc of his crutch grew shorter, and the up-and-down motion of his shoulders became even more violent. His weariness was also revealed by the way the squeaking of his artificial leg became louder and more insistent. When Ono heard this change in the note of Muon's leg he rested in the shade of a tree or in the entrance to a refugee house. The beads of sweat shone on Muon's forehead and his hair, wrapped in its head cloth, shook faintly in the breeze. On one side of his face the sunken, closed eye socket softened in the wind, taking some temporary respite from the coolness of that little corner of shade.

Ono noticed the expression on Muon's face. "Are you tired?"

"I'm alright."

Ono proffered his cigarettes, and Muon took one in the hand which bore the star-shaped scar

and lit it. As the tip glowed bright red it seem to make something smoldering deep within Muon's breast blaze up.

Muon had an unusual pocket watch, and when Ono peered at it he saw that the second hand was not moving. It was stopped. Muon treasured it, even though it no longer told the time.

"It doesn't work does it?"

"Heh, heh, it's alright. It's silver. I can get a little money for it if I sell it."

Still, the way that Muon took care of it made Ono suspect that he treasured it for a completely different reason.

Sometimes, in the gloom of a corner of the workshop Muon would gaze abstractedly at this watch. Running his fingers over it, it was almost as though he was checking over a timepiece that lay within himself—immersed in some horrendous instant in the past. From the shadow of his face in the faint light one might imagine that, rather than trying to forget the hideousness of it, he was, on the contrary, taking an eerie pleasure in retracing it.

"My father was an English teacher. Under the Lon Nol administration, before Pol Pot, I was a good-for-nothing. I paid no heed to my father and dropped out of school to become a taxi driver. I could earn a lot more money that way, and a lot of interesting things happened. A teacher's salary, even at a high school, was not much. I was the eldest of six children, so I had to look after my little brothers and sisters. I wanted to earn money to give them a chance to have an education. The quickest way to make money was to work for foreigners. Picking up American officers and soldiers paid very well. You could get even more if you found women for them."

"When Pol Pot's army took Phnom Penh they drove us all out of the city. They hated urbanites. People who could speak English were killed right and left, because they were said to have

connections with the previous government. My father was seized because he was on the side of the old regime. I heard afterwards that he was tied to a tree and clubbed to death with poles. It seems afterwards they dug out his liver with a knife and ate it. The Khmer's believe that eating raw liver gives you strength. Somebody told me what time he died. My father knew he was going to die and he gave me this watch as a keepsake. It was just before they took him away. He said to me, 'Whatever you do don't talk English.' I ran away soon after that. If they had found the watch I would have been killed as well, so as soon as he gave it me I buried it in the ground at a certain spot. Before I left Phnom Penh I dug it up and saw that it had stopped at about the time my father was killed. My father's words had been burned into my brain. I swore to myself that whatever happened I wouldn't speak English."

"I changed my name, too. If it became known where I came from and that I could speak English I would be killed. Pol Pot's soldiers had lots of excuses to kill people from Phnom Penh: they were America-lovers, they were spies, and so on. In other words, they wanted to eliminate anyone from the city who had been part of the old order, they were just in the way. I saw a lot of people killed before my own eyes. Their hands were tied behind their back with wire and they were hit on the back of the head with a spade, and just thrown down into a hole. Some had their stomachs split open with an axe and their insides pulled out."

"A lot of people were killed in secret. I went on desperately concealing the fact that I could speak English. A little after that, while on the way to Takeo I was on the point of being executed. A soldier pointed his gun at me and accused me of working for the Americans because he said I had looked at him in a funny way. Three of them jumped on me and held down my chest and arms. Suddenly something bright and red entered my eye. It was as if my brain was on fire. They had shoved a knife into my eye. They were laughing. Writhing and turning I pushed them away. That was when I should have

been killed; but at that precise moment they were ordered to fall in, and they let me go."

"For two months I suffered. At times I thought it would be better to die. If it hadn't been for some medicinal herbs I probably would have. My eye went on blazing deep inside. Even now I still feel it burning somewhere. I only just made it through. After I had recovered something remained inside me. It was if the blood has turned into a black lump. Now I still hate and curse that unreasoning power that destroys human beings. I could not rid myself of the black will that put the blade inside me. It was like a living thing inside me; and I myself lived on because of my hatred of it."

"This watch of mine is still stopped. I don't think it will ever go again; and I'll no doubt go on keeping this stopped watch until the hatred inside me melts. It's sign of my contempt for this world."

Behind the International Red Cross Hospital was a place where medical waste was thrown out. Syringes and plastic tubes for saline drips, polyurethane containers for liquid medicines and bandages stained with dried blood were all disposed of there. Amongst these were plastic bags wrapped in greaseproof paper, from which blood was still leaking out. A number of them were lying around, and a dog had worried something out of one, which, on close observation proved to be a human foot. Usually amputated limbs were put in the containers that had been adapted to serve as refrigerators for the corpses but, for some reason, a number of these limbs had been simply thrown out and left exposed to the elements. He counted them. There were six altogether. Muon went around him on the far side and, as the crutches passed him, Ono was suddenly struck with the realization that feet were still going on being severed in minefields on the Cambodian border. There must be at least as many amputated feet as there were crutches. While an even greater number belonging to those who had died without making it to hospital must be lying around as bones on the national frontier. Muon's crutch drove off the dog, waving in the air above the severed foot in its waxed paper, as if in purification.

When Ono wrote his reports he had no sense of how they were received in Tokyo. It was as if he was sending them from the midst of a fantasy world.

If he collected stories that were “touching” or “tragic”, which could be used for fund-raising, and laced his reports with them, the response from the Tokyo office was positive. Yet this were far from the way he actually felt about things. Here, where he was, it had become difficult to know what was touching or tragic. What looked tragic was not actually so, just as what looked fortunate was not so either. In the womb-like hazy primordial sphere that was the Asian tropics contradictory values existed side by side. He realized that he was arbitrarily extracting certain things, putting them together with a “tragic” spin and sending them as a shadow play for the entertainment of the temperate world.

Japan and Tokyo, which should have seemed very far off, sometimes appeared bright and clear to him. This was especially so after that letter arrived sounding a note of distress about his father. The sound of crushing cars had opened a crack somewhere deep within him. Hammers were striking down upon him. On the one hand there was the actual pressure he felt from loan sharkers and debt-collectors, on the other it was something strangely spreading itself in the cityscape itself, the entire city rose before him in the guise of an enemy. It seemed to him that the loan sharks and banks and the whole interest-rate system had become a weapon dismembering his family. His good-natured father, who had simply put his seal on a document to help a brother in trouble . . . .

The whole cityscape itself, the city, with its life of convenience, was like a trap stretched out on all sides, in which their necks had been caught. The figures gripped him by the throat: 18% interest, 25% interest and then 30% interest. The insults and threats rained in on him: “What are you going to about it, you bastard!” His colleagues, his friends, people who had been his neighbours for years, even his relatives were without sympathy for one who had gone under, all despising him and trying to kick him

further down. Behind the city the grotesque black cogs went on creaking around.

If you walked about the city you would very soon find yourself being handed a packet of tissue papers containing advertisements from loan sharks. Their signs blinked brightly on and off in the entertainment districts. “Be careful not to over-borrow” “Plan your borrowing” they said. Well-meaning, simple and honest people were sucked into the quicksand. Where, against whom, could his anger be directed? The giant steel cogs turned on, grinding down all human cries. Mangling flesh, crushing bone, dripping with blood they turned on.

The sound of the train sliding into the platform of the underground station and the metallic sound of the wheels on the rails, echoing in the underground space, the squeaking of the couplings, the tide of human beings jostling out of the doors, the noise of countless feet, the station announcements . . .the babble of voices added to the metallic sounds formed into a dense and whirling mass. After he had resigned from the Social Service Bureau, those noises came raging through his single-room apartment, as if the whole city were breathing like some grotesque living creature.

The offices of the Loan-sharkers who were pursuing Ono and his family were in one corner of a multi-storey block in Shinjuku. Ono was summoned there, and a female employee showed him how his debt had swelled to almost double in a short time. The figure of millions of yen emerging from the woman’s soft lips, together with the inflexible framework of the law and the legal contract were like whirling ice picks stabbing and hacking at him.

“When I arrived at the border I stepped on a mine. It was a trip mine. The wire is hidden in the grass like in a trap. I stumbled over it. I was blown upwards by this tremendous force and something struck my leg. Before I knew any more my leg was blown off in front of me. The rest of my body was thrown in the air and then I came banging down to earth. It was as if I had been bitten by a poisonous

snake. My own blood-spattered foot was rolling around before my eyes. Luckily there were some people nearby and they came running at the sound of the explosion. I was taken to the ICRC treatment centre at Nong Samet, and then I came to the hospital in Khao-i-dang . I had come to the border because I wanted to try to get into the Khao-i-dang camp. It's ironic isn't it? I got in but minus a foot. One-legged people can't get into foreign countries. At some point I'll probably end up back in Nong Samet, though it's called Site Number Seven now."

"I wanted to gamble to see how much I could win. Live or die . . . At any rate I'm still alive. I still think I might as well gamble and see. Even though I've had my eye gouged out and my leg blown off, and those crows blew a hole in my hand and thrust me into a hole. I'm on the return journey. I've been dyed a deep black. I've been plunged up to my neck in blackness. Heh heh . . . how have I managed to come back to life in this world so many times? How long will I have to go on looking into this blackness? . . . Heh heh this world, which I should loathe, I am now just starting to like. It's a wonderful thing. I'm sure my gamble is going to pay off. I just feel it."

What was that feeling of oppression that descended on him when he left the building in Shinjuku? A power, way beyond the strength of his family was bearing down upon them, shredding up their future. How could he pay more than 400,000 yen a month? Because of this would he be crawling around forever in the inferno of lifelong debt, forever pursued: a bankrupt, a loser? It seemed to him that the noise of a scrap car, ruthlessly torn and dismembered came echoing down from the entire building. His family was in complete collapse, disaster descending upon them all at once. He was showered with abuse from the other side of the broken window, rattling the sliding doors and cupboards. The loud cries of "no good bastard" surrounded the house and rang out around the neighbourhood. Could he never escape from this trap into which he had fallen? Would he go on being pursued for ever?

It was as if many invisible nets had been cast upon him from above before he was aware. The figures raged around him like a whirlwind. Abstract undertakings and the system itself became weapons that hunted down individuals, tore families apart. Insurance, pension, tax, mortgages, electricity, gas, water, television, telephone . . . . in a convenient high-tech urban lifestyle, even when you did nothing at all the figures went on piling up. With each breath, it seemed, they wound themselves tighter around you. There was a sense of something gritty and sand-like piling up under the invisible pressure, a destructive impulse storing up its energy. Unable to bear the overwhelming weight you wanted to cry out. You wanted to rip away all those things coiling themselves around you, and you wanted to hurt other people. The hatred and frustration built up pressure like a saturated gas.

If you took an X-ray photograph of the form and structure of the skyscraper district and made it appear as a negative image it would appear as sinister castles that bred and inflated desire, which also corrupting themselves.

The buildings stretching up thirty, forty, fifty stories would be revealed as fortresses that had reduced desire to a system. It was the systematic power with which they sucked up toil and endurance from below that gave them the strength to tower up into the sky. If you listen to the voices of those that were sucked up from below, it would sound as though the winds that blew against the buildings' walls were charged with their cries. The lamentations of those whose unpayable debts are piling up pulsate through the steel supports. It is as if the concrete is breathing with the heartbeat of those downtrodden people.

"At first I didn't believe that the city would be reduced to ruins. But Pol Pot's soldiers did it. After Phnom Penh fell, the soldiers in their black uniforms came in and drove all the inhabitants out, moved them onto the land."

"We called the black-uniformed Pol Pot soldiers 'crows'. When they came into the city they told everyone to leave their houses. They used different excuses such as that there were booby traps, or there was a danger of the city being caught up in the fighting again. We were forced out of buildings and homes at gunpoint. The people swarmed out into the streets, and joined the lines of others. The crows went into the houses and pitilessly drove out everyone who had stayed behind."

"The city was like an empty shell. It was a strange feeling. I felt as if I had left some huge thing behind me. The crowd of people moved on, leaving behind this giant ruin. And there was something else that drove them on."

"It wasn't the poisoned bloom of corruption, but a different monster. It was, you might say, a madness born from that poisoned bloom: its fruit. It was an even stranger and more dangerous will, ruled by an empty theory."

"One of the 'crows' told us, 'You must abandon the towns and build the nation again from the countryside'. And the lines of people left the city as they were told. But, in fact they were like a docile herd of cattle being driven to the shambles. The black-clad soldiers drove us on with their rifles, threatened us and did actually shoot people. Scattered by the side of the road were the corpses of those who had been shot, the sick who could not keep up with the others, and the dead bodies of pregnant women. Babies, too, were abandoned. There was one person who was shot for resisting when one of the soldiers tried to take his wristwatch."

"Even from these soldiers who did such cruel things without a second thought, we had only the feeling that they did not know what they were doing or where they were going. It was strange willpower acting on them from above that caused them to move all of us in the required direction. Something inimical to the human race was laying waste the cities, leading us somewhere. It was as if we

were being taken to a mass execution ground. We were pursued from behind by the silence of a city: once a lively and bustling whirl of activity, now turned in one day into a city of death. We were like a giant snake winding its way to its destination. The will seemed like something inorganic, like the impulse to mass suicide."

"In the end, my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters were taken out to the forest on the outskirts of the city and never came back. I wept when I remembered how it had felt when I embraced my father for the last time. Once again I seemed to feel the warmth and comfort of his shoulder flowing through my body."

"Urged forward, we walked on listlessly under the burning sun. The line of people was linked together in an unbroken line. I will never forget that dusty, winding column of human beings walking onwards. The sight of that great crowd of people like obedient cattle abandoning the city and heading for the villages is burned into my eyeballs. All those people, obedient to a single enormous will—madness, massacre, mass suicide, plunging into a fated annihilation. A demonic will led us on, and we could do nothing but obey. It was a pestilence, engulfing cities and crowds of human beings.

What was that inorganic will? I hated it. You can't find it in any one place, it is close to all of us—in fact it is in me.

6

During the nights in his lodging, Ono read the Japanese newspapers that arrived a month late. Just outside his room was a light trap. Many moths came flying to the light of this bluish white tube. The corpses piled up as they fell to into the gutter below. They made a continual knocking sound as they

crashed into glass neon tube.

Although Japan was so far away, when he saw a picture of buckwheat noodles his mouth watered at them, he became suddenly nostalgic for *kaitenzushi*[3] shops. The results of high school baseball games wrapped around him like a volley of shouts and cheers.

Looking at the situations vacant columns, his eye was caught by an advertisement that took up a mere three lines: “Cash lent only on a driving licence”. He knew that the menace of the loan-sharkers could not pursue him here. Even so, it would suddenly burst in upon him from an unexpected direction. The noise of someone banging on a windowpane, the noise of breaking glass, and then the yelling would come back. The hoarse, threatening voice from the other end of the telephone line re-echoed deep inside his ear. “Why don’t you die, you fuckwit. . . .” “ Sell a liver or a kidney. . . .”

Reading the society page he found an article about a time bomb that had been placed inside Shinjuku station. Police officers and railway staff had carried out an emergency evacuation of passengers and people using the underground walkways. Ono felt an illusion suddenly arise within him. What if such bombs had been set off here and there throughout the capital . . . what if one of them had gone off? There would have been a panic that paralysed the whole city. Everyone would have fled the entertainment district leaving the skyscrapers empty. Only that forest of concrete buildings would have remained eerily behind. If it were a nuclear bomb, even if it had not gone off, just the news of it would surely cause everyone to leave Tokyo. The crowds would depart from the city and pour into the country districts. A long snaking procession would stretch out, like a funeral cortege for the city. The enormous city would remain behind like a strange kind of hollow shrine. A city become an empty shell, now what was that

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3 A kind of cut-price sushi restaurant where the plates of sushi are carried along in front of the diners on a conveyor belt

exactly? A ruin? A shell? A graveyard?

Before he took his father to Fukuoka, they had climbed together to the graveyard on the hill. They were about to go on a journey and would not be back in their hometown for some time, so his father's feet naturally turned in that direction, perhaps with the intention of apologizing to his ancestors for having given up land which had been in the family for generations.

Ono remembered how, as a family, they had always visited the graveyard on the spring and autumn equinoxes, spreading a plastic sheet on a spot with a good view and treating the occasion as a picnic, eating *ohagi*[4] and the contents of their layered picnic boxes. They would break off occasionally to filch a few grapes from the vineyards nearby.

The fields of vines spread far below in one great plain, as if sliding downhill from this graveyard situated on top of a hill, where the land fanned out from mountain into foothill. You could gaze down at the landscape where Fuefuki river flowing from the east and the Kamanashi river from the west came together to form the Fuji river and carried on south to the bowl of land where lay the city of Kofu. The course of the river disappeared into the distance, where the ridges of the Southern Japan Alps and the Mount Misaka Range sunk and mingled together. Above these mountain ranges soared Mount Fuji, it's peak still covered with snow and looking chilly as it stood out clearly against the blue sky of early March. Before this landscape, so filled with family memories, which he would not be able to see for some time to come, his father gazed on as if drawing the scene deep into his breast. His body swayed in the wind blowing from the bowl of land below.

Hearing that an older colleague from the Social Service Bureau had taken over a newspaper distribution concession in Fukuoka, and thinking that it might be possible to hide oneself in a place so far

4 A kind of rice-cake, eaten traditionally in the autumn, particularly at moon-viewing parties.

away, Ono had asked his friend for a favour. He had flown to Fukuoka to see the situation for himself and, after listening to his explanation of circumstances, his friend had agree to take the task on. Once more bowing his thanks, Ono had optimistically hoped that, although the room was old and small, his father could put up with it until he, Ono, returned from abroad.

Standing before the grave where his wife lay at rest, Ono's father simply placed his hands—made strong from his labour at the bath factory—silently together. Two weeks before, the mortification he suffered at losing his home, the break-up of his family, his pursuit for debt and abandonment of his native town had all exuded from his father's countenance. But now the sadness had gone from his face. Dully he turned his cheek to the cold breeze, abandoning his mottled skin to its breath. It seemed as though his body was becoming transparent and dissolving into the wind.

Two weeks ago when they had handed over the ownership of their home and moved to a rented apartment, his father had suddenly hugged tight to a beam in the living room, where they were the thickest, and clung there motionless. Ono had tried in vain to drag him off it. With set teeth he had pressed his forehead against the surface of the wood. With his brow and nose set in the wood he recalled a cicada. His vehement, repeated call seemed to be audible from everywhere in the house.

There was no longer a house to which he could return. The Yakuza's debt collectors had already sniffed out the rented apartment to which he had moved and stuck up a notice demanding reparation. He seemed about to go insane from the constant fear of pursuit.

Ono stared at his father's back in prayer, and sensed something hollowed out: an empty shell without grief or regret at parting. In his profile had already settled the look of a wanderer—something blown about by the wind. Smoke from the burning incense passed through the hollow that was his father's body and streamed upwards into the sky.

On their way home they passed a group of rocks known as Kubizuka. As always, his father joined his hands in prayer in front of them.

