

Leaf 85

I called to the brave soldiers, the courageous men. I said to them, all the reservoirs are stained with blood. We have little sweet water. First we will wash with the water and then we will drink it. We will drink each other, but then we have shared so much already. The deserving warriors plunged their elbows into the cisterns and poured the water over their heads into their mouths. I said to the women, prepare a feast, a feast from nothing, boil rice flour into dumplings, bake the dried fish on skewers. Nia and pual came with herbs and other good things. The women brought bowls of food, singing. The hungry men ate. Come, Comrades, I said, let us have games of fighting with blunted lances. Let no one be injured, let all enjoy. They fought each other in quilted jackets and they smiled. The musicians beat gongs and drums and blew the conch shell. The sons of Kambu danced beside the lake of blood. They had won. They were home.



Leaf 86

I thought of Suryavarman who left no heirs. I had a fierce and noble son who was incomplete, and a Kumara who was strong but a devotee of Siva. So I called for the noble Vidyanandana without parallel, the son of Jaya-Harideva. I asked him to climb up beside me and I said to all my warriors, look at this great prince and ally who today saved my life once on water and once on land. Look at the brave soldier and noble prince. Does anyone doubt that this is a man of wisdom and spirit? Does anyone doubt that he is our ally? The assembled gave assent, cheering Vidyanandana. It was then that I thought I might make a Cham my heir, to join the Kingdoms in peace. A year later, after his service in Malyang, I gave Vidyanandana the title of Yuvaraja, another form of Crown Prince. I made a Cham my son.

Leaf 87

I walked through my dead City, burned years before. The Aerial Palace stared through charred foundations like the sockets of a skull. I heard the echoing laughter of childhood friends. I saw my beautiful Cat as a child slave polishing floors. I heard the giggling of Jayarajadevi as a girl. I saw a plump little fellow run and wondered: who is that? In the upper floor, made of stars and spider webs, sat Yashovarman, King. His hands crawled over his face thinking of betrayal and of his own weakness. In the lower floors towered Suryavarman. Like a giant mantis he lifted up his arms in blue moonlight, speaking in a voice like dust. You have come home, my son. Our City has been burned and you are fifty years old, and I never thought you would be King, though I loved you. This is why I made myself a god, so I could go on learning.



Leaf 88

I saw the faces of my burnt people wandering through their burnt streets. They could only rustle like leaves in the wind. They could only stare as they have always stared: hungry, bewildered, and angry. Poor homeless spirits! Boys in the trees who threw mangoes, fathers in the streets, mothers selling flour from stalls, all of you whose homes, names, hopes, and loves were destroyed by the foolishness of kings, I mourn for you. I promise you that everything will be restored. I see a golden window in a new hall. All people, no categories enforced, will come and make their cases, demanding justice. The making of justice will be my main work. I felt the world turn about me for I had spoken to the past, and made a promise to the future. I saw both laid out before me like shadows on the forest floor. I felt the moon turn around the earth, the sun move through the sky and stars. They all joined hands to hold the universe together. In this way, in moonlight, I was at the centre of the world.

Leaf 89

The fires smouldered; the dawn came quietly. Over the tops of the trees I saw the great Vishnuloka, the eternal prayer of stone. I saw Mount Meru, and the royal mountain. It was then that I said, all this is past. Now there will be a new beginning. I will make a new city here. I will rebuild the wooden pavilions. I will build new temples on new models and I will encircle Yashodharapura, all of it, with a great wall so that none may overwhelm it again. I began in a slow way to be joyful. I gave praise to the Gods and I counted the time I had left. I realized that this happens to all men. We all visit the ruined palace of our face, our friends, our youth, and start again.

It was my people who did the starting.

Season of Drought and Sweating

Map loves prison.

They live four to a cell and are locked in with a bucket behind an iron door. It's hot and it stinks. The tiny window is blocked by their clothes, which they wash in the same bucket and hang out to dry. The food regime is brutal: rice if you're lucky, and soup if you're not. Everything that Map likes.

Map is scared of no one. He enjoys a good fight and gives back whatever anyone gives him four times over with a gleaming smile. He's one of the scariest guys in the place, but he's also sane. Doesn't start fights, but ends them.

It's April again, New Year, and Sinn Rith comes to visit Map.

Rith's not sure why he keeps coming. When someone bears injustice with such equanimity, you have to respect them.

It was a hard story to believe. An old woman comes walking out of the rain and hands you a translation of the *Kraing Meas*. You don't know her name or address and she can't be found.

If only the translation had been wildly inaccurate. But it matched the photographs of the Book. You or someone must have had the *Kraing Meas*. Where is it? they kept asking. And you just laughed.

'We're going to get nowhere,' you said, as if it were all some kind of celestial joke.

