My Thai Girlfriends

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MY THAI GIRLFRIENDS/*Tom Ireland*

IN THE DREAM I'M SERVED by a Thai woman wearing a white plaster mask. She and I are the only people in a large hotel dining room: antique table settings, six or eight to a table, and white linen tablecloths. The masked woman folds herself around me from behind, but along with the pleasure of being held comes the fear of impropriety. Foreigners are expected to practice restraint while visiting this country.

Upon waking I write, "At my age sex may be a thing of the past, but to live well, it's best not to rule it out entirely. The desire, not the act, is the important thing."

A year off from work requires complicated arrangements. Someone must be found to replace me at work, where for fifteen years I've been editing archaeological reports for New Mexico's Office of Cultural Affairs. I'm worried that my replacement will not do the job as well as I, or that he will do it better. My house must be leased so I'll have enough money while I'm in Thailand. My medical insurance will be discontinued, putting me at the mercy of Asian diseases. I'll cancel my telephone, and the telephone company will give my old number to a stranger.

There's some explaining to do. It makes people nervous that I'm pulling up roots, leaving everything behind for a year. It causes them to question their own comfortable routines. They demand reasons. I say that I've always wanted to travel, which isn't true. The thought of going alone to an unknown country terrifies me. I say that I want to experience a foreign culture, knowing that it's no more possible to leave my own culture behind than it is to leave my own consciousness. Among coworkers, I don't say that my leaving has more to do with the disavowal of what I'm doing here than with anything I might find to do over there, which might remind them of their own dissatisfaction. Nor do I say that the real object of this adventure is not having to do anything at all.

One of the archaeologists at the office recommends Chiang Mai, a city in the cooler northern part of Thailand, as the best place to start. Chiang Mai has everything, he says—great food, friendly people, antiquities—and for Westerners, at least, it's incredibly cheap since the Asian economic collapse. He tells me how to use the red taxis, which

only seem to be taking you miles out of your way. And he warns about the beauty of Thai women: "It's okay to sleep with them, but don't get serious. You'll end up having to support her whole family."

The Kingdom of Thailand issues me a visa that's valid from July 23, 2002, until July 22, 2002, that is, minus one day. I didn't want to go to Thailand all that much anyway, and now Thailand has complied with my basic reluctance to visit their country by granting me less than no time in the kingdom. The Thais are famous for politeness, and "Please come for minus one day" is probably their polite way of saying, "Don't bother to come at all." I call the Royal Thai Embassy in Washington, D.C., and talk to Mr. Pop. He apologizes and says there's been a mistake, which means I have to go after all.

As a going-away present, the Office of Cultural Affairs gives me a lifetime supply of condoms.

It might be Saturday. I'm alone in Chiang Mai, sitting on the wooden balcony that overlooks the courtyard of the Mountain View Guesthouse. Guests on the second floor are asked to walk lightly on the teak floors to keep from disturbing those in the rooms below. There's no view of the mountains, but Miss Daeng, the manager, says you can see them if you climb to the roof of the building after a rain.

This morning two real estate agents showed me an apartment in a high-rise condo called the Embassy, in the diplomatic district, across the river from the Old City. It was nice in a creepy way: the polished-stone lobby, the Winnie the Pooh sheets on the bed, the baby-blue carpet, an extra bedroom for the people from home who said they would visit. From up there I could see the mountains, the green valley, the red rooftops of the city, clouds and sky, the brown river down below with shapes of things floating in it. Chiang Mai looks much better from the tenth floor of the Embassy than it does from street level, but I'd rather be down here among the leaves at the Mountain View.

A woman named Jessica lives in the room next to mine. She's from Tucson, Arizona, and has a horse named Happy, a buckskin mare, whom she misses. She loves animals and thinks that Thai people do not treat them with enough kindness. Other times she was in Thailand, she didn't see some of the things she's seen this time around. Maybe because the country was so beautiful and the people so friendly, she didn't see the unpleasant things on her earlier visits.

