

KENYON *review*

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you positively ID the cow that won the blue ribbon
at the Delaware County Fair floating dead
down the west branch of the Delaware River,
it means what they won't teach you in the Academy
is how each drink you drink is the last fuck you'll fuck
and it means the last slash on the tallied-up list of everything
they never intended to teach you about your heritage,
like least of all how grateful you ought to be
that there's only this one world left for you to die in.

Erika Krouse

When in Bangkok

The morning after we landed in Bangkok, my father tossed some *baht* onto the restaurant table without counting it. Enough eating, he said. My sister and I stood immediately, still chewing.

But the girls haven't finished their breakfast, my mother said, and got up to file out of the hotel restaurant behind us.

Our hotel was only two blocks from the Patpong district in Bangkok. Patpong was a different place during the day. All the bar girls slouched around in flip-flops and dirty tank tops. Crumpled cigarette butts clutched each other in the gutters, and the garbage of the night before rotted gently, mixing with the aging urine. We walked looking down to sidestep the vomit and sticky spit that would never dry here.

My father hustled down the street, his hands swinging, knocking into other people and swearing. He darted in and out of stalls, peering at the signs written in Thai and English. He strode so quickly, it was hard for the rest of us to keep up.

-What are you looking for? my mother asked. A bathroom?

Not a bathroom, he snapped, and then he stopped.

A little girl sat alone on a stool outside a place with a sign that read, *Oil and Thai Massage*. She wasn't more than four. Couldn't have been. She licked a red popsicle that was melting rapidly in the heat. Red syrup dripped down the outside of her hand and arm and onto the pavement. Her lips were stained red, by the popsicle, maybe. She licked until the popsicle was gone, until she was forced to insert the stick into her mouth for the last nub. Black kohl lined her eyes, and her messy hair had a small dreadlock toward the back. She wore an orange tank top and pink shorts, and she kicked her brown legs in the air.

A woman appeared. She was middle-aged, with short styled hair, dyed black. She looked almost like my mother, except she was Thai and wore a yellow tube top over her lumpy breasts. She poked my father and asked, You like? You buy her another?

The little girl looked up at my father, juice on her chin. He shoved his hands into his pockets. One of his shoulders was up by his ear.

The woman said, You come back. I member you.

My father shook his head no and sidestepped off. My mother and sister were lingering by a vendor grilling food on a stick. My father pulled out his wallet and selected some charred meat for them. His gaze caught on the window of a nearby tailor. He jutted his chin at a white mannikin wearing a boxy black suit with a skinny piano tie.

I need a new suit, he said.

It's a *family* vacation, my mother said, swallowing her meat.

But my father stared into a horizon he couldn't see, obscured as it was by building after building full of more people than the world could possibly hold. He looked relaxed now, and even smiled.

I've earned myself a suit every now and again, he said.

• •

This was our fourth trip to Bangkok, for our fourth family vacation since we moved abroad to Singapore four years ago. The company paid for the vacations, one per year, anywhere on the globe. My mother had asked for Paris this year, but my father said no. I was twelve, and my sister was fourteen.

My father was a genius, my mother said. He had graduated college when he was nineteen, some kind of prodigy in engineering. He was bossing around people twice his age by the time he was twenty-one. Now that he was forty-five, he wasn't a prodigy anymore, and just bossed around people his own age. He had worked for the same oil and gas company his whole adult life. I never saw him in anything but white dress shirts, short-sleeved on weekends. He slumped, and his eyes had started to pucker at the edges. When he first got the assignment to Singapore, it was like he won some kind of big company prize. Now, he sometimes growled to our mother, They've all but forgotten me stateside. There's nothing for me if we go home. Fucking Reaganomics.

To make him feel better about himself, sometimes my mother told me to ask my father for help with my homework, but nothing is for free. There was a space in the hallway of our Singapore apartment where we were meant to store bicycles, and I slept there at night until I got caught, and that was over.

