

By Geoff Ryman

*Unconquered Countries*

*The Child Garden*

*Was*

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*Lust*

*The King's Last Song*

GEOFF RYMAN

*The King's Last Song*

or

*Kraing Meas*

HARPER

## *Awakening*

**You could very easily meet William.**

Maybe you've just got off the boat from Phnom Penh and nobody from your hotel is there to meet you. It's miles from the dock to Siem Reap.

William strides up and pretends to be the free driver to your hotel. Not only that but he organizes a second motorbike to wobble its way round the ruts with your suitcases.

Many Cambodians would try to take you to their brother's guesthouse instead. William not only gets you to the right hotel, but just as though he really does work for it, he charges you nothing.

He also points out that you might need someone to drive you to the baray reservoir or to the monuments. When you step back out into the street after your shower, he's waiting for you, big for a Cambodian, looking happy and friendly.

During the trip, William buys fruit and offers you some, relying on your goodness to pay him back. When you do, he looks not only pleased, but also justified. He has been right to trust you.

If you ask him what his real name is in Cambodian, he might sound urgent and threatened. He doesn't want you to think he has not told the truth. Out comes the identity card: Ly William.



He'll tell you the story. His family were killed during the Pol Pot era. His aunty plucked him out of his mother's arms. He has never been told more than that. His uncle and aunt do not want to distress him. His uncle re-named him after a kindly English aid worker in a Thai camp. His personal name really is William. He almost can't pronounce it.

William starts to ask you questions, about everything you know. Some of the questions are odd. Is Israel in Europe? Who was Henry Kissinger? What is the relationship between people in England and people in America?

Then he asks if you know what artificial aperture radar is. 'Are you a student?' you might ask.

William can't go to university. His family backed the wrong faction in the civil war. The high school diplomas given by his side in their border schools are not recognized in Cambodia.

William might tell you he lived a year in Phnom Penh, just so that he could talk to students at the Royal University, to find out what they had learned, what they read. You may have an image of him in your mind, shut out, desperate to learn, sitting on the lawn.

'My uncle want to be monk,' he says. 'My uncle say to me, you suffer now because you lead bad life in the past. You work now and earn better life. My uncle does not want me to be unhappy.'

This is how William lives.

He sleeps in his uncle's house. It's on stilts, built of spare timber. His eldest cousin goes to bed late in a hammock under the house, and the candle he carries sends rays of light fanning up through the floorboards. The floorboards don't meet so that crumbs can be swept through them.

There is a ladder down to the ground. There are outbuildings and sheds in which even poorer relatives sleep. There is a flowerbed, out of which sprouts the spirit house, a tiny dwelling for the animistic spirit of the place.

William and two male cousins sleep on one mattress in a

room that is partitioned from the others with plywood and hanging clothes.

William is always the first awake.

He lies in the dark for a few moments listening to the roosters crow. The cries cascade across the whole floodplain, all the way to the mountains, marking how densely populated the landscape is. William is himself in those moments. At every other time of the day he is working.

William looks at the moon through the open shutters. The moonlight on the mosquito net breaks apart into a silver arch. This is his favourite moment; he uses it to think of nothing at all, but just to look.

Then he rolls to his feet.

The house is a clock. Its shivering tells people who has got up and who will be next.

One of his cousins turns over. In the main room, William steps over the girls asleep in a row on the floor. He swings down the ladder into his waiting flip-flops and pads to the kitchen shed. Embers glow in moulded rings that are part of the concrete table-top. William leans over, blows on the fire, feeds it twigs, and then goes outside to the water pump.

Candles move silently through the trees, people going to check their palm-wine stills or to relieve themselves. A motorcycle putters past; William says hi. He boils water and studies by candlelight.

He has taught himself English and French and enough German to get by. Now he is teaching himself Japanese. He needs these languages to talk to people.

On the same shelf as the pans is an old ring binder. It is stuffed full with different kinds of paper, old school notebooks or napkins taken from restaurants. Each page is about someone: their name, address, email, notes about their family, their work, what they know.

William has learned in his bones that survival takes the form of other people. They must know you, and for that to happen



you must know them. Speak with them, charm them, and remember them.

A neighbour turns on her cassette player. Sin Sisimuth purrs a gentle yearning pillow of a song. The working day has begun in earnest. William snaps on the kitchen's fluorescent light, attached to a car battery.

Sometimes at this quiet hour, William is seized by a vision. A vision in which Cambodia is a top country. Like Singapore, it is a place of wealth and discipline. To be that, Cambodia will need different leaders, people who are not corrupt, and who do things well. Who remember other people.

William is possessed of a thought that is common among the poor, but seldom expressed: I know who I am.

And I am as good as anyone.

He discovered that as he hung around the university students. He had one pair of shoes, but they were spotlessly white. He'd sit down with a group and smile and get their names and give them his own. What do you study? they'd ask. Politics, he'd reply. He would find out what books they had to read for their courses.

The university students talked about fashion and mobile phones and motorbikes, just like anyone else. They looked soft and grumpy and made less effort than country people. Some of them made fun of his regional accent and didn't listen to what he said. That's OK, I learn from you, but you won't learn from me. He kept smiling.

There is a grunt and William's cousin Meak stomps into the kitchen. William calls him Rock Star. He has long hair and a torn T-shirt that says WE'RE SO FULL OF HOPE, AND WE'RE SO FULL OF SHIT.

'Hey, coz,' Rock Star murmurs.

William makes a joke and passes him his breakfast. Breakfast is a cup of boiled water. Rock Star is always smiling. He plays air guitar at parties, but he is the one family member who truly loves being a farmer. He loves his pigs. He even looks a little like them, smiling, short and bulky.

'I'm going out towards the Phnom for feed this morning. I could go and pay the families out that way for you.'

William's uncle and aunt are getting too old to work in the rice fields, so he pays other families a dollar a day to help with the harvest. But he must give them their money all at the same time, or there could be jealousy.

'Cool, cousin, thanks,' he says.

Rock Star grins sleepily. 'I know you can't wait to get to your foreign friends.'

Working for the UN dig team brings in seven dollars a day during tourist season. William has a contract with them; he shows up there first to drive one of them if they need him. That money pays for many things.

Outside, as tall and handsome as William, his cousin Ran goes to wash. He is so proud of his artificial leg. It is one of the best. He goes to wash at the pump wearing only a *kramar* round his waist so that everyone can see that he is not angry at life and very grateful to William. He waves and smiles. William sold all his ten cows to buy the leg.

William must always prove his value to the family.

Aunty comes next. Even first thing in the morning, she does not wear traditional dress. She is a modern woman, with curled hair and lipstick. She smiles at William and takes over in the kitchen. She is as kind and loving to him as if he were her son. William goes back to learning *Kanji*. Outside on a bamboo pole are his clean clothes for the day, washed by his cousin. In his baseball cap, trousers with big pockets and track shoes, he will look like a teenager in any suburb of the world.

My family, William thinks with fondness and gratitude. Where would I be without my family?

**You would meet Map easily as well.** Or rather, you would not be able to escape him.

He would scare you at first. Map is forty-four years old and



smells of war. His face is scarred, and his smile looks like a brown and broken saw.

But he is wearing a spotlessly clean brown police uniform, and he seems to be patrolling Angkor Wat in some official capacity. As if in passing and wanting nothing from you, he starts explaining the pools to you in good English. The four dry basins you see so high up in Angkor Wat symbolize the four great rivers flowing from Mount Meru.

The information is of better quality than you expected. You smile, say thanks and try to edge away, dreading another request for money.