Jessica calls me "Neighbor." I'm often sitting on the balcony over the courtyard when she comes and goes from her room. She's in Thailand to learn a therapeutic technique in which bundles of steaming herbs are applied to the body. She's buying the herbs in bulk and packing

them in plastic bags to be sent back to Arizona. She's been talking to farmers in the region, trying to line up a reliable source of herbs for her business, but it's not easy to buy in sufficient quantities. Jessica has a large tattoo on her lower back, which I've come to think of as the *saddle* of her back, but I haven't been close enough to get a good look at it.

I ought to be seeing the sights of northern Thailand while I'm still a recent arrival here; otherwise I might become jaded and never see them at all: the orchid farm, the elephant camp, the snake farm, the water buffalo market, the umbrella village. One of the guidebooks says, "In order to experience the real Thailand one must leave the womb of the guesthouse," which I'm slowly preparing myself to do. For now I'm curled in the womb of the Mountain View Guesthouse with no view of the mountains, taking furtive looks at Jessica's tattoo and waiting to be born into the real Thailand. It must be here, within walking distance, and I'm convinced that it can be experienced by anyone with plenty of time to look, like me, or someone with less time but endearing personal qualities. I've been told that Americans are not yet hated here by the majority of the population—that if we are not exactly admired, at least we are looked upon with nothing more harmful than curiosity and envy. It's not the world outside that threatens as much as the task of being born into it.

Miss Daeng will know which of the sights in and around Chiang Mai are really worth seeing and which have been invented just for tourists. She and Jessica are in the lobby, a narrow space between the courtyard and the street decorated with sun-bleached posters of the orchid farm and all the rest. Miss Daeng is on the telephone long distance to India because Jessica needs to reach the teacher of some Indian martial art who might be willing to accept her as a student even though she is a Westerner and a woman. She wants to talk to him before traveling all that way for nothing, but Miss Daeng is having trouble getting through. Maybe the international telephone lines are tied up.

"Maybe India is closed today," I say.

She laughs at the joke. "Miss Daeng" (Miss Red) is her *cheulen*—a nickname. She knows a woman who has been called Miss Bank all her life because her mother worked as a bank teller before she was born and couldn't wait to get back to work after the baby was born. Miss Daeng is a short woman, even for a Thai, with disturbingly good posture. She's unmarried and has worked at her job as manager of the guesthouse seven days a week and all but two weeks out of the year for the past fifteen years, starting at six in the morning and finishing at nine or ten at night to support herself and her family, who live in Chiang Rai, another northern city.

"Maybe India is closed today," says Miss Daeng. "Ha ha!"

Eventually she gives up, and Jessica goes off to look for herbs.

"You're very kind to help your guests," I say. "You really ought to charge extra for your services."

"What do you mean?"

"In the United States people are paid for making arrangements for other people."

"How much are you going to pay me?" she says, sitting very straight in her chair. "One million?"

Jessica is buying a foot massage for Miss Daeng and Miss Nit, the guesthouse cook, to thank them for their help, and I've been asked along. The four of us walk through the wet nighttime streets making jokes about our umbrellas. Miss Nit, a sinewy woman with dragon eyes, has the biggest umbrella. It's blue, and if it were the only umbrella among us, it would be big enough to keep everyone dry. Miss Daeng has the next biggest and the most beautiful, with its garland of red and yellow flowers. The two Americans have the smallest umbrellas, which is funny because Americans are bigger than Thais. My sorry umbrella is crumpled from being turned inside out by the wind too many times. The women laugh at it as we walk along the wet streets where families are eating.

"You've got to raise your umbrella awareness in Thailand," says Jessica, "to keep from sticking it in people's faces."