Last year, on our third trip to Bangkok, we went with another family. My father was the other father's boss. The two men went off shopping for menswear while we all lay around a hotel-roof pool. The other

family's kids ignored us, and my sister and I ignored them. The sky was Asia-gray, like a muffler above us. The two mothers drank bitter Tiger beers all day, tried and failed to suck in their chubby stomachs, and said, Now, isn't this pleasant! Isn't this pleasant!

When the other family's father — why can't I remember his name? — came back from his outing with my father, he walked straight over to the pool and fell in with his clothes still on. He wore a dress shirt tucked in, belt and pants, everything. He stayed underwater for a long time, while everyone pretended it was normal to do that.

He finally surfaced after I thought he had already drowned. I realized with shame that I hadn't even thought of jumping in after him or calling for help. He was gasping, face tinted yellow, his glasses wet and flashing. His white shirt had turned gray from the shadow of his chest hair beneath.

Are you OK? I asked.

He shook his head and coughed for a long time, tethered to the side of the pool by one elbow. Finally, he pulled himself out of the water and sat next to me at the side of the pool. Water streamed from the hems of his pants legs, from the heels of his leather shoes. The water pooled under me, wetting my suit. His wife laughed at something my mother said, a laugh like a scream.

I poked him. Where's my dad?

The sun slid out from behind a cloud. The man said, Your dad, he's, he's, he's . . . We got lost.

Should we go look for him? I asked.

The man opened his mouth to say more, his round jaw wobbling. But then he just shuddered at the water casting its reflection onto his face, and said, When in Bangkok, man. When in Bangkok.

The next morning, that family was gone, checked out of the hotel in the middle of the night. That man quit his job before we got back to Singapore, and the company sent them all home to the States. We never saw them again.

• •

On each trip to Bangkok, we visited one tourist hot spot, alternating each year between the Grand Palace and Wat Arun (What a Ruin, my father liked to joke). This year it was the Grand Palace again, which was the shinier of the two and didn't have puns.

It was horribly hot. Our bodies were slick and slippery under the long skirts we had to rent to wear on temple grounds. The air was a

bog. Our clothes chafed our armpits. The fabric soaked up the humidity and stayed wet.

The buildings in the Grand Palace had gold walls and ceramic statues with gems encrusted in them. Or maybe it was steel that was painted gold and chips of glass that just looked like gems. The place was so shiny it hurt. Demons and monkeys propped up buildings on their shoulders. Massive currents of people pushed us around the grounds, and my father poked our spines with two fingers. Move it, he said; his gaze pointed past us at the distant exit. When we didn't walk fast enough, he kicked at our legs.

But he lingered at the Inner Court, where the king kept his harem. My mother read aloud from her guidebook: *King Rama V kept a consort who was his half-sister, and he is singlehandedly responsible for reviving the Thai national sport of Muay Thai. The Inner Court was governed by a series of laws known as the Palace Laws, punishable by death.*

My mother's thin eyebrows lifted. She said, Girls, aren't you glad we don't live under Palace Laws?

I'm sure glad, my sister said.

My sister reminded me of a doe, or a cow. A mythological doe-cow creature. Her eyes were far apart behind her glasses, and she was a stranger to outrage. Her grades were perfect. She was here, but not here. Nothing affected her, as if she were constructed from some non-stick surface. I never saw her cry, or hurt herself, even when we were little. I had broken an arm, a foot, a collarbone, and three toes, but she had never even sprained a finger. I couldn't understand what she was made of.

Behind me, my father said, The king was a lucky man. He had a whole harem to choose from.

Words seemed to shudder up from my feet, and then they were in the air before I could stop them: And some of them young enough to be his daughters, I bet.

Shut up, Elsa, my sister said, and then she kicked me herself.

I blocked my head with my arm as I turned around. But my father had stopped to count his money several meters behind us. He hadn't heard me.

Don't you screw this vacation up. He's in a good mood, my sister said. She pulled me close, clawing my arm through the damp cloth of my shirt, her voice hot in my ear: Don't you know when you're lucky?

• •

After the taxi, we changed into bathing suits and took the elevator to the rooftop pool, where we would spend the rest of this vacation while my father shopped and never bought anything. As my father was leaving, my mother said to his back, Bring up some sunscreen before you go. We're all out, and the girls will burn.