During the final years of the Shogunate, certain peasants, driven by starvation, had risen in revolt, breaking into the local magistrate's office and houses of the rich in search of food. This incident had swollen into a great uprising across the Kofu region. The revolt had at last been put down, with the help of cannon supplied by a neighbouring fiefdom. Two thousand people had died, including women and children. The rebellious peasants had taken a final stand in the temple on top of this hill. They had fortified it and continued to resist, but finally the temple was burned down. It became a bloody struggle in which, when scythes and hoes were bent and useless, stones, planks and branches and even corpses had been thrown at the enemy.

More than 400 people were punished, of whom 109 were decapitated. After being dragged through the town the decapitated heads were exposed in a great heap on a hill. Those who had died fighting were buried on this hill. Now it was nothing but a place with a loose scattering of black rocks, but a sense of something bloody still remained between the shadows of the stones.

It was said that one of Ono's ancestors had taken part in the uprising and had been executed as a ringleader.

Outside the refugee camp was the crematorium. The usual thing was for those who died inside the camp to be cremated there after a simple funeral service in the neighbouring bamboo-built temple. Those who had no friends or relatives were sent straight there. Those who died at the Red Cross Hospital or at the JMT hospital were also cremated there.

Sometimes patients at the Rehabilitation Centre took a turn for the worse and were sent back to hospital, in some cases they died while still at the centre. On this particular day Ono and Muon had

attended the cremation of one patient who had died suddenly of tetanus, and who had had no friends or relatives.

Because the crematorium was set on high ground it commanded a view over the whole refugee camp. And then, far to the east, could be seen the hill standing on the Cambodian border and the temple that topped it. Muon, repeated from the Khmer standpoint, what Ono had heard earlier by his driver Chang Chai.

“In our belief, hills are holy places where we receive heavenly decrees from supernatural elements like the sun, the moon and lightning. The capital Phnom Penh means the hill of Penh, which was the origin of all things. It was where the gods revealed their intention to rule over Cambodia. It is the place where we communicate with the gods. The temple you can see on the hill at the border would have been constructed with the same purpose. Generally speaking most of the temples in Cambodia are built facing Angkor Wat. It is the symbol of our Khmer people. That temple should also be pointing towards heaven to symbolize our aspirations . . . personally I think of altars as places where they offer up living sacrifices to the gods, though. . . .”

The sun, which had now begun to decline, lit up the region towards the border in red. Muon’s face was burning in the crimson light, seemingly dyed with the anger that boiled up from within him. The wind coming down from Khao Idan (Mount Idan) brought the faint smell of burning corpse and, coiling itself around Ono and Muon, continued on towards the plain, flowing towards the Cambodian jungle which lay far off on the horizon.

The pebble-strewn whitish slope of the mountain jutting above them made a blurred cross against the green horizon. The huts of the refugee camp were spread out below. The way the barbed wire on the slope blended with the rich, blue green of the horizon, made the camp of 60,000 souls on its

formation of uplifted strata appear like a stage set.

The sun of the Asian tropics was shining far in the west as if stirred by a desire to burn yet more fiercely, after firing everything on the plain to a crisp. To the ears of the two men came a clear, dry note as the evening breeze stirred the white band of piled and scattered bones near the barbed wire.

As they looked down at the whole scene, Muon began to speak to Ono, or rather it was if he addressed himself to the wind, in which somewhere the heat still lingered.

"All those friends of mine who died like flies—what did they die for? What was the reason they were killed by Pol Pot's soldiers? I don't know whether I hate those bastards of Pol Pot's or I hate war. Do I hate the conditions here on the border and the Vietnamese army and the Thai army, or do I hate the *kharma* of the Khmer people? I don't know. Is it just a matter of sacrifice? Are we being told to become the manure for this soil . . . what is this sacrifice for? I don't believe in 'the world'".

Muon lifted his arms and spread them apart, the star-shaped cicatrice held up to the sky, offered to the scarlet light of the sun. That scar was in unity with the cruel remains of his blinded right eye, as if they both contained within them the inimical will of providence. It made him feel, rather, as if Muon's strength were drawn up from an abyss below and then passed through his body to be released in a defiance of the heavens.

"I was on the point of death so many times, and I survived each time. How is it that I have managed to come back to life in this world so many times? How long will I have to go on gazing into the darkness . . .? It just keeps thickening up inside me. How have I gone on living, though I had my eye put out, been thrust into a pit, had my leg blown off? I've been dyed through and through with something thick and black. Heh, heh . . . when I was pushed into the pit and lay on all the dead bodies below me, I survived. I climbed up a creeper and got out through a hole in the side of the pit. What kept me alive? I've

no idea. It was as if I had come back from hell. How many times have I gone from here to there . . . heh heh . . I feel as though I'm falling even now. . . How far will I fall into this bottomless pit? Even now I feel as if a great hole has opened in my hand. I can see the starry sky through the hole in my hand. . . See here: I can see the sun as well."

7

While he was studying social services at university, Ono also did some research into the famine of the Tempo Era[5]in the library in his spare time. In the Kai region, as his native Yamanashi prefecture was known at the time, over 20,000 people died of starvation. It appeared that the spread of infectious diseases also greatly increased the death toll. Countless individuals became beggars, selling off their fields and their other possessions, abandoning children and parents, leaving their wives. Abandoned children swarmed by the roadside or in the temples. Some were eaten by dogs, who also ate the flesh of those who had died of starvation. Human body parts could be found scattered around the country. Conversely, human beings fought with each other to eat those same dogs, some apparently also disputing over who should eat the flesh of the human dead.

As he researched further it became clear that it was the extraordinary rate of taxation that lay behind this situation. It was the cruel and calculating power of the government officials demanding taxes from peasants who had nothing to eat that increased the famine, pressurizing the poor, altering their human nature. Those who could not pay the levy were ostracized, driven out of their villages, stoned or thrown into jail. They had their noses split and their ears cut off to make them an example.

It was that merciless, that rapacious and grasping power which drove the peasants mad and

5 1830—1844

drove them in fact to rebellion. The undercurrents of it still could be felt into the Meiji and Showa eras[6]. It seemed to him that, in a changed form, it could be detected hidden beneath articles in newspapers and magazines. It had not disappeared, but rather had worked itself, more guilefully into the currents of the world.

"They divided people into new and old citizens. The old citizens were those who lived in the rural villages and produced food supplies. Those who, up to now had been had the benefit of a pleasant and convenient urban lifestyle, were regarded as "new" citizens. These, together with the intellectual classes and merchants were categorized as 'A'. The lower class, manual workers were 'B'. 'A's were superfluous to the construction of the new society of the future. In some cases 'B' citizens were too. In their minds the most stress was to be placed on extermination.

"We were cattle. The concept of cattle is a simple one. When they can no longer work you can dispose of them as and when you like."

"Life in the villages was in chaos. Money was not permitted. There was no freedom of dress. Everything had to be done as a group. It was the life of a slave. We were supposed to double production in two years, so every day we were forced to work late into the night."

"Little plashing sounds could be heard in the darkness as we all planted rice seedlings in the paddies. The only light came from pine torches. Nobody said a word, as we all worked away in the dark. There was just rustling a movement in the gloom. Someone would collapse into the water and no one lifted a hand to help. We went on mutely with our work. We were continually bent double deep in the water and almost naked, so it was cold. Someone else dropped in. People who fell did not get up again."

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6 Respectively 1868—1912 and 1925—1989, but the modern period in general is intended, since the story is clearly set before the Showa era had ended.

“Far into the night came the sound of clanking wheels, which finally released us from our labours. We began to walk back through the darkness to our communal dormitory I could not see those next to me. I did not know who was there, who was still alive. It didn’t matter. If I was alive myself that was good enough; and yet, I didn’t even know if I was alive myself or not. People who had set out to work with you that morning would suddenly be gone. When you returned yet more would have disappeared. I didn’t know where they went. Death swarmed around us. We just worked on from morning till night, on a diet of rice-gruel that was more like water. If we could still breathe then we were still living beasts. In bodies and in spirit we lived on as cattle. It was as if we were waiting to be killed. I wanted to run away, but I no longer had the strength of will left. Some mysterious entity had enveloped everything.”

“It was easy for them to kill. Those who resisted, those who protested were eliminated. Any excuse would do. All they had to do was pronounce someone a ‘Vietnamese spy’ a ‘discontented urban element’, a ‘degenerate’. Such people would be summoned and told they were being taken to a new work site. They were then led to the execution ground away from the village and make to dig a hole. They would be blindfolded and made to kneel down. A wooden club would be brought down on their heads and they would drop into the hole.”

“The crows would announce that such people had ‘gone to a new, far-away work camp’. Little by little the people in the village grew fewer. Everyone informed on everyone else. Secret whisperings were all around us like rippling of the wind in the grass.”

“Some executions were carried out in front of everyone as an example. Gradually such examples became more frequent. The prisoner was blindfolded and his hands were tied together with wire。 He was bound to a tree with his arms outstretched. Then his skull was split with a machete. His whole

head turned red, and the blood spurted down to his chest. The crows laughed sardonically. They would split the victim's belly open with a knife and rummage among the entrails. Then they plunged the knife in again and sliced round. When the hand was withdrawn it was clutching something bright red. They ate the liver in front of everyone and passed it on too the other soldiers. All of them ate. The fresh blood would be dripping down from their faintly-smiling mouths. The liver was also passed around for us to eat . . . ."

"I'll tell you about this scar some day . . . it's a reminder of when I was sentenced to death in that camp. . . ."

9

Just before Ono's departure for Japan the JIRV representative had taken him out for a drink, "The nation of Japan is awash with debt," he had forcefully observed. "Everyone is borrowing money: mortgages, education loan, car loan, holiday loan, credit card, debit card. Everyone's lifestyle is founded on consumer finance and loans. Sectors that depend on borrowing are increasing hand over fist. The negative power of borrowing has reached epidemic proportions. Everyone in this country suffers from it. We live in an age when advertisements for consumer loans are blatantly broadcast on television at peak time. You can't deny that this negative influence has spread to an incredible degree. And then, on top of this trend, you've got consumption tax. That's how the government is trying to plug the hole of national debt but they'll never manage to balance the books—the negative economy is expanding too fast. And then, I don't know when exactly, but at some point it will all go to pieces. At any rate consumption tax is going too be pushed up further, is going to work its way even further into our lives. So this debt-dependent lifestyle will get worse. The negative effect must then be even greater. Because of this negative force ruling the economy the country is going to become more reactionary. Becoming more

reactionary means becoming more like Pol Pot. People will no longer regard each other as human beings. Japan will have an official army. They will revise the peace constitution . . . By giving people guns and sending them overseas they will become "volunteers" in the military sense. Instead of sending out crutches and prosthetic limbs we'll be bringing weapons. As for the peace constitution—pearls before swine!

Ono's father would often croon "*Ue o muite arukou*" (Look up when you walk) [7]. It was the only song he knew, and he would sing it in his husky voice when he was in his cups, when he was feeling down or when he had something to celebrate. Conversely, his mother could tell his mood and physical condition from the manner in which he sang. Smilingly she would say, "Your father's cheerful today. Something good must have happened." Alternatively, "Something really bad must have happened, he's singing really low and painfully isn't he." It was fixed thing that he would sing it to Ono on his birthday. When was in junior high school, Ono learned to play an accompaniment on the guitar while he and his father sang together.

When they visited the graveyard during the festival of remembrance of the dead his father used to sing his song in a rather louder voice than usual. As they descended the hill from the graveyard his father would gaze over the slope of the vineyards as it dropped away in front of them, and gradually sing louder.

The echoes of his voice swelled and then seemed to merge with a strange power that rose from among the gravestones. It seemed that they slipped downwards and away, mounted on the winds that blew towards the hills from the distant bowl of land.

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7 Given the rather unfortunate English title of "sukiyaki" this is still the only Japanese song to have reached the top of the American charts, which it did in 1963. The English version has been a hit several times for different groups.

In his second letter from Fukuoka, his father wrote that he had started keeping goldfish. He said that he had bought some at a local festival, put them in a small bowl and was now feeding them, adding: "they listened to me singing". No doubt it was "*ue o mite arukou*" that he was singing to them. He said they looked rather sweet when they were eating the leftover bits of noodle he gave them. He also wrote that *kakesoba*[8] was all he was eating. Ono thought that if, after his work here was finished, he could get over to Fukuoka to see his father, they would celebrate the end of his duties with a special *tempura soba* followed by a visit to a karaoke bar where they could sing the song together.

In the bed nearest the window on the west side was a boy who had had his right leg amputated. He was always looking out of the window, gazing vaguely at the scene under the bright sunshine. His artificial leg did not fit very well, and he was always lying down on his bed and then sitting up again.

He would sometimes gaze over at Ono with his limpid eyes as if asking for something. The pale smile that would occasionally appear on his face had the transparent beauty of the wind. This ten-year-old was named Ien. Perhaps because there was an obstruction in his throat he could not speak. Some said his throat had been crushed by a Khmer Rouge soldier, others that shock had rendered him incapable of speech.

When he wanted to communicate something he would write it on the slate he always had next to him and show it those nearby.

Sometimes he would draw pictures. Once he started drawing he couldn't stop. His pictures would overflow the slate and spread out wide over the ground.

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8 A very cheap dish: buckwheat noodles made more tasty by a sprinkling of batter bits left over from making tempura. It is, in a sense, a poor version of the *tempura soba*, mentioned later. The "special *tempura soba*" mentioned later would normally consist of two prawns lightly fried in batter laid on the bowl of hot noodles.

Muon was fond of this boy. When he had to go to Aranyaprathet on business he bought him a crayon set and a sketchpad from the Chinese-owned stationers. As soon as Ien received them, he started to draw as if a dam inside him had burst. His drawing showed a Cambodian country scene with coconut palms standing here and there. In the centre were men clad in black with *khroma* round their necks. There were scenes of people working in the fields as well.

There were naked, blindfolded men, and scenes of men being clubbed to death by black-clad soldiers. There were also depictions of something like innards being removed from their stomachs, mixed with red blood. He drew large holes with men being thrown into them and being buried alive. Their heads were struck with bamboo poles and they fell into a hole.

He also drew a scene where soldiers, rifles on their backs, were torturing a group of farmers. They had their hands tied with wire. The wire was passed through their hands and they were bound like that to a tree trunk.

There were pictures of flames leaping here and there from the ground. Many mines had exploded and human legs were flying up into the air and being scattered on the ground. Each one was bright red. To the left were the figures of soldiers driving people onwards.

Shivering he pointed to the pictures he had drawn, apparently trying to say something. He wrote something in Khmer on his slate tremendously fast as if his fingers were possessed. Muon peered at it and translated the boy's explanation.

"Pol Pot's soldiers drove us on from behind with rifles . . . there was sound of gunfire behind us, and the sound of shouting. People who tried to go back were shot. There were lots of mines buried in front of us. Thousands of Khmer people went forward into them . . . explosions came from all sides. Peoples' limbs came flying up from in front of us. Even after we had gone a long way forward we could

still hear the sound of explosions behind. Unable to stand it any longer someone ran forward. His body lifted in the air at the same time as the noise of the explosion. My hair stood on end at the thought that I was about to be blown up. My whole body was taut as wire. When would it be my turn? The fear was unbearable. . . . Everyone went mad, started to run . . . .”

Ien was panting hard and his face was distorted. It had become the face of a fifty or sixty-year-old man. “Thank you”. Muon laid his hand on the boy’s shoulder and, taking the weight on his crutch, stood up. “At one time Ien had this dream all the time so that he couldn’t sleep. He became half-crazed, saying ‘the dream is coming for me’ and ‘I don’t want to sleep’. . . . recently he’s got a bit better—since he could draw these pictures, you see.”

Muon walked by in front of Ono, his crutch making its creaking noise. A whisper escaped him: “In one way or another, we all have this kind of blackness inside us.”

One hot afternoon, Ono had lain down on an empty bed in the hospital wing to take a rest. Many of the patients used the interval of rest between lunch and two o’clock to get some sleep. Some people went out, and all those who happened to stay behind would sleep in the heavy afternoon air. A couple of people were awake but even they seemed to be moving in daze. Outside the white-hot brilliance poured down and a period of emptiness reigned. One by one human figures, departed from their shell of reality, broke away as free apparitions, leaving behind a hazy, slow motion after-image. Ono himself was cast into the dreams of full noon.

The white Plaster of Paris and plastic legs lined up next to beds and against the bamboo wall appeared.

The patients would remove their artificial arms and legs before sleep, just like taking off clothes. In their dreams those arms and legs, now scattered so far away, were gently breathing. Although

they had been severed they seemed to still maintain an organic connection, each of them seeking its original form, acting in unison as an even greater living body. Each artificial limb had its own will and was trying to move like a living creature.

In the muzzy air, the arms and legs though mixed up and scattered, still seemed to be moving as one. It was a scene of battle, with arms and legs and heads and torsos all scattered around, at the same time it was one huge living creature making its first foetal stirrings for rebirth.

That night Ono steadily drank the local Mekong Whiskey with Chang Chai until he suddenly became hopelessly drunk. Remembering nothing of what came before or afterwards, he was carried to his room by Chang Chai. He himself didn't understand why he had got so drunk.

In the dream he had around dawn Ono found himself in a large room of coin-operated lockers in an unknown station in Tokyo. He had been told that a very important letter from his father was in one of the lockers, and he was inserting his key into each of them, one by one. The key rattled in countless locks, and just matching the number of the key to the number of the locker was an onerous task. He grew annoyed. At last he got one open and then gave a start. Inside was a severed foot: a foot blown off by a landmine and still covered with blood. The severed part hung down the metal side of the locker, dripping pearls of blood. When he hastily shut the door and opened the next locker, it contained another foot. There was no letter from his father. His impatience only grew as he wondered how a letter could have got in somewhere like this. They all had severed feet in them. Each and every locker had a foot in it. As he opened the door he sensed instinctively that they were being kept there as some kind of collateral. But as a collateral for what? . . . . Oh, safety perhaps. Perhaps convenience . . . all he was sure of was that they were a guarantee of something. He could not find his father's letter . . . .

In this menacing atmosphere he felt that each individual one of them became a time bomb.

The one he had found first had at some point begun to tick out the time. This coin locker room had become one enormous bomb. Bombs like this were proliferating in many other stations, spreading through the city underground. Where was his father's letter? There was no time. . .

He was woken from his dream by his own anguish. A large Tokay gecko, holding a smaller gecko in its mouth fell with a thud onto his bed. The grotesque pattern of red and white spots on its belly writhed against the sheet. The hind legs and tail of the gecko that it was trying to swallow were still squirming in agony.

That afternoon, after he had returned from the UNHCR office, he found Muon, who had fallen asleep in a chair. His two arms were spread out defencelessly and his single leg was bent slightly inwards. He had taken his artificial leg off, so the stump of flesh at the knee was visible. The rounded scar tissue where it had been severed faded into the semi-darkness of the room.

He had the impression that the confusion of war had been exposed like a suppurating sore, and the darkness arising forcefully from it, was now flowing through Muon's body. He felt as though, as a result of this torrent Muon's body had attained infinite mass, like a black hole.