Visitors and prisoners mingle in the big hot concrete courtyard. In one corner, some of the guys play *saprak takwa*, kicking a badminton cock. Some of the kids practise sounding like beat-boxes and rapping. Rith and Map stroll together round and round the yard as if on Sivutha Street.

Rith is dismayed by Map's appearance. His long fingernails are starting to curl round on themselves, and the red thread on his wrist has turned into a kind of beaded amulet. His hair is long, matted and held by hair grips, and there are all kinds of paraphernalia dangling from his neck, including a pigeon feather and a beer-bottle cap.

'Map, you look like a crazy man,' says Rith.

'Yep. Good crazy,' says Map, and holds out his arms and smiles, as if welcoming the sun, the dry concrete, and the smell of sweat. 'Do those idiots still think Professor Luc Andrade stole the Book?'

'Oh. His colleagues go all quiet when he is mentioned. He is dead after all. I think they have decided not to decide. The police? Well, they have all the convictions they can use.' Rith laughs and shakes his head. 'They arrested everybody. Motoboys, people on the docks, half of Clean Hen, Saom Pich's wife! They were so scared of losing the tourists. They just wanted to show everybody how safe Siem Reap is.'

'How quiet it is, with all those people in prison.'

'William asked how you were. I said I didn't know, but I'd see you and let him know.'

Map laughs, and imitates Rith. 'Map's gone crazy! All the pressure has driven him mad.'

Rith persists. 'Do you have anything you want me to say to him?'

Map pauses and tries to think of something emotional to say and dissolves into giggles. 'Tell him I wish he was here! No, no, no don't say that!' Map's voice goes quiet and businesslike. 'How is he?'

'He got married. Did you hear? To a cousin of his. He found

an Australian university that does degree courses on the Internet. The UN dig team helps him a lot, they let him use their computers. So he's going to university at last.' Rith shakes his head. 'I've asked him to talk to my layabout son.'

Map's eyes are dim but his smile is thin as if satisfied and his head rocks from side to side. 'I told him. I said, he would have all kinds of good luck, just so long as he stayed away from me.'

'Why is that?' There is something Rith doesn't understand. William asks after Map, but doesn't come to see him. All the time Rith talks to him about Map, William looks edgy and unquiet, trapped in his own house. 'Are you bad luck for everybody, or just him?'

Map tells him, almost serenely. 'I killed his parents.'

Rith's eyes sag shut. He has to hide them with his hand. 'I didn't know that.'

'Neither did he for a while.' Map looks cheerful. 'So it's pretty good going that he can even talk about me without hatred. William,' says Map with finality, 'is an advanced spirit.'

With a twinge, Rith realizes that Map has been able to say that with absolute authority.

They will kill him eventually, when they think nobody's looking.

Which is another reason for Rith coming to visit, in his army uniform. Some respectable people are watching.

Map leads Rith sauntering towards the shady wall. Some of the guys are terrible-looking fellows with deep creases in their cheeks, broken teeth, stained shorts, missing hands, knife wounds, faces as immobile as pig's behinds. They shift very slightly to let Map pass.

Rith has to control a little tremor of fear.

'Has the Book been published yet? Did that printer I gave it to do anything with it?'

Rith shrugs. 'I don't know about books.'

Map's eyebrows wiggle. 'I do. Books aren't necessary when

you have a people. Books grow out of people, and if you have the people first, the books will trail after them.'

They make their way to a small group of men sitting on the ground. They do not look nearly as threatening as some of the others. Skinny little guys, here for drug offences probably, or pimping. They all wear red threads around their wrists. Map squats down to talk, and tugs at Rith's trousers.

'OK, roostershits, listen up. This is my good friend Sinn Rith. He fought in the wars; he told people at the trial that I was a good man full of remorse. But despite that he's clever.' The men chuckle. Most of them have lost teeth, and there is a kind of self-protective air about them. They're a group, Rith thinks. Map's little band.

'If anybody hurts him, I promise you, I'll make him eat his own testicles.' Map makes a slitting gesture with his fingernails. The men chuckle again. 'Then I'll make him eat yours!' More laughter. Map's voice goes husky and insinuating. 'Only gently, so you like it.' They hoot with shock.

These are the guys who can't rely on brawn or sheer cruelty. These are the guys who make bad drawings to pass the time, or act in plays or weave cloth.

Around them, the courtyard plays on, huddled around cards or dice, or doing push-ups. One of the rap guys is strolling over, handkerchief tied over his head, blue football shirt in his hand.

'OK,' says Map. 'Yesterday we got near the end. Last two. I go first?' A murmur of assent. In a low, slow voice, sounding like he's playing a game of dominoes for money, Map starts to talk.