'You've missed the main bas-reliefs,' he warns, again as if in an official capacity. 'Come this way.' He leads you down steps, to the bas-relief gallery. The stone is polished, the detail amazing. Map explains scenes from the Mahabarat and the Ramayana. He turns a corner and explains that the roof of this gallery is how all the galleries would have looked.

You might ask him if he is a trained tourist guide. He tells you, 'I work for Professor Luc Andrade of the United Nations dig team. I do their website.'

That throws you for a moment. Who is this guy?

He points to carved soldiers in strange uniforms. 'These are mercenaries. Nobody trust those guys,' he says. 'Like me. I used to be Khmer Rouge, but I changed sides and joined Hun Sen. They made me march in front, to step on landmines.'

Then he tells you, smiling, that he guarded a Pol Pot camp. It wasn't a camp; it was a village, in a commune; but Map knows what Westerners expect. He knows he has you hooked.

He takes you on a tour of hell, the long bas-relief of people being tortured. Map lists them all for you.

*The frying pan, for people who kill embryos.*

*Pot baking for trusted people who steal from gurus.*

*Forest of palm trees for people who cut down trees unduly . . .*

'We need that in Cambodia now,' he says and smiles. 'People cut down all our forest.'

He points to someone hammering nails into people's bones. 'I was that guy there,' he says.

*Howling, for those who are degraded . . .*

Today, 11<sup>th</sup> April, Map gets up later than William does, but then he worked all night. He's a Patrimony Policeman, protecting Angkor from art thieves. He sleeps off and on in a hammock strung across the doorway of the main building.

Then he works all day as well, anything to add to his salary of sixteen dollars a month.

This morning, he has persuaded an adventurous *barang* to sleep alongside him in another hammock. The foreigner, a German, is swathed in mosquito nets and smells of something chemical. He is pink and splotchy and still has on his glasses.

Map rocks him awake. 'Come on,' Map says in German, 'it is time to see the sunrise.' The man has paid him ten dollars for the privilege but like all tourists is so scared of theft that he has hidden his tiny digital camera in his underpants. Can you imagine how it smells? Map thinks to himself. I wonder if it's taken any pictures inside there by mistake.

The German sniffs, nods.

Map chuckles. 'You never been in a war.' The German looks miffed; he thinks he's a tough guy. 'You wake up in the morning in a war, pow! Your eyes open, wide, wide, wide, and you are looking, looking, looking.' Map laughs uproariously at the once daily prospect of being shot.

In the early morning mist, the five towers of Angkor Wat look magnified, as if the air were a lens. Map leads the German up steps, past scaffolding to the empty pools. He considerably takes hold of his elbow to lead him up onto the next level.

Here are tall staircases to the top of the temple. They taper to give the illusion of even greater height, and they are practically vertical, more like ladders than staircases.

'People say these steps are narrow because Cambodians have small feet.' Map grins. 'We're not monkeys! We don't like pointing our bums at people. These steps make people turn



sideways.' He shows the German how to walk safely up the steps.

Then, as a joke, Map sends him up a staircase that has worn away at the top to a rounded hump of rock with no steps or handrails.

The German finds himself hugging the stone in panic. From here, the drop looks vertical. Map roars with laughter. The German looks back at him and his eyes seem to say: this wild man wouldn't care if I fell!

He is not wrong. There is something deranged about Map. He has been shooting people since he was twelve years old.

Map chuckles affectionately, and nips around him and up and over the stone on his thick-soled policeman's shoes. He crouches down and pulls the German up.

'You have a lot of fun! You don't want to go up the staircase with a handrail.'

'Uh,' says the German, just grateful to be alive. He turns and looks down and decides that, after all, he has just been very brave. Adventure was what he wanted. 'Not too many old ladies do that!'

Even at this hour, the pavilion around the main towers is full of people. Other Patrimony Policemen greet Map with a nod and a rueful smile at his tourist catch. A large image of the Buddha shelters in the main tower, robed in orange cloth. Black-toothed nuns try to sell the German incense sticks. He buys one and uses that as an excuse to get a series of shots of an old woman with the Buddha.

Map leads the tourist through a window out onto a ledge, high up over the courtyard, which is itself above ground level. It is what, a hundred, two hundred feet down to grass?

The ledge is wide – twenty people could easily sit down on it. The German grins and holds his camera out over the edge to take a picture. Over the top of the surrounding wall, trees billow like clouds, full of the sounds of birds and smelling like medicine.

'So,' says the German, fiddling with his automatic focus. 'There are many bas-reliefs on Hindu themes. Did Cambodians become Buddhist later?'

'There was a king,' says Map. The morning is so quiet and bright he wonders if he can be bothered trying to make this foreigner understand who Jayavarman was and what he means to Cambodia.

'When Angkor Wat City is conquered, he takes it back from the foreigners. He make many many new temples. Angkor Thom, Ta Prohm, Neak Pean, Preah Kahn, all those temples. He make Cambodia a Buddhist country. After there is Hindu revolt, but Cambodians still remember him.'

Map says the King's name, feeling many complex things: respect, amusement, love. The German asks him to repeat it.

'Jayavarman Seven.' Map can feel his smile stretch with sourness.

He thinks about the five-hundred-dollar bribe he paid a few years ago to get a job removing landmines. He bribed the wrong person and didn't get the job. He'd sold his motorbike to get the money. Originally he wanted to use it to pay for his wedding, but he thought the job would be a better investment. His fiancée left him.

He thinks of all the so-called leaders and the tangled, self-serving mess they are making of the country. 'Now we need Jayavarman.'

**The gold leaves have slept for a thousand years.**

Two metres down, below the range of ploughs and metal detectors, they lie wrapped in layers of orange linen and pitch.

They were carried at night, hurriedly, jostled under a bridge and plunged down into the mud by the canal to keep them safe. They were cast in imitation of a palm-leaf manuscript, inscribed and inked. The leaves still yearn to speak, though the ink has long since soaked away.

The canal overhead simmered in the heat, then silted up. The



water ceased to flow. The soil was parched and inundated by turns for centuries. Rice reached down, but never touched the leaves or their linen wrappings.

Gold does not rust. Insects and rodents do not devour it. Its only enemy is greed.

On 11<sup>th</sup> April, in a version of 2004, something fiercely invasive drives itself into the Book. A corer grinds its way down through five packets of leaves. Then it hoists part of them up and out of the ground.

For the first time in a thousand years, light shines through the soil, linen and pitch.

The Book is awake again.

Light shines on a torn circle of gold. It shines on writing. The words plainly say in Sanskrit, 'I am Jayavarman.'

### Leaf 1

My name in death will be Parama Saugatapada. In life, I bore a king's title, Victory Shield, Jayavarman. I will be known as Jayavarman the great builder, father of the new city, the wall-builder of Indrapattha. I am lord of the temple that is like no other, the temple that is history in stone, the great Madhyadri. I will be known as the founder of the King's Monastery. I will be known as the son of Holy Victory City, Nagara Jayasri that rose like a flower beside the Lake of Blood. My face will greet those who come to the City for a thousand years. My son calls it my Mango Face, ripe and plump. My Mango Face looks four ways, in the cardinal directions. My face is the four Noble Truths. I am Jayavarman, the bringer of the new way that subsumes the old and surmounts it.



### Leaf 2

The Gods themselves listened to the great soul (Buddha) for enlightenment. So it is that the new kingship enlightens the old. This new kingship builds walls to protect the City and builds love in the hearts of the people. Love is also a wall to protect the City. I once had the name of Prince Nia, Hereditary Slave. How a prince came to be called Slave is only one reason why I burn to do a new thing. I will turn the eyes of language away from dedications and gods. I turn my gaze towards people, just as I caused my temple the Madhyadri to honour the images of farm girls and merchants and Chinese envoys. I turn the light of my mind to ordinary days. My words will show lost people. My words will show the sunlight of great days now turned to night. My words will show parades and elephants and parasols whose march has long since passed into dust.



