

# Remembrances of Red Trauma (2) - The room on the 7th floor

written by ภู กระดาษ | May 1, 2020



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*By Phu Kradat*

The tips of the hair on my forehead swayed as it flicked past. It made a loud dripping sound as it reached the floor. I looked up to see where it came from; the air-conditioning made a humming sound. Hanging from its white cover, it gently expanded, steadily growing plump. It would probably drop onto the floor again soon. Staring for a while, I then stooped down to look for where it was dripping. No trace. The white-tile floor had completely swallowed it up. I looked at it and then rubbed my feet over the floor until I found the spot where it was dripping and moved away from it.

I was standing outside on the balcony. The sun hadn't appeared all morning; it didn't come until the afternoon. The humidity in the air was probably at the same level as the water droplets. So humid that the sweat could not bring itself to travel around the pores. Goopy and so concentrated that it could almost burst its own body into pieces.

Only exhaling could vent the heat out from the body. But breathing alone was quite difficult already. It was as if there were many things perched on various parts of the respiratory system from the nostrils, the nasal cavity, pharynx, windpipe to the bronchioles.

Far down below me was a long line of taxis lining up under a tall and airy

roof at a gas station. In the same area, under a low roof and reaching beyond its eaves, dozens of personal vehicles were lined up. In the back of the gas station, the strong bodies of car wash staff were spraying water onto vehicles. Right on the footpath, close to the gas station's wall, a food stand was crowded with customers. Some people were standing while many others were eating at the tables. The steam from the boiler rose like a mountain after the rain.

They looked like office workers, like those who would usually scurry about on the street of Soi Waiti because the clothes they were wearing seemed more like office clothes, rather than casual clothes or pajamas. I thought that I dare not say for certain whether they really were office workers. That was because today was Sunday, a day-off of work.

Two soldiers held on closely to their weapons-small rifles-eyes fixed on the humvee of their commander who had shown up to briefly check in on them, and was now sailing away. Then I wondered to myself, "How many years have we been under the rule of the latest military dictatorship?"

The sound of cars honking and of engines whining and roaring loudly on Chan Road. A sniff of exhaust fumes and street smells floated up to assail the nostrils. I turned to my right side to see a flashing, shining billboard detailing a list of products. These advertisements were too far beyond my eyes's sight to be clearly identified. I slowly reframed panorama before my eyes, wider and wider. Countless tall buildings stood submerged in the dim of the day.

I stood outside for a while until my body began to protest. My body didn't hold any signs. It didn't shout or yell. It didn't engage in civil disobedience or use any hashtags (#). It just felt increasingly uncomfortable and agitated.

Then I went back into the room again.

The seventh-floor condominium unit left something to be desired in terms of size, though the room was superbly decorated. Based on a short briefing by the owner when I first arrived, this room had been turned from a most desolate state into a new, fresh and pleasant place to sleep or organize personal activities. The owner invested quite a bit of effort before it turned out to be like this.

When you opened the door into the room, you'd find the kitchen area on the left-hand side. There was a microwave, gas stove, and cabinets for kitchen equipment, and rows of cabinets divided into small spaces for various purposes. There was a compact refrigerator. But I could not quite tell what its exact dimensions were. It rested next to the sink. There were three bedrooms. One was adjoining the bathroom next to the other rooms, all arranged in the same fashion as the second and third rooms. The second room, or the one in the middle, was divided by curtains. A dining table with chairs and seven place mats stood in the middle of the hall and a lamp, set against the wall, stood about seventy or eighty centimeters away. All these things were laid out in an orderly and tasteful fashion.

I slid open the clear glass door that separated the balcony from the inside, back into place. I looked at the dining table. Today, someone would have to sit at the head of the table if everyone came as planned.

We had been discussing the perfect time for almost a month before agreeing on this day, and everyone should arrive in unison. It was not any special occasion at all. A few things had led to this appointment for dinner together today.