There's an aspect of the Buddha that can't be carved in stone. An image of him would need to be carved in the wind, because he is always moving, sweeping his arms over the heads of the grain. This is Bhaishajyaguru who heals. The smile of the Healing Buddha is not distant and calm, but crumples into

weeping. His eyes are not closed in meditation, but are startled open, thick along the lower edge with tears.

Map mimes it, the crumpled lower lip that still smiles, the wide stare. It's a look that Rith recognizes. From knowing Map.

The Healing Buddha is small. He is the pattern on the wings of a butterfly. He is the scales on the gecko's feet. Children work in the fields hammered by heat and they hear him. He whispers to the gleaners who sift the straw. He shivers in the April flowers. Bhaishajyaguru reminds us of the variety and sweetness of the world, as it was in the past and will be again, even when men have made it stink of charred wood and drying blood.

Total silence for the count of five.

'OK, who wants to do 150?' asks Map.

'I do,' says the rap kid. He talks Khmer like a foreigner. He's Khmer-American, Rith realizes. He got into trouble there, so they deported him to Cambodia, and now he's in trouble here.

The kid starts to bounce up and down and makes a kind of whooshing noise. Once he's going, he starts to drawl the words.

Bhaishajyaguru is NOT Buddha as Balual the horse who rescues sailors. He is NOT Buddha as Lokeshvara, the creator.

He makes it sound dark and scary. He has an appetite for darkness that most Cambodians do not have.

This is the Buddha of the burned earth, the Buddha of the red land, the Buddha of the rain that turns to blood.

'A Buddha for us,' the boy interjects.

This is the Buddha of Forced Seeing who does not close his

eyes and who is not serene. The Healing Buddha sits with his people through all their sufferings. He even sits with men who've committed the worst crimes, who no other aspect can help, for whom no hell is far enough away from heaven.

Even Rith can feel how close that shaves.

When everything else fails, Bhaishajyaguru is there.

'And this is Jayavarman Seven talking,' says the boy and makes a fist.

For I have lived beyond my time into my eightieth year and I have seen great temples rise from dust and great men fall into dust.

Some of the sitting skinny guys have their eyes closed. Their mouths move in time to the words. They know them too.

I have seen enemies become friends and then enemies again. Through all the waste and confusion, the motion is always onward, like wind over the heads of grain. With motion comes healing, which is acceptance.

Oh, Map is smart. He grins at Rith and says, 'They know it. Some of them know the whole Book.' Map sighs. 'I won't get out of here. But they will.'

April 1191

Over the trees and the smoke and noise of the City, the five great towers rose, covered in gilt: finished.

At the top of the temple of the royal palace gold curtains billowed; breezes stroked the forehead; there was a sound of birdsong. From here, looking out over the walls of the palace, the life of the City could be seen.

Princess Indradevi described it to her sister who lay on a hammock. 'The baby is still tugging at its mother's skirts. She wants that sticky rice. Oh, the mother is a nice lady. She's kneeling down now to talk to her. She's stroking the baby's hair and smiling, but Mother's-child is not to be placated. The little one is still crying. She is pushing a fist into her eyes.'

Indradevi turned and looked at her sister who lay still and shrunken, with many layers of cloth wrapped around her. 'Can you hear me, Sister?' asked Princess Indra.

Queen Jayarajadevi was able to flick her tongue. Yes. Go on.

It is a great sadness to see a younger sister die. Especially when you have lived with her until your own old age. When you have seen her coltish, gawky and wayward. When you have seen her grow beautiful, strong and graceful. Saddest of all when you have seen her flower into someone who is absolutely exceptional in her intellectual accomplishments.

When you have led her extreme soul back onto a true Path and watched her help make an empire, becoming its leader in spirit.

You watch as the petals fall. As naturally as a beautiful orchid, the body grows sad and starts to drop away.

'Oh! The mother and child have gone on. I fear we will never know now if the child ever got her sticky rice.'

The story goes on after us, and we never know the end. If there ever is an end.

'Two Chinese traders have come up to the stall owner. Devils! They don't want sticky rice; they want to talk to her because she is pretty. She is pretending interest. She smiles. She leans forward. She is not afraid of them. Oh! One of them is stroking his goatee!'

There was a sarika bird in the top of a silk-cotton tree, looking at them sideways.

But oh, Sister, you are not falling like fruit, naturally ripe.

You are dying of a broken heart.

'Oh, 'Sri, our City is so beautiful. The King's new central temple is already rising over the trees, and the City itself is restored. The birds are back, and the homes are all new and strong, and the park is full of monks, meditating among the horses.'

Indradevi searched her sister's crumpled, yellow face. 'We did so much.'

The sarika bird called, as if asking a question.

'Did you hear the bird, Sister? Such a beautiful bird. It is singing to us.'