## April 1136

The Prince was supposed to be asleep with the other children.

The adults were all in their hammocks. Only insects were awake, buzzing in the heat. To fill the silence, the Prince stomped up the wooden steps as loudly as he could.

The King's gallery was empty. The gold-embroidered curtains breathed in and out as if they were asleep. The only other person he could see was a servant girl dusting the floor.

The girl was about four years older than the Prince. Maybe she'd want to play. He broke into a run towards her, but then lost heart. Old palace women with wrinkled faces and broken teeth would pick him up and fuss over him, but pretty young girls with work to do would be told off for it.

The Prince grew shy. 'Play with me,' he asked, in a soft breathy voice.

The girl bowed and then smiled as if there was nothing more delightful than to be approached by a person of his category. 'I must work,' she beamed, as if that were a pleasure too.

He was a *sujati*, a well born person. The girl was bare-chested, some category of worker. A diadem of wooden slats was tied across her forehead, and the stain across her temples was her passport into the royal enclosure. The Prince watched her clean. For a moment it was interesting to see the damp cloth push



grains of food through the knotholes and gaps in the floorboards.

Then boredom returned as unrelenting as a headache. Boredom drove him. It was nearly unbearable, the silence, the sameness.

The thin floor rested high off the ground on stilts. The floorboards gave the boy the foot-beat of a giant. He lifted up his bare foot, drove it down hard, and felt the whole house quiver. He giggled and looked back at the girl and then took more high, hammering steps across the floor.

The girl paid no attention.

No one wore shoes, so dusty footprints trailed across the red gallery floors where the girl had not yet cleaned.

To the Prince they looked like the tracks of game across a forest floor.

He was a hunter in the woods. He charged forward. 'I see you, deer! Whoosh!' He let fly imaginary arrows. 'I see you, wild pig! Whoosh I get you!'

He looked back at the girl. She still dusted.

Suddenly the footprints looked more like those of enemy troops. He imitated the sounds of battle music: conch shell moans and the bashing of gongs. He paraded, thumping his feet. He was a Great King. He waved the Sacred Sword over his head and charged.

He thundered back down the length of the gallery, wailing.

The girl still dusted, looking hunched.

He could be naughty, this prince. He had a formal name, but everybody nicknamed him Catch-Him-to-Call-Him, Cap-Pi-Hau.

All right, Cap-Pi-Hau thought, you want to be slow and boring, I will make you play.

He ran back and forth up and down the empty gallery until the entire floor shivered. He shouted like a warrior. He cried like egrets on the Great Lake, surprised by battle and keening up into the sky.

He stalked down the front steps and out into the thinly grassed enclosure. He pummelled his way back into the gallery. He ran in circles around the girl. He bellowed as loudly as he could and jumped boldly, no steps at all, out of the house and fell face down onto the dry ground. He billowed his way back into the gallery, trailing dust behind him.

Each time he ran past her, the little girl bowed in respect, head down.

Most devilish of all, he clambered up the staircase to the forbidden apartments on the storey above. He rumbled all the way to the head of the stairs and spun around, to see if he had succeeded in making her follow him, to chastise him and pull him back down.

Instead the little girl looked mournfully at her floor.

Everywhere she had already cleaned there were footprints and shadow-shapes of white dust.

She dared not look at him, but her mouth swelled out with unhappiness. Abruptly she stood up and took little whisking steps towards the entrance.

Cap-Pi-Hau tumbled out of the door after her to see if he could join in.

She took nipping steps down the front steps to the ground, holding up her beautiful skirt, palace-blue with gold flowers. What was she doing?

'Ha ha!' he said, a harsh imitation of a laugh to show this was good, this could be fun.

She held up her mournful face. She took her cloth to the ceramic water butt and wrung it out.

'What are you doing?' he demanded.

'I will dust the floor again,' she said, and turned away from him.

He followed her up the stairs. Suddenly, his feet felt weighed down. He hauled himself back into the gallery and saw the floor patterned with his dusty footprints.

Cap-Pi-Hau only slowly realized that the weight he felt was



sadness. He had wanted to make the little girl happy, he had wanted to have fun, and now he had a terrible sense of having destroyed something.

He felt his eyes swell out, as if to burst like fruit into tears. Why did everything turn out bad? Why was fun never possible? Why was it always learning, chanting, sleeping, bowing, and silence?

The girl knelt down and began to dust again. Maybe she would get a scolding or a beating.

Cap-Pi-Hau trundled towards her, softly now. 'I have a thought,' he said.

Her swollen, sad face still would not look at him.

He had thought of a way to make dusting fun. Gently he coaxed the cloth out of her hands. 'I'll show you,' he whispered.

He laid the cloth flat on the floor. Then he stepped back, ran at it and jumped.

The floor had been smoothed by years of cleaning. It had to be free of splinters so that bare feet could walk on it.

Cap-Pi-Hau landed on the cloth, and it slid across the floor, bearing him forward, harvesting dust.

He giggled and turned back to her. 'See? See?' he demanded. A butterfly of a smile fluttered briefly on her lips.

He laughed and applauded to make her smile again. Then he walked all the way back to the edge of the pavilion and ran. It seemed to him that he shook the entire house. When he jumped onto the cloth, physical inertia swept him even further across the floor.

'I am the Great King who leads his people!' he shouted. 'I am the Great King who leads troops in polishing floors!'

The slave girl giggled and hid her mouth.

'You go!' Cap-Pi-Hau insisted. 'It will be fine. I will say that I ordered it.'

The girl gathered up her skirt. Her ankles looked like twigs. In comparison, her feet looked big, like the heads of buffaloes. She ran and jumped and slid only a moment.

Not enough. She spun and commandeered the cloth, and stepped back and ran again. She was older than the Prince and her co-ordination was better. She pelted down the floor, leapt and was swept on. She stood erect, skirts fluttering, and she turned to him and this time her mouth was swollen with a huge, smug grin.

The next day Cap-Pi-Hau asked one of the nannies, 'Where do slaves come from?'

The old woman waved her hands. 'Oh! Some are the children of people taken in battle. Some are presents given to the King. Many are given to the temples, simply to get rid of them. Most are attached to the land, like cows.'

The woman had a face as hard and polished as wood furniture. Taken in battle? Given away? Do they know their families did not want them, did not love them?

The other six- and seven-year-olds were corralled together outside in the shade of the enclosure temple. There was to be a great procession soon, and they would have to learn their parts.

The royal temple of the Aerial Palace, *Vimana-akasha*, rose as a holy mountain in stone and stucco layers. Painted red, black and gold, the temple baked in the heat. Birds landed on the steps and hopped away back into the air, the stones were so hot. The palace children roasted inside their quilted jackets.

The Prince demanded, 'If I wanted to find one of the slave girls, how would I do it?'

'Oh!' The nanny showed her false teeth, which were made of wood. 'You are too young for that, young prince. That will come later.' She beamed.

'If I want to be friends with one of them now, how would I find her?'

The smile was dropped suddenly like an unleashed drapery. 'You have your cousins to be friends with. Your destiny is to lead troops for the King. I should not grow too attached to



the slaves of the royal household. You will not always live here. Your family lands are off in the east.' She looked suddenly grumpy, and for some reason wiped the whole of her face with her hand.

The children, seated in ranks, stirred slightly with the light breeze of someone else getting into trouble.