The sidewalks are choked with parked motorbikes and eating stalls, the paraphernalia of family industry spilling out into the public space from lightless interiors. A man sits in a black cell full of blackened gasoline engines that take up all the room there is except for one oily spot of light, where he does his accounts. We walk past a floodlit, elephant-sized Buddha, past the Boys' School (girls are also allowed to attend), past ghostly temple courtyards closed for the night, and leave our shoes and umbrellas in the rain outside the massage parlor.

The masseurs, in their green-checked uniforms, are expecting us. The TV is on and stays on while we get our feet massaged. They smear our feet with Nivea and continually look over their shoulders to keep tabs on the action. Lots of shooting and fiery explosions. Jessica asks for the sound to be turned down. Miss Daeng translates from behind her newspaper. On the wall, a map of the human foot, its regions and municipalities, its major thoroughfares. When he's not watching TV, my masseur sometimes looks at me to see how I'm taking it. What I send back is my best imitation of a beatific smile even though his hands are very strong and just then when he dug his knuckles in I

might have cried out in pain, but I didn't want to seem ungrateful or impolite.

The rain keeps coming down. My umbrella, left upside down, fills with water until it shifts and empties itself on the street. Next time I'll remember to leave it right side up, the way any intelligent person would.

Whenever I contemplate going somewhere else, getting on a bus or a train, I find reasons not to go. There's hardly enough time to travel out of town before my Thai language course begins. Anyway, what pleasure could there be in going alone and in being so uncomfortably conspicuous in one's aloneness, which is hard enough to accept when it goes unobserved? A man alone in Thailand, native or foreigner, is an object of curiosity, if not suspicion. You do not eat alone in a restaurant, or you do it well after dark, when the restaurant is full of other people and your solitude is not quite so loud.

Night justifies sleep. In sleep I can forget who and where I am and all the things I am not doing here: crossing borders, exploring the trackless jungle or lolling on the beaches, chasing women, meditating, finding my way in Thai society, volunteering in refugee camps. I'm not doing much of anything besides walking aimlessly through the city. At night I sleep and sleep in the womb of the guesthouse.

The best time is between deep sleep and morning's first dove, when dreams can be read in the language of the waking mind. Cigarette smoke finds its way into the room, which means that the koi are being fed in their pond beneath the balcony. As always, the man who feeds the koi is standing at the edge of the pool with a cigarette and a cup of coffee, looking into the water. Jessica asked him not to overfeed the koi. She used to work in a pet store and knows that overfeeding kills them. The man listened to her advice and promised not to overfeed, but now Jessica has left for India to study martial arts and the man feeds the koi the way he always has, generously. When a koi dies, he ladles it from the water with a board that he keeps hidden among the plants next to the pond.

A few days before she left, Jessica decided to overhaul the koi pond. She and Nit and I took a taxi to the koi market and bought hyacinth and lotus and a few small koi to replace the ones that had died. I carried the koi in a plastic bag through the market, where some boys were playing checkers with bottlecaps. Back at the guesthouse Jessica and I took off our shoes and waded into the pond and placed the pots of hyacinth and lotus where they looked best. Some of the pots would not stay put, and we had to weigh them down with rocks

and bricks. Then I opened the plastic bag and released the young koi into the water.

"How is your class?" asks Miss Daeng.

"Boring. All the students are men except for one Korean girl who wants to be a missionary."

We are expected to wear long pants and refrain from asking questions, which takes time that could otherwise be used for practice. I don't mind wearing long pants because it's cold in the classroom. Nobody is allowed to adjust the air conditioning except the teacher, Miss Patcharee. She warns against transgressions that we, her students, have hardly had a chance to commit: coming late to class, not reciting when the whole class is asked to recite en masse, not studying at least one hour at home for every hour at school.