It is singing you to your death.

The anger came again, and Princess Indradevi bunched her fists to fight it. That man, that stupid, stupid man. In the end he is just a man; it is not for us to judge; he is a king and falls victim to the vices of kings, the things they must do. We must not hate, we must not let the world hold sway. Life, death, self, all of them are a willed illusion.

But he must have known that you were delicate. He must have had to consider what it would do to you.

And your stupid son should have given consideration too.

Indradevi spoke of other things. 'Oh, and the monkeys are back, too. They're sitting under the new trees and they have got hold of a monk's alms bowl. 'Sri! They look like they are asking for alms. People have seen them and are laughing. They keep licking their fingers, to see if there is any food on them. Oh! Now one of them is eating the bowl. Ha ha! He's cracking it with his teeth.'

Men. Something happens to people when they pass into male bodies.

'One of the temple boys has seen them, and he's coming with a long cane to chase them away. Oh! 'Sri! One of the monkeys has snatched his cane!'

I want to say something to ease my sister's heart. All I can think of are the small things that she can no longer see. I want to say something that will make her open her eyes, smile, eat and recover.

I suppose I should be joyful, for I am sure that at the very least she will pass on to a higher life even than this one. Even if she has never achieved her great goal, to reach Nibbana, to clear her mind of self. She came nearer than anyone else I know.

I should be joyful, I should be mindful, but I am flawed and the world is flawed. And so I suffer.

I may as well speak what is in my heart.

'I am angry, 'Sri. I am so angry it floods my heart and my mind. I lose all concentration and mindfulness, even the beauty of the City is not enough to restore me. I am so angry at your husband, I cannot speak of it without sputtering with rage!'

With less strength than the breeze through the temple-top pavilion, the Queen's hand squeezed hers.

'I'm sorry. I am being selfish, but oh, Sister, this is the worst thing I have ever had to bear!'

The Queen's reply was absolute stillness. Nothing. It means

nothing. Her stillness seemed to say: *it is how life is, 'Sru. Along with the wind through the leaves, the sounds of birds, the warming hand of the sun. Just life.*

Her cheeks were a terrible shade of yellow, her eyes shadowed, her mouth a string of muscle. Queen Jayarajadevi seemed to say: *it did not start with injustice.*

Indradevi thought: you will always defend him, but yes. He made many great actions, such as no other Universal King had ever before made.

The King had named his enemy his heir. He made the Cham Prince his Crown Prince. A very great good, but the King's son Suryakumara turned against his father. He left the Path, and announced he would be a Hindu king.

And the King did what kings do with troublesome princes. He sent his own son to war crowded round with gold parasols, to draw arrows.

It was not the death of your son that did this to you, Queen. It was the death of your king, the king you thought you had created, a king like no other. He turned out to be just like all the others. He arranged for the death of your son. And then turned his back on the Cham Prince as well. Policy.

And so you turned towards Nibbana. You turned away from this world, towards death. The fate that had been awaiting you all your life swallowed you up. You starved yourself.

And that is not the Path.

And so you die losing even Nibbana.

But you were great, my sister. You ruled as much as the King did and with far more wisdom and far more vision. Now he's made Rajendradevi his First Queen. Well he had to as she is mother of the heir, but everyone knows, all the people, what you accomplished in this world. And as for the next, even if you do not join God, you will be celestial. His mother, his father, oh they are all made aspects of the Buddha. You, what honour will he do you? In death.

Indradevi said aloud, 'Oh, my sister, I will build houses for

the poor and I will dedicate all that merit to you. I shall write great inscriptions, I shall tell the world of your virtues and your holy actions. I will make sure that you are remembered!'

I hope merit will keep you from sinking in the samsara for having starved yourself to death.

And Sister, oh Kansri, where will I be in this life without you? You have always been here. The whole world will go silent without you. And I will be an old spinster lady, with shadows under her eyes, and a shadow in her womb, some aunty trying to hold us all on the Path.

Listening to the birds and the wind in the leaves for comfort.

Why am I making you hold on? For myself? I will have to be brave and alone sooner or later.

Indradevi said, 'Kansri? You have my permission to die. If your heart is broken and you are alone and we are not enough to keep you, if you yearn for your next life. Then go. Go on. We will remember you. We will always love you. Your spirit flies like a bird.'

On the ground, in the City, the stall owner was still teasing one of the Chinese merchants. Who had evidently charmed her. Ox-carts full of onions and herbs arrived for the market.

Princess Indradevi said, just to keep talking, just to give herself comfort, 'The university is being consecrated today.'

The King had finally found his Crown Prince.

It was one of his sons. This was a late surprise to the various generals, allies, war-mates and fellow seekers after the truth.