Even though it was twice as hot and wet up on the roof, the air felt lighter with my father gone. My mother and sister wore matching purple bathing suits. I felt embarrassed by my mother's cowering shoulders and the clots of fat on her thighs. When other pool guests passed by, she grimaced behind her orange lipstick, as if they might hit her.

My mother and sister lay down on plastic lounge chairs and opened their books. I swam and swam and swam in the pool until I was dizzy. When I pulled myself out of the water, my mother and sister had fallen asleep in the sun, like in a fairy tale.

I pushed a chair against the wall, stood on it, and hoisted myself up, kicking my legs over the side. I steadied myself and let my legs dangle toward the ground so far below. We were very high, twenty-one stories up. The people on the ground were little dots, all streaming in two opposing directions in the street. There was nothing beneath my feet but thick, wet air, with my father somewhere down there.

I could just let go and fall, I thought.

I scooted closer to the edge, my bathing suit catching on the concrete. I felt strangely human at that moment, with the street below, the crumbly concrete beneath my thighs, the smell in my armpits. I wondered what I'd have to do to land on my father's head.

I leaned forward and willed myself to find that edge between here and there. Just to see if I could. The street rippled below me. Gravity pulled at my ankles. A rare breeze lifted my hair from my neck. A siren sang.

I lost my balance but caught myself with my hands before I realized it. It surprised me that I did that.

Shuddering, I jumped back down to the terrace. My mother and sister didn't wake up, so I slipped my T-shirt and shorts over my bathing suit and rode the elevator down to the lobby. Bottles of sunscreen littered the gift shop, but I had no money. I walked out of the hotel instead, retracing the path we had taken after breakfast.

The suit shop hadn't changed its mannikins, so I recognized its storefront right away. Inside, a family sat in chairs, sewing. They looked up at me and then back down at their fabrics. A man stacking rolls of cloth asked, You want suit?

I'm looking for my father, I said. He's buying a suit somewhere.

Not here, he said. Your first time in Thailand?

We've been to Thailand four times. Just Bangkok, though.

Bangkok is not Thailand, darling, he said. It's OK. *Mai pen rai*. He plucked an orchid from a bowl of water and handed it to me. It was wet. I thanked him. Back in the street, I dropped the flower on the ground and stepped on it.

A few doors down was the same massage parlor as before, its sign a geriatric pink beneath the sleeping neon. The same woman stood in front, pinching a smelly cigarette.

Is my father in there? I asked her.

The woman said, No English.

I said, You knew English this morning.

The woman assessed my sandals, my damp shorts and T-shirt. You go home, she said.

A little girl was here this morning. Eating a popsicle? I said.

The woman slipped easily into her anger, shoving me backward, yelling at me in Thai. Her face reddened. The sounds whined in the back of her throat and people wove past us. I retreated, hands up, until she broke off and walked away, her butt wiggling out of long habit.

She said over her shoulder, Girl gone. Just like you, *farang*.

• •

That evening, everyone was sunburned except for my father and me. My mother and sister hadn't woken from their naps until the sun finally hid behind a cloud that promised afternoon rain but never delivered. Their burned skin looked shiny and too tight for their bodies. My father drew a scalding bath and made my sister get in, her red legs turning purple. It draws the heat out, he said. He was so happy, his voice went singsong.

My sister finally emerged from the bathroom gingerly, in a towel. My father shot her the disgusted look reserved for her and me now that we're older, as if we have taken something away from him.

We need food, my mother said. We haven't eaten since breakfast.

Then get your clothes on, my father said. It's terrific out.

You forgot our sunscreen, my mother said. We're lobsters. I'm ordering room service.

Too expensive, my father said. Take-out it is.

He took me along to help him carry and set off toward the Patpong district. I let him bounce ahead while I followed like his dog, staring at the dark hairs on the back of his head, the square outline of the

wallet in his back pants pocket. I always avoided his eyes. You could get sucked into that blackness and never come out. I didn't want to see anything as he saw it. It was good he never looked at me anymore.