The bright young men show their exasperation with the dull-witted sybaritic retirees: "Khun! Khun! Don't you remember yesterday? Khun cheu arai, kraap?" Miss Patcharee smiles that deadly smile of hers, the one that says, "I'll make you suffer for your ignorance and sloth." Some of us recognize instantly that *rongraam* means hotel. Others must employ tricky memory devices. (A man enters the wrong room in a hotel and surprises a couple in the act of love. "Sorry, wrong room," he says. "Wrong room" sounds a little like *rongraam*.) We are taught the names of fruits that few of us have ever seen, much less tasted. Durian. Rambutan. Mangosteen. Miss Patcharee wants the Thai to leap immediately to our lips without any mental translation process. English, we are told, doesn't have to enter into it at all. We will learn the language as a child learns it from his mother.

"Don't let me catch you saying *nung*," she says and makes a foolish face. "When you say *nueng*, I want to see your teeth." She shows us hers, which were prominent to begin with. That deadly, patient smile.

The class gives me a reason for being in Thailand. Now when someone asks what I'm doing here, I say, "Studying Thai," a far more respectable answer than "Sleeping and dreaming."

I experience a hunger for something sweet. Miss Daeng and Miss Nit are in the office at the end of their long work day, fighting off sleep. At this time of day their eyes are open but they can barely see.

Before going to bed, Miss Nit lights incense at the spirit house, a gaudy miniature castle by the door where the guesthouse spirits live. When people occupy a place, the spirits who lived there first need a new place to live. Like people, they need to be cared for, fed, satisfied.

Miss Nit looks sexy even when performing a religious ceremony. George, an American with rheumatoid arthritis who's staying here, hired her to give him a massage even though she's the cook and doesn't know the first thing about massage. I would ask her for a massage, too, but it might be taken for an overture, and it might be one. What then? If desire is the important thing, then the act is not worth considering, and one had better stop considering it.

"Mr. Tom," says Miss Daeng, "what can I do for you?"

"I'd like two bananas, please."

"You have to ask me in Thai. If you want to learn Thai you have to practice."

"Gluay song by."

Miss Daeng looks dully at me. She has fallen asleep sitting straight up in her chair. Either that, or I have forgotten to add the word at the end that makes it polite.

"Gluay song by, kraap."

"Aaah," says Miss Daeng. "Hok baht, kaa."

I give her the money. The bananas are small and starchy and sweet.

"Without question you cannot have conversation," says Miss Patcharee. She's right. I can't understand why this simple fact has escaped my attention for fifty-six years when I could have been having conversations with all sorts.

"You see pretty woman. You say, 'Hello, my name is John. I live in Chiang Mai. I come from America. I have motorbike. You are very beautiful.' No question. This is not conversation, *chay may?* So you must practice asking question every day in class. You must not be afraid to speak Thai. No one will laugh at you here."

I'm holding my own in the middle of the class, posing no challenge to David, the eager young American who teaches English to Thai children, or Sonjin, the Korean girl who intends to do missionary work, but managing to stay ahead of the dull-witted sybaritic retirees, such as Jeffrey, who's in his seventies and spends his evenings at the erotic massage parlor, and Howard, an Australian who's studying Thai so that he and his Burmese wife will have a common second language. The rest of us fall somewhere in the middle: Drew and Andrew, two young men who live in a Thai boxing camp where they work out seven hours a day, six days a week, and come to class beaten and exhausted; Peter, an ex-pat Irishman who spends his time between Montpelier and Chiang Mai, depending on the season; Min, a Burmese political dissident who fled his country thirteen years ago during the crisis; and Nigel, a spherical Brit who stays up until four A.M. every

night drinking beer and carries a business card that says "Professional Yachtsman."

By the end of class every afternoon I have a headache from concentrating too hard. But it's worth taking note of small victories: ordering *khao sawy* in a soup kitchen without menus, a place where foreigners don't go.

Improvements are being made at the Mountain View Guesthouse. The owner, who is also a doctor of herbal cures and a landscape architect, supervises the workers as they come and go. They're building a new entrance from the parking lot, a formal gateway made of the same red clay brick that was used to build the walls of the Old City. There are plans for a waterfall that will empty into the koi pond. The stream will course through a tangle of make-believe dead trees made out of plastered chicken wire. Experts in the on-site manufacture of dead trees are doing the work.