The nanny's face swelled. 'You will be turned out of this house. You forget your real situation. The time has come to stop being a child.'

Before he thought anything else, the Prince said aloud, 'Then we are all slaves.'

The nanny's jaw dropped. 'Oh! To say such a thing!' She gathered her skirts and stood up. 'It shows your foolishness, Prince Whoever-you-are. Slaves work, while you sit still in your jacket. You will be at the head of the troops so that the enemy will kill you first, and that is your destiny!'

She started to strut. The thin line of her mouth began to stretch into a smile. 'You think you are a slave? We will call you slave, ah? *Khnom!* Or are you a hereditary slave, a *nia*? Shall we call you Prince Hereditary Slave?' Her voice was raised. Some of the Prince's cousins, rivals, giggled. 'Children, children listen.'

The nanny grabbed Cap-Pi-Hau's shoulders and pushed him in front of her, presenting him. 'This young prince wants to be called Nia. So will we call him Nia? Ah? Yes?'

This was going to be fun. The children chorused, 'Nee-ah!' The Prince tried to shrug her off, but she held him in place. 'Nia! Ni-ah-ha ha!' chuckled the children of other royal wives, other royal uncles, other royal cousins. They had already learned they had to triumph over each other before they could triumph over anything else.

The nanny settled back down onto the ground, full and satisfied, as if she had eaten. The laughter continued.

Cap-Pi-Hau also knew: there are many princes, and I will be nothing if no other princes follow me.

He strode to her and faced her. She was sitting; their faces were level. His gaze was steady and unblinking.

Seated, the woman did a girlish twist and a shrug. 'What of you?'

The Prince felt his face go hard. 'I am studying your face to remember you, so that when I am older you will be in trouble.'

From a prince of any degree, that was a threat. She faltered slightly.

The Prince turned his back on her. He said to the other children. 'This woman is a slave. This is what we do to slaves who mock us.'

Then he spun back around and kicked her arm.

'Oh, you little demon!' She grabbed him.

Cap-Pi-Hau sprang forward and began to rain blows about her face. Each time he struck her he called her, accurately, by the name of her own lower category. '*Pual!*' He said it each time he struck her. '*Pual! Pual! Know your place!*'

'Get this monkey god off me!' she cried.

Perhaps she had also been hard on the other women, because they just chuckled. One of them said, 'He is yours to deal with, Mulberry.'

Her legs were folded, tying her to the spot. She could hit back, but not too hard, even if this was a prince far from the line of succession.

Finally she called for help. 'Guard!'

The bored attendant simply chuckled. 'He's a prince.'

'Nia! Nia! Nia!' the other children chanted not knowing if they were insulting him or cheering him on.

The nanny fought her way to her feet. 'Oh! You must be disciplined.'

'So must you.' The young prince turned, and stomped up to the guard. 'Your sword.'

'Now, now, little master . . .'

Cap-Pi-Hau took it.

The woman called Mulberry knew then the extent of her



miscalculation. She had imagined that this quiet child was meek and timid.

'What are you going to do?' she said, backing away.

He charged her.

She turned and ran and he slapped her on her bottom with the flat of the sword. 'Help! Help!' she was forced to cry.

The children squealed with laughter.

The tiny prince roared with a tiger-cub voice. 'Stop, you pual! Talk to me or I will use the blade.'

She yelped and turned, giving him a deep and sincere dip of respect.

'Hold still,' he ordered. 'Bow.'

She did, and he reached up to her face and into her mouth, and pulled out her wooden false teeth. He chopped at them with the sword, splintering them.

'These teeth came to you from the household. For hitting a prince, you will never have teeth again.'

She dipped and bowed.

'Now,' said Prince Hereditary Slave. 'I ask again. How do I find a particular slave girl I like?'

'Simply point her out to me,' the woman said, with a placating smile. She tinkled her little bell-like voice that she used with anyone of higher rank. 'I will bring her to you.'

The guard was pleased. He chuckled and shook his head. 'He's after girls already,' he said to his compatriot.

**The next day, Cap-Pi-Hau found the girl for himself.**

It was the time of sleep and dusting. He bounced towards her. 'We can play slippers!' he said, looking forward to fun.

She turned and lowered her head to the floor.

'Here,' said Cap-Pi-Hau and thrust a slipper at her. She had no idea what to do with it. It was made of royal flowered cloth, stitched with gold thread. She glanced nervously about her.

'You do this!' said the Prince. He flicked the slipper so it

spun across the floor. 'The winner is the one who can throw it farthest.' He stomped forward and snatched up the shoe, and propelled it back towards her. She made to throw it underhand.

'No, no, no!' He ran and snatched it from her. 'You have to slide it. It has to stay on the floor. That's the game.'

She stared at him, panting in fear. Why was she so worried? Maybe she had heard there had been trouble.

Cap-Pi-Hau said to her in a smaller voice, 'If you make it go round and round it goes farther.' It was the secret of winning and he gave it to her.

She dipped her head, and glanced about her, and tossed the slipper so that it spun. It twirled, hissing across the wood, passing his. She had beaten him first go, and Cap-Pi-Hau was so delighted to have a worthy adversary that he laughed and clapped his hands. That made her smile.

His turn. He threw it hard and lost.

The second time she threw, she lost the confidence of inexperience and the shoe almost spun on the spot. The Prince experimented, shooting the slipper forward with his foot. So did she. The two of them were soon both giggling and running and jumping with excitement.

He asked her name.

'Fishing Cat,' she replied. *Cmâ-kančus*.

The name made him laugh out loud. Fishing cats were small, lean and delicate with huge round eyes. 'You look like a fishing cat!' Instead of laughing she hung her head. She thought he was teasing her, so he talked about something else, to please her.

'Do you come attached to the royal house, like a cow?' he asked. Groups of slaves were called *thpal*, the same word used for cattle.

'No, Sir. I was given away, Sir.'

This interested the Prince mightily because he had been given away as well. He pushed close to her. 'Why were you given away?'



Her voice went thin, like the sound of wind in reeds. 'Because I was pretty.'

If she was pretty, he wanted to see. 'I can't see you.'

She finally looked up, and her eyelids batted to control the tears, and she tried to smile.

'You look unhappy.' He could not think why that would be.

'Oh no, Prince. It is a great honour to be in the royal enclosure. To be here is to see what life in heaven must be like.'

'Do you miss your mother?'

This seemed to cause her distress. She moved from side to side as if caught between two things. 'I don't know, Sir.'

'You're scared!' he said, which was such an absurd thing to be that it amused him. He suddenly thought of a fishing cat on a dock taking off in fear when people approached. 'Fishing cats are scared and they run away!'

Her eyes slid sideways and she spoke as if reciting a ritual. 'We owe everything to the King. From his intercession, the purified waters flow from the hills. The King is our family.'

The Prince said, 'He's not my family.' Fishing Cat's head spun to see if anyone could hear them. The Prince said, 'I miss my family. I have some brothers here, but my mother lives far away in the east.'

Cat whispered, 'Maybe I miss my mother too.' Very suddenly, she looked up, in something like alarm. 'And my sisters, too. And my house by the river. We lived near the rice fields and the water. And we all slept together each night.'

Cap-Pi-Hau saw the house in his mind.

He saw the broad fields of rice moving in waves like the surface of the Great Lake, and long morning shadows, and the buffaloes in the mire, and rows of trees parasolling houses along the waterways.

He saw home.

He himself had been brought from the country, carried in a howdah with nine other distressed, hot, fearful children. He dimly remembered riding through the City, its streets full of

people. Since then, he had not been allowed outside the royal enclosure.