It was his son, little Chubby, now with the full kingly honorific of Indravarman. No halfway 'kumara' for him.

And Indravarman was beautiful.

He was tall and straight, but had his father's bulk; and in low sunlight, he was the colour of a perfect, smooth-skinned apricot. Golden. He loved talking to people; he was good at fighting; he was smart but not so clever that he made things anguished or complicated. He was like the rising sun. His father

Jayavarman looked at him long and gratefully, smiling with pride.

Rajapati looked at Prince Indravarman with an ache in his heart.

Only fourteen and certain of kingship. From their glances and approving nods, the people love him too. Only fourteen and able to speak to them like his father, at a moment's notice, eloquently, from the heart.

Rajapati had long ago given up talking to people at all. It only caused trouble.

Able to run, able to fall in love, able to attract people, and hold them. They loved looking at him. Even Rajapati loved looking at him, but with yearning and a sense of loss from which he knew he would never escape. He would have to learn to accept.

Even now, the Crown Prince was rowing the barge, chatting quietly to the rower in front of him. Learning boatcraft? His shoulders, which were already taking on the outline of a fully grown man's, swelled and contracted with a simplicity that made Rajapati want to write an ode to the perfection of the human body. Some human bodies.

Oh, what did I do in a previous life to deserve this?

Perhaps you were a perfect prince who was cruel to cripples.

The boat eased up to the dock. Today was the consecration day of yet another grandiose complex made of stone and other people's sweat. Jayavarman the magnificent flung up his arms to welcome the sight, the men, their arrival. Had he grown taller? Father, you look as big as the moon.

Jayavarman spun and held out his hand towards his son, the only son there who counted. The King's whole face beamed hope and love. The boy grinned back and slipped neatly like a dancer through the rowers down to his father, who seized his hand and held it up.

Look at this boy, isn't he the picture of a king?

The rowers chuckled. The boy beamed back.

He's like a horse being inspected. Perfect teeth, good strong haunches.

Don't try to be humorous, Rajapati. Everybody else gave up listening thirty years ago.

Oh, look, the little dear can laugh. Cheerful, aren't you, Indra? It isn't your mother who's dying is it, Chubby? Oh no, your mother has done her job properly. Just like a sow. Multiple piglets. And she's First Queen now, it says so on that inscription stone. Queen Rajendradevi, mother to the future king.

Oh God, she'll probably want to teach just like Jayarajadevi. It will be like a pig talking.

Ho, ho, endless amusement. Alone inside your head, Rajapati.

The King sighed in satisfaction with his prince and shook the boy's shoulder, looking at his perfect head with love.

Oh, oh, oh, thought Rajapati, to have had even a glimmer of that from you, Father. I suppose that was what I've wanted all these years.

Rajapati was trapped in a kind of palanquin, scaled down to his size. It looked like a toy. For form's sake, two people carried it, though it was so light one bearer would have done. But two were better at keeping the twisted little bundle inside it quiet.

God, I am so sick of sitting curled up here with my own thoughts. Everybody speedily glancing away to avoid looking at me.

Well, put me away then. Don't drag me out on these occasions; I don't like being gawked at. I didn't ask to be born like this. I didn't ask to be clever, just so that I could fully appreciate how wasted my life is. I didn't ask to be put on public display so that everyone could say: oh, look how generous the King is to that half-human bundle in the box.

Shut up, 'Pati.

You're envious that's all. And you have so very much to be envious about. In addition to looking like a lump of driftwood, you're bitter and mean-minded. You're not even a pleasant person.

In addition to being an affront to very nearly every sense except the olfactory . . .

. . . or maybe even that since the maids douse me in so much perfume. They assume I'm this way because I'm diseased, like a leper, and so I must smell.

Just shut up.

Oh good, my box is moving. Something is happening. To me. Don't cheer all at once, grateful population.

The beautiful Indravarman rocked and rolled his way down the plank onto the landing. He walked next to the King as an equal, talking fervently about something.

Watch out, little Chubby. That man next to you? He looks nice.

But he kills crown princes. He might kill you too.

Don't you just wish, Rajapati?

The various dignitaries stood with their studious backs towards Rajapati and his deformities, waiting their turn to follow the King down the gangplank.

With a weariness of the soul, Rajapati realized that he quite sincerely wanted to die.

Really. It would be a kindness, and so easy. Just drop me over the side, like a bird pooping. Plop! Into the water and two minutes later it will all be over.

Silence. Simplicity. Dark. Quiet. I've accumulated not a feather's weight of merit, but at least I don't think I've done enough harm to burn in hell for ever.

As the palanquin bounced down the gangplank, Rajapati promised to kill himself.

We can have a double funeral, me and the Queen. Save on expenses.