Meanwhile, business as usual. The old hippy, Pondo (short for Ponderosa), who proudly claims not to have worn shoes of any kind since 1970, shows up for breakfast first thing every morning. He has respiratory problems. With the end of the rainy season the air is getting worse, and he'll soon have to move to the coast, where sea breezes blow the smog away.

Young Christians have retreated here to study the Bible and do charitable work among the hill tribes. Every morning after breakfast the students, mostly German, meet in the building on the other side of the courtyard and sing loudly and joyfully for thirty minutes before studying the Bible until eleven. I envy them each other, their energy and youth. They sing as if they really mean it. One of the German girls has smoky eyes, and I try not to look at her too rudely from my place on the balcony.

The maids, whose nicknames mean Miss Beautiful and Miss Good, come every morning to make the bed and sweep up the droppings of the pale house lizards called *jing-jok*. Miss Beautiful once studied English and would go back to school if she didn't have to work. Yesterday she asked me if I was married. Today she asks me if I would be interested in meeting a certain friend of hers, an educated woman who has a good job selling textiles.

"No thank you, I'm not looking for a woman right now, I'm studying Thai."

"Oh? You study Thai language? Waanii wan aray?" (What day is it today?)

We haven't studied the days of the week yet, so she has to give me the answer. Today is *waan aathiit*, Sunday.

An old man with a mottled face and skull, wearing what my father used to call "carpet slippers," does his laps in the lane that runs along one side of the courtyard, up and back five or six times, before allowing himself to go home and watch television. He takes extremely small steps. His feet slide along the wet pavement in the carpet slippers. He runs far more slowly than most people walk, but he's running nevertheless.

I meander across the campus of Chiang Mai University looking for the bookstore. Since leaving the Mountain View Guesthouse and all the way over here in the taxi I have been rehearsing, "Kaw thot, kraap. Raan nangseu yuu thii nay?" (Literally, "I beg for punishment, sir. Where's the bookstore?") Everyone seems to understand what I'm saying. The following conversation, more or less, is repeated a number of times as I walk across the surprisingly large campus:

"I beg for punishment, sir. Where's the bookstore?"

"The bookstore?"

"Yes, the bookstore."

"The bookstore is over that way."

"Thank you, sir."

The bookstore is nowhere to be found. There is no bookstore, but nobody wants to be responsible for disappointing me, this foreigner who is trying so hard to speak Thai. What I find instead, by accident, is more like a stationery store, where they sell T-shirts and coffee mugs with the university insignia. I buy a pad of paper for homework assignments and a note card with a picture of an elephant for Aunt Nancy, who lives in Connecticut. She used to collect elephants of wood, stone, clay, and glass but eventually got sick of having them all over the house and donated them to the Salvation Army. Back in the guesthouse, I write an apology to my aunt for sending her a card with a picture of an elephant. Thailand is a land of elephants, I explain. It's almost impossible to avoid them.

A French woman, Nicole, is staying in the room that Jessica occupied before she went to India. Nicole leaves her room early each weekday with a cup of coffee in one hand, a satchel of massage equipment in the other, her wine-colored hair tied in a no-nonsense ponytail. One afternoon she and I happen to eat lunch together at the guesthouse, and she comments on the "pretty little bird" that is singing in the branches above the balcony.

"It's a red-whiskered bulbul," I tell her. "You can buy them in cages in the market."

"How terrible!" says Nicole. "The birds should not be in the cages."

"Well, you don't have to keep them. You can just give the people some money and they'll let the bird fly away. That way, everybody wins. The people earn some money, the bird is free, and you gain merit for your next lifetime."

"Mais qu'il est barbare! They should not be in the cages. They should be in the nature."

"Yes, I think so too. But this is Asia."