Muon's eyes were closed. They were both wrinkled up so one could not tell which was the one that had been gouged out, and they were staring into the darkness. The distinction between blind and sighted had disappeared, they were sunk in the darkness of sleep. All that existed was that deep space of sleep. It was due to the very comfort afforded by sleep that his two closed eyes, could receive this dark torrent. They had the weight of a huge rock unmoved by the waterfall that beats upon it. And yet, it was that same weight that allowed him to float into space, giving way to the freedom of dreams. The space in his soul was spreading wide. That deep pit stretching down without end, suddenly lit up like lightning by the glow of some past battle."

"How is it that human beings can kill so many other human beings—I don't understand. Is it fun to kill? Does cruelty instinctively please us? Did a smile come to the lips of Pol Pot's soldiers when they pushed people into holes and piled earth on them to bury them alive? . . . is what motivates human beings something so grotesque and unredeemable?

Ono suddenly thought of the four-sided faces of the stone statues in a group of crumbling ruins buried deep in the forest and overgrown with banyan trees. They were neither smiling, nor sleeping nor meditating. Their stone features were sunk in the green-encircled silence. Judging from the corners of their thick, faintly curving lips they seemed rather to be amused at something, enjoying themselves. It was as if, in the forgetfulness of time, their black, sandstone ears had gone on listening attentively to the sounds of a more than thousand years of waves in the ocean of greenery. They were fertilized by tyranny and brutality, drawing in death and suffering and lamentations as the power needed to move through the circles of life, and achieve a profounder, weightier silence. While expressing solemnity on the surface, behind the scenes they were chucklingly devouring the blood of living sacrifices offered up to them. It was as if the ceremonial blood of sacrifice was the offering that caused the greenery to grow thick, that filled this world with the energy needed to make it turn. Death was not destruction and an ending but rather the beginning: the prelude to eternal rebirth in the music of the circle of reincarnation. Each of the four faces while bringing death, corruption, ravine and annihilation; at the same time, the peaceful aspect of their features changed them to rebirth and purity and mercy and resurrection: deepening the melting-pot of chaos. Their eyes running red tears, the succulent blood dripping from the corners of their mouths, their well-fleshed faces opened into bloom.

The breathing of the sleeper was faintly audible, and sweat ran down his spine. Beads of sweat shone also on the brown skin rising over the ribs of his chest. A mosquito descended onto the swell

of his shoulder muscles and sucked his blood. Muon did not move. His shoulders were like stone. The curved fingers of his upturned palm were like fossils—all movement frozen. It looked as though the hand was holding a ball of empty space.

As Ono looked down at Muon's face, which seemed to have been sleeping for a thousand years, he remembered once again his words of yesterday: "Some thick darkness has sunk down inside me. However much I try to rid myself of it, I cannot. Instead, it gets bigger. It's steadily getting bigger inside this blinded eye. I feel as if one day I myself will be swallowed up by it."

9

The clouds spread from the west with violent haste, turning the sky jet black. In the thickest part of the clouds whirlpools of air jostled one another and then forced their way down from above. From inside the dark mass pure white light darted out and penetrated the ground. The shapes of trees stood out against the jagged electric bolts as they ran from sky to earth. A tremendous growl of thunder shook the plain. Great drops of water fell like bullets, and the earth became suddenly invisible through the haze of the rain. In concert with the sound of this ferocious rain, the rumble of thunder became even closer and more frequent, raising the volume of noise higher still. Amidst the lightning, the trees and shrubs danced along with the naked children.

The rain had come towards the end of May, after an unprecedented delay. The raindrops rebounded off the canvas hood of the JIRV pickup, and bounced from the surface of the soil, caking the vehicles bodywork with mud. The drainage ditches, hitherto just empty depressions in the soil, now ran turbulently with muddy red water.

Chang Chai the driver, who had gone to renew Ono's pass issued by the Thai Army's Task

Force 80, returned through the rain to hand Ono the new version and to report the latest news from the border. Because the supply of information at the front was so disjointed these passes had to be renewed frequently, at least once every two months. In the confused situation at the front, the enemy was also involved in frequent intelligence activity, and this was one way of combating it.

The mobile intelligence unit or Task Force 80 provided intelligence and information and was directly attached to the Thai High Command's information and publicity section. It gave direct orders regarding intelligence matters and was independent of the Second Army Division, which oversaw the territory towards the border. When passing through the checkpoints that were scattered across the border region you had to have both the High Command's pass and the pass issued by Second Army Division, as regional commanders. Now the High Command's permit had to be supplemented with one issued by Taskforce 80. While the Second Division's pass was written in Thai and bore a Garuda[9] bird crest, the Task Force 80 pass was printed only in English. Ono's eye was caught by the brand new letters 'JIRV' and 'HIROSHI ONO', written on the coarse Thai paper.

According to Chang Chai, at the moment things were peaceful on this side of the border and there wasn't much going on; but, on the other side, the Vietnamese army were constructing military roads. They were using Cambodians as labourers but there were also quite a few labourers and overseers from South Vietnam. There was construction everywhere. The Pol Pot guerillas were doing their best to hamper the work, but the Vietnamese defended themselves fiercely and they weren't having much effect. Since they were working so fast, the job was apparently already half completed. Chang Chai went on to say, the lines between his eyebrows gathering into a frown, that it was obvious that they were building

9 A lesser divinity in Hindu mythology, depicted as having a man's body and eagle's beak and wings. The body is golden and the wings red. Familiar to many as the name of the Indonesian national airline, it is used as a national symbol both by Thailand and Indonesia.

these military roads either to tighten their defenses at the border or because they were preparing an all-out assault on the guerrillas' bases of operations to cut them off at the root and wipe them out. The Thai army was particularly wary of an all-out assault. Ono his expression showing that he could not quite take in the significance of what he had been told, averted his gaze from Chang Chai and walked toward the car, but from behind him the other said casually in a low voice. "Ono *san*, I wouldn't get to friendly with Muon. You might get hurt if you get too involved."

In June an eleven-year-old girl entered their care. Her treatment was going well, but she still could not be considered completely recovered. Even so, a smile would break out on her face when Ono arrived, and she would place her hands together to greet him in Cambodian style. As she bent her neck, her hair, cut in a pageboy style, would sway gently. When she greeted him Ono habitually replied with a salutation in Khmer: "*chum reab suor*"

When she met Ono's gaze she would smile back at him vivaciously with her large eyes. She had light-brown skin, a small nose with clean healthy lines, white teeth showing themselves through her sharply- angled lips. It eased Ono's heart to be touched by her smile

The girl, whose name was Sopheap, wore cut-down jeans. They were made from old ones sent from America but the right leg that emerged from them had been severed just below the right knee. The left leg was supple and graceful. The stump where her leg had been severed only made the youthful freshness of her left leg stand out the more.

According to Muon she had no parents and had entered the centre alone. To begin with she had fled from Phnom Pen to the border with her family, but they were forced back by the Thai army and been driven into the minefield at Preah Vihear, where she lost her mother and her older brother. For a while the family had returned to Cambodia, but her father detested communism and was regarded with

suspicion by the authorities so they escaped again. They got as far as the refugee settlements but then her father was attacked by Pol Pot's soldiers and shot dead. She alone survived and made it to the Nong Samet refugee camp. She went out of the camp to collect firewood to prepare her evening meal and walked into a mine. She was rushed from the village clinic to the ICRC hospital in Khao-i-dang for treatment.

When he looked at this girl he felt as though her fresh, lively smile washed away all the horrible circumstances of life. When she came up to greet him he would echo her words in his faltering Khmer "*chum reab sour*". When he arrived at the centre he would first encounter her smile, exchange greetings with her, and afterwards begin his work with Muon.

Sopheap rapidly became a favourite at the rehabilitation centre. Before her own artificial leg had been completed, she was already helping with the preparation of prosthetics for others, or changing the nappies of babies belonging to patients. As she was helpful, attentive and intelligent people could be heard calling her name from every direction.

Muon also often called for her. He gave her the notebooks he got from Ono as well as his leftover rations. One day he translated a request from her: "Ono *san*, Sopheap wants to hear about Japan."

"Really, what does she want know?" Taking her example from Muon, she would always call Ono "Ono *san*". Shyly she put her questions to him:

"What did you do before you came here, Ono *san*?"

"Social service work. Probably you won't understand if I tell you but I was caring for people with physical and mental disabilities. I cared for old people, and people with learning disabilities as well."

Having been taught how by a fat middle-aged woman called Mao, Sopheap would sometimes cut open plastic tubes and spread them open on the bed, and then knit and weave them together. She was

clever with her fingers. Sometimes she would use coloured paper.

At the entrance gate to Khao-i-dang camp children would sell souvenirs to the journalists and those visiting from UN or from the governments of individual countries. There were Khmer stone carvings and vases, a two-stringed instrument like a violin called a Tro U, which reminded Ono of the Japanese *kokyuu*,[10] and these goldfish made of plastic tubes proved very popular when added to the mix. As decorations they were cleverly designed and, at the beginning Ono bought about ten and sent them to the office in Bangkok. The transparency of the tube conveyed a feeling of coolness, and he thought they would give pleasure to people in Japan too.

In no time it became Sopheap's role to make these tube goldfish. Many more were on sale at the gate, so it couldn't be just Mao and Sopheap making them but, as Sopheap had a talent for the work, little by little the orders increased. She was given a great number of the plastic tubes to use as material.

Ono also bought a goldfish from Sopheap directly and hung it by the window in his lodging. Remembering that his father was keeping goldfish, he sent three of the tube ones to the newspaper delivery office in Fukuoka.

When he came to think of it, these plastic tubes were used at the Red Cross and JMC hospitals. They had been stolen from the waste disposal area where Ono had seen the severed foot. People would pick up what had been used for blood transfusions and intravenous drips, wash them with water and bring them all to Sopheap. Some of them still had water in them. When the number of hospital patients increased, so too did the supply of plastic tubes. At the sound of fighting and gunfire Sopheap's work would increase.

Using a knife to divide and cut the tubes Sopheap would make a neat job of the goldfish. For

10 A four-stringed lute-like instrument, similar to the more widely-known shamisen

the eyes and tail she would tuck in folded coloured paper of red green ad blue. The accent this colour gave to the area around the eyes was striking; and when they were finished and hung up, they made an attractive and stylish souvenir, something like a mobile. The cheerful Mao took on the role of manager. Gathering them neatly with both hands and placing them on her crutches, she would count them up. Muon would take the finished ones and store them. On occasions Ono would give Muon a lift to transport them. They only made a little money, but when she received that meagre amount from Muon she would always take it joyfully, her hands joined in thanks.

When she was making the goldfish she would stretch out her single leg on the bed, intent as she wove the plastic together. Her soft hair in its page-boy cut would fall forwards and occasionally she brushed it aside as she delicately manipulated her tweezers.

One evening, just after the rain had stopped, Ono was about to leave the centre a little earlier than usual when Muon called him back. “Sopheap wants to thank you, she says you bought twenty goldfish last week.”

“They’re very popular in Tokyo, you see. The charity shops and such places soon sell out of them. I’m sure there’ll be more orders soon.”

“Sopheap is asking ‘what is Japan like’. If you could tell her a few things I’ll translate for you.”

“It’s much colder than Cambodia. There are four seasons . . . we have snow . . . I don’t suppose you can imagine that. . .”

Looking at Sopheap’s shining eyes Ono explained that Japan had many mountains, and there was a beautiful one called Fuji, that it was surrounded by sea, that the scenery in each season was beautiful and so on.

"Is it peaceful"

"Yes, it's very peaceful"

"Can I go there?

"I'm sure you can, sometime . . . ."

10

Morning came swiftly in Khao-i-dang. Since the camp had no lights, everyone went to sleep early and so all 6,000 inhabitants began their day with the rising of the sun. By seven the centre was ringing with the sound of labour.

When Ono came into the centre at eight, the noises of drill and hammer were already all around. The lively sounds of knocking and hammering beat out a pleasant rhythm in the crisp morning air. The rattling sound of tools used together made even the unpleasant creaking of artificial joints and squeaking of screws something lively and heightened the sense of getting down to work.

Most Cambodians were clever with their hands. They deftly worked the wood and plastic to produce prosthetic limbs. In their method of construction a tradition of handicraft was augmented with a delicacy of touch. Their productions showed an attention to detail which bettered that of the handiwork to be seen at Aranyaprathet and other places in Thailand. In their plain and simple taste there breathed a freshness and strength.

They were absorbed in the pleasure of making. Hope attached itself as a replacement for the arms and legs they had lost. To the ear, it sounded as though the concentrated, steady rhythm extended out towards the east bearing the thought that some day they might return to Cambodia. Those various hopes for the future, braided together in sounds and voices, projected a vitality filled with an earthy strength

onto the morning air.

As usual, Ono was brightened by Sopheap's smile. The pupils of her eyes conveyed an innocent greeting as, joining her palms, she falteringly used the Japanese she had learned "*Ono san ohayou gozaimasu*"[11]

Ono had, for his part, had come to look forward to being greeted by her in this way. Giving her left over paper from his office he said, through the intermediary of Muon "You work hard Sopheap. You're getting better and better at making those goldfish. If you want anything I'll buy it for you at Aranya. Just tell me whatever you'd like."

The refugees and the volunteer workers called Aranyaprathet "Aranya" or "Aran" for short and Ono, too had unconsciously begun to use the abbreviation.

"I'd like some more coloured paper that I use for the goldfish eyes—red and blue and green. If there's any gold I'd like that too.

"How do you say goldfish in Khmer?"

"*Thrai kontou bai*"

"How about in Thai?"

"I don't know."

Muon struck in to help her: "They say '*pla torng'* Coloured paper is '*kradart see*'"

In Sopheap's smile of everyday her fears of the past seemed to have been wiped away. In her expression and gestures one could not detect the scars made by losing her parents, by war and a regime of terror. One could only see a normal, cheerful child. However, when she happened to scratch her leg and her fingertips touched the stump of her amputated leg, the cruel path trodden by one who had lost all her

11 See note 1.

family and lost her own leg would extend bleakly before her. The blackness of the past would seem to wrap around her, and her innocent form would show itself as if inverted like a film negative and

Perhaps because it was that stage of life, Sopheap always wanted to be learning things. When she had a bit of free time she would often get adults to teach her how to write or to do sums, using her slate.

Through Muon she observed to Ono, “I suppose all Japanese children are clever”

Her face lit up when he told her that everyone received free education up until the end of middle school.

“I want to live in a country like that” She put her mouth close to Muon’s ear and said something, her big eyes gauging Ono’s reaction. Muon smiled ruefully as he explained what she had said:

“She says she would like you to teach her Japanese.” Ono was surprised but not put out by the request. Sopheap seemed likely to pick things up fast, and would probably be a pleasure to teach. Ono himself might be able to study Khmer with her in return. He could spare the time, too, if it were about fifteen minutes before going home or during the lunch hour. He met Sopheap’s intense gaze and nodded.

“All right, I’ll only be able to do it a little at a time, but let’s give it a try.” Her large pupils suddenly flashed and a dimple appeared in her round cheek.

Ono asked the Bangkok office to order him some Japanese textbooks, and gave Sopheap Japanese lessons for quarter of an hour or so during the lunch break, or before going home. He also learned a little Khmer from her. They soon became able to say simple things in each other’s languages, greetings and phrases like: “Where are you going?” “What are you doing?” “When is your birthday?” They also learned how to express thanks. She absorbed things much faster than he. When he returned to his lodging Ono would have to prepare lessons for her, and go over the Khmer words he had learned.

At noon the food would be brought round from the canteen at the back. With a cheerful rattle the aluminum containers would be set out on the tables. On each tray would be two plates and a cup, containing some plain fare. The food was prepared by refugee volunteers from outside the centre.

Work would stop and everyone would gather around the long table. Those who still had difficulty in walking ate at their bedsides. Relaxed voices could be heard in lively exchange— their laughter echoing along with the noises of spoon and fork.

Along with the Thai rice and vegetables supplied, of course, by the UN were some frugal side dishes: a type of long bean boiled and flavoured, or stir-fried vegetables such as carrot, potato or cabbage. From time to time some kind of meat was added, although only a tiny amount. There might be dried catfish, showing grilled and shrunken whiskers and a charred muddy-tasting belly.

At mealtimes Mao would often make them all laugh. Muon, a little apart from the centre of things, and yet usually seeming to keep watch and control over the whole, formed another centre of gravity from which he would strike in to the conversation. Mao's exaggerated speech, gestures and body movements drew the attention of the table. The liveliness she projected brought guffaws all around. When there were no Thais or people from the UN around her voice would swell even louder, giving vent to an energy that threw back the narrow confines of their world. Mao and another white haired woman, like cross-talk comedians, between them whipped the conversation into a ferment. Laughter would gather in waves break and then reform. Those waves seemed to foment a life-force capable of driving back their constrained circumstances and bring about the full recovery of each individual there.

After the meal, silence would engulf the centre. Outside, the white rays of the sun ricocheted around. Around the hottest part of day, between one and two o'clock was rest time. Most of them lay down for an afternoon nap.

Ono and Sopheap's Japanese lesson would ripple out across this quietness. The repeated words sounded like echoes in the woods, sounded like a duet.

One afternoon, about three weeks after the Japanese and Khmer lessons had begun, Sopheap approached Ono with a mischievous smile, both hands held behind her. She said, in her newly-acquired Japanese: "*Ono san me o tojite kudasai*" (Mr Ono, please close your eyes.) Somewhat taken aback Ono nonetheless did as he was told. "*Te o hiraite kudasai*" (hold out your hands) When he put his hands out he felt something being pressed into them, at the same time she said: "*Kore wa watashi no purezento desu*" (This is a present from me). When he opened his eyes he saw it was a large plastic goldfish, three times as big as the usual size. For the eyes she had used red paper, and its pupils were a vivid colour.

She directed a smile at him as she said "*Nihongo, arigato gozaimasu*" (Thank you for the Japanese). Ono with the goldfish in one hand, shook Sopheap's hand with the other, saying "*aakoon chiraun*." As he put his arm around her shoulders, Ien, Mao and Muon, who were nearby, burst into applause.

Unusually, that night in the town of Aranyaprathet there was the continuous noise of trucks. The ground rumbled to the deep note of military trucks on the move along the border line, possibly new troops coming up in relief,.

It was the latter part of June. Japan would be covered with the gloomy skies of the rainy season. Probably the rain would be falling on his father as he walked to deliver his newspapers. A reply came about the goldfish he had sent. His father wrote, "Thanks, the way the chimes ring when it moves in the wind is pretty." He sent the large goldfish Sopheap had given him as well, together with another letter.

The week before, a Japanese journalist had come from the Yomiuri newspaper, and he had done a story about the plastic goldfish and Sopheap learning Japanese. Ono added in his letter that it

might well be reported in Japan and that his father should look for it in the newspaper.

The Cambodian refugees were a cheerful group, and would seize any excuse for a celebration or a feast. It might be for someone or other's birthday, or it would be because someone was leaving the clinic, or again a Buddhist feast day. They would get together and make it feast. Just being discharged from the clinic would warrant an extravagant leaving party.

In point of fact there was nothing very special to eat, just the leftovers from lunch or the rationed canned goods that somebody had got hold of, contributions from the NGO. They would just get it all together and eat merrily, singing songs swaying their bodies or dancing, each according to his or her physical limitations.