Cap-Pi-Hau had only been able to hear people from over the walls. The calls of stall owners, the barking of dogs, the rumbling of ox-cart wheels and the constant birdlike chorus of chatter. For him, that was the sound of freedom. He kept trying to imagine what the people were like, because he heard them laugh.

Cap-Pi-Hau asked, 'What did you like doing best?'

She considered. 'I remember my brother taking the buffalo down to the reservoir, to keep cool. It would stay in the water all day, so we could too.'

Cap-Pi-Hau thrust himself up onto her lap, and suddenly she was like an older sister, tending the babe for her mother.

'I want to stay in the water all day,' he beamed. 'I want to drive water buffaloes. Great big buffaloes!' Something in the sound of that phrase, big and hearty, made him explode with giggles.

Finally she did too. 'You are a buffalo.'

'I'm a big big buffalo and I smell of poo!' He became a bouncing ball of chuckles. Even she chuckled. Laughter made him fond. He tilted his head and his eyes were twinkly, hungry for something different. He writhed in her grasp. 'What else did you do?'

She had to think. 'My brother would catch frogs or snakes to eat. He was very brave.'

'You hunted snakes and frogs?' Cap-Pi-Hau was fascinated. He could see a boy like himself, skinnier maybe. They would hunt together in the reeds. He mimed slamming frogs. 'Bam! Bam!' he grinned. 'Flat frog! Yum. I want to eat a flat frog.'

She joined in. 'I want to eat mashed cricket.'

'I want to eat . . . monkey ears!'

That joke wore out. He asked about her family. She had six brothers and sisters. They were the nias of a lord who lived far away from the perfect city. Their canal branched off from



the meeting of the three rivers, far to the south. She could see all of that, but she could not remember the name of the place.

All of her brothers and sisters slept in a tidy row on mats. When one of them was sick, that child slept cradled by their mother. So they all pretended to be sick sometimes. One night, so many of them said they were sick that Mother turned away from them all. Then their mother got sick herself. With no one to work the fields, they had to do something to feed all the children, so Fishing Cat was sent away.

The Prince still wanted fun. 'And you never went back, never, never, never.' He rocked his head in time to the words. 'I never went back either.'

Something seemed to come out of them both, like mingled breath.

'What's your name?' she asked, because Cap-Pi-Hau was a nickname.

'Nia!' he said, delighted, and started to chuckle again. 'I am Prince Slave!'

'I will give you orders!' she chuckled, something irrepressible bubbling up.

'I will have to dust floors for you,' he giggled.

'I will say, you, Prince, come here and help me with this thing.' She snapped her fingers.

'You can call me Prince Nia.'

She chuckled. 'You can call me Princess Nia!'

For some reason the laughter faded.

'I hardly remember my home either,' said Cap-Pi-Hau.

Until the day of his marriage, Cap-Pi-Hau called himself Prince Nia. When people expressed astonishment at the choice he would explain. 'All princes are hereditary slaves.'

#### The day of the procession arrived.

The Sun King's great new temple was to be consecrated.

Prince Nia stood high on the steps of an elephant platform. Ahead of him the next batch of hostage children crowded

the platform, scowling at the sunlight, flicking their fly whisks.

The Prince had never stood so high off the ground. He was now level with the upper storey of the Aerial Palace. There were no walls and all the curtains were raised.

He saw servants scurrying, carrying, airing, beating – taking advantage of their mistresses' absence to perfect the toilet of the rooms. Category girls ran with armloads of blackened flowers to throw them away. They beat cushions against each other. They shifted low bronze tables so that the floor could be wiped.

In the corners, musical instruments were carefully stood at attention, their wooden bellies gleaming. The lamp hooks screwed into the pillars were swirling bronze images of smoke or cloud-flowers. The rooms had handsome water butts of their own, with fired glazed patterns. The pillars on the upper floor were ornately carved, with images of celestial maidens, as if the rooms were already high in heaven.

He could see the lintels and the gables close up. Monsters called *Makara* spewed out fabulous beasts from their mouths. Gods abducted women. Brahma rode his giant goose; Krishna split a demon *asura* in two. Regularly recurring shapes of flames or lotus petals were embedded with glass pieces. And the roof! It was tiled with metal, armoured like a soldier's breastplate. The metal was dull grey like a cloudy sky, smooth and streaked from rain. So many things had been kept from him!

An elephant lumbered towards them. It was old, and the howdah on its back wobbled on its loose skin.

It was not a good elephant. The howdah was functional, no carvings. The beast came close to them and coughed, and its breath smelled of dead mice.

Now the King's elephant! Its tusks would be sheathed in gold, and the howdah would rest on a beautiful big carpet!

The children began to advance one at a time onto the elephant's unsteady back.



And the King himself, is he blue, Nia wondered, like Vishnu? If he is the Sun Shield, is he blinding, like the sun?

Someone shoved Nia from behind, trying to push him aside. Nia thrust back and turned. It was an older, more important prince. 'Get out of the way. I am higher rank than you.' It was the son of the King's nephew.

'We all climb up and take our turn.'

At the top of the steps, a *kamlaa*-category slave herded them. 'OK, come on, press in, as many as possible.' He wore only a twist of cloth and was hot, bored, and studded with insect bites. He grabbed hold of the Prince's shoulders and pulled him forward. Nia tossed his shoulders free. He wanted to board the howdah by himself. In the future, I will be a warrior, Nia thought; I will need to be able to do this like a warrior. He saw himself standing with one foot outside the howdah, firing his arrows.

The *kamlaa* peremptorily scooped him up and half-flung him onto the howdah. Prince Nia stumbled onto a girl's heel; she elbowed him back. Nia's face burned with shame. He heard older boys laugh at him.

Then the *kamlaa* said, 'OK that's enough, step back.'

The King's nephew's son tried to crowd in, but the *kamlaa* shoved him back. The higher prince fixed Nia with a glare and stuck his thumb through his fingers at him.

The elephant heaved itself forward, turning. Was the procession beginning? Prince Nia craned his neck to see. All he saw was embroidered backs. Nia prised the backs apart and squeezed his way through to the front. Two older boys rammed him in the ribs. 'You are taller than me,' Nia said. 'You should let me see!'

The elephant came to rest, in no shade at all. They waited. Sweat trickled down the Prince's back.

'I need to pee,' whispered a little girl.

Adults lay sprawled in the shade under the silk-cottons. Soldiers lay sleeping, wearing what they wore to battle, a twist

of cloth and an amulet for protection. Cap-Pi-Hau scowled. Why didn't they dress for the consecration? Their ears were sliced and lengthened, but they wore no earrings.

The musicians were worse. They had propped their standards up against the wall. A great gong slept on the ground. The men squatted, casting ivories as if in a games house. Did they not know that the King created glory through the Gods? That was why their house had a roof made of lead.

The afternoon baked and buzzed and there was not enough room to sit down. Finally someone shouted, 'The King goes forth! The King goes forth!'

A Brahmin, his hair bundled up under a cloth tied with pearls, was being trotted forward in a palanquin.

The Brahmin shouted again. 'Get ready, stand up! Stop sprawling about the place!' He tried to look very important, which puffed out his cheeks and his beard, as if his nose was going to disappear under hair. The Prince laughed and clapped his hands. 'He looks silly!'

Grand ladies stood up and arranged themselves in imitation of the lotus, pink, smiling and somehow cool. Category girls scurried forward with tapers to light their candles or pluck at and straighten the trains of threaded flower buds that hung down from the royal diadems.

The musicians tucked their ivories into their loincloths next to their genitals for luck. They shouldered up long sweeping poles that bore standards: flags that trailed in the shape of flames, or brass images of dancing Hanuman, the monkey king.