"I'm tired of it," says Nicole. "I'm tired of Chiang Mai. All the traffic! I cannot breathe here."

"Don't say anything bad about Chiang Mai to a Thai person. Chiang Mai is the Jewel of the North."

"Next week, after we finish the massage school, I want to travel."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know," says Nicole. "To the mountains, where it's cool. Not too many tourists. I just want to be in the nature."

"Yes, I know what you mean. That's what I want, too, come to think of it."

"You should come with me."

Here's the company I've been wanting since I got here. She's sitting at my table and offering in no uncertain terms to go with me in search of the real Thailand. Someone to talk to, to negotiate with from one day to the next. Where to go? What to eat? To see the country through my eyes and insist on making me see it her way.

"I'd like that, Nicole. But I've got to finish school."

Miss Patcharee explains that Thai people are very curious and ask a lot of questions when they meet you. This is normal, she says: "In your country, it may be rude to ask somebody you don't know very well a lot of questions. 'How old are you? Are you married? How much money do you make?' But in Thailand, everybody asks these questions. This is how we learn who you are and how to speak to you. So when a Thai person asks many embarrassing questions, do not be angry."

We practice asking embarrassing questions in class. When Sonjin, the Korean girl, asks me how many Thai women I have, I say four.

"What are their names?"

"Daeng, Nit, Suay, and Dii."

Nobody knows that I've given the names of women who work at the guesthouse. It's easier for them to believe that I have four Thai girlfriends than that I have none. Thais and foreigners alike assume that if you are a single man from the West, you have a Thai girlfriend, or you are looking for one, or you are gay. Anything is acceptable except not having a Thai girlfriend and not even looking for one. If you say you

have one or more Thai girlfriends, they leave you alone, but if you say you don't have a Thai girlfriend, they say, "You don't? Why not?" and then you have to explain. You begin asking yourself, "What's wrong with me? Why don't I have a Thai girlfriend like everyone else?"

Miss Patcharee teaches us the words for the different times of day. She explains that these words come from another time when there were no clocks, only the movement of the sun and stars across the sky. Nothing could happen at 2:45, for example, in the time before there was time; it could only happen in the afternoon.

"Now," she says, "you ask me question with morning, late morning, noon, afternoon, evening."

"Miss Patcharee," I ask when my turn comes, "what are you like in the morning?"

A new woman has joined the Bible students, and I've angled my chair on the balcony in such a way that I can keep a surreptitious eye on her. She's older, although not as old as me. Asian, although perhaps not entirely Asian. Her hair is short and very black; it shines marvelously. She's wearing a gray business suit with padded shoulders. She stirs a straw in a pineapple shake and listens intently to the German man, one of the leaders of the retreat, who is talking about a worldwide mission, going global in scale. Finally he stops talking and goes away. She's alone. She takes a book out of a black leather handbag and reads. I'm attracted to women who read because my notion of happiness includes lying in bed with someone reading. In this fantasy, we interrupt one another to speak only at long intervals, if at all. Our respect for one another extends to the other person's book. Right now while she's alone it would be possible to go downstairs and introduce myself. Everything would go well if I could remember to smile. If I smile too much she might notice that I'm missing a front tooth and draw conclusions about me from that, but if she is the kind of woman who draws such conclusions, I wouldn't want to be with her after all. Anyway, she's too well dressed, too respectable, too Christian and probably too married. The ring on her right hand. How would I appear to such a woman? A man with no apparent work or purpose in life other than studying a language that he will quickly forget when he leaves Thailand. A man who wears shorts and T-shirts and sandals, who rides songthaews or walks until the sweat breaks through his clothes. Just another of the aimless beer-sodden foreigners who spend all the hours after dark in tourist pubs looking hungrily at women. The only way I could distinguish myself in the eyes of such a woman would be to dress well and put on the guise of seriousness or ambition.