Ono would often be asked to bring beer for their parties from Aranyaprathet. The black market canned beer that was sold in camp was too expensive for them to buy. Beer brought in bulk directly from the market in Aranya was much cheaper. On top of which, if Ono bought it on his NGO expenses under some convenient category, they would not be out of pocket at all. They would always look forward keenly to the beer that Ono bought for them. Possibly it was in order to obtain it that they held the parties in the first place. In principle it was forbidden to bring alcohol into the camp but, as long as there were no very strict checks, it was always possible to hide a few cans and bring them in. If one brought them in in several goes, there would be enough for a small party. Ono, sneaked in the alcohol and snacks, looking forward to the sight of their animated faces as they sang and danced.

Towards the end of July the ceremonies of *Wisakha Puja*—the three treasures or *Tri-ratna* in Sanskrit—and *Khao Pansah* were held in the bamboo-built temple inside the camp. Buddhism had been banned by the Pol Pot regime, and a good number of Buddhists had been killed, but those monks who had survived maintained the practice of Theravada Buddhism in the camp. *Wisakha Puja* was the day on

which the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment was celebrated, and was also a holiday in Thailand. In the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, becoming a Buddhist monk is regarded as a rite of passage to adulthood for men. There is a deeply rooted tradition for young men to begin one monsoon season as a monk on that day, called *Khao Pansah*. Ordinary people would escort the monks to the temple, and after their dedication there would be a feast with drinking and dancing. In this atmosphere it was decided that a party should be held at the centre as well.

Each person prepared his or her own simple dishes. Ono also bought food and drink from the market. With the edibles spread out before them the refugees made ready their entertainment, bringing out instruments that had been hidden under beds and in tool and supply boxes, or borrowed from others. The concert began with the mellow note of the Khmers. Beads shaken inside a hollow bamboo pipe gave out a full and rolling sound. Those sounds, quick with breath of the greenery, enfolded them

A buzz of laughter, teasing and mellifluous voices all blending together, stirring up the breath of the vegetation, raising the pitch of liveliness and pleasure. Crutches were lined up and rhythmically beaten against artificial limbs that had been removed for that purpose. The sound of the prosthetic limbs strangely harmonised with the notes from the instruments, swelling the music of the vegetation. It was like some green, climbing plant, stretching out its tendrils, winding around each false limb, joining each stump from which arms and legs had been separated, linking them together like a nerve, secreting a liquid that bound them all together. Suddenly it seemed as though the room had turned into dense forest strung with a green spider's web. In the denseness of that forest a ringing note sounded: something striking against the stone walls of ruins. The twittering of birds met and echoed, the wings of parrots in their primary colours cut vividly across the shade of the treetops. Banyan tree roots descended to wrap themselves around the faces of the stone statues. The sound of rebirth, of breathing, flowed up from the

cracks in the earth's crust—the furnace of creation allowing a glimpse of its bright red vortex.

Mao took the lead in singing. Accompanying herself with gestures and body movements, her lively singing inviting others to begin to move as well. The sinuous linked actions of the dancers left an afterimage that generated a new limb to replace that one that had been lost: remaking it stout and strong. Her voice went on unwaveringly singing the song of the Khmers. Bright and clear it stretched out ripe and luxuriant vines of melody, its stirring, and swaying afforded a glimpse of the shrine deep in the fastness of the forest.

Sopheap sang along with her. Her high solo, also took the people back to the lush fields of Cambodia. Calling to the spirits that wandered continually about the minefields, drawing them together and leading them towards the green fields. So beautiful was Sopheap's voice, such was its purity of tone that Ono was left astonished. As she began to sing, the curtain of the night descended, and the moon reigned together with a profound stillness. In the pale light the harmony looped and flowed. Upon the sandstone flags of a stage formed by a gigantic ruined gallery, a flower opened—the angels danced the aspect of reincarnation. The unending wheel opened its bloom like a rich kaleidoscope: from within the cauldron of blood and flame, intoxication and depravity gave birth to a new strength. The flaming colour taught that hope could actually be found within the outpouring of red blood.

Hands clapped and the instruments sounded out. Sopheap salaamed reverently with hands before her breast, bowing deeply, sinking her hips in prayer to the Khmers' ancestral gods.

Perhaps on the third occasion, after they had become more relaxed with each other, as the celebrations got into their swing the refugees had called on Ono to sing them a Japanese song. Ono was reluctant but, being so strongly pressed and finding it had become difficult to refuse, after some thought he launched into his family's favourite "*ue o muite arukou*" It was the first time he had sung the song in

front of foreigners and was worried that they wouldn't understand it. Still he thought it should be a catchy enough tune. Most of them didn't know the actual tune and wouldn't know whether he was singing it well or not, on the other hand it was an easy melody and he sang out, falling into the rhythm. When he had finished, the refugees all applauded. It had been an unexpected hit. He was amazed himself.

After that, at every such feast he would sing the song, and everyone would clap in time. Quite a few of them would hum along with the tune. Fired by this, Ono bought a guitar from the pawn shop in Araya, tuned it and practiced so that he could take on the role of accompanist. Harmonizing with the refugees he became one with their Khmer voices. A hot viscous substance flowed out from them and permeated within him; and something bright and red welled up from within him in response. It flowed out over the colourless, oppressed world of Japan, freeing him from the bonds of his father and the loan sharks. It was if a flow of hot magma had melted the core, and drawn it down into the burning cauldron.

A profound feeling of intoxication dissolved the hard shell within him. Ono strummed his guitar and sang along with all the rest, as if as if abandoning himself to a burning wind. Harmonizing with their instruments, and feverishly drawn into their whirling dance he too became imbued with that green scent. His father's existence, frozen in its burden of debt, dissolved amidst the notes of the guitar. Taking on the red hue of restored life, it flowed into the air of the tropics. It was as if the cries of the geckoes were sounding piercingly from within him. The throats of countless reptiles opening in wild abandon.

About two weeks after the *Khao Phansa* festival at Khao-i-dang, Muon announced: "Mr Ono, Sopheap says she wants to learn how to sing '*ue o muite arukou*"' Muon and and Sopheap exchanged glances, and smiled mischievously. Instinctively, Ono smiled in return.

Ono wrote out the words in the Roman alphabet and handed it to Muon. Muon in turn wrote them out in the Khmer script and gave his version to Sopheap. Every day for about five minutes Sopheap,

Mao and Ien would standing next to their beds and practise the song, looking at the scrap of paper and fitting the words to the tune, which they already knew. Before long Sopheap became able to sing it without looking at the words. Muon joined in as well. Many of the other refugees learned the words, passing the memo around from one to another, so that most people in the centre became able to sing it.

One day, as Ono was walking from the entrance gate to the Centre he heard voices singing in Japanese. The sound of a chorus of many voices flowed out in the rays of the morning sun. The interior of the single bamboo building was saturated with it. That fresh harmonic tone was like an echo from a temple. Like the fresh note of a chorus sounding from a temple building it reverberated back, a pure and powerful volume of sound. Feeling anew the beauty of the human voices and with that storm of voices blowing on him Ono walked into the centre.

Coming up to him, Sopheap called out in her lively voice. "*Ono san, tanjoubi omedetou!*" (Happy Birthday Ono *san*)

And Muon loudly repeated the same words the others all poured out their congratulations "*omedetou*", "*omedetou gozaimasu*". Mao and Ien also wished him happy birthday in Japanese. Listening to their resounding voices Ono was shaken to the depths. Being so busy and so far from Japan he had completely forgotten about his own birthday. When he had worked at the social service organization in Japan he had never been congratulated by such a crowd of people like this. "This is a present from us," said Muon handing him a model of the Bayon temple at Angkor Wat. This simple human bond woke a kind of strength in him. When he was congratulated like this by the refugees, the plain and naked human exchange transcended country and race and war, and awoke the power of human unity. Not knowing how to express his thanks Ono merely repeated "*aakoon chulaun*" (thank you very much).

11

The sudden rainstorm, which always blew between afternoon and evening, came that day after dark. It struck with a roar against the roof. The sound of thunder split the night, making the earth tremble. Outside the banana palms, their great fronds tormented and groaning were whipped violently around.

In a letter from his father he read “Thank you for the big goldfish mascot you sent. All my goldfish have died, so I have hung yours in the window as a substitute. It cheers me up a lot.” The letter itself was not so different from usual. It was affectionate in his father’s usual way. It was, rather, the letter he got from his friend who ran the newspaper shop that he found odd. His friend wrote that, a few days earlier, a stranger had come in and asked a lot of questions about his father. His father had happened not to be there at the time, so he had put him off some how or other, but that they would have to be careful in the future. The day before his father had suffered a heart attack while out on delivery and been taken in to hospital. Ono thought it strange that his father had not said anything at all about his state of health. Closely considered, the indirect cause of his father’s heart attack might be that someone had been dogging his footsteps for some time. Might it not be that which had set off his father’s attack? His father had written his usual type of letter in order not to cause his son any anxiety. If the loan sharks’ reach extended as far as Fukuoka . . . it seemed to him that the reverberations of the thunder were now blended with the dismal sound of the crushing machine. When the thunder broke he felt as though the ground beneath his feet had split open.

The rain grew lighter and the banana leaves began to stop shaking. He opened the window. Beyond the white glow of the light trap stretched the garden streaked with traces of the recent rain, the puddle-strewn ground and the liquid shadows of the trees. From the background, a harsh aspect of life,

different from what had gone before, now revealed itself. It seemed that the negative face of things had now come to the fore. Its hidden violent features were now laid bare, and appeared before him in the blackness of the night.

Worried, Ono opened the door, intending to make a phone call to Japan. In Aranya there were only a couple of places from which you could make international calls. One was the post office and the other a small private telephone bureau. In Thailand government permission was still required to install a phone line and the costs were very high, so none of the NGOs had installed their own private lines. NGO employees and foreign journalists would often use the private bureau phones. Here each cubicle was roughly made, with a half-door only concealing the caller's upper body. There were three telephones, and usually you had to wait to use them. The assistant on the other side of the counter would obtain an international connection on the manual exchange and then signal the caller to start speaking. The assistant would time the call and then bill the caller accordingly. One minute cost 120 baht, the price of more than ten Thai beers. If you spoke for five minutes it would cost the equivalent of 6,000 yen[12] but in his present state of disquiet he was not about to start worrying about the cost. His worry was rather whether the bureau would still be open at this late hour.

The clouds flew past at a wild speed. The cold rays of the moon that came peeking through the gaps in the clouds gave a greater depth to the night sky. The hands of his watch now read ten o'clock. Every shop in Araya's shopping street had its shutters down. On the far side of the sky from the moon the clear stars twinkled asunder.

Amidst that cold darkness the whole night sky opened out a disquieting path into the far distance. The pitch-black firmament hung low over him. He felt as though it was closely linked to the

12 As a rough indication, in January 1985 1000 yen was worth approximately 4 U.S. dollars

blackness of Japan. The appearance of the sky made it seem that everything on the earth was being drawn up into the blackness of space, dragged to its farthest edge and then annihilated—dissolving into a kind of powder and then being blown away by the wind.

At the same time there was a sense of pressure and unease twisting itself inside him. He had a fear of being wrenched and severed, forced downwards and crushed. He felt as if as if a murderous axe was whirling down upon him, as he lay resistless.

The lovely twinkling of the stars was linked with the past, at the same time it was linked with his anxiety. At the present time it was precisely its beauty that was throwing him off balance.

Ono thought of the hill in Shizuoka. He could clearly recall the scene when he had climbed up it with his father on that clear evening and looked at the shining stars. Ono took in the scene of boundless darkness. The shining night sky above the hill drew the laments of those crushed to death or beheaded into itself and somehow thus became even more beautiful. It was a deep blackness that worked its way painfully into his chest. With the feeling that he was returning along that same path, he entered the telephone office.

A cubicle was free but he couldn't get through. Apparently no-one was answering. Ono returned home feeling even more worried and uneasy.

In his restlessness and anxiety he suddenly came up with an idea: he would bring his father to Thailand. At the end of a year he should be allowed to take a two-week holiday back in Japan. At that time he could go to Fukuoka and bring his father back. They could settle down and live together in Thailand. Here, he felt, it would be safe. But it should be done as soon as possible. If he could take time off at New Year he would do it then. Ono felt a sense of relief, happy at having reached a decision.

"Ono *san*, where did you go?" He was startled, as if at a sudden knife thrust.

"I just had to go and make a phone call" he replied in confusion.

In the darkness, Chang Chai turned his bright eyes on Ono. "It's dangerous at this time of night" he said, in apparent allusion to how one NGO premises had recently been broken into and robbed. Chang Chai's eyes looked piercingly at him—recently Ono hadn't gone drinking with him or had him round to his house very often.

"Take care of yourself and don't ignore what I say. Let's have a drink together soon. There are a lot of things I want to tell you."

At that he disappeared into the darkness

12

As they entered October, here and there the rice plants in the fields began to grow heavy with grain, and the end of the rainy season drew near. As *Auk Phansa*, the Buddhist festival to mark the end of the rainy season also approached, the Thai Second Division controlling the border region also became more active. The Chinese-made military trucks passed backwards and forward and tanks, which were normally always moved at night, now were to be seen in the daytime.

According to Chang Chai, the military road that the Vietnamese army had been constructing along the border had been finished faster than expected. What was more, with its completion they were starting to increase their activities again in one section of the border area.

From last year to this, there had been no attacks during the dry season. Suspending their normal dry-season offensive the Vietnamese had put all their efforts into road construction, and there was now a feeling that they were readying themselves for a major push. They were thought to be preparing an all-out assault on the guerilla bases even before the rainy season ended, in order to eradicate them before

the end of the next dry season. In consequence, Chang Chai opined, the Thai Divisional Command was now in something of a panic.

At the end of October a new troop movement was suddenly announced. The Vietnamese army had thrown a large-scale military force into the southern sector, and was vigorously assaulting the guerilla bases there. In particular, the KPNLF base at Sok San was on the point of being overrun. The Vietnamese seemed to be intending to send in yet more troops and, after the fall of Sok San, move up towards the north. News also suddenly arrived that more troops had begun to be moved from Phnom Penh and Battanbang.

Chang Chai asked "Ono *san* can you give me leave of absence for while?" He went on to explain, "I have relatives in a village in the South, and I need to go to see them".

By November the sound of gunfire could be heard in Aranya. It felt as though the reverberations were growing closer and the distance diminishing.

Khao-i-dang, which had been almost free from alarms, was now frequently given the "Situation Two" warning signal, meaning the inhabitants should prepare themselves for instant flight if necessary.

Thai tanks and military transports frequently drove past and the sound of helicopters cut across the sky overhead.

On his return from Sok San Chang Chai said almost in a whisper: "Apparently it's true that the Vietnamese are sending the regular army from the north to the front. It seems there is a general exchange with the army from the south of Vietnam, which has been in the border area up to now. Sok San in the south has fallen. This is no half–hearted attack. The crack units are also going up north. Who knows where they'll attack next."

The Northern Army was formed of the elite troops who had fought against the Americans. Normally they were in strategic positions around Phnom Penh and Battanbang, which they only left for major assaults. The Southern Army, currently in the border region, consisted of conscripts drafted after the liberation of Saigon in 1975, whose morale was low. Some were elements formerly opposed to the regime who had been forcibly drafted and sent to the front. There were also deserters. But if the army from the north were in action then the situation had completely different. If the regular army from the north were moving in their direction, then at last the real conflict would open up in their area.

"Will they come as far as Khao-i-dang do you think?"

"I don't think so. We are 13 kilometres from the border. If the Vietnamese army comes in this far there will be a real outcry. Aranya would be in danger too. The Thai army couldn't let them invade as far as here, they would lose too much face. Before things get dangerous here there would have to be a major battle. There are a lot of UN aid agencies and NGOs. in Khao-i-dang as well. If they come under attack, international opinion won't be silent. The Vietnamese are a wily lot. Two years ago Nong Chan bought it. This time the Vietnamese army will go for Nong Samet. Or somewhere further to the south like Tap Prik or Khao Din. . . . they may be planning a bolder stroke . . . that's what worries me."

Thai conscripts were chosen by drawing lots among twenty-year-olds; but if you paid a certain amount of money you could get out of it. Naturally the farmers' sons who couldn't pay the exemption money were the ones who ended up doing the military service. It seemed that Chang Chai himself had done two years military service guarding the frontier not far from his own home.

According to him the eastern region was considered the most vital defensive sector. As Military District Number One, the first, second and ninth divisions were stationed there. The area towards the Cambodian frontier was particularly strongly guarded, as it was a front against a communist activity.

In order to maintain the physical strength of the division and to share information and defensive techniques, soldiers were replaced every two years. At present it was the Second Division. The coming March would see them being replaced by the Ninth Division. If the large-scale attack Vietnamese were to take place precisely during that period, inevitably the Thai troops would be thrown into confusion.

The Second Division was now fully occupied with responding to the recent movements of the Vietnamese army. If the Vietnamese made a sudden attack, their replacement would necessarily have to be postponed. For a while they would have to protect the frontier region in conjunction with the Ninth Division. But if the Vietnamese made some unexpected manoeuvre the Thai army would have to come up with a special strategy to counter it . . . what would the upshot be . . . Chang Chai's expression revealed his concern.

Ono got through on the phone to Japan. His father's relatively cheerful voice, made itself heard through the distortion of the international link. It was Ono himself who was being asked how he was doing.

"OK"

"Don't overdo it"

"How are you doing yourself—that's why I'm calling you."

"I'm alright now."

"Are you taking some medicine?"

"Yes: four different kinds!"

As they conversed he was gauging his father's condition. He thought he could hear him breathing heavily, but it might just have been interference on the line. Right at the end he touched on the most important issue: "Has anyone come, so far?"

"Yup." His father's reply came as though broken off.

"Have you met them?"

"Yup."

It seemed to Ono that he could comprehend everything of his father's circumstances from the tone of his voice. He cursed inwardly. For the time being he said: "I'll send you some money, if things look bad get out of there—anywhere will do. I'll be back at the New Year, so hide yourself somewhere till then."

"Don't worry" his father's wan voice seemed to be trying to evade Ono's own. At the end he said: "Thanks for the goldfish. It's really nice. It puts heart back into me just to look at it. Thanks for the photos of the centre as well. You're obviously working hard yourself. That Sopheap or whatever her name is seems a nice little girl."

He would have liked to have talked longer, but his father seemed worried about making such a long international call.

"OK then, thanks," he said, implying he was about to hang off.

Before Ono could finish saying "I'll call again" he heard the purring sound of the replaced receiver.

The office assistant, who was dressed like a Thai farmer wrote out the figure for 485 baht. Ono took a purple 500 baht note from his wallet. The fear that, once sucked by leeches they will go on sucking your blood till the end, crawled over him.

Impelled by his anxiety Ono called the friend who owned the newspaper shop where his father was working. The time difference was two hours. Since it was nine p.m. here in Thailand it would be 11 in Japan. It was a time when someone working in the newspaper delivery business would be sound

asleep, but he couldn't worry about that now.

Despite the fuzziness of the connections the other's voice was surprisingly clear over the receiver. He reported that there had been a lot of strange calls recently. Although his tone did not sound harassed, he stated his apprehension in a low tone. "It's all right. I'm the owner so if comes to it I can ask the police to get involved. I'm giving your dad his wages directly. So don't worry."

Ono walked back towards his lodgings in the darkness, through which could be heard the distant sound of gunfire.