No, no, why diminish the Queen? Nice lady and she's had a bad enough time of it lately. Even my shrivelled little heart feels sorry for her.

No, 'Pati, you'll just have to hang on a few days longer.

In which case, I might as well have it out with the King.

Yes.

I'll finally make that scheming old roostershit talk to me. And then I'll die.

Now will you just shut up and enjoy the show?

At the end of the dock, the King turned and said, 'We'll wait for the workmen to come.'

All the lords, *mratlans*, and the monks and princes had to stand in place. Wind stirred their garments. Some of the Brahmins gave each other meaningful looks. They disapproved of this continual mingling of categories. In silence.

From within the new complex, the sparkling sound of chisels ended.

The workers came lumbering down towards the dock as if to see one of their fellows. They were burned black by the sun, polished like driftwood by toil. They came wiping their hands and faces. The King strode forth to greet them as if they were ambassadors from China. He smiled and called them by name. The men bowed and bowed again. Indravarman was presented to them, and they bowed even lower.

The little dear asked them if they were tired, working so hard. One of the men chuckled, gap-toothed. 'We are so happy to do this! It is another great labour!'

Could that possibly be true? That they were happy to labour on temple after temple? And on that great surrounding wall? On the new university, library, and administration block that rose behind them?

They chatted with the King and then with easy grace remembered their manners and the occasion. They bowed and strolled into the lake, to purify themselves. They poured water over their heads.

The King's face crumpled with love. He announced to the lords, 'When we won the battle, the men washed their faces, too. They poured water over themselves. It was like this. Just like this.'

Another barge with a carved Naga on the prow raised its oars and settled next to the landing.

Again the King mixed formal with informal. Honoured generals, Brahmins and little princes hopped, relaxed, out of the barge. The King strode back up the dock to meet them. With his implacable smile, he looked like one of the guardian statues.

The King greeted the new arrivals and then, when he was sure the workmen had bathed, he marched all the superior people across the churned earth of the banks, and through a mist of rock dust.

Rajapati's tiny toy palanquin lurched forward towards the building site. In front of the scaffolding, palace women were setting pots of noodles on low tables. Embroidered cloth had been laid out beside them over the ground.

One single gateway had been finished. On its lintel were freshly carved words.

The King stood in front of it, and sighed.

'I am a soldier and an ascetic. I find words desert me. I have never written anything worth reading in my entire life. But this inscription was written by my son, Virakumara.'

Who hates you in his heart.

The King blinked and looked down, and said quietly, 'My other fine son Indravarman will read it to you.'

What does an older brother feel to be overtaken by a younger? How does it feel to have your older brother killed? Poor Virakumara. His shoulders were rounded from too much reading and his ribs too obvious from continued abstinence. He'd grown a Brahmin's beard. What happens when old men have young men's occupations.

Indravarman looked like an athlete who had just won a wrestling match. He grinned at the workers, at the guests.

He turned and said, 'It's a very long inscription, Father. And a very hot sun.'

'My son wishes to spare you.' Flicker. 'And it is not an al-

together happy day.' Pause. Think of your dying queen. Whisper. 'Thank you, son.'

Rajapati smiled at the theatrical skill. One might almost think you had a heart, Father.

With graceful ease, Indravarman summarized.

'This stone consecrates the City of Holy Victory, *Nagara Jayasri*. It will be a new kind of place. It will be where monks can come to learn and live and study. It will be a place of administration. All the people who make the City work, will find their houses here. The badges of authority, such as the Sacred Sword, will be housed here. Above all else it will be a temple to all religions, and all the Kings. This palace temple will be dedicated to my grandfather, who was compassionate. The *Rajavihara* was dedicated to my grandmother, who was wise. There will be a new hospital here, and a great library and a hall of music and dancing. In this way we establish that the Path is a marriage of Wisdom and Compassion.'

He summarized the Sanskrit text, and gave examples from the Khmer list of donations made by Queen Jayarajadevi. Indravarman looked sad and dignified. Finally he finished.

There was a long silence, filled with the sounds of wind and water from the reservoir.

The King spoke next, his voice shaking. 'The real spirit of this temple is that of my beloved wife, Holy Victory Queen. The stone tells it.' He flicked his hand towards it. 'It tells how many bolts of cloth, and gold this and gold that she gave to this foundation and other places. But that is not what she really gave. She gave the ideas that live behind these things. She showed all of us the Path, on which we now walk as a people.' His voice went as thin as a child's. 'Without her, this building would be uninhabited stone.'

How do you get away with it? Rajapati wondered. From anyone else such displays of emotion would be unseemly.

'Across that lake, there is an island, and that island is her idea. On that island will be a new temple.'

Another new temple, what a surprise. And just what we needed.