The owner of the condo, Karaket, just wanted to make it up to Chaniya for her advice on the doctoral study or dissertation she was working on. There were some parts that were related to the ideas of Hannah Arendt, and Chaniya had provided advice because she, herself, was also working on a dissertation about Arendt's concepts—of course, it was a personal matter between Karaket and Chaniya.

Neither the others nor I knew anything about it other than the name. Nonetheless, it won't only be Arendt that Karaket and Chaniya will talk about. They always pour their hearts out about everything in the world which makes them especially close. Their intimate familiarity had only grown when Karaket's father fell ill. And throughout the half year of watching over her father, Chaniya gave Karaket advice about treatment options, the mind, and Arendt.

Chaniya graduated from medical school. After having worked enough to pay back her loan and having built up enough savings, she poured her life

into the study of political science, first a master's and then a doctor's degree.

It was finally time again for another friendly get-together after failing to meet each other many times in the past. We had only met two or three of us at a time but never had a quorum of this size before. And finally, this appointment today also marked my moving into a new house (condo).

I threw myself down on the sofa and found that the pillows seemed to outnumber my needs. Before I leaned over to pick up the remote to turn on the TV and the receiver box on the glass table, I pressed the on-button on the flat screen TV, which had a size of probably no less than thirty inches, and the image and sound came up. I put the remote back in the same place and got up from the sofa. I walked up to the bookshelf under the TV console. Art and home decoration magazines, and novels were huddled together unobtrusively. I felt the book spines and read the titles of each book before taking one out. Green-red like a duck's head, the cover was Antonio Tabucchi's book translated into Thai by Nanthawan Charnprasert that I had already read, the *Sostiene Pereira*.

I sat back on the sofa and opened the book. The voices of TV show characters were heard in the background. The characters in the novel about the Portuguese dictatorship were laughing. I read the first page, and skipped to another, and skipped to another, and returned to another. I then looked up to watch the characters on the TV screen. I had no idea what drama was on. I placed the book on the glass table in front of me and looked around the room before lying back down on the sofa.

I closed my eyelids, only to hide my black eyes. I wasn't sleeping.

When Phakon and Nuankhae entered the room, I quickly got off the sofa to greet them and get a hug. I embraced Phakon. As for Nuankhae, I just gave her a smile. Phakon introduced his wife to me, and me to her. Nuankhae and I, we had never met before. But Phakon and I, in the past one or two months, we had met often.

And we were all doing well.

The first question he asked me—after insisting firmly that “You can talk about anything, brother. My wife doesn't mind”—was “Will Joi join us

today?”

I replied, “I’m not so sure. I’ll try calling him. He said before that he was busy and afraid he wouldn’t be able to make it. We’ll see.”

Nuankhae explored the condo. Phakon picked up the book that I had put on the table, and opened it. I tried calling Bodin again, but no one answered.

“Not answering,” I said.

“We can try again later,” Phakon said.

Phakon placed the book back on the table before turning around to look at me. We smiled at each other.

Nuankhae was still exploring the condo and said, “Who lives in this condo?”

I responded, “No one. It’s for rent, but no one wants it yet.”

Speaking to Phakon, Nuankhae said, “Shall we rent it? It’s near where we work.”

Phakon: “It’s interesting but the prices around here are not that cheap.”

I said, “It’s about 30-40 thousand a month. That’s what I’ve heard.”

Nuankhae groaned from the back of her throat. Phakon changed the subject and talk about his article that had just been published online in the Thai version of *Vice Versa* magazine, and which might become part of a print-to-order book.

The magazine focused on philosophy and literature, and he had written an article reviewing a literary book in that edition. Although he’d changed the subject to talk about that article, he didn’t go into much detail. And I had read that article and gave him feedback already so there was no need to speak about it in detail.

But when he said that he had a project to put the article into a book or something, I said it was a good idea. Then Phakon went on to talk about students who were studying with him in a course and were assigned to

read a book and summarize it, one book for each group. He spoke with tone of satisfaction about those students. I just agreed with what he was saying.