The darkness took on a hue of danger, reflecting the approaching threat of the Vietnamese army on the border. There was an atmosphere of menace and, from far in the distance, something else seemed to be bearing down on him. Together with the giant shadow which had been pressing in on him from before, he sensed some ill-omened thing pursuing also from behind. He was caught in a pincer movement. Though he felt he must do something quickly, he could not think of anything. Feelings of fear and impatience merely circled vainly within him, and his anxiety only increased. This whirlpool of anxiety opened up at his feet, drawing him further in, as it grew ever deeper.

As always, Ono was arranging his papers and preparing to leave his office, as evening drew near. The red rays of the evening sun shone through the gaps in the slatted bamboo walls. The piercing note of a drill's motor still reverberated from the other side. The echo of the metal hammers also threaded through slanting beams of light. Muon was standing around in a daze. He gave the impression of not knowing whether he was asleep or awake: he was simply standing still and breathing. He had laid down his crutches, and his seated form seemed too tired to move. There was something somehow unpleasant about its density. The gloom of the past that lay within him had solidified, stored with a dull yet pure light.

His pupils were blank and unseeing. It was as if he was gazing into the distance, and yet his eyes were not directed far off, but rather deep within himself. He was as heavy as lead. His field of vision was closed down, and yet he seemed to be looking through everything.

Beneath that blankness of expression was an unfathomable world. At the same time Ono felt that it was linked, in some profound way, with what was going on all over the border region.

Perhaps aware of Ono's gaze, Muon suddenly lifted his head as if waking and looked towards Ono. Slowly he gave a sad smile.

"Ah are you there Mr Ono? You should have called me—recently there's been a lot of gunfire. It seems to be slowly getting closer. . . "

"It seems that Sokh San has fallen in the south"

" . . . is that so?"

"I wonder what the Vietnamese are trying to achieve."

"Things seem different from usual, don't they?"

He rolled his tongue when he pronounced the "r" in "different"— repeating the same word several times. He seemed to have suddenly descended deep into his inner depths, so putting on a smile he looked Ono directly in the eye and changed the subject .

"Sopheap has got pretty good at Japanese, hasn't she? What do you think Ono *san*?

"She's a child, so she learns fast. She's very eager as well. She's learning Japanese much faster than I am Khmer. I can't keep up."

"She's a good kid. She puts her heart into whatever she's doing."

After a brief pause Muon suddenly said quietly: "Mr Ono—would she be able to live in Japan?" His left eye looked smilingly into Ono's face. "She seems to have taken to you, and you seem to

have found something in common with her too. How about if you took care of her and took her back to Japan with you?"

He looked at Ono with a half-joking but meaning smile. A strength seemed to flow out from deep within him; in his eye something seemed to be writhing and struggling in repeated anguish. Ono felt something stirring within him too. It had some strange connection with his dark memories of Tokyo, encouraging in him a warmer sense of connection with the refugees.

"She is crazy about Japan and she wants a calm and peaceful life. Since she's a hard worker she'll be able to adapt to the lifestyle over there."

"But Muon, it's not so easy to get into Japan. You need a passport and a visa. If refugees with no official nationality could go abroad when they wanted the whole population of Khao-i-dang would leave. Sopheap is an orphan with a disability. She couldn't emigrate to Japan as she is. She would be turned down if she applied for permanent residence status too.

"That's true if she tried to get in by the official route. But there are lots of backdoor routes and scams. There are fake marriages and parents with fake children. If it helps them get out people will do anything. How can you investigate what happened before? Everybody has cut themselves off from their past. It's all a muddle. That's what refugees are like. Let's suppose you get to like a Thai woman from the Aranya region, a woman with Thai nationality. That woman could have a child like Sopheap couldn't she? There are women everywhere in Aranya who would let you use their name for a little money. Then you could take her to Japan as your child. It would be no problem, Ono *san*. Heh, heh in war it's all a scam!"

Internally Ono had been shaking his head, but Muon's voice went on with a terrible enthusiasm, laying things out. "If you made use of a Thai person you could do a number of different

things. Quite a lot of Thai children die. You could substitute Sopheap for one of those dead children. And there are lots of other ways."

In his bewilderment he had the sense that, deep within him, some hitherto unused door had been opened, and something was beginning to stir. Muon's blind eye seemed nonetheless to be directing a sharp and penetrating beam at him. As Ono listened unspeaking, some heat from the refugees seemed to flow in his breast.

"If she could get to live in Japan and be settled in a peaceful way of life she would be free of the nightmares of the past.

Bright red within Ono rose up those dreams of being driven into a minefield, and of the horizon in flames. Scenes of mines exploding all around, and the whole earth an angry fire spread out before him.

"Ono *san*, the Vietnamese army have started some new manoeuvres. The refugees in the Rehabilitation Centre who haven't got Khao-i-dang identity cards will have to go back to the refugee camp on the border—Sopheap too. Up there they'll be at the front. Nobody will protect people with disabilities. I have a feeling there's going to be a big battle. If there's any chance of it, at least I'd like to do something for Sopheap. Really everybody would like to go to Japan, would like to go to another country. That's really the wish of every one of us. But at least Sopheap . . . ."

Muon's working eye and empty together regarded Ono in a kind of harmonious accord.

The torrent of energy that the refugees carried deep within them forced its way into him. He felt it pouring in like red hot molten metal

The night did not quieten things, it stirred up his feeling of unease. The whole earth was in ferment, and the wild dance of the greenery continued. The smell of rotten banana, and the strong stink of

durian, the musty smell of rambutan were all blended into the thick night air; or rather, it was as if night took on its dark shade from that compound of countless mingled breaths.

At the edge of the now-deserted market, Ono was walking along carrying the coloured paper Sopheap had asked him for in one hand. Fortunately the Chinese stationer's was still open and Ono had bought ball pens and note books for her there too.

In the rumbustious air of a tropical night, the noise of the daytime market seemed to return yet more strongly. Geckos and snakes, mongoose and pangolin were to be seen swarming around, their activity adding to the liveliness in the faces of the human beings. The rows of pig heads, piles of chicken feet, writhing and squirming fish and meat in many different forms in amongst the human beings created a festival mood. The fishes' lives were put to an end by a fierce blow to the head from a tiller handle, but that violence appeared rather as something fresh and full of life. Hens, which were sold with their beaks bound and wings tied, flew energetically dozens of metres into the air when their cords were unbound. In the smiles of the people was the power over the lives and deaths of living creatures: to unite, absorb, receive and restore. Ono gazed at the features of a monkey as it moved with dizzying rapidity, its tail wound round a beam, its teeth bared.

Only a few decades before, children had sometimes stood in this market to be sold. Sometimes their impoverished parents had been with them; sometimes negotiations would be carried out by an intermediary.

Among the distant houses a suspect-looking red light glowed. That was where young girls from Chang Mai in Northern Thailand were brought to be sold. According to Muon, some of the girls from the Khao-i-dang refugee camp were also brought there in secret and their bodies sold in the brothels

Many different things all spread out their tendrils and wove them together. The feelers

stretched out freely everywhere on the earth and in the air.

It seemed to him that taking on or abandoning children made up a single aspect of life and of living: like the natural intertwining of flourishing creepers.

It suddenly occurred to Ono that, in this tropical landscape, it would be possible for him to take responsibility for of a young girl and live with her. He could bring his father over to Thailand and the three of them could live together and then, some time after things had settled down, they could all go to Japan . . . the Thai wind enveloped everything in fiery dreams.

The starry sky spread out overhead as he started to walk. The glittering company of stars began to turn in a single vortex, as if about do descend. Orion was already aslant in the Western sky. The constellation deepened the perspective and filled it with its huge swirling movement. The delicate starlight was shining at billions of light years distance. Encountering this miraculous birth and dying of light, which was spread out before him like a vast carnival, Ono seemed to be drawn into the storm of undulating light

13

It was an evening of bright starlight at the end of November. Ono had stepped into the back garden after playing the guitar for a while, to hear a rumbling noise from the northeast. The earth gave off a low reverberation. The Thai armoured corps was heading towards the border. The shapes of low-loaders carrying 130 millimetre heavy guns were also to be seen. These masses of over twenty tons of metal were headed towards the Cambodian border, amid a rumble of diesel engines. The noise of the engines was mingled with that of the caterpillar tracks. The dully amplified creaking of the metal bodywork sounded

like an earth tremor. Up until now, the Vietnamese army had only invaded Thailand once. Three years ago, during the battle of Non Mak Mun, they had encroached 6 kilometres into Thai territory. There had been a battle with the Thai troops, but on that occasion the Thai army had been helpless before the Vietnamese. Now it was said that an even greater number of Vietnamese troops were massing on the frontier. The crack troops from Battambang in the north were in the vanguard and they would be joined from the south by the regiments who had taken Sokh Sang.

The arrival of the Ninth Division in replacement had been speeded up, and armoured units had arrived to take up positions along the border front.

The shaking of the ground brought a heightened sense of conflict. The will to attack and destroy now worked its way within the smell of greenery. It was as if some insane tempest had been whipped up into the heated air, summoned by the breaths of countless refugees.

Before dawn he had an even more vivid dream than before. His father was walking ten metres in front of him. Ono called to him to stop but received no answer. However loudly he called his father did not turn round.

“Father, where are you going? It’s me. Can’t you hear me? Father!”

His father walked on steadily into the darkness. Ono desperately went on calling, but his cries apparently did not reach his father.

The crusher at the scrap yard was bearing down on him. The piercing sound of flattened and shattered metal was drawing closer as if to engulf both him and his father.

Masked men appeared and surrounded his father. Ono gave a great cry but the ring of men around his father just drew tighter. Ono yelled: “run! Why don’t you run? Dad, quickly! Run!”

His father, hands tied behind his back, was made to stand under the scrap crusher. He was tied

to a metal pillar which looked like the chassis of a truck driven upright into the ground. Suddenly Ono also found himself with his hands bound to the same pillar.

His father was stripped naked and some numbers were written in marker pen on his aged skin. Ono was no longer able to speak. However much he might try to cry out, something hard was pressing down on his throat.

The masked men muttered the numbers: this much for the liver, this much for the kidney, this much for the stomach, this much for the heart . . . one of them, who seemed to be taking down what they said, was writing the figures on his father's naked body: 1.5 million, 2 million, 1.8 million, 3 million . . . "not enough!" "Add the brain." And numbers were added to his legs and forehead.

An axe penetrated his chest and blood spurted from his father's body. Ono screamed, but only inside his head. The man thrust his hands within his father's cloven chest and searched among his entrails.

"Why do you don't you say anything? Why don't you resist?" cried Ono inwardly.

The liver was cut out from the body. The sensation of being cut open turned into that of pain running through him. "Stop" "Stop it you..!" The severed kidney dropped with a slither into a plastic container. As his father stared at him, the metal mass of the crusher descended . . . .

The next morning a khaki-coloured Thai reconnaissance aircraft was circling over the border area. The racket of helicopters could be heard. The Vietnamese army's T54 tank regiment that had massed on the border was on the move. Before dawn on that day, Site Six had come under strong attack.

To the east was the roar of heavy gunfire. Thai troop transports were heading north on the national highway. Jeeps and armoured cars coated in dust were turning into the road to the east.

The Vietnamese army's 105 millimeter guns sounded unceasingly, the noise of their continued fire making the ground on the frontier shake. It seemed as though the entire jungle was shaking,

howling and rumbling.

The smoke from the burning refugee villages rose wide above the jungle, enough to make it seem that the trees, too, would catch fire. The refugees in Site Six had begun emergency evacuation, moving deep inside Thai territory. Twenty thousand refugees crossed over the antitank trenches and poured like an avalanche into the Thai army's forward positions.

At nine in the morning, the sound of gunfire in the east ceased for thirty minutes. The Vietnamese army's Fourth Division advanced twenty of its tanks into Site Six and occupied the whole position. From the heavy artillery of the Thai army came a wild roar of gunfire. The helicopters overhead reported the fall of the shells, and directed the gunners to their targets. However, it wasn't easy to adjust their direction of fire and they couldn't inflict much damage on the main occupying Vietnamese force.

A guttural voice could be heard over the UNBRO radio saying: "Vietnamese forces of the 2314th Division have occupied Site Six. Refugees should immediately evacuate to an area four kilometres to the southwest. The Thai army is resisting. The Vietnamese are advancing. Warning, warning, Situation Three, Situation Three . . ."

This voice, mixed with static, relayed the tense situation on the border, conveying the excitement of a live broadcast. The voice overflowed with energy, and seemed almost to be overflowing with joy.

Site Six itself was 2 kilometres inside Thai territory; and the Vietnamese army already had a force of several division coming up. At any time they could spread out to take positions to on either flank and then make a slow advance.

The two Thai helicopters were joined by a third, and more reconnaissance planes circled high up in the sky.

At one in the afternoon the advancing Vietnamese army attacked the foremost positions on the Thai defensive line, four kilometres from the border. The supporting fire from the rear was accurately concentrated on one position, breaching the Thai army's fortifications, and soon afterwards the tank units raced into that position. The defensive line was breached, and the Thai army poured back in retreat

Information came in that the Vietnamese army was also moving towards Nong Samet. In addition, tank units were also deploying towards Nong Plu, the Khmer rouge base in the south. According to the Task Force information the main Vietnamese offensive was directed at Nong Plu with the intention of wiping out the Khmer rouge base, so the attacks on Site Six and Nong Samet were feints covering the assault on Nong Plu. Their real objective in breaching the Thai army front and invading deep into Thai territory was to cut off the Khmer rouge's retreat, surround them and capture Nong Plu which was said to be their strongest base.

The Thai Ninth Division was in disarray after the collapse of their defensive line. The bodies of Thai soldiers were removed by truck to somewhere in the rear. The corpses of the Vietnamese soldiers were abandoned as they lay and rapidly putrified in the blazing heat. From time to time the wind would bring the strong stench as far as the control point.

The Vietnamese force divided into three sections: one occupying Site Six , one heading towards Ampil and one for Nong Plu. Suddenly, all movement stopped, perhaps because they were waiting for supplies from the rear, perhaps they were gathering their strength.

The emergency cases were hastily brought to the ICRC and the JMT. Trucks from the border continually skidded in, offloading the wounded on stretchers. The entranceway was bright red with blood. Yells and moans in mingled Thai and Khmer reached as far as the rehabilitation centre. Those voices, the hectic activity, the sense of impending threat, the voice from UNBRO radio all enveloped the centre in

their grim atmosphere.

Three cars stopped one after another and a coordinator from ICRC, a Thai official from the UNHCR and others ran into the centre, calling out to Ono and Muon. They were repeating: “We haven’t got enough beds in the hospitals, we want you to let us use the empty beds in the rehabilitation centre.”

Since there were quite a few empty beds he agreed, and the patients were brought in immediately. Someone with a severed right arm, someone with chest dyed a deep red, the smell and colour of blood, the cries and groans of the wounded filled the centre. It was not just the beds: mattresses were spread out on the empty areas of the floor for many bodies to lie on. Lumps of flesh shredded and hanging off, half crushed faces, hair clotted with blood: it was an invasion from the border war. Its gory atmosphere occupied the room. The patients from the centre looked from a distance at the wounded, whose plight linked, as it was, with their own past, amplified their fears.

In the evening the noise of gunfire became even louder and the Thai trucks brought in many more wounded. They were in heaps in front of the ICRC, who could not take them in. They were laid out in the garden and the square in front. The Rehabilitation Centre was already full, and there was no other building that could be used nearby. Mattresses were spread everywhere, and on them the wounded rolled like tuna, covered in blood. Here and there, in the sloping shafts of evening sun, arms and legs bloomed as vivid as flowers, bright red where the flesh was crushed. Pales faces lit by that sun glowed like gold. Each face, its eyes closed as it strayed between life and death, seemed to be shining in an excess of delight.

Ono got a call on the radio asking if they could use the square to the rear of the Centre and whether he would act as assistant coordinator. He went himself to make his reply to the JMT. The coordinator could no longer fill out the medical records and his Khmer assistants were all running about

among the wounded. They were writing the patients' admissions numbers directly on their foreheads and cheeks with marker pen— 87 . . . 88 . . . 103, 104—as Ono picked his way around them as they lay at his feet, they leaped to his eyes as numbers of the dead. Once he stumbled and found himself gazing into the face of one of the wounded. Perhaps because it had been written in too great a rush, the marker pen had run on to put a vertical line down the man's eye.

Running a fever and wrapped in her blanket, Sopheap was having a nightmare. On the face of it a common cold, it was perhaps also some other kind of fever. White and frayed skin stood out from her cracked, dry lips. Ono made her eat the fruit and drink the orange juice which, despite being busy, he had bought for her in Aranya. However she couldn't get it down. If she managed to drink any of the juice she would soon throw it back up. "It's a bit worrying," said Muon. When Ono felt her forehead it was as hot as burning metal. Her neck and chest, even her ears were hot. He wondered if it might be malaria but Muon disagreed. "If it was malaria a single blanket wouldn't be enough. She wouldn't stop shivering. Her teeth would be chattering so hard she could hardly keep them together. Unusually, perhaps because he couldn't understand what was wrong with her, Muon was worried. It was true that she wasn't shivering particularly badly. She was just rolling her head as if in an agony of fear. Her brows were contorted and her closed eyelids fluttered as if she were having bad dreams. As she writhed in discomfort, sometimes the blanket would slip off. When he replaced it and pulled it over her, he accidentally put his hand on the severed stump of her leg. The raised flesh there was also of course burning with fever. He had the illusion that it was that part which had first begun to fester, and the inflammation had then spread upwards

"Let's get a doctor from the JMT to look at her."

"Right now they're snowed under with wounded, they won't want to be looking at someone with a fever."

To Ono, the dreaming Sopheap seemed to be driven on towards the start of a fresh new life. Her figure, as she walked in the minefields, was being driven into an even bigger minefield. Suddenly it seemed to him that she was overcome with nausea because something strange had impregnated her. She was carrying within her the quickening seed of the tropical banyans, pregnant with madness and flame. Yes, she had been impregnated with the germinating shoots of nightmare. The border terrain itself had worked its way into her abdomen, was quickening with life and beginning to swell.

She spoke some words in her fever. At the approach of dusk, for some reason her temperature subsided for a while, although it then rose again to 39 degrees. When it fell there was a sense that that she had been accorded a momentary respite in her physical struggle. The heat remained in her face but a touch of calm came to her expression. Loose strands of sweat-soaked hair lay across her forehead. Released for a while from her suffering, her face was suffused with an ecstatic beauty.

In the darkened room on the far side of the bamboo screen, the salmon pink tropical sunset filled the wide sky. In the vivid light of that dry-season sunset, the whole hospital wing in its chaos seemed linked to the heavens.

Sopheaps's euphoric expression melted and flowed out, and he had the vision of heavenly maidens beginning their dance. He seemed to hear the sound of Khmer music, the mellow note of xylophones and tubular bells. A graceful rhythm and melody were diffused as if melting out from deep within the jungle, inviting the hearer to a stately dance. The countless images of Apsarases carved into the walls of Angkor Wat escaped from their stone stillness and joined together in a circular dance. The fragrance of those depths of greenery entwined upon their finger tips, as they bent them back in a lovely arch, fashioning the furthest depths of the jungle. The delicate light from their golden neck ornaments and their bracelets sprinkled with jewels revealed those verdant spaces with a flickering refulgence like

sunlight gleaming through the trees The voluptuous bodies of the Apsarases seduced him deeper and into the thick of the jungle. To the sound of bridal music and gathering towards the celebratory feast the roots and canopy, the leaves and the creepers all wove together like a net, drawing him towards some hallowed place in the fastness of the forest. He felt he was stepping into a cavern of green.