The guidebook says that it's possible to reside in Buddhist temples in Thailand if one is a Buddhist or can "act like one." In the same way, couldn't one act like a Christian and win the admiration and maybe even the love of the woman with the shining black hair?

I pretend to be reading my book, which I got from the school library, to keep her from observing that she's being observed. Someone has left a scrap of paper in the book, probably for a bookmark, with a handwritten message on it: "Went to Soi 1 to investigate cushions."

Now and then, something turns loose in me, and I stop resisting the idea of being here. Then I'm yanked back into the resistance. The turning loose happens most reliably when I can make myself understood in Thai. I go to the airport to get my passport fixed. The woman in the immigration office smiles more than obligingly when I explain the situation in Thai, a smile of complete understanding.

"How well you speak Thai!" she says in English.

"*Khun paakwaan,*" I reply. You're just sweet-talking me.

"No, no! Really!" She fixes the passport stamp and says that I can stay in Thailand until September, a full year from the date of entry. After that I can apply for another year, and so on indefinitely because I have a retirement visa. I can stay forever if I want. I could get a job at the university, have students who idolize me, buy a big shiny motorcycle and travel around, get a house in the mountains and hire handmaidens to cook and clean. Why not? Sit out on my own balcony in a rattan chair like a colonial lord and have the handmaidens bring me iced drinks.

After dark the desire for something sweet overcomes me again. Something sweeter than bananas. In order to get to the sweets from the guesthouse I have to cross Sriphum Road, wait for a break in the traffic and make a dash for White Elephant Gate. There is no such thing as pedestrian right-of-way in Thailand. Just the other day an English woman was hit by a motorbike trying to cross here and sat dazed on the curb, refusing my offer of a chair, until the ambulance arrived.

On the other side of White Elephant Gate, a moat separates the Old City from the world outside, and then comes Mani Nopharat, another four lanes of constant one-way traffic. I push the button that operates the traffic light, the only one of its kind in Chiang Mai, and when the traffic slows I make another run. It must be done in a way to make the drivers believe that you really mean to cross and will not stop for anything, and then you have to watch for those who will run the light, regardless.

On the other side I move through a carnival of eating stalls, clear-glass light bulbs strung treacherously head high, starving dogs with open sores, giggling schoolgirls in uniform with large bows at the neck, men selling shots of whiskey from a bottle on a wooden crate, a woman in tribal dress carrying a wok filled with rocks on her head, whole families, whole villages, all eating and talking, and not one person among them who knows me.

All at once I realize I'm in Asia. It's been here all along, no farther from the guesthouse than a mad dash through the gate which isn't a gate at all but a gap in the ancient wall wide enough to admit a herd of elephants, an absence, incapable of keeping anyone out or in: invading armies or lone tourist in the throes of a midnight sugar fit. All it took to get here was the risk of my life.

With a bag of sesame candy I move through the pandemonium, survive the return crossing and reenter the guesthouse. Miss Daeng and Miss Nit have gone to bed. The night clerk is snoozing at his desk, and out on the wooden deck in the courtyard, where the half-formed shapes of ferro-cement trees lie fallen by the koi pond, the woman with the shining black hair is eating watermelon and reading a Bible smaller than the hand that holds it. She is so intent on her study that she does not look at me as I pass, nor does she offer me a slice of watermelon. On her perfect ankle, like volcanic islands in the process of being born, is a chain of infected mosquito bites.

I tell Miss Daeng that I'll be leaving the Mountain View when my Thai class ends.

"What's the matter?" she says. "Are you boring?"

"Yes, I think that's the problem."

The rain wakes up a gecko, or what I assume to be a gecko, having never heard one before, a clack like two pieces of wood being struck one against the other or water dripping into water in a cave, greatly amplified, or an old dog that has lost part of its voice. People here kill geckos because they're noisy, I'm told, but nobody would dream of complaining about the two small dogs at the end of the lane who throw demented fits of barking at all hours of the day and night.