Anything could be said, no need to worry about his wife, but I still hadn't uttered a word. It was not because I didn't trust or doubted her but I was just too lazy to speak, and I didn't know why I had to say anything at all. So it was Phakon who started a new topic. Just a few sentences he spoke; I couldn't help but join in. Immediately I escaped my laziness. Nuankhae didn't join our discussion. She moved herself to the other bedroom, the one with the curtain separating the room, and laid down on the bed, playing with her smartphone.

We were talking with passion about the same old things that we had always talked about over the years. With dissatisfaction. With resentment and anger. With inconvenience and discomfort. It was bursting out like all hell was about to break loose. And every time it got heated, we still found comfort and satisfaction before we separated.

Then Chatchai entered the room, carrying plastic bags filled with food. Inside these plastic bags, there was *lab*, raw *koi*, soup, grilled brisket, and sticky rice. It looked like there was no less than three sets of each.

Chatchai wordlessly appointed himself the manager of the room, taking care and being responsible for everything—his main career was as an editor for some publisher which printed political analyses and hard-hitting stories against the government, and frequently had military men visiting his office. He walked towards the dining table, put the plastic bags down before greeting Phakon and me. Then Nuankhae got up from the bed, opened the curtain, and greeted him. Phakon introduced the two.

We were all doing well.

After that, Chatchai turned to ask Phakon and me, "Have you been here for a while?"

Nuankhae went back to her original position on the bed.

Phakon replied, "Not for long."

Chatchai asked, "Joi, Ket and Alam aren't here yet?"

I replied, "I can't reach Joi. I'm not sure if he's coming. As for Ket, she went out to pick up Alam. They should be here soon."

Chatchai said, "Uhm...I'm already hungry. I didn't have breakfast this morning."

I said, "Let's eat then, shall we?"

Pakhon smiled and then walked to Nuankhae, asking her to come out to eat together. But Nuankhae declined. So he came back alone. Chatchai and I walked to the cabinet where dishes were. Pakhon walked to the refrigerator and opened it-the inside of the fridge was loaded with two or three brands of beer, packed together-before he took out two cans for himself and Chatchai.

I put some plates on the table and poured the food out of the bags: the *lab*, *koi*, grilled brisket, and boiled soup. Then I handed one bag of sticky rice to each of them. Pakhon and Chatchai raised their beer cans and toasted before starting to eat.

It was quite an intense kind of eating. We ate and talked. We discussed everything. Anything could be said; nothing held us back. We talked about this and that. Any kind of matter, from complex mysteries and the deadliest, the most dangerous ideas that could land us all in prison, to the deep private stories. Here in this room, we could talk about anything. This room on the seventh floor. With dissatisfaction. With resentment and anger. With inconvenience and discomfort. It was bursting out like all hell was about to break loose. You didn't have to worry about anything entering or leaving this room. Nothing could penetrate this space of us. And Pakhon's wife was not an obstacle for us to talk openly, either. He had assured us already, and I had believed him.

Later, at the time when Karaket and Chaniya entered the room, the remnants of a battle on the table had already been cleared up. The greeting began again, in the same manner as I had greeted Phakon and Nuankhae, and as I, Pakhon, and Nuankhae had greeted Chatchai.

And we were all doing well.

After we finished greeting each other, Kamaket turned to ask me if Bodin

would come. I replied that I wasn't sure before I left the room to call him again. Everyone in the room then moved to find a place to be. Chaniya, Phakon, and Chatchai sat on the sofa. Kareket walked to the refrigerator and returned with a drink for Chaniya. Phakon and Chatchai raised their beer cans up and drank. Nuankhae sat on the bed with the curtain opened all the way.

I slid the glass door open. The sounds of cars and the hustle from the outside rumbled in. I looked at the gas station below. Those cars were still waiting in a long line. Then I pressed buttons on the phone to call Bodin. Someone answered.

I asked, "Can you come today?"