Patpong was awake. American music played everywhere, and we walked from John Lennon to Tears for Fears to A-Ha. The night market was doing good business under its plastic canopy, and we passed stalls of T-shirts and tapes until my father veered away into one of the bright side streets where the go-go bars were.

Neon illuminated the street in primary colors, and everyone was friendly-mean. The doors opened to women lounging against poles. Some displayed menus, but instead of food there were photographs of girls next to the prices. Men stood outside and chanted to us, Ping-pong show. Watch pussy open bottle, shoot banana, put fish in, write letter, blow out candle. Hey, you bring your daughter.

A grown-up woman in hot pants sidled up to my father, hips first. She stroked his arm and rubbed her big breasts against his chest, saying, I love you, you love me? Why you no love me?

My father shoved her away with a snarl. That's just disgusting, he said.

Dad, I said, can we go somewhere else tomorrow?

Where? he asked, flailing his arms as if there were no other place on earth.

Mom's guidebook says there's a Tiger Temple. Or maybe an elephant ride?

I have a fitting at eleven, he said.

He stopped at a stand to get some food, the great-smelling kind that grabs you by the shirt, with chili and soy sauce and ginger and garlic aromas attacking the air. The cook started unstacking Styrofoam boxes while my father pointed at things: stir fry, grilled banana, roasted duck, green papaya salad, black sticky rice.

Across the narrow street, two younger white men walked down the street singing loudly in some language, arms swinging wide. That's the difference between Asians and *farang*— or *ang moh*, as Singaporeans called us at home. Asians walk with their elbows in, and *ang moh* walk with their elbows out. The men were cute and free, swinging their elbows, and I wished I were with them instead of with my father. A white dog sprawled before them on the sidewalk. It flipped its tail at them, grinned, and rolled onto its back for a scratch.

As if they had rehearsed it beforehand, both men jumped in the air. They landed on the dog's belly.

The dog flailed in the dark, its paws groping at the air while bile

and blood spurting from its mouth. The two men skipped back, and one pointed at the now-bloody cuffs of the other's pants, laughing. They walked away while the dog pawed at nothing, trying to get up, failing, trying again, failing, and trying again.

I thought I might fall down. Please, I said weakly as my father filled my hands with plastic bags and sauntered back in the direction of the hotel, hands in his pockets, whistling through his teeth. I couldn't see the dog anymore in the crowd. I faltered behind my father, tripping and crying.

I don't know if I actually saw that dog, or if I made it up.

Back at the hotel, everyone but me sat on the floor and ate the corrugated strips of meat and gleaming vegetables and then lay on the beds, drowsing toward sleep until my father turned off the lights. I couldn't stop trembling. My sister was also sleepless, flipping around on our double bed, trying to find a cool place for her burned skin. It felt like there was too much blood inside me. I strained to force air into my stiff lungs. I think I'm dying, I whispered. I need to get out of here.

My sister whispered back, You just don't know how to be happy.

• •

I once read a Thai myth of a family with several daughters. The youngest daughter talked too much. Her family hated her. Her town hated her, because wherever she opened her mouth, malicious rumors spread. They just couldn't be true. So the family and the town put her and her sisters on a raft and sent them down the river.

After a few hours adrift, a pirate brought the daughters aboard and made them his wives. But after listening to the youngest daughter talk, the pirate couldn't take it anymore and threw her into the ocean. A pair of sea eagles picked her up and flew her high into the sky. The girl kept talking. She couldn't stop herself. So they dropped her back into the sea, where she died and fed the fishes.

Years later, a monk found a skull washed onto the beach. He decided to make it into an incense holder for the Chanting Room at the monastery. But the monks began squabbling among themselves. The girl's skull had poisoned their minds, you see. So they turned her skull into a water scoop for the bathroom. Then the monks got rashes all over their bodies.

Finally, they burned the girl's skull and scattered the ashes to the four winds. Pieces of her flew in every direction. She was everywhere. And she was silent.

• •

I started vomiting at 10:40 the next morning, when my father started tying his tennis shoes. My mother's pink face hovered as she peered into the toilet bowl. Cottony brown clouds floated in bilious wisps. The stench swirled in the dead space there.

Elsa is sick, she called out to my father, and bent over me. What did you eat for breakfast?