'This new temple will be open to people of all categories. The humblest will be able to go there to wash away sin. No linga, no yoni, no high king giving rites and rituals. Families, babies, old men, the sick, those who have laboured all their lives or who survived these horrible, terrible, dreadful wars. They will go there to wash, to hear birds, to listen to music and to be in a state of peace.'

He's crying. You can't have a king who cries.

You can if the people know his wife is dying. What a great heart he has, they will say, truly he is the King of Compassion, the King of Love, but I know you, Father, and I know you are the reason why Auntie is dying. Which is why Indradevi isn't here, nor even Rajendradevi. You are lucky that three of your remaining sons have come. And your old Cham Crown Prince, he's causing trouble now, isn't he?

Jayavarman breathed in the world again. 'So. This new city is consecrated. It is consecrated by the sweat of the people who build it, and the ideas and love that come from those who thought of it. It is consecrated by what it is. Follow the Path.' He blew out. 'Now, let the labourers eat.'

No one moved. The spirits moved in the wind. The dust moved. Everything else, even the birds and crickets seemed to be stilled.

'Eat,' beckoned the King again, and held out his hands towards the men. With a sound like the pattering of light rain, the labourers began to move. They walked towards the steaming reed bowls and the folding tables and the smell of rice and cardamom.

Indravarman talked urgently to the King. The King's eyes closed and he smiled in gratitude.

Indravarman turned and ran back to the tables. He was so happy to eat with the workers, to share the meal with them.

Every inch the worthy heir.

The visitors returned to their boats.

The King stomped along the landing towards his barge. Rajapati thought: my father always walks as if he's trying to punch holes in the ground, or stamp his words permanently into the earth. The King's back was turned towards him and it was the back of a man who wanted to be alone, who wanted to be in the prow of the boat by himself, with sun, water, breeze, and lake birds. Instead he sat cross-legged in the shade of the middle deck, facing the procession filing onto the boat with his eyes closed and a smile imposed.

The King meditated. He was always doing that in public. It was how he wanted to be seen. But this time, his face did not glow with serenity. This time it was puffed out with unhappiness and struggle. The eyebrows were wrenched and twisted with grief and hurt.

The things you have done, Father. Sometimes they show.

The boat glided from Victory Lake to the huge and ancient ten-kilometre artificial Lake of Yashodhara.

Sunlight danced on the artificial lake. The boat swung around, and there, ranged before them, was the great sight of Yashodharapura.

The biggest city on the planet, now enclosed in a wall of laterite. What stuff it is. Laterite cuts like wet clay when it first comes out of the earth. But it hardens in air to light-weight, enduring stone. Red-grey laterite, honey-coloured now with the sun on it. A perfect wall of stone, extending along most of the horizon. Like a saw blade, the top was arranged with niche stones, thousands of them. And inside the sheltering hood of each, was an image of the Buddha.

Thousands upon thousands of images of the Buddha.

On far banks, boys fished, skimming nets on poles over the surface of the water.

Women in groups squatted, washing their clothing.

Boys had driven their oxen down the earthen banks into the

lake to drink. You could see the mud-coloured swirls where the beasts had trod. The boys were jumping off the backs of the beasts into the deeper water.

Far out towards the first island temple behind them, little fishing skiffs plied their way. Over it all, in scintillating patterns, white water-birds rose and fell.

This is your doing too, Father. This happy kingdom, this place of peace, this giant among nations. You gave it back to us.

Did you have to make yourself inhuman to do it? To make all the Khmers your children, did you have to kill your real ones?

The King's back still did not move.

The barges glided up to the landing beside the Victory Road. Elephants and giant parasols waited for them, men and animals shifting from one foot to another. Prince Rajapati's little bier, with its tiny pointed cupola in the shape of a house, was hoisted up and he was borne up the steps to the elephant platform.

The King rode on alone.

Children ran screaming and laughing. The King was back before his public. The King called down to the children. He knew some of their names.

Their beautiful mothers sauntered next to their children hushing them and beaming up at their king.

Everything was new. New wooden houses stood on polished green poles, with new palm-frond or wood-tile roofs. Grannies spun new cloth. Young mothers nursed new babies. Tiny plots of ground sprouted fruit from new trees. Everything smelled of wood smoke, cardamom, hot greenery, rice paper drying in the sun, and syrup boiling in vats. Even the smells of fish from the lake were new, delicious, invoking the scents of barbecuing to come later in the day.

The happiest place on earth.

The great elephants lumbered along Victory Road. Stalls sold heaps of grain, valuable tree barks, medicines, or embroidered

cloth. People whose religion allowed them to kill offered pork and the fruits of the forest hunt.