Her eyes still closed, and with a beautiful and ecstatic smile Sopheap said "*Ono san, motto nihongo, oshiete kudasai . . .*" (Mr Ono, please teach me more Japanese). "*Watashi wa nihon e ikitai desu*" (I want to go to Japan).

The Vietnamese army showed signs of renewing their advance on Ampil. Although, at the check point that morning they were closely examining each person's face in turn, if anything, it took Ono less time, because those who could be recognized were taken out of the queue as soon as possible.

The battle for Site Six had died down, but the sound of gunfire in the north, although shifting its location, continued ferociously. The state of alert remained at Situation Three, and the sense of impending danger became more acute during the brief lull in the fighting. No one could tell when the Vietnamese force at Site Six would make a move.

The number of trucks bringing in the wounded decreased, but that was not to say the number of wounded themselves had lessened. It just meant that, since they could not be recovered from the battlefield, there were many more who were simply being left where they were.

The night before many of them had breathed their last in the Rehabilitation Centre, and the front garden of the JMT. The corpses had been immediately carried away, and other wounded now lay in their places.

Because the dead soon began to decompose, they were all piled together in one place, one body thrown on top of the other. Many legs were stacked up higgledy piggledy like firewood. Eyes that

were closed and eyes that were half-open, open mouths that seemed to be smiling in the strong sunlight. Dry Khmer voices performed their task.

The weapons dump at Ampil, the Sihanouk faction guerilla base, was blown up, the sound echoing out to a considerable distance.

The activity of the Ninth Division became urgent. The shadow of the Vietnamese army began to spread wider over Thai territory.

In the middle of the night Ono awoke as if he had been summoned. A message was reaching him from across a distance of 5,000 kilometres. A pain shot through his heart. Something called out powerfully to him. His body was being torn apart by some extraordinary force. That something then separated from him, going far away together with the piercing pain. He was ripped apart. Not being able to stand any more he went out of the house. The darkness of the night only deepened his feeling of disorientation, winding it around him. The night air opened wide its throat and invited him to step through its pitch-black entrance.

The night was cloudless and the stars glistened bright and fair, yet the air was in violent turmoil, thick and close.

The pain of some definitive parting clutched at his heart. A thick trunk had been chopped through. He could not repair it. It was a terrible separation, setting him at an immeasurable distance. His heart seemed on the point of freezing He placed his hand on his chest, and squatted down as he experienced the pain. There was the scent of the soil. He put his cheek to the ground, and at the touch and smell of the soil he found he could endure the pain.

In the evening, the rays of the setting tropic sun died everything scarlet. The earth and the vegetation all around glowed a bright pink. The mattresses with the wounded were lined up in front of the

Centre—the prostrate bodies covered the red soil. The shadows of stretchers bearing dead patients moved slowly in the evening light.

The high squeaking note of an artificial leg approached Ono from behind. Though he offered a brief greeting Muon hardly paid any attention to Ono, seemingly plunged in contemplation of some other matter. Propping his crutches against the bamboo fence under the eaves of the Rehabilitation Centre he leaned back against a pillar, standing on his one leg. He took a bent cigarette from the crumpled pack of Krongthip and inserted into his mouth. The rear of the nipa palm building provided some shade. On the edge of it the sky, dyed its salmon pink, presented an acute contrast with the many artificial limbs hanging down from the window of the Centre, and the darkness behind: deepening the chiaroscuro of Muon's face and exaggerating his expression. He looked horribly tired.

He searched his pocket for a match to light his cigarette. Approaching him, Ono took out his 100-yen lighter and held it up to the other's face, the flame springing out with a little popping noise. It flickered with a pure brilliance in the crimson of the setting sun.

Muon supported Ono's hand in both his, as if enfolding it in his soft palms, and brought the flame close to his mouth. The feel of his hands conveyed their human body heat to Ono's own. The scar in the centre of the back of Muon's hand was right before his eyes. It was like a starfish placed there. It was a grotesque swelling, like something thing that had been cut up and then buried. His severed stump, protruding a little beyond the supporting leg brushed Ono's trousers.

Muon drew the smoke deep into his chest, slowly closed his eyes as if in satisfaction, and then once more blew the purple smoke out into the light.

"*Aakoon churaun*" he said

Muon took his last battered cigarette from his pack by pinching it between two fingers, and

held it up to Ono: “would you like one?”

“Aakoon” replied Ono as put it in his mouth and lit it. Because the cigarette tip was bent and he had to adjust the angle to light it, he brought it too close and his hair fluffed into flame.

Then, as the strong fumes of the Krongthip descended into his chest he moved aside Muon’s crutches in order to stand along side and talk to him, leaning his back against the bamboo wall. He realized that he, too, was tired. He turned sideways and addressed Muon. The sound of gunfire rumbled in the distance.

“Are you tired?

“No, I’m OK.”

They breathed out their smoke at the same instant, and the silence filled the space between them. Together they listened to the tremor of the guns. Yet it seemed to Ono that in that noise he could glimpse a vital gulf. It opened out a frozen world at his feet beneath the tropical soil. It was as though a frozen hell gaped at his feet, one which was the opposite of burning heat but, precisely because of that, it made that heat burn the fiercer. From far below countless voices were calling to him.

Muon seemed to be hearing the gunfire as a different noise. He was listening with his blank eye socket. He perceived it as a world into which he must thrust himself. He had taken a decision to plunge himself into the unavoidable? The traces of that decision still lingered around him.

“Ono *san* we must say goodbye”

In the tiredness of his expression there was still some degree of hesitation, but he spoke the words with a strength that came from deep down. It was if his voice was underlain with the clash of blades. Although his blind eye looked ahead, in a direction away from Ono, the latter had the illusion that he was being directly addressed. It was if that blind eye was wide open and speaking to him. Ono thought

he could predict what it was about to say. Already he had the feeling that whatever lay in that gulf between them had now acquired a distinct form. However, when it took the form of actual words, he felt once again that he was being assailed by some destructive physical force. As well as being bewildered by this sudden assault, momentarily his body shook at the scale of the ruinous power contained in those words. Once more Muon's empty socket allowed a glimpse at the naked reality of the refugee's world.

"Ono *san*, I have a final favour to ask you."

"OK" said Ono. There was a catch in his voice, though he did not really understand

"Tomorrow night or tonight, some of the refugees from Khao-i-dang will be transported to the front line. We will be the very first to taken away in the trucks."

Ono bit back the words of enquiry that rose to his lips. What cut him was not the words themselves but the emotional shape into which they were formed. It was as if something powerful had cruelly stripped the outer skin from reality. This news was doubtless something involving a section leader or the Thai army.

However that was not what mattered. It was just a distraction from the main issue, which was that some reliable source had guaranteed the accuracy of this information. The stern truth was there, the premonition of impending battle bore down on everything. Together with the dangers of battle. some incredible force bore down as if to swallow everything up from above.

Now, more than ever he felt that force close to him, a vortex of incredible savage power. Ono silently strove to comprehend the position that Muon had been placed in. In the back of his mind the life in Tokyo that he would live after his return clearly appeared.

"We are Cambodian. We have lost our country. It's terrible. . . ."

Thai military helicopters flew across the southern sky, their rotors loud. Ono continued to

mechanically utter words, aware that he had lost all grounds for speech and was merely turning in circles. He had the unpleasant sensation that he too was sliding downwards. “How many will they take?”

“They’re preparing more than ten trucks.”

Although he already sensed the reply, hesitantly he brought himself to ask: “Will everyone from here be taken?

“Maybe. If it was just us, one truck would be enough. They’re saying that all the people from an area close to the detention centre will all be taken.”

Ono finally got out the words: “what for?”

“Ono *san*, they are going to put us in front of the Vietnamese army. They are calculating the Vietnamese won’t advance over us. There is the temple of Wat Phnom on the border. That is still a focus point, and there’s a fierce struggle to capture it. So if we are going to be moved, probably that’s where’ll they take us.”

The phrase “human shield” filled Ono’s mind: defenceless human beings lined up in the face of guns and tanks. But would that really stop the Vietnamese advance? Was it not rather that this crass action contained in abstract the grotesqueness of all human inventions?

“Do you know why they will be taking people from the Rehabilitation Centre?”

“We are the easiest to deal with, and we are a nuisance. You understand, don’t you, Ono *san*? . . . . It has already been decided.”

The section to the east of the detention centre contained those refugees who had been in Khao-i-dang the longest. There were many who were linked with the Khmer Rouge. Its inhabitants were those left behind, unable to meet the conditions for permanent residence, and no longer with any hope of emigrating to a different country.

The ash on Muon's cigarette had now grown long and curled and it fell in one piece to the ground. He took the last puff deep into his chest, inhaling briefly so that the flame came close to his dark fingers, and allowed the butt to drop gently onto the ground.

"Ono *san* what are refugees? How do we come to be like this? Have we committed some special kind of sin in this world? Or is it that we are guaranteed to be happy in the next? My blind eye has given up looking at the light. But it seems to me that it's this blind eye that knows the truth. Perhaps that's better. Having lost the light it can't see reality: it probably best suits this world to just exist like a hard stone, a lump of hatred. My hatred is fixed forever. It's more like, because it's become hard it has come to shine even more. It's an extraordinary thing, how far this world will betray you."

Ono stole a glance at Muon's profile. The same salmon-pink evening light coloured his one eye. The shadows gradually converged on his blind eye and opened out what lay deep within him; it was if they were growing in force, casting free from Muon's control.

Ono realized that Muon's blind eye was now wide open. Its eyeball-less state gave it a stony hardness, a pupil of sandstone. The faces of those immemorial stone figures sleeping on in the jungle, appeared. Green creepers bound their heads, rotten leaves lay over the earth. Banyan roots had worked into the cracks in the stone like wedges, outdoing the work of humans, urging on the luxuriance, the rampant life-force of the forest. Those huge sculpted eyes in the great sea of time were laughing uproariously as they drank in the darkness. Expressionless, ash-coloured eyes absorbed the dark, compounding the depths of the structure. The thick lips smiled, the abyss of their throats opening amidst this empty fertility. The fossilized eyes seemed to open out the darkness of history into a green and luxuriant nothingness. The contrasting world of treachery and executions, of massacres and oppression spread its icy coldness deep beneath the tropics.

The stopped watch began to move, frozen time began to flow forward. Lost limbs were re-grown. The terrifying nihility of history laughed mockingly at everything and sang in festival. Muon's eye opened wide its features of stone, as if pleased at these reversals of history.

His open eye clutched desperately onto life, and regarded Ono with a limpid gaze as if to clearly establish his individuality thereby. Its urgency seemed somehow to be conferring on Muon the beautiful forms of the world .

"Ono I have a last favour to ask you. Will you listen?"

Ono threw away the burning stub and crushed it out under his canvas shoes.

"What is it?"

"Could you talk about this to some journalist? If the newspapers write about it, they might stop it. I mean, if the media makes a fuss, there's a chance the Thai army will change course. That's our only hope. Do you know anyone?"

Bewildered, Ono looked into Muon's good eye. It seemed to him that there was a fearful distance between it and the blind eye. Yet it was that distance itself which gave him a sense of the great strength Muon displayed when striving to escape from impending danger. At a loss and floundering Ono racked his brains for the name of a journalist. He was reminded of the reporter from the Yomiuri Newspaper who had visited the centre a few days before. Where had he put the business card . . . ? He thought of quite a few others, but he didn't know if he could actually contact them.

"I'm not sure if I can do anything, but I'll try."

A smile came to Muon's face as he regarded Ono. "*Arigato* Ono-*san*. I'm sure I won't forget you."

His smile, harmonizing with his blind eye enfolded and embraced Ono. "Ono *san*, there's one

more favour. Can you get Sopheap out of Khao-i-dang?" If she is transferred up to the front she very probably won't come back again. If you are going to get her out the only chance is now. Can you do something?"

Ono pictured Sopheap's face fever-haunted face. It was as if, deep in the jungle, the Apsarases were dancing their dance. The movements of that dance seemed to be awakened amidst the greenery. The dancers' smiles interlaced like creepers.

"I'll ask Chang Chai. If we work on it together we should be able top pull it off."

"Chang Chai? He's no good." Muon's eye now looked mocking

"Why not?"

"Ono *san*. Haven't you realized yet?

"What?"

"He works for the Thai military intelligence. He's a lieutenant in the army." It felt as though a part of the ground under his feet had given way. He spat and then looked into Muon's face?

"You're joking!"

"I was told to keep my mouth shut, so I never said anything . . . but I thought you would work it out for yourself at some point . . . . He's using the name of the Japanese aid organization as a blind. Japan is well looked on internationally, so it makes a good cover. The Japanese all have their wits dulled by peace as well, so it's easy to take them in. He's very good. He's not just maintaining surveillance on Khao-i-dang He's also been given the responsibility for gathering and analyzing intelligence from the southern half of the Cambodian border region. He's already received the order to send us to the front. In fact, it might well be his plan."

Ono kicked the ground with his canvas shoes. He thought what a fool he had been to be used,

and how idiotic Japanese organizations were. The red laterite soil showed itself bright under his feet like the scarlet welling of blood. Damnation . . . his anger grew. When he recovered himself he said, as if in response to Muon's eye:

"What should I do?"

"It has to be tonight. Bring the car round to the barbed wire behind here at one in the morning. Nighttime is dangerous, but it's the only chance."

Ono thought of the dangers of driving on the national road near the border in the middle of the night. Foreigners were often stopped and robbed of their valuables. Robberies were frequent, just the week before a warning had been issued because an official of the FAO had been attacked.

"Who knows if it will work out, but let's give it a try."

Muon proffered his hand. "*Arigato* Ono *san*. If this turns out to be goodbye, then please don't forget us. Ono gripped Muon's dark hand, feeling the touch of that warm palm.

Just as on their first meeting he felt the sensation of the fleshy lump in the middle. Here was the sign of Muon's passage through the shadow of death. Once more it was beginning to grow hot. It was as if now, in this instant, the blood was in audible flow around Muon's body. As well as being the warmth of Muon himself he felt it was the warmth of the blood of all those human beings who had gone to their deaths. It was like the pulsing of the blood of the refugees throughout Khao-i-dang camp. Still now, throughout the whole border region, the warm blood of the refugees was flowing and loudly pulsating

With such painful feelings Ono returned Muon's grip, and Muon returned his pressure strongly again. Although their bodies were separate they had become one, the counterflow racing through their two bodies at once contained, he felt, a burning poison.

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He opened drawers at random looking for the business card given him by the reporter who had once come to do a story there. He must have put it away somewhere, but he couldn't find it. As a he was searching his desk and files he was stricken with anxiety. If he went to the private phone bureau and made a call to Bangkok there was no guarantee that the journalist would be at the newspaper's office there. Even if he was, Ono wasn't confident that the journalist would remember him.

Muon had said that ten or more trucks of refugees would take them to the front. His request that Ono should bring a car round that night could only mean he wanted to try to get as many people to escape as possible before that happened. What should he do about the car? Shouldn't he be deciding about that first?

He began to feel agitated. If he was going to get hold of a car, he ought to find as big a one as he could, so they could get as many people away in it as possible while cutting down on the number of trips. But, having said that, it was impossible to get hold of a truck at this short notice. The cars he might lay his hands on were the JIRV pickup or the pickup that was entrusted to Chang Chai. Even if he made several trips he could only take a few dozen people; and even if he set them down relatively close to the perimeter of the camp and made as many trips as possible he wasn't sure he would be able to take more than 50. What would he do about checkpoints? He would have to get the refugees out of the car somewhere before he was stopped, get them to split them up, and then, after a day or so, move them on in small groups hidden in the back.

He felt more worried still. The Thai army was keeping watch on the outside of the camp. Although there were fewer of them at nighttime, they didn't relax their vigilance even then. Would the

Thais soldiers fail to see such a large number of people sneaking through the barbed wire? If was only a matter of one or two people escaping you could probably bribe the guards to look the other way, but was impossible that they could overlook the escape of more than 50 refugees. How would Muon work it? If they were caught in the act, in the worst case they could be shot. If he himself were caught he would be in a pretty serious situation. Unquestionably he would be thrown out of the camp but there was also a good chance that he might be put in prison or thrown out of the country. They might ban his NGO's activities as well. Yet Muon's plea had something in it that required definite action. His manner had shown that he was sure it was possible. If it were not, he would not have made such an explicit request. What had made him so certain Ono didn't know. Perhaps had done a deal at so much a head, handing over enough money to cover a good number of people to some high-up in the Thai army. Or had he made some other kind of arrangement? Ono didn't know, yet there had been an unshakeable resolve in Muon's words and his manner, so he just told himself he would have just to have quietly get on and do what Muon had said. He wanted to help Sopheap and Muon and Mao. He couldn't just stand by and allow them to put into mortal danger.

He suddenly thought of the stone monument to the Ikki riots on the hill in Yamanashi. From it arose the murmured voices of those who had been driven to their deaths. Once they turned to rebellion the strength to resist had swelled within them, urging them on. Under the group of stone burial markers lay the corpses of many who had suffered decapitation; and buried nearby that spot were the young and old, men and women who had built stockades and fought and died in the siege. That hill was dyed deep in a great welter of blood. Now it seemed to him that it had turned to a murmuring of voices from the darkness, beginning to declare their resistance to being killed like this. Their rage and lamentation swelled and echoed like a tremor of the earth. It was as if they had risen up from the far side of the

darkness to make their way here. He thought of Sopheap's body being riddled with holes.

At last he found the business card. He grabbed it, folded it in half and was on his way outside when it happened. A figure suddenly appeared from the darkness of the rear courtyard. Ono started and called out to the black form:

"Who's there?"

"Ono *san*, where are you going?" said the figure in a low voice. It was Chang Chai. When he replied that he was going to make a phone call, Chang Chai said, as if restraining him: "The Vietnamese army is getting close, everything is in confusion round here. It's better not to walk around outside at night."

A keen glance was directed at Ono from the far side of the light cast by the insect trap.

"A telegram has arrived from Japan"

"From Japan?"

"And from the office in Bangkok as well."

"From Bangkok too?"

"Here they are."

Out of the gloom he could make out the two telegram forms which Chang Chai was holding out. They seemed to sink weightily in the darkness, and to have the hardness of steel. Taking hold of them and he began to open them under the light of the insect trap. However, in his anxiety he tore more than was necessary and with a noise the paper ripped wide across the middle. He felt the rough texture of the Thai paper against his palm. A large moth flew up, blurring the blue-white light of the insect trap, and cutting disturbingly in front of Ono's face. It was as if Chang Chai was controlling it.

The author of the telegram from Japan was his friend from the newspaper delivery business.

The roman letters stood out in the blueish light.

"*TITI JISATU. SUGU KAERE*"—the Japanese words formed themselves in his mind: "Father Suicide, Return Soonest".

His father was dead.

He hastily opened the other telegram from which almost the same words leaped out at him. The address of the sender was his office in Bangkok, the JIRV representative had been in touch with them.