I ate what you ate, I said. I leaned into the stench and retched again. I said, I need medicine or something.

My mother said, Stan, could you please go to the lobby gift shop? She's a kid, he said. Kids throw up. I have my fitting.

She snapped, You can be late for your tailor. Your daughter needs Pepto-Bismol.

You go get it.

How can I when you won't let me have money?

You always do this, he said. I work hard, while you sleep on the couch all day and make spaghetti for dinner. I ask little of you.

Yet you take everything, my mother whispered, clawing at her red chest.

While they argued in the hallway, I stuck my finger down my throat again.

• •

My father left anyway, of course. I crawled back into bed and told my mother, I just need rest. You two go ahead.

My father had relinquished a short stack of *baht* to my mother, so she left with my sister, promising Pepto-Bismol upon their return. As soon as the door shut, I jumped out of bed and jammed on my shoes. I took the next elevator down, slid into the crowd, and walked the two blocks back to Patpong.

This time, I didn't ask. I watched and waited behind a pay phone. The heat slid over my body, drenching me in my stillness as people flowed by. The same woman paced in front, in a green tube top this time. When she drifted to the bar next door with a plastic cup in her hand, I held my breath and ran into the stinky hole of a building, down the narrow hallway with its line of cheap doors.

I threw open each door. The first room had a bucking white man and a Thai woman, both naked. Same with the next one, and the next one. The last door opened on its own.

It was my father. He was still dressed but with a wad of *baht* in his hand, his finger hooked around the neck of an empty beer bottle. He stared at me as if he had never met me before. He stood behind the door, his mouth open. In the room behind him was a bed.

I pushed at the door, but he stayed it with his hand. I saw only one wiggling foot, light brown and impossibly small.

Daddy, I said.

Then I lunged at him, clutching at his shirt and clawing at his face. He shoved me away with one palm on my forehead and slammed the door. I tried to turn the doorknob with both hands, but he held it tight from the other side.

Now the woman in the green tube top ran down the hall and tried to pull me away, joined by women streaming half-clothed from the other rooms. They yelled at me in sharp voices. I was shouting, Come out, you asshole, you coward, I hate you, I hate you. I held onto the slippery doorknob, but the women clutched my limbs and counted in Thai. On *Saam*, they gave me a good yank, and I lost my grip and fell backward to the floor. I scrambled back up, grabbing everything within reach and flinging it at the door — a lamp, a door mat, a credit card imprinter, a magazine.

As the women closed in on me again, I took one final run at my father's door. At the last second, I dropped my arms and rammed myself into it, head first.

I woke up on my back. The air was orange and pink. Everything hurt. Someone was running fingernails through my hair, probing my scalp. Women surrounded me on the floor.

Did he come out? I asked.

The women leaned in, murmuring soft vowels: *Mai pen rai, mai pen rai*. They patted me all over. My father's door was still shut.

I turned and pressed my face into the women's laps, crying into their perfume and sweat and that rubbed-off smell from their crotches, that underwater stench of everything I had tried to forget, and now knew I never would.

• •

There's a dead place where no one else goes. It's warm and still and deep and perfectly quiet, like the bottom of a full well. Up above, you can be walking, talking, smiling, but all the while, you're asleep down there in the silent, dead place where no one else goes, and no one is your enemy. That is your enemy.

• •

That night, my father came back late, bounding around the hotel room, elated by his own nerve. He smacked a fist into a palm and sang, Girls, get your shoes on. He wouldn't look in my direction.

I was having trouble walking. My head hurt, and a lump swelled just past my hairline. I threw up again in the bathroom, this time without trying to. I asked for an aspirin, but they all just stared at me as if I were speaking another language.

My sister said, Those aren't even words.

Elsa, my mother said. Try.

Something tickled the inside of my ear, and when I wiped it, there was a pink smear of blood.

Outside the hotel, rain had congealed in the clouds, which had lowered like a brow. My father shuttled us into a *tuk tuk*, loud and metal and dark, and it carried us down the road. My father rested his arm around my mother's red shoulders. My sister tried to keep her balance in the *tuk tuk* without her skin touching anything. I was sweating on the outside and the inside.