The rain excuses sleep, and sleep puts off my need to make better sense of all this. It's not really necessary to make sense of it in the way that eating and sleeping are necessary, but I *think* it is, and the thinking creates its own kind of necessity. Making sense of things—for example, my compulsion to hear the word "gecko" in the mechanical grunts of a lizard—is human and forgivable. So I'll forgive myself for thinking, as I'll forgive myself for going back to bed on a rainy morning. I'll lie

in bed listening to the "possible" gecko, as they say at the Office of Cultural Affairs. It may or may not be what I say it is. I'll listen to the rain on the guesthouse roof as sense departs.

After a night of heavy rain, the canal has flooded, and water is standing in four rooms on the ground floor. A nation of cockroaches emerges from flooded drains. Stunned by the light of day, displaced and having no other place to go, they collect on the walls, the branches of the manufactured trees, the tables and benches in the courtyard. They observe the guests and delicately taste the air with their long coppery antennae.

The staircase to the roof is opposite Miss Daeng's desk. It has been here every time I passed through the lobby to Sriphum Road over the past two months to walk along the canal or catch a songthaew, but this is the first time I've troubled to climb it. Three doors lead from each landing, rooms usually occupied by missionary students, all of whom have successfully avoided me for two months except in passing, and I them. They've all left for two weeks in the mountains to sleep on mats on the ground and eat the food that the villagers eat and talk about the Bible. Their final exam.

The staircase ends at a wooden deck where potted plants have been allowed to grow wild. Vines cling to the wire of a dovecote and meander between runs of pool-blue plumbing. The cook, Miss Nit, is there on break, smoking a cigarette. She leans against the parapet and watches the traffic on Mani Nopharat plow through the flooded street. Sometimes at night I've heard her screaming at her daughter, presumably for the same kind of reasons that parents scream at their teenagers in my country, and found it strangely comforting, a reminder of home in a land where it's considered rude if not disgraceful to show anger. Miss Nit's toughness shows in those dragon eyes at all times, even when she's enveloped in steam in the kitchen, and now, in the enticing way she leans over the parapet, pulls the smoke from her cigarette and releases it into the air.

"So much water," she says in English. "Too much."

"Where I live, there's never enough."

"It's dry?"

"Very dry. It's so dry that the trees are dying."

"I cannot live in so dry country."

The mountains are slowly coming out of the clouds after the storm. Nests of fog have snagged in the trees of the lower slopes, and higher up, behind a veil of vapor, I can barely see the white ramparts of Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, the first place one is expected to visit as a tourist

in Chiang Mai. I stand there on the roof with Miss Nit and watch the clouds dissolve.

"Have you ever been to the United States, Miss Nit?" ("Without question you cannot have conversation.")

"No. I want to go with my daughter. I would like to see your country. I would like to travel in different places and see different things. It must be wonderful to do that."

"Wonderful, yes."

"Where do you go now?"

"I don't know. I have to decide. Or maybe I won't decide. Maybe I'll just get on a bus and go."

"This is good way," says Miss Nit. "You visit Doi Suthep?"

The veil of cloud is lifting from the temple now. It stands newly washed and dazzling in the late afternoon sun.

"I've been too busy with my Thai class and everything. But I want to go soon, this week, before leaving Chiang Mai."

"When you go, please burn incense for me."

"Why don't you come with me? We can both burn incense."

"Thank you, but I have to work. You will burn incense for me on Doi Suthep?"

"Sure. Do I have to say anything?"

"No. Just light incense and think of me. Then give it to the Buddha."

Dawnyen. Evening. Soon the *jing-jok* will stake out their places on whitewashed walls all over the city and begin their remorseless hunt for insects.

Tom Ireland is an editor at the Museum of New Mexico. He's the author of an essay collection, *Birds of Sorrow*, and he received an NEA grant in creative nonfiction. His work has been published in *The Sun* and *Fish Drum*. This is his third appearance in *The Missouri Review.*