A gong sounded from behind the royal house. A gong somewhere in front replied. The tabla drums, the conches and the horns began to blare and wail and beat. Everything quickened into one swirling, rousing motion. The procession inflated, unfolded and caught the sunlight.

The footsoldiers began to march in rows of four, spears raised, feet crunching the ground in unison and sweeping off the first group of musicians along with them. A midget acrobat danced



and somersaulted alongside the musicians and the children in the howdahs applauded.

Then, more graceful, the palace women swayed forward, nursing their candles behind cupped hands.

'Oh hell!' one of the boys yelled. 'You stupid little civet, you've pissed all over my feet!'

Prince Nia burst into giggles at the idea of the noble prince having to shake pee-pee from his feet.

The boy was mean and snarled at the little girl. 'You've defiled a holy day. The guards will come and peel off your skin. Your whole body will turn into one big scab.'

The little girl wailed.

Nia laughed again. 'You're just trying to scare her.'

Scaring a baby wasn't much fun. Fun was telling a big boy that he was a liar when there wasn't enough space to throw a punch. Nia turned to the little girl. 'They won't pull your skin off. We're not important enough. He just thinks his feet are important.'

Nia laughed at his own joke and this time, some of the other children joined in. The older boy's eyes went dark, and seemed to withdraw like snails into their shells.

Endure. That was the main task of a royal child.

Suddenly, at last, the elephant lurched forward. They were on their way! The Prince stood up higher, propping his thighs against the railing. He could see everything!

They rocked through the narrow passageway towards the main terrace. Nia finally saw close up the sandstone carvings of heavenly maidens, monsters, and smiling princes with swords.

They were going to leave the royal house. I'm going to see them, thought the Prince; I'm going to see the people outside!

They swayed out into the royal park.

There were the twelve towers of justice, tiny temples that stored the tall parasols. Miscreants were displayed on their steps, to show their missing toes.

The howdah dipped down and the Prince saw the faces of slave women beaming up at them. The women cheered and threw rice and held up their infants to see. No men, their men were all in the parade as soldiers.

Beyond them were their houses – small, firm and boiled clean in tidy rows. Planks made walkways over puddles. The air smelled of smoke, sweat, and steaming noodles. The Prince tried to peer through the doorways to see what hung from the walls or rested on the floors. Did they sleep in hammocks? What games did the children play?

'What are you looking there for, the tower's over there!' said one of the boys and pointed.

Tuh. Just the Meru, the Bronze Mountain. They could see that any day. Its spire was tall, but everybody said that the King's great new temple was taller.

The road narrowed into shade and they passed into the market. The Prince saw a stall with an awning and a wooden box full of sawdust. Ice! It came all the way from the Himalayas on boats in layers of sawdust. He saw a Chinese man press a chip of it to his forehead. He had a goatee, and was ignorant enough to wear royal flower-cloth. The Khmer stall-wife was smiling secretly at him.

The howdah slumped the other way. The Prince saw sky and branches; he steadied himself, clinging to the rail, and looked down. Beyond the stalls were ragged huts, shaggy with palm-frond panels. A woman bowed before a beehive oven of earth, blowing air into it through a bamboo pipe.

The air smelled now of rotten fruit and latrines. The Prince saw a dog chomp on the spine and head of a fish.

Splat! The little girl squealed in fear. Over-ripe rambutan had splattered over their shoulders. Overhead, boys grinned from the branches of trees and then swung down. One of the kamlaa took off after them with a stick.

Along the road, other people watched in silence.

One of them gazed back at Nia. His mouth hung open with



the baffled sadness of someone mulling over the incomprehensible. How is it, he seemed to ask, that you stand on an elephant in flowered cloth, and my son stands here with no clothes to wear at all?

The man standing next to him was so lean that every strand of muscle showed in lines like combed hair. His gaze turned to follow the howdah, insolent, fierce, and angry.

These were the great people of Kambujadesa? The young prince didn't like them at all. They were ugly, their houses were ugly, and they smelled.

This was Yashodharapura, abode of the Gods, the perfect city. The soldiers should come and take away all such people.

The procession moved on, into the precinct of the holy mountain, Yashodharaparvata.

Here in the old centre of the City, everything was better. Wives of temple workers, all of them royal tenants, waved tiny banners. Their hair was held in handsome fittings, and they wore collars of intricate bronze.

Nice people, smiling people. They dipped and bowed and held up their hands for princes, as was fitting.

Their houses stood on firm stilts and were linked by covered walkways. Airy cloth bellied outward from the rooms. The Prince glimpsed the canals beyond, full of boats. Amid fruit trees, carved stone steps led down to small reservoirs.

Prince Nia turned around and saw stone steps going all the way up the miraculous hill of Yashodharaparvata. The trees were hung with celebratory banners, and the gates to the hilltop temple had sprouted poles that supported ladders of coloured cloth. From the top of the hill, golden kites swooped and dipped. The kites reflected white sunlight that continued to dapple the inside of the Prince's eyes long after he looked away.

The procession passed into orchards and rice fields and dust began to drift over the howdah like smoke.

Suddenly they came upon a new, raw desert. All the trees had been cleared, their fresh yellow stumps staring out of the

earth. Dust blew as if out of a thousand fires, and above rose the new temple, the *Vishnuloka*.

The Prince was disappointed. The five towers were not that much bigger than the spire of Mount Meru. They were made of raw uncarved stone, unfinished and undecorated blocks that bore down on each other. The towers looked like the toy buildings he himself made out of clay cubes. Some banners trailed limply from the scaffolding.

Ahead of them, pickaxes rose and fell out of a great ditch. Men struggled up the banks, passing baskets of dirt to queues of women and children who swept the baskets away hand-to-hand into the distance. Boys ran back with empty baskets. To the Prince the workers looked like busy termites swarming around their nests.

More banners bobbed on poles that marked where the entrance would be. The elephant passed between them and rocked the children up onto a causeway that crossed the moat. The moat looked like a dry riverbed running due north, sweltering with a few puddles.

The elephant did a slow dance round to join a row of waiting elephants. The Prince saw the puffy faces of other children in howdahs sagging in the sun. They waited again, on a plain of churned earth.

The Prince craned his neck to the right. 'I can't see the rest of the parade,' he said.

'Aw, poor little baby,' said the boy whose feet had been peed on.

Another elephant full of unwanted princes churned up the dust and came to rest beside them. Dust polished the Prince's eyes every time he blinked.

Finally an elephant strode past them, shaded by two heaving parasols. The howdah was carved and balanced on a beautiful rug, and on it stood a high-born warrior. He wore a felt coat and a diadem and a bronze tiara, rising up like an open lotus. He stood holding his arrows in his hand.



That was more like it!

White horses pranced, lifting their feet high, but holding to formation. Their riders rode on their unsaddled backs, hands on hips.

Behind the horsemen came a ballistic elephant, a crossbow on its back. Its protecting infantry marched in rows alongside it.

A third elephant followed, with a solid shell of wood over its back. Resting one foot outside the ornate howdah, a real warrior prince stood in full armour with a crown and a metal breastplate tied across his chest.

Prince Nia squealed in delight, and leaned so far out of the howdah that he nearly fell.

Soldiers trooped past. These were nobles. They wore flower-cloth chemises and their topknots were held in metal tiaras in the shape of totemic beasts: eagles or tigers or deer, which showed that they were fast, or fierce.

More horses wheeled past, white like falling water. The Prince's military heart danced. Then, oh! Their riders stood up and pulled back their bows and let loose flaming arrows. They arched up into the blue sky over the southern moat.