Then the rain began. It was so much rain, like a giant hose was trying to wash away all the human dirt and spit and urine and shit from three thousand years, wash it all into the Gulf of Thailand where the waves would beat it and sterilize it with salt until it had disintegrated into nothing but water again.

But that didn't happen, and instead the city just smelled like wet garbage. The *tuk tuk* sloshed through roads like shallow rivers. By the time we made it to the Muay Thai stadium, it was raining so loudly we didn't even try to speak. Our waterlogged tickets broke apart when the man tried to rip them.

This is Thailand's national sport, my mother said. It has ancient royal traditions. We're fortunate to experience it.

My father grunted at her.

Inside, the stadium was hot. We sat on red plastic seats. We were only about fifteen rows from the ring. The ropes were so old the red had worn off in spots, showing brown underneath. Rain pelted the tin roof. It was hard for me to focus on anything. I tried to lay my head on my sister's shoulder, but she shrugged me off.

The children fought first. The adults headlining the posters would come later. The matches began slowly with the traditional dances and ended quickly with the fights between scared seven- and eight-year-old boys. I wondered what happened to the losers and the winners. There

were no proud parents that I could see, just trainers and some kind of handler who shouted things to make the kids kick and punch harder and grab each other in clinches.

People were already betting. A special group of gamblers sat at one end and waved *baht* in the air, although the betting was all around us, too, people pointing fingers in combinations that made no sense to me. They were loud, yelling and scoffing at the little boys, who held their wrapped fists in front of their faces and fired off stunning leg kicks. The crowd cheered at each one. My head felt like it might crack at every sound.

Isn't this pleasant, my mother said.

The next match was a couple of boys my age, about twelve. The first boy was far bigger than the second — fattish, with a head so big the wreath they placed on it looked like a miniature crown. His muscles shone bulky and smooth under his flesh, and his eyebrows lowered in an expression of cruelty and stupidity.

The second boy looked strange. His features were small, and he was much thinner yet fleshier than his opponent, with narrow shoulders. He wore red trunks, and his skin was dark and perfectly smooth. His hair was shaved so short he was almost bald.

Of course, the big boy was beating up the little boy. Each time the bigger boy landed a heavy kick, the crowd cheered in unison. He smirked around his mouthguard. The blades of the ceiling fans pivoted around and around. Gamblers touched pieces of paper to their lips.

The small boy's arms wobbled with exhaustion. The music circled him, whining and wheedling — a sireny horn, bells in relentless beat. He was losing, but he kept going. The small boy's handler slapped the floor of the ring and pointed at him, saying something sharp with a sweating face, eyes wide. The small boy then suddenly came alive, punching and kicking with everything he had left, as if this were his last chance to live.

The small boy was a girl.

She looked the same as any boy fighter — skinny chest, polyester trunks, hips tight. But I knew she was a girl, as surely as I knew I was a girl.

I suddenly realized: everyone knew it. The betting men knew it, piling on the odds. The announcer knew it, the referee knew it, everyone knew except for my fat, dumb mother who cheered when the fat, dumb boy delivered a sharp knee to the center of the girl's stomach. Or maybe my mother knew, too, like everyone else.

But no one would say it.

My father's gaze flicked once in my direction, and then away. He cupped his hand around his mouth and shouted, Get 'er. His eyes were half-moons. I deserve this, I heard from inside his head. I deserve happiness.

Now I was standing in front of him, blocking his view. I said, You can't do this anymore.

Startled, my father looked at me, maybe for the first time ever. Fear rose from him like an odor.

And I'm telling everyone, I said.

The crowd ignited around me, loud with surprise. Something had happened. Men exchanged large stacks of *baht*, waving hands in front of their noses. My father didn't speak, didn't cheer. I turned around.

The girl was on her feet, and the fat boy was on the ground.

The sour referee grabbed the girl by the elbow and raised her arm in the air. Her wet cheeks rippled with exhaustion. Still surrounding us was the eternal siren music and the men trading on her pain. But this girl knew it was over now. She was going to make it out of this place alive.