Bodin said, "Next time. I'm so busy today. I'll be finished at around 7 p.m. and it would take me forever to get there."

I said, "Okay. Let's talk again soon."

We talked about a few things before I hung up. But I didn't return to the room right away. I gazed around from the level down, the eye level, and the level above, before turning to stare into the room. Everyone's lips, except those of Nuankhae, were moving, conversing, and smiling, and touching bottles of alcohol. I looked on for a moment and then went back into the room.

The room was getting darker and darker. Karaket then turned on a lamp. It was not very bright but also not too weak. The soft and dim light made me feel warmer and safer.

I let everyone know that Bodin could not finish work and he probably couldn't come today. Everyone could only nod before Phakon said, "It's too bad. My wife had wanting to consult with Bodin about something. So I said, "I can give you his number so you can call him sometime."

Chaniya asked, "What food do we have? Do we have raw *koi*?"

Chatchai answered, "I bought three sets of food."

Chaniya said, "What are we waiting for? Let's eat!"



The war on the dining table was reignited. Nuankhae was stationed in the chair next to Phakon. Karaket took a bottle of Kavalan Single Malt out of the box and handed it to Chaniya to open and smell it before passing it to everyone to smell, and then poured out a glass for each of us. The beer was then temporarily ignored.

Switching between drinking, eating, and chatting. Many things gushed out onto the table. They could talk about everything—so things spilled out like the vomit of a drunken person and were often hard to understand.

From reconciliation after the killings in Cambodia, in South Korea, to peace talks, the moving of various concepts of foreign thinkers into Thai language books, about various books, fiction and nonfiction, to updating about another's work life before Karaket and Chaniya turned to discuss about Arendt among themselves.

I ate raw *koi*. Phakon, Nuankhae, and Chatchai were having some whiskey. After a while, Chananya turned to ask Phakon and Chatchai, "Where did tomatoes come from?" Then everyone debated, searched on Google to find their real source of origin, when and where it came from, and this seemed to be the longest-lasting topic of discussion. They then returned to discuss books. After that, they went on to stir-fried basil leaves with long beans and sweet basil leaves before moving on to another topic.

We discussed it fiercely. With dissatisfaction. With resentment and anger. With inconvenience and discomfort. It was bursting out like all hell was about to break loose. And at that moment Chatchai said, "How many years do you think we'll be under military rule this time?"

"Maybe ten or twenty?" Chanani answered.

And everyone fell silent. The sound of the air-conditioner replaced every sound. And we were still doing well.

Everyone looked at each other's faces, so pale with dull eyes. No one said anything anymore for quite some time. Chaniya took another spoonful of raw *koi* into her mouth. Chatchai raised his beer to drink. Phakon and Nuankhae sipped their Single Malt. Karaket got up, walked into the room and returned with a guitar. When she sat down, I got up from the table

and walked out to the balcony outside the room.

I did not drink more than two gulps but I felt dizzy. I slid the glass door open but I did not close it behind me. The sound from the outside, the cars, people talking, all hit in and spilled into the room.

I stared down below. People were still scurrying about. Cars were still being washed. Taxis were still waiting to fill up with gas. The restaurant was still crowded with customers.

One gun shot was fired and three more followed. I turned to let my gaze follow the sound. Two soldiers raised their rifles off their shoulders and fired another five shots each. As the shots rang out, the people below froze and then scrambled. Shortly after, a furious applause followed. Phakon, Nuankhae, Chatchai, Karaket, and Chaniya jumped up from the dining table and rushed out to join me on the balcony.

Chatchai asked, "What's happening?"

I replied, "Some soldiers fired their guns."

Karaket, "Shooting at what?"

I said, "I don't know."

Chaniya: "At people?"

Phakon: "Or at dogs?"

Me: "No idea."

Nuankhae, "Why are people clapping? Shall we go down to see?"

Nothing more was said about going down to see. We could only stand and stare at each other before going back into the room. I slid the glass door closed and we all walked back to the dining table.

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