Nia was beside himself. He yelled and shouted and pummelled the shoulders of the bigger boys next to him. Suddenly affectionate, they laughed with him, pleased by his fervour, sharing it.

'Steady, Little Warrior,' one of them chuckled.

The other rocked him by the shoulders. 'You will have your chance of battle soon enough.'

The little prince cried aloud. 'We are the soldiers of the world! We are the warriors of the Gods!'

Some of the troops heard him, and they waved and smiled. The sun was in the sky at the same time as a pale daylight moon. Auspicious or what?

The soldiers passed and boring high-rankers followed. Women reclined in carved palanquins. Fly whisks and fans

replaced swords. The elephants had a bit more glitter, but who cared? Glitter does not need skill.

One elephant, bigger than the rest, heaved its way through the fog of dust. The howdah was a bit bigger than most, too. An old man wearing a temple-tower tiara stood up in the howdah with all the usual stuff. He had a lean, pinched face like an old woman.

It was not until the man had passed with a forest of parasols and nothing further followed that Prince Hereditary Slave realized: that must have been the King. That old man had been Sun Shield, Suryavarman. The King, it seemed, was just another soldier.

The dust settled, but the thought remained.



*April 11, 2004*

Luc Andrade steps down a little stiffly from a white Toyota pick-up.

He feels thin-legged and pot-bellied. Too old really for beige Gap jeans and blue tennis shoes. Out in front of him stretch the plains of Cambodia.

Luc sighs. He loves the heat, the silver sky, and the wild flowers clustering in the shade. The palm trees always remind him of Don Quixote with his lance – tall, stretched thin and riding off into the blue distance. And perhaps of himself.

In the back of the pick-up truck, Map and two of his friends from the Patrimony Police are gathering up tents and rifles. Mr Yeo Narith steps out of the cab. Luc has spent a lifetime reading Cambodian smiles and Narith's wan, tight smile is still angry.

No one is supposed to excavate anywhere in the precincts of Angkor without an APSARA representative being present. APSARA defends the interests of the artefacts and the monuments. They contend with tourist agencies, art thieves, airways passing too near the monuments, or museums in Phnom Penh – interests of all kinds. The last thing APSARA needs is to find it cannot trust its archaeological partners.

'*Allons-y,*' says Luc. Narith is of the generation who finds it



easier to speak French. He nods and extends an arm for Luc to precede him down the bank.

Out in the field, the contractor is guarding his find, next to a motorcycle and William, the spare driver.

Luc skitters a little awkwardly down into the field. Underfoot, the harvested rice crackles like translucent plastic straws.

It's April, the end of the dry season and horribly hot. Luc is Director of the United Nations archaeological project. Most of his UN dig team have gone home, except for one Canadian excavator and Sangha, the Cambodian dig manager. Work is normally finished by the end of March, but the project might not get financing for next year. Since the JPL/NASA overhead flights four years ago gave them a radar map of the old road and canal system, their trench has uncovered one unremarkable stone yoni and nothing else.

A white sheet is spread out on the ground, and rocks and earth are lined up in order along it. Village children squat, peering at the stones. As Luc approaches, the contractor and William the driver stand up. The children chew the bottoms of their torn T-shirts. The contractor from the university hangs his head and kicks the white dust.

So, thinks Luc, he came out here with William and took a risk. The augur, a long slim white tube a bit like a hunting stick, lies abandoned. The contractor grasps two full lengths of pipe. God knows how he got the augur that deep in all this dry ground. William probably sat on the handles.

The contractor is called Sheridan. He's a microbiologist, out here to identify where he will core in the rainy season. Like Luc, he works at the Australian National University. The UN dig has paid for only four days of his time.

Sheridan launches into his apologies. They sound heartfelt, but Luc shakes his head. 'I still don't understand how it happened. You know the rules.'

'I knew this was where a bridge crossed a canal. The ground was still very wet, and I thought: why not just do a test, see

if this will be wet enough in rainy season . . .' His voice lowers. 'I was trying to save you money.'

At least he hasn't laid the gold out on the ground for the village children to see. They walk back towards the pick-up to look at the find.

At the top of the embankment, Map guards the truck. Map jokes with someone, an old farmer. The farmer has a face Luc has often seen in Cambodian men of that age. The eyes are sad and insolent all at once. The man glares at Luc over half-moon spectacles and stalks away. Map shakes his head and calls, 'Hey, Luc!' then surfs down the embankment on his heavy police boots.

'Oh-ho, is that guy ever unhappy with me. He came and said this is his field and we can't stay.' Map strolls companionably alongside Luc. 'I told him to go buy a mirror and practise smile. I said that you guys find something that Cambodians can't use - knowledge.' Map claps his hands together. 'He used to be my CO in the Khmers Rouges, and he didn't like me then, either.'

Map outrages people. He drives the APSARA guides crazy by stealing their business. He exasperates the Tourist Police by taking elderly foreigners to stay in country farmhouses. A single red cotton thread barricades his wrists with some kind of magic and his long fingernails are a mottled white like the inside of oyster shells. Luc once wondered if Map was an exorcist, a *kru do ompoeu*. Map told him that he uses the fingernails for fighting, 'like knife'.

But he takes good photographs, speaks French, English and German and knows HTML.

Inside the cab of the pick-up, away from the village children, Sheridan reaches into his rucksack and takes out a disk about twice the size of a silver dollar, dull yellow with crinkled cookie-cutter edges. Luc sees Sanskrit.

Gold. Writing. From Angkor.

'We've got to excavate as soon as we can,' Luc says to Narith.



Narith then telephones. They already knew they were going to have to camp out all night to guard the find. Mr Yeo asks for more police, with guns.

Outside, the old farmer marches up and down the dyke. Wind blows dust up around him, Map, all of them, like the smoke of war.

### They dig through the long afternoon.

The walls of the tent run with condensed sweat. Luc, two volunteers from the Japanese dig and Jean-Claude from Toronto are crouched inside a trench, brushing away dirt.

Slowly, rows of packets wrapped in linen are emerging.

'*Meu Deus!*' mutters Jean-Claude. For some reason he always swears in Portuguese. He gestures towards the packets. 'There's at least ten packets there,' he says to Luc, in French. 'Ten to a packet, that's one hundred leaves.'

They've found a book. An Angkorean book made of gold.

Map darts from side to side taking photographs from many angles.

William, the motoboy, leans over the trench, looking forlorn. Luc can't let him leave in case he tells anyone about the find. He's trapped here. He knows that.

Luc pulls himself out of the trench and gets cold cokes from the chest. He passes one to William.

'What we're trying to do,' Luc explains to William in Khmer, 'is to get as much information as we can about the earth around the object. See the side of the trench? See, it's in layers, white soil, brown soil, then black soil? That will tell us a lot about when the leaves were buried.'

William dips and bows and smiles.

Map intervenes. 'Hey, Luc. You think we should take the book out of those packets and photograph it here?'

Luc shakes his head. 'No. The packets will have information too. We could photograph what the augur pulled up. The disks.'

The ten torn disks are laid out on the ground. The gold is

brown, thicker than paper, but not by much. A light slants sideways across their surfaces, to make the incisions clearer.

Luc can read them.

The text comes in torn snatches across the face of the ten disks. Luc's breath feels icy as he reads.

... *who conserves perpetuity* ...

... *men seek for heaven and its deliverance* ...

... *the ninth day of the moon* ...

'We have a *saka* date,' Luc announces. The Japanese volunteers stand up to hear. Luc is so skilled at this that he can do the conversion to the European calendar in his head. The text is about a consecration in 1191 AD.