His father had killed himself—

He felt his feet suddenly give way at the mention of death. His father had been supposed to wait for him to come home. He had promised. Ono had been looking forward to going to see him in Fukuoka. What was the point of his having come to Thailand? The shock ran through his entire frame. He felt as if everything that he had been holding onto was in collapse.

. . . they killed him . . .

Another large moth flew by, brushing his face. A few scales from its wing scattered on the ground and broke.

Now, it seemed to him that a great wave had arisen and changed everything. His thoughts were in turmoil. What would happen now? The floods would come pouring in and carry everything away.

Was his father really dead, was he perhaps still alive and just been taken to hospital? At all events he had to telephone Japan.

"Ono *san*, what's in the telegrams?"

He hesitated, but since it would soon be known anyway he went ahead and answered: "My father is dead."

"Your father. . . ?"

Although Chang Chai's tone was one of surprise, it also contained an ironic inflexion, as if he had already known. In the darkness a faint smile seemed to cross his face, and thought occurred to Ono's whirling brain that Chang Chai had been in league with the group of people who had killed his father. In the depths of this blackness, he had the illusion that these sinister acts of violence were all connected. Chang Chai went on sympathetically "That's a terrible thing to happen."

"I'll have to go back to Japan right away."

"I'll look after things while you're away."

"Can you lend me the pickup?"

"I'll drive you to the phone office."

"No, it's OK, just let me have the keys. I'd like to use the pickup myself tonight."

"What's wrong with your car?

The plight of Muon and the others was weighing him down on the other side. He couldn't abandon them to their fate. He desperately wanted to ask Chang Chai to come with him, but Chang Chai was the enemy. He entertained the faint hope that if he told Chang Chai about Muon's request and implored him to lend them a hand perhaps he might do something., but Chang Chai's eyes, gleaming blue and snake-like, in the darkness forbade it.

"My car's broken down."

" . . . OK. I would have liked to have taken you to Bangkok myself tonight, but there is some work I have to get done . . . sorry.."

"I'll take the first bus tomorrow morning. Apparently there is a part of your life I know nothing about, somewhere I can't have access to. . ." He infused these words with hatred and contempt.

They hit home, getting a reaction from Chang Chai, who retorted mildly: “Ono *san*, this border area is on a battle front. It’s where politics and war meet. Thailand is at war with communist Vietnam. It’s possible that the fate of the whole country is bound up in all this. The army is in charge here, in this vital region. It’s better not to underestimate the power of the Thai army. Perhaps I should give you a word of warning. There is only one telephone office in Aranya. Ask yourself why that is the only one that is permitted to operate. Behind the scenes the army control that phone office too. When you make a call from Aranya, everything you say is monitored by the Thai army. Please don’t do anything foolish.”

The blue light of the insect trap shone on Chang Chai’s cheek, sharply highlighting the pupils of his eyes. They seemed to be responding somehow to Muon’s pupils as he had seen them earlier, gazing into his internal darkness. It seems that, within the enmity of those who act and those who are acted upon, there is a secret bond.

A large, light-blue moth flew near the neck of Chang Chai’s t-shirt, scattering its scales on his brawny chest. The venomous glitter scattered in the darkness, dissolving its invisible poison into the air. A massive force that would coldly reduce a life to powder was roiling in the background. That power, now embodied in Chang Chai was showing its red throat—a giant serpent about to swallow everything.

If Chang Chai didn’t have the power of the army behind him, he would presumably just have been an able young Thai man. When they were drinking together his smile was that of a very ordinary friendly young Thai. Yet when he was clad in that enormous strength he was a very different person. He was a cold steel machine with no room for feeling, a giant presence imposing himself on you. Ono hated the overbearing strength that had placed this mask on Chang Chai’s face.

And if it was this same strength, and the same system that had pursued and had killed his father he was sure that if had been there he would have been able to resist it. He would have killed the

human being, the servant of that force, who had killed his father. If it had been Chang Chai he felt he could have killed Chang Chai.

Chang Mai half met the gleam in Ono's eye but then, with a mixture of resignation and contempt, he let it pass him by and smiled a faint, cold smile. Searching in the pockets of his jeans for the keys, took them out and handed them too Ono.

"Sorry I can't go myself. Take care. Perhaps we may not meet again."

Ono felt touch of the metal slipping into his outstretched palm while, with his other hand, Chang Mai waved his long, shapely fingers in farewell. It looked half like a salaam, but also like a dark conductor's baton with which he was waving Ono away. With the words "Good luck" Chang Chai disappeared, melting into the darkness of the shade of the banana tree.

He hurried to the telephone bureau.

His father had committed suicide—Ono still couldn't believe it; and yet it weighed down on him with increasing heaviness: an inescapable fact. It was once again painfully borne in on him that, five thousand kilometers away, far off in the darkness his father no longer drew breath.

Rushing into the bureau he hurriedly asked for four forms and wrote down telephone numbers one after another. There were a good number of other customers, among whom were a Chinese-looking man and a Westerner. The numbers he wrote were those of his friend in Fukuoka, the representative offices of the JIRV in Tokyo, the Bangkok office and the Bangkok bureau of the Yomiuri newspaper. There was no point in worrying about things like time difference. As he looked at the young man at the counter, he saw that farther behind him there was a virile-looking young man. A young woman was there during the day and he hadn't previously noticed this man. As Chang Chai had said, he looked like a soldier. The westerner's voice could be heard faintly from the veneered-wood booth, partitioned only

from the waist upwards. He seemed to be holding a conversation with someone in New York, from which it appeared that was a journalist. The man finished his conversation and emerged from his booth just as Ono was handing his forms in at the counter. Ono addressed him, “Are you a journalist?” At all events, he had to try to do what he could with what was to hand. The man replied he was a journalist with the New York Times. “Please listen, I’ve got some important information. I’m a volunteer with the JIRV.” Stumbling over his words he explained that he had to contact Japan urgently so he couldn’t go into details right then, but asked if the other man wait for him. If he told him where he could meet him he would go there afterwards. Responding to his emphatic tone and the urgent plea he saw in his eyes the journalist said, “I’m in a bar called the Aran Café. Come and find me there when you’ve finished your call.” He added that he was staying at the Hotel Amunek II.

“Mr Ono, booth number three,” came the voice from the counter.

His call to Japan had come through.

He told the American that he would meet him at the Aran Café, then hurriedly entered his booth. On picking up the receiver he heard the voice of his friend in Fukuoka. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. He hanged himself.”

The grave voice came to him, mixed with the static and crackle of a distant connection. His friend related that, the day before, when Ono’s father hadn’t come down to the work room at three o’clock as usual, he had gone to his room and found him hanging. He couldn’t wait until Ono got there so he had informed the police and they had taken care of the body. Ono’s father’s remains had been taken to a hospital in Fukuoka. The only thing corresponding to a suicide letter was a short, hastily scribbled note that read: “I can’t take it. Hiroshi help me.” With anger in his voice Ono asked whether somebody had been visiting him frequently. “Yes they had,” was the reply. “Damnation!” With wild regret the words

were uttered somewhere deep within him. His father's friend said again, "I'm sorry". He added, "I should have called in the police and dealt with it sooner. I didn't think they'd push him to this."

Ono felt the strength draining from his shoulders and the blood draining away throughout his entire body. He said only, "No . . . it was I who should have . . . still. . . if it had been sooner." Adding that he would try to get to Japan on the next day and, if possible, take a plane directly from Narita airport to Fukuoka, he hung up. He felt giddy, but remembering he still had to make arrangements to return to Japan as well as other things he roused himself. It was a waking dream. He felt repeated pangs of remorse that he had not been able to do anything about it, thinking with regret that he could at least have made a phone call,

He was through to Bangkok. The woman in the office there expressed her surprise and sympathy but, setting her words aside, he merely asked her to organise a plane ticket to Japan and a domestic flight from Narita to Fukuoka. He intended to leave by the first bus the next day to Bangkok and then go straight to the airport, so he asked if she could get his ticket delivered to him there, and if she could handle things while he was away, and also advance him three months salary. Perhaps she had already been contacted by his organisation's representative, because she readily said yes to all these requests.

Tonight he would not sleep. He could sleep on the plane. His blood sank, then flowed back, then a feverish exalted rage scorched through his body. His body was no longer his own, he felt it was being flung around in a demented tropical wind.

When he got through to the home of the Tokyo representative of his NGO, the man's wife came on the line. She greeted him politely and passed the phone on to her husband. Ono then suddenly gave rein to his anger. "You said you would do something, take some steps and I believed it. You didn't do anything, did you?" He said, his voice harsh.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I didn't think things would go as far as that." the lawyer replied apologetically. In the end the law and public justice had been of no use. The forces of disorder had mocked them all. The representative patiently absorbed Ono's words. His tone still apologetic, he explained the arrangements made with the Bangkok office for Ono's advance salary and for payment of bereavement allowance, and that he had also arranged for his ticket back to Japan. Suddenly feeling how pointless it was Ono hung up. Although he had known what the result would be beforehand; grief had caused him to blindly give vent to his anger.

When he next phoned the Bangkok Office of the Yomiuri newspaper he got a Thai assistant. Although this man could understand Japanese, Ono couldn't get across the important facts. It seemed that the bureau chief was currently in Chang Mai and the journalist whom Ono knew was now on his way to Aranyaprathet. He'd left in the afternoon but was going to stop in Pukhet on the way to cover a story about the American navy aircraft carrier Midway, so he would probably arrive in Aranya pretty late. Probably he couldn't be reached in time. It might be faster for Ono to get hold of him at his end, but in all probability Ono himself would have left by the time he arrived.

He clicked his tongue in frustration. After he had worked himself up to make the call, in the end he felt he was going round in circles. His brain whirling, he cursed the missed opportunity: if it just been a little sooner . . . .

When he left the office the virile looking man in a T shirt seated at the back was staring at him. He had the illusion that he had been listening to Ono's entire conversation through the headphones which he had just removed.

He had got in touch with Japan and made arrangements for his return. All that was left was to take a bus directly to the airport from the bus terminal the first thing the next morning. Still he could not relax.

He felt as though his father was still calling him from somewhere. Some cruel force had stretched his neck before Ono could get back to him. That hanging body was summoning him. He found himself wanting to cling to that body and weep.

The voices calling to Ono echoed from the air, from the whole of space. They came from far away in the darkness, rising up from the direction of Fukuoka, and also echoed from close at hand, from the Cambodian border. They were also, it seemed to him, reverberating out from Khao-i-dang camp. His father had merged with Muon and the others and was crying out to him.

At the same time, from the direction of Cambodia the shadow of conflict was drawing much closer, seemingly about to engulf the town.

As he walked towards the Aran Cafe suddenly into the back of his mind came the memory of Sopheap's fever-racked face. Peering into her bed as he was leaving the camp it had seemed to him that she had taken a turn for the better, but it was just a lull in the fever that had made her burning face look a little more peaceful. In his head sounded the mellow music of the jungle. The figure of Sopheap was wandering in that jungle, impelled by her fever. The altar was giving off a sparkling light. The darkness at the heart of the forest opened its gates as if to welcome in the dance.

As he opened the door the sound of a cheap electric band was coming down like a torrent of rain under the dim lighting. Together with their metallic sound, the high and low notes of the guitars set up a thick oscillation from the top of his head to the pit of his stomach, More or less in time with the rattle of the drums, a woman's voice wove together the melody in the echoing microphone. The figures of black marketeers swayed in the red light.

The faces of women and their customers appeared like masks in the candle light. The thick makeup on their faces caused the red painted lips to stand out more vividly, giving their movement an

extra quality of malignancy. At every table women were sending out inviting glances to the customers. Their slender fingers stroked the men's arms as they importuned them for cokes. The low-cut dresses revealed their swelling breasts. When they smiled their teeth shone red in the candlelight, revealing the movement of their tongues. The countless glass beads covering their gorgeous scarlet dresses gave them, if anything, a certain air of rusticity, as they sparkled in the narrow beams shed by the mirror ball which hung revolving from the ceiling; the artificial light and hollow gaiety reflected out amidst the tobacco smoke and fumes of alcohol.

This was the only cafe of its kind in Aranya. It was bustling with the town's merchants, black marketeers from Bangkok and the surrounding regions, junior officers of the Thai army on leave, and journalists. Recently because the border situation had gone quiet, it had had rather an abandoned feel to it, but with the approach of the Vietnamese army and the assault that followed it, people had once again started to gather there, rekindling its lively atmosphere. War and refugees drew in the crowds, and the atmosphere of human death generated energy. The clash between the desire to kill and the desire to live itself produced a great maelstrom, which sucked in others as it whirled wider and faster. The prostitutes, too, gave off a strong carnal odour. Each silhouette was buoyed from within by swelling desire.

He saw two Westerners who looked like journalists at table in front of the stage. There were women with them. Ono went over, and blurted out that Muon and the others were being sent to the front as human shields. Both the men were already pretty drunk, their hairy arms biting into the shoulders of the Thai women.

"Thanks, that's a useful bit of news. I'll look into it tomorrow." said the New York Times reporter.

"Tomorrow will be too late." yelled Ono.

The other reporter stood up saying: “I’ll run it by my stringer,” and left the bar.

The New York Times journalist offered Ono some of the brandy they were drinking. The strong taste of the alcohol descended to his stomach rapidly spreading its burning sensation into his intestines.

Letting the important matters slide Ono felt himself sinking endlessly down. His body has rapidly heated up. His intestines felt as if on fire, and his heartbeat had gone up rapidly. He heard the thick throbbing of his pulse. His stomach burned, and all his internal organs seemed to have turned to a mass of scalding metal.

“O*no san we are being transported right in front of the Vietnamese army and then left there. . . . We are a wall* . . . . Muon’s blind eye was laughing loudly in the blackness.

The other journalist now returned and, patting Ono’s shoulder said: “There’s no information about it.” With a faint smile he sent Ono a glance that labelled him a NGO troublemaker.

‘That’s not true, look into it properly . . . .’ He felt his anger rise in the face of the journalist’s smile. He wanted to ask whether the man thought military secrets would be leaked out so easily, even to his stringer. Amid the racket inside the cafe the vibration of the guns could be heard. The feeling that the Vietnamese army was approaching spread, and at the same time his whole body was enveloped in a sense of powerlessness. The journalists shrugged and smiled wryly at Ono.

What if it was really true that Muon and the others were not about to be taken away . . . his anger and concern grew as they pursued each other within him. The journalists’ intelligence had undermined Muon’s words. And yet there was a powerful voice that denied this view. As if in protest, Muon’s solemn words arose up deep within him.

When the music stopped for the moment, the faint sound of gunfire could be heard from the direction of the hotel’s rear garden. If the Vietnamese were advancing that didn’t just mean that the battle

was approaching, it means that rioting would increase: swelling and rising. Ono looked at his watch. There were still more than four hours to go before one in the morning. He could probably do something during that time. At all events he must do what he could. He felt that these were his father's orders to him.

Across the sound of the drums could be heard a pounding on the earth. The sound of the band thumped violently against the walls, as if to disguise the noise of the gunfire. The piercing, brain-shaking whine of the shells and the violent sound of bursting shrapnel pressed on his ears. The spindle-shaped metal objects tore through the air with a high soaring noise, cutting through the night and putting it to uproar. The shells, their tips revolving at high speed, were calling out for destruction to be unleashed. The low note made by base guitar made the ground shake to its depths. The mouths of the guns, throwing out their bright red flashes, blasted out packets of flame into the night sky. The red trajectories of the shells marked out bright trails in that sky like showers of meteorites. It was if the starry sky itself, pulling behind its trail of light, was coming down in an avalanche.

The sound of a xylophone made itself heard, and then Sopheap's song and the form of the Khmer dance emerged. The dance of the Apsarases, the heavenly maidens extended itself out to the east. He pictured Sopheap's face, haunted by the nightmares of a high fever. Could she really manage to get to Japan? The pleas of the refugees were directed to Ono in the guise of this girl. He felt that they were all imploring him. Would Sopheap recover from her illness? And yet the high fever was lighting up her face beautifully. If she only smiled, it seemed. her whole body shone. The mellow note of woodwind instruments sounded the music of the greenery.

The thing that had hounded his father . . . . the power that had driven his father to a death at a rope's end, now it was trying to send Muon and the others to the front.

Muon's watch was audibly ticking. He felt it was as though Muon, now grown desperate, was directing the Vietnamese army from the east, causing the shells to rain down. Muon's blind eye was staring into the darkness, and the pupil that was open there was burning with light of one who bargains with the devil. "Are you going to abandon them?" The cry rose up from deep within him.

The rumble of the guns shook the windows. The shooting stars poured down from the night sky. Amidst the music and the drunkeness it seemed to Ono that Sopheap's fever was infecting him also, drawing him into some deep delirium.

This strong inebriation increased his anger and sense of futility. In his distress he felt like punching the journalists' faces. He got up, dashing his glass to the floor.

15

Countless huge vehicles came into view. The cries of the geckoes was drowned by the noise, some huge strange feeling of tension gripped him. Its deep and massive note, different from that of armored cars, filled the night. It had a dullness to it. On the far side of the papaya and banana trees a black mass of metal was on the move in the light of the full moon. Pulled by heavy lorries thick steel cylinders were advancing. In the moonlight the gun barrels pointed their imposing muzzles towards the border. There were a great number of them in a line heading towards north. The 130 millimeter artillery corps, was advancing towards the front.

The lights of their transporters cut through the tropical night, the darkness was stirred into wild activity. They advanced into the hot and whirling cauldron. In the moon's rays the light from the metal surfaces was infused with a murderous dullness.

A pillar of fire shot up to the north, in the direction of Anbil. A few seconds later the sound of an enormous explosion reached him. They were attacking the base of the Sihanouk guerilla faction, and it

was the sound of the weapons dump being blown up. The night air trembled as if at an earthquake. The Vietnamese army's shellfire became even more clearly audible. The attack on Anbil was continuing and seemingly the conflagration had grown even fiercer.

It felt to Ono as if he were just rolling down a slope, the brakes were not working and who knew to what depths he would be drawn down.

His promise to Muon continued to gnaw at him. He jumped into the pickup and drove it out. The heat in his stomach reminded him that driving could be dangerous, but he couldn't keep still. He had not been able to alert the newspapers or the mass media. All he had done was got drunk and cause a scene. He felt the true nature of his own powerlessness, and wanted to ask the pardon of Muon and the other refugees. He couldn't get the thoughts of his father out of his head. So, in the end, this is what it was, he felt that he had known it all in advance. He felt as if his body was aflame, and that he was a state of drunkenness in which everything had turned to an illusion. Only his anger continued to grow.

As he drove along the national road, the wind came through the fully-opened windows and slapped at his face and chest. The stars flew by.

Briefly, he worried whether he would be able to get hold of his ticket and make it back to Japan, but now he could only leave that for others to handle on his behalf. He felt his own actions to be extraordinarily critical.

Suddenly it occurred to him to wonder why the army would conceal the matter of this "human shield". If they intended to place the refugees in front of the Vietnamese army and use them as a human shield, surely it would exert more leverage on the Vietnamese army if they informed the mass media, announced it publicly, to stir up international opinion? The Thai army would want it all clearly written up.

They should have brought in more people from the media. Why hadn't they then—then it occurred to him that they might have judged it more effective to get the refugees killed and then display their bodies.