'It's twelfth century. The time of Jayavarman Seven.'

'One hundred leaves from the time of Jayavarman?' Even Yeo Narith rocks back on his feet. Map looks up, his face falling.

'*Plus que ça,*' mutters Jean-Claude inside the trench. He holds out his hands as if at a Mass. He has brushed aside all the loam. Inside his trench, lined up in rumpled, pitch-coated linen, are fifteen packets of ten leaves each. 'Plus there is one smaller packet to the side,' he says.

One hundred and fifty leaves of gold?

Art gets stolen in Cambodia. It gets chopped up, incorporated into fakes, shipped across the world, sold by unscrupulous dealers. If it's gold, it might get melted down.

Luc turns to Yeo Narith. 'Who do we trust in the Army?'

### William can't go home.

It's late at night. The tent glows in the middle of the field like a filament.

Around a campfire, William and Map face each other. Working for the same boss, they should be polite and friendly with each other, but Map won't even look at William.

Many other people sit drinking coffee: Dik Sangha, officials from APSARA, Map's captain from the Patrimony Police, and a friend of Teacher Andrade's from the École Française



d'Extrême Orient whose name William keeps trying to catch. Patrimony Police stand guard round the field. They've already stopped people with shovels and metal detectors.

Map cradles his gun. He's been sipping beer all evening and his face is bright red. He grins and tells unsuitable stories.

William is mystified. Teacher Andrade trusts Map and gives him responsibility. Map knows about the Internet and a lot about the monuments. He could teach these things to William, but he won't.

William thinks: when I started to work for Teacher Andrade, you were friendly. Now you won't talk to me or even look at me. I've done nothing to you.

Map is talking in English. 'So my older brother and me go to shoot the Vietnamese. They have a big ammo dump behind the Grand Hotel. And my older brother Heng is crazy man. You think I'm crazy, you should see Heng. He strap grenade launcher to his wrist. One launcher on each arm. He fires both at the same time, kapow, kapow. I hear him breaking his wrist. But he keep shooting, shooting. I say, Older Brother, you are a crazy guy. Then all that Vietnamese ammo goes up, huge big fire and I have to drag Heng home.'

Map pauses. His eyes get a wild look to them.

'He died of Sweet Water Disease. Diabetes. Nobody give him insulin.'

Another sip of beer, a shaking of the head.

We are not tourists, William thinks. There is nothing you can get from us by telling sad stories, over and over, boasting about your wars.

'I went to look for my parents, all that time. I look all over Cambodia. I have to go AWOL to do it. And it turned out they are dead since the Lon Nol era.'

William has noted that Map's sad stories do not add up. He also tells a story in which his uncle tells Map when he is twelve that his parents are dead and Map goes to hide in a haystack. Both cannot be true.

There is something wrong with Map's head.

'Cambodian joke,' says Map and grins. He is so ugly, thinks William. He has a big mouthful of brown teeth that push out his jaw, his nose is sunken, and his face is covered in purple lumpy spots.

Map tells a story about a truck driver who has to stay in a farmer's house. He sleeps in the same room as the farmer's daughter. The truck driver gets to do everything he wants to with the daughter. In the morning the farmer asks, did you sleep well? The truck driver says, yes, your daughter is very beautiful, but her hands are so cold! Ah, says the farmer and looks sad, that is because she is awaiting cremation.

Map roars with laughter and pummels his foot on the dust. He looks at Teacher Andrade's frozen smile and laughs even louder.

William shakes his head. He says in Khmer, 'That is not a good story to tell someone like Teacher Andrade. What will he think of us?'

'He will think we tell funny stories.'

'He will think we are not respectable.'

Map still won't look at him. 'He knows more than you do.'

William shrugs. 'He is a great teacher and of course knows more than I do.'

'You know nothing.' Map lights a cigarette.

William has had some beer too and his tongue is loose. 'Why don't you talk respectfully to me? If I have done something wrong, you should tell me what it is, so I can correct it.'

Map sneers. 'Monks tell you that?' He finally looks at William.

'Yes.'

'You're so *peaceful*,' says Map, smiling slightly. He sits back, inhales and watches. 'I do all the fighting, you have all the getting. I march for forty years, you go to school. You have a pretty girlfriend, I have no family.'

'My mother and father are dead,' says William.



Map is silenced and looks away. His face closes up like a snail going into a shell and he coughs. He says nothing for a very long time.

William believes in connection. It is how he survives, and he is good at it because he practises on people whom no one else can reach.

All right, thinks William. I promise. I promise that you will be my friend. I will have your name and history in my notes, and you will know my family. We will celebrate New Year together.

There is a rumble of trucks in the dark. All the Europeans stand up. The Patrimony Police lift up their rifles. The trucks stop, their brilliant headlights go off, and a full colonel strides down the bank towards them. His lieutenant follows.

The Colonel holds up his hand, and greets Yeo Narith as if they are old friends. William's ears prick up; he does not know this Colonel. He must be from somewhere other than Siem Reap. The Lieutenant is Sinn Rith, a man William knows is far too rich to have earned all his money from soldiering.

Teacher Andrade trusts these people?

In Banteay Chmar, it was the Army itself that stole the bas-reliefs.

They enter the light of the fire and Tan Map grins.

'Lieutenant-Colonel Sinn Rith! My old friend!' Map cackles with glee.

Sinn Rith is impassive behind his sunglasses. He mutters in Khmer, thinking the Europeans won't understand. 'The Frenchman's brought his dog.'

Whew! William has to expel breath. They hate Map. What's he done? Sinn Rith fingers the handle of his pistol. Map's captain looks alarmed, eyes flickering between them.

The Colonel's polite smile does not falter. He ignores Map, and greets the scholars, shakes their hands, and says how privileged he feels to be asked to help protect such a treasure. Can they view the find?

Still grinning Map leaps to his feet. 'I am the dig photographer, I do the UN dig website,' he says, every word directed at Sinn Rith. 'It would be an honour, Colonel, to explain the finds.'

He is so rude! The man has no shame. He is humiliating everybody, making them look small. Dik Sangha, the Cambodian dig director is smiling but he's shaking his head. Map swaggers his way in, laughs, and claps Sinn Rith on the shoulder.

Sinn Rith flings off his hand.

Inside the tent, the Colonel has to exclaim over the packets. 'So many!'

'We actually think it's written by Jayavarman himself,' says Yeo Narith. Luc explains. The Sanskrit text uses first person. It seems to be memoir. By the King himself.

The Colonel shakes his head. 'For such a thing to come to the nation now. It is a gift from heaven.'

The lamps baste the interior of the tent; it is roasting and airless. Back outside Map sits down and says to William, 'Hey motoboy, go get me a beer.'

Teacher Andrade says gently to William, 'Perhaps the officers would like one as well, William.'

It gives William something to do. He sompiachs and makes himself look lively.

Even inside the tent, getting the beers, he listens to the debate.

The Army, it seems, want the Book to stay in Siem Reap. William thinks: the generals all own hotels, they want a museum here for the tourists.

The archaeologists say the Book needs to be repaired. It should go to the National Museum in Phnom Penh.

'Is it safe anywhere?' the French archaeologist asks.

Map takes his beer from William without even looking at him. He smiles and says, 'The Army want to take care of the Book to earn merit to make up for all the people they killed.'



It is too much for Sinn Rith. He turns his head with a snap.  
'Like all the people you murdered?'

Map still smiles. 'Everybody knows not even Buddha himself  
can keep a Khmer Rouge out of hell.'

The next day, the Army resolves all debate. They send a heli-  
copter to airlift the Book out of the field.