If they were displayed after they were killed no-one would know how it happened, or that the Thai army had transported them to the front. At the same time they could satisfy their wish to get rid of people who were basically only a nuisance. Above all, the dead refugees could tell no tales. If they killed a thousand of them what would their motive be? Ono had a sense of the malign and powerful force that took control of human beings when they acted as a group. A giant serpent was coiled around the entire jungle, its glistening belly exposed. It was about to eat something from the head downwards.

Why should they be killed? For what purpose—were they simply sacrifices offered up to some larger living creature? And it seemed to him that his father, had been carried from far-off in Japan to merge into the same current,

The tropical night arrived, a dramatic shift into darkness like the effect of a revolving stage. The hot wind struck at Ono's cheek. Sopheap's feverish face burning and shining smiled at him

"O*no san watashi wa motto nihongo wo naritai desu*." Mr Ono I want to learn more Japanese.

She smiled as she made this artless plea. And then, in the dark of the night, she began to dance the graceful dance of the Khmers.

Muon's guffaw, was added to the laughter of the New York Times journalist and his stringer, twining together they rose up into the night sky like a twister. The light from the stars formed a vortex disturbing the immense nebula of space. It seemed to him that figure of his father, hanging in mid air, was also rising high up into the sky. His father must have been hounded unbearably by all those bastards who surrounded him. An image of his father being cut and sliced by their jeers appeared like a screen drawn across the starry sky.

Suddenly Muon's confession about the wound in his hand came vividly to mind. The watch that ought to have stopped suddenly started to go, its second hand ticking out the time. The loud sound it made seemed to be focussing in on something. It was a time bomb driving on the time that still remained. Muon's blinded eye guffawed into the darkness, while he displayed the scar in his hand and began to talk.

"That night I was summoned by the *onkah* (the Pol Pot cadre). We were told we had to assemble in the public square. That was bad news. It meant we would either be transferred somewhere or executed, one of the two. When they killed people to make an example of them they did it in the daytime in front of everybody. However, after rumours started to go around that the Vietnamese had crossed into Cambodia, they did a lot of them secretly at night. When the summons came and I heard the name "Muon" I felt my whole body freeze."

"For them killing was just one kind of task that they had to accomplish, it was of the same order as working in the fields or looking after the livestock. For these boy soldiers it was just another disposal job. It was if they just carried out whatever they were ordered to with mechanical obedience. When they were wearing their black uniforms they became just like tools. Still, you could sense that somewhere deep down a kind of hatred was taking shape inside them."

"When I was called to the parade ground, as I waited, I saw a number of other people appearing out of the darkness. We were eight in all. The crows all had guns and were standing behind us. The flames of the torches they held were flickering. Although they had the faces of young men, they seemed to be hundreds of years old. They were like stone carvings. Each one made me think of the stone faces in the Bayon temple at Angkor Tom. The smiles on their faces had not change for a thousand, for two thousand years. One of them had a bundle of wire in his hand."

"An invisible voice echoed from the darkness: 'We're taking you to a new communal labour camp.There you will be given new work. It is important work for the new Cambodia.'"

"It was about 50 kilometres away and we had to walk. We knew what was meant by 'new work'. Nobody had ever come back from that place. After the cadres had gone, our tension relaxed a little. One of the crows had a giant gecko, which he held up to the flame of his torch. The gecko struggled but the youth, as if in fun, began to broil it in the flames. Pinning it with a tree branch he pressed down on the writhing creature's neck. He surveyed the gecko's body in amusement as it was played upon by flickering tongues of flame and occasionally made movements as if in astonishment. The other boy soldiers giggled, excited by the spectacle. When the gecko had stopped moving, they tore off its limbs and ate it together."

"Still munching they approached with their weapons pointing at us. They ordered us to lie face down. When we were on our bellies on the ground they told us to hold our arms behind our backs with the palms spread upwards. When the man on the ground in front of me kept his fists closed the crow yelled at him to open them. He jabbed the barrel of his gun into one of the man's hands and fired. The dull report of the gun echoed right next to me. One of our number jumped up and ran off, but he was spotted in the act of getting up and shot. He ran two or three steps and then stumbled and fell. The crows pumped several more bullets into him. At that his body shook and something scattered out. Even in the light of the red flames it was clear that it was riddled with bullets."

"My second companion was already lying on the ground and his palm, too, was pierced. My palms were also spread out. The laughter of the crows descended on me from above. The barrel of the gun was already burning hot, my palm was scorched by the burning hot metal. It was pressed down hard so I couldn't take my hand away. I could only go rigid. Something weighty and hot pierced my palm with a

jolt. I clearly felt the shock of the blast go down into the ground. It felt as though my hand had been burned clean off. “

“They got us to our feet, and then passed a wire through the holes in our hands. The wire was then wound round our other hand and both hands were bound together. The wire was dripping with blood. In this way, strung together like beads, we started to walk. Because our hands hurt where the wire ran through them we could hardly move our arms at all. When we were pulled in a certain direction, the pain was excruciating and the blood dripped down from our hands.”

“There was a lovely starlight. As we walked through the night, and as the darkness grew more profound and the pain in our hands grew more fierce, so the stars appeared the more splendid and beautiful. We had only torchlight to guide us on our path. Somewhere geckoes were calling. The shadows of the coconut palms looked down on us from above. It felt as if they were linked with the shapes of other trees that dotted the horizon, and that the Cambodian earth and starry sky were being whirled into that sacramental vortex.”

“Hills rise up here and there from the flatlands of Cambodia. It is thought that from these hills one can commune with the gods; they are holy places amidst the wide rich plains. From there we can watch the passage of the clouds, hear the revelations made by the voice of the wind, observe the shining of the stars and the meeting of past and future, and listen to the will of heaven in the sound of thunder. They are places where humans can have intercourse with the heavens, holy mounts where humans are granted the powers that they exercise over the earth.”

“Our destination was the top of one of those hills. We were told that there was a temple on the hill, and it was there that we would be staying. The road began to rise, winding upwards as it led towards the temple on the hill.”

"The blood did not stop. It flowed on from our palms, mingling with the pain. The wires were thick with shining red blood which glistened occasionally when it caught the light of the torches. Step by step we climbed on up the slope of the rocky hillside, as if we were drawing nearer to heaven, as if we were stepping into the starry firmament, mounting up into the splendid festival of light. It seemed as if the crest of the hill was at the centre of the whirling nebula. Although we were human beings, at the same time we were stars, we were the wind, we were the coconut palms, were individual grains of earth. Even if we died we would live on for ever as part of this scene."

"As we climbed higher the smell of death grew. A grisly atmosphere descended from above, giving off that peculiar scent of heaps of putrid flesh that had been left for a long time."

"We heard a noise as if something was flowing out from the earth. It flooded over the surface of the wire that bound us; it rang and echoed both as the outflow of our own blood and also the red current of life that pulsed within us. It swelled the cries of the great hosts of those who had already been slaughtered, crying out to the current that runs deep within the earth, harmonizing with its tempestuous echoes."

"Above us, the smell of death was everywhere. The terrifying, insane, disgusting smell wrapped around us and seemed also to be guiding us onward. It seemed to me that many souls of the dead were still swirling around us, giving off their pestilent vapours, and that here was an accursed land where evil spirits were permitted to infest the heavens."

We climbed on up the steps that led to the temple. A *naga* or giant snake reared up at the entrance. These *nagas* are always to be found in Khmer temples but in the darkness of night I looked up in dread at the sickle-like curve of neck. Its eyes glowed red in the light of the torches, its forked tongue seeming to be spitting out some vivid blood-red colour."

"Above the main temple building at the top of the hill the constellations spread out into the sky like the temple of heaven. I felt I had suddenly been brought much closer to those heavens: and I was at once being drawn up into the skies and simultaneously cast into pestilence and death."

"The interior of the main building was filled with an unbearable stench of death. The smell of rotting human flesh was nauseating. It was only the pain in my hand that prevented me from vomiting. The corpses lay in rows, and here and there were scattered scraps of clothing. Skeletons were rolling around and there were skulls with their faces still covered with cloth. Those skeletons still wearing clothes made us think of our fellow-villagers. In fact there were some items of clothing which I thought I remembered. How many skeletons were there? I couldn't count them. A wire had been passed through each skeletal hand. The floor of the temples was spattered with the hue of rusty wire. Here were so many hands that had struggled in death!"

However, what caught the light of the torches was not so much the corpses but the great statue of the Buddha. Its head had been removed and that gentle sandstone smile had now rolled into a corner where it was buried under a heap of corpses. The ceiling, decorated with a pattern of clouds and lotus flowers representing heaven, and the murals showing scenes from the life of Shakyamuni appeared vividly in the pale red light. It was a weird atmosphere. On the one hand there was the depiction of paradise on high, a promise of the blessed land for the righteous and virtuous in the next world, and in the real world before it —hell."

"Below these sacred pictures of the Buddha preaching 'do not kill', 'do not steal', 'do not lie' to all sentient beings rolled the slain, the blood-stained, yelling curses. The floor of the temple building was smirched with great volumes of their blood. I wanted to laugh aloud. There was so little room to tread that it was if the skeletal hands lying everywhere were clutching at our feet. This place,

where human blessedness was preached had become a place where humans were murdered. A place where the happiness of being human was celebrated had become a slaughterhouse. Obscene words were written on the walls in blood, graffiti reviling the Buddha in vulgar and sordid words, as well as crude representations of sexual organs."

"We could hear our breath echoing inside the building of. Forgetting the pain in my hand, forgetting what linked me with these victims of execution, I laughed to think that the world was like this: a headless Buddha, graffiti-covered walls and, on the floor, skeletons and rotting corpses. This hilltop that should have been close to heaven—a place where we could hear the voice of heaven had now become this: an execution ground. I couldn't help but laugh. It was as if the skeletons had risen up one by one and let the echo of their bones cry out to heaven."

"The main temple was in such a state that it was no longer possible to carry out executions there. We went out a rocky outcrop that lay beside the building. This was the very top of the hill. From this highest point we felt as if we could almost reach out and touch the stars. It was as if the showers of shooting stars were falling directly down at us. As the stench of death drifted up towards us from the dark night below the stars shone above, beautiful and everywhere. We were seized by the delusion that we would be drawn up into them, that we would ascend to heaven. I seemed also to hear from the main temple a voice reciting the sutras in Pali−the resonant voice intoning the sutras seeming to wind up among the stars. The wind blew across the plain and caressed our sweat-soaked backs."

"We were made to kneel down in a row on the edge of a rock. One of the crows pulled out a bit of his torch and hurled it before him into the darkness. It remained floating in the air for a long time. Right in front of us there was a deep hole. It was a cave the bottom part of which was fairly wide and there was a row of Buddhist statues against one wall. When the burning brand hit the floor it was still alight, so we

could see bodies piled on top of one another. They had been pushed into the hole and fallen higgledy piggledy on top of each other. Wires protruded from them. The cavern was a dozen or so metres deep. It yawned deep and wide before our faces and from it came an even stronger smell of death."

"How many people had been brought, like us, to the edge of this cave and cast down into it. They were all in heaps below, rotting, stinking turning to earth. We were about to become like them. We would fall, just as we were, all joined together with wire. I shook uncontrollably. My teeth chattered, teeth that would soon be like those belonging to the skeletons we had seen in the temple building.

"We would soon drop among those corpses. The moment of our fall was peering up at us from below our feet. We were assailed by the sense that we were about to plunge into hell. So many human beings steeped in the stench of death must have been thrust down here to their own deaths. Their bodies, and those in the temple and the many who would come to be slain and piled in heaps after them, seemed to be holding back a great cry. Within this abomination, this accursedness this grisly stench all kinds of evil all kinds of hate, all kinds of corruption seemed to be contained. I felt that every evil impulse sprang from here into the world. An evil to match this deed would mean that anything whatsoever could be permitted, such was the power that was roiling here."

"Just before I fell I looked up at the sky. One star was twinkling beautifully as if about to descend. For a brief moment of time I looked up at those stars, distant and therefore beautiful. I cursed that feast of beauty. I could only curse all the stars and their radiance, wishing that they would fall from the heavens and that their glorious radiance should be destroyed. Yet, at that moment, in the opposite direction to our downward-looking selves, exactly counter to our sense of physical destruction, the corpses seemed to be floating upwards, gathering together from their different resting places and rising up into the sky. From the main building too, the corpses were gathering together in the bottom of the hole

and then, merging into one stream, bursting upwards. It was a river like the waters that gather and flow into Lake Tonle Sap[13]: cruelly murdered corpses were coming from countless other regions, mingling together here, and rising up skywards. They were drawn up into the night sky like a waterfall falling upwards, throwing out spumes of radiance. The fierce current became like a thick pillar of light, mounting like a starry whirlwind into the sky. It seemed to me that there was something in the blood-drenched earth which meant it could be drawn upwards in the form of light.The glittering of the stars flashed through my breast."

"One of the crows thrust his foot against my back and my body fell with the others . . ."

". . . my falling body caught on a dead branch that projected sideways from the side of the cavern, momentarily rebounded, and then sunk into the pile of corpses. I spent the night in that sea of putrid skeletons . . ."

"Only I had miraculously returned to life, I felt I was on an eternal journey to hell and back. Submitted to the pitiless deeds of human hands , thrown to the bottom of the earth, made to stare into darkness . . . I felt that this would go on into infinity . . ."

The night wind blew upon him.

As Khao-i-dang grew near, although it was the middle of the night there were more Thai soldiers than usual stationed at the checkpoints, and they were carrying out thorough inspections. The lights were bright and numerous searchlights were trained on the passing vehicles. A slew of armoured cars were lined up on the road facing east. The Vietnamese army was attacking Site Seven, while certain divisions were attacking Anpil. Thai troop transports swung with ferocious energy into the road to the

13 The largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. The water level can change dramatically according to the seasonal rainfall.

east, while another squadron of armoured cars raced in from the west.

However much he explained they would not allow him to proceed. Lower ranking Thai soldiers didn't understand much English. Even a soldier he recognised had become a different person, casting a cold eye on Ono as if he were a stranger. His Khao-i-dang identity card and his usual pass were taken from him and not returned. Until he got them back he had to stay where he was in the car. He was completely at a stand.

A number of other vehicles arrived at the checkpoint after Ono and were held back in the same way. They were Thai journalists. They had not sniffed out Muon's story but had come to report on the escalating conflict. Journalists from the English-language Bangkok Post and The Nation had been seized and were undergoing exacting body searches. If they wrote something maybe there would be a chance . . .

Catching his eye, a journalist gave vent to his frustration: "The Vietnamese army are already there. It would be in the Thai army's interests for us to report it. They should let everybody through. Why are they holding us here? 'Wait till morning,' they say. What are they on about? The battle will be over!"

As he told them Muon's story, Ono felt that things were beginning to speed up. It was almost the arranged time. He had had told Muon he would be in Khao-i-dang by this time. Muon should have now brought Sopheap and be waiting there. Yet he felt things were already under way much earlier than anticipated. Everything was now beyond his reach, was all slipping away from his control. The repeated sound of gunfire reached him.

He couldn't get in touch with Muon. He could think of no way of doing so other than going to Khao-i-dang in person. He regretted not having acquired a walkie-talkie.

The roar of an aeroplane made itself heard, the rumble of its jet engines compressed the sky.

There came the urgent sound of it diving steeply down, like the fall of a huge thunderbolt. As the noise changed to that of the machine being thrown violently into a climb, a large explosion covered the earth and flames leaped up. The Cambodian jungle on the horizon seemed momentarily lit up like noonday. The flare of the explosion beautifully irradiated the trees to the east.

Headlamps approached from the north. There were very many in close succession. A convoy of trucks raced into the cross roads in front of the checkpoint, and a line of many lights lit up the darkness. It was like a swarm of fireflies all strung together. They grew larger and became a ball of light and, as he became aware of their rumbling approach, they swung one by one into the road to the east just in front of the checkpoint, the one that led towards Nong Samet and the front. For a second their lights were all directed towards the checkpoint. Without hesitating at the barrier, hardly reducing their speed, they raced off eastwards. Two, three, four: the dazzle of their lights stabbed into the eyes of Ono and his companions. Their backs had large canvas coverings, closed so that no one could see into them from behind. When the trucks lurched or swung round a curve, the fastenings were flipped up by the wind. You couldn't see in. What was their load? What was being transported? Closed up, the heavy, grass-green chassis moved on. Through a gap in the cover of the fourth one he caught sight for a second of a Thai soldier holding a gun, and then nothing.

They might be taking ammunition and other supplies to the front, but the trucks didn't seem quite heavily laden enough for that. It was possible that many people were crammed inside there. He was seized by a delusion that Chang Chai might have acted to speed things up. Or perhaps it was in response to the rapid deployment of the Vietnamese forces . . . .

He now felt mired in a feeling of utter futility. He raged and cursed, everything piling up to become one huge negative force. So it was too late . . . Suddenly he was utterly sure that, rather than

waiting until tomorrow, the transportation of the refugees had already started today.

The ties fastening the tarpaulin on the back of the fifth truck had come loose and a corner was flapping. Through the gap he saw a *kroma*; and, at the same time, he caught a glimpse of the refugees packed inside. A camera flashed. The reporter from the Bangkok Post had taken a photograph of the truck. At the same instant a Thai soldier came up to the reporter, seized his camera and dashed it on the ground.

As the seventh trunk was passing in front of him he had a sudden shock. He heard the sound of singing mingled with the roar of the engine. For a moment he thought he was imagining it. The tune of "*ue o mite arukou*" was sounding out. A chorus of voices singing in Japanese could be heard from inside the canvas cover. The human voices flowed out into the darkness of the night, they seemed to change their form into flowers that were scattered and spread into the dark. Here too, the back of the cover had come loose, and the packed forms of the refugees were visible. He didn't see Muon, but he thought that someone waved.

Presumably Sopheap was still there racked by her high fever. He imagined that Muon's single eye was smiling at her as he waved to him. The thick body of the middle-aged woman who had cosseted Sophep was dancing the dance of the Khmers. The young man haunted by dreams of the horizon bright red with flame was saying his farewell to Ono. All of them were playing their Cambodian instruments, clapping in rhythm and singing "*ue o mite arukou*". They were calling out "*sayonara* Ono *san*". All were melting into one another, becoming one and flowing into the flame of the battle. Suddenly it struck him that his father was among them. His father was singing "*ue o mite arukou*" along with them. He was going before them and singing. Ono had the overwhelming impression that his father was also bidding him goodbye.

To the east the green jungle burned bright red. Renewed explosions could be heard. The

bombardment must have started again. The convoy of trucks was advancing into the burning forest and Muon and the rest were going to the altar to be sacrificed.

The thirteen vehicles, making a caravan of victims, raced into the darkness of the border. The group of lights finally turned to the right and began to go up a gentle slope. It was an indication that they were starting to climb the hill towards Wat Phnom, as Muon had predicted. They looked as if they were leaving the earth and gradually ascending into the sky. To Wat Phnom and, at the same time, to the hill of execution near his home town—his father's form appeared him. The temple rose up out of the darkness of the frontier.

The singing of the Rehabilitation Centre refugees rang across to him. The song left a trail of light behind the truck, drawn up towards the hills on the border. It seemed to him that the lovely glitter of the stars had become meteorites cascading to earth. His father, Muon, Sopheap, were drawn into the vortex of starlight, and swallowed into its very centre. The solemn glittering flow of the heavens was streaming down towards the hills, stretching out a bridge of light.