A skinny man with broken brown teeth and the moustache of a Brahmin ran out of his stall holding up a reed bowl. 'My Lord, my King, Jaya, Jaya!' The man laughed at his own daring. 'Oh, Universal King, my food is especially good this morning. Fresh fish, lemon grass, noodles. Oh so fragrant! Please, King, please stop and eat!'

The King did. The elephant was pulled around. The King's boy swung down from the side basket and took up the reed bowl.

The stall owner was overjoyed. He bowed and bowed and laughed and bowed again. The King pressed the dish between his fingers and ate, and then offered some to his boy.

'It's good, it's good!' the King called down. He then ate again from the bowl the boy had touched. 'You have saved me the trouble of having lunch.'

The man was gleeful and grinned and bowed, and the women under the screens leaned against the posts, arms around each other. These were not attitudes of disrespect, but attitudes of ease as if they were among their own family. All their faces beamed.

This, thought Rajapati, is how every king would wish to be seen.

You have to acknowledge. He does it through fearlessness. The fearlessness comes from pure thinking. Because he emphasizes that the King is always a man, he is not afraid of looking human. This humility wins hearts.

The King is not afraid of being poisoned, because he knows his people love him. He is not in any case afraid of dying, for he can explain death, and gives death no power over his actions.

Oh King, you know that stall owner would now do anything in his power for you. His family will tease him, but they will also say: we have a good king. That man will save the reed

bowl as a souvenir and say: the King ate from my bowl. He will say to customers: see how good my food is.

And his sons will die for you.

The procession walked up the Victory Road towards the eastern gate.

In the old days, you would have to think carefully about the symbolic meanings of the gate you used. Coming through the east gate would symbolize something or other, say the King coming from the direction of Life.

This king would say, I always come from the direction of Life, even if I come from the west or the south. With this king, you come in the Eastern Gate simply because that is the most direct way to come.

That was the most annoying thing of all – to be wounded by a man who is perfect in every other way. Who would be interested in hearing your complaints against such a man, such a king? They whisper that he is a Boddhisattva.

The procession passed through the gate. The Gods on one side, holding the Naga serpent, the demons on the other, churning the Sea of Milk. If you were a Hindu, that was auspicious. If you were Buddhist, the Naga was the Rainbow Bridge that connects the worlds. You were entering a holy, Universal City.

The four faces of the Buddharaja stared down. If you were Hindu, these would be the faces of the three gods, the fourth being Buddha. If you were Buddhist, it would be the Four Noble Truths or the four cardinal directions or the four great rivers.

Oh, King, you mean everything and nothing at the same time.

Once through those gates, you were in the core of the new City, the Indrapattha.

Here, the red wood buildings housed palace slaves, officials and children. They were noble structures, carved with Naga serpents on the lintels.

Ahead loomed the towers of justice, where criminals were

kept, and just above the rooftops of the houses, the upper storey of the Flying Palace. In front of that, the half-mile long terrace was carved to look as if it were borne up by flying beasts, garudas. The earthbound palace was an image of the celestial dwelling that flew in the skies, amid cloud fields, and cloud-flowers.

Over that the private family temple gleamed like a golden bell.

The elephants passed through the gates, and the families of the court began to dismount. Rajapati's bier was carried on. The King continued alone, up the steps of the temple.

'Take me to join my father in the temple,' said Rajapati.

'You are to go to the palace and rest and eat,' said his servants. They looked embarrassed, poor fellows.

'Your instructions were to carry the bier to the palace?'

'Yes, Prince.'

'Then do so,' said Rajapati. And he belly-flopped himself out of the bier.

'Lord!' they cried.

'Go on, the King can't punish you. You did what you were told. I'll tell him that. Now go on!'

And the Prince bat-crawled on his arms, hobbling after his father, one step at a time. Undignified? Oh, yes.

Frankly, that's the problem of the people who look at me.

The unfinished man hauled himself like a tree frog up the steep staircase. The stucco was gilded and glowing. The statues had gold leaf pressed over them. Around the base, plates of gold had been drilled into the stone. All these things were the gifts of the Holy Victory Queen. How fitting then, that she should rest here.

Since she evidently no longer wished to rest beside her husband.

On the top of the temple stood a simple red pavilion. Rajapati hauled himself into it.

The King stood over Jayarajadevi's hammock rocking it

gently. He looked up. 'Oh God,' he croaked in utter despair. 'Not you. Of all times.'

'Thank you for that sincere greeting.'

'I don't want you now, go away.'

'No change there, then.'

The King looked at him searchingly with a sadness that could be mistaken for affection. 'You know, you have a fine head. If only something kindly or wise ever came out of it.'

'Again, Father, it is your complete sincerity of expression that has made you the King you are.'

'You're right.'

'Then at least we agree on something.'

'The Queen is dead, 'Pati. Leave me in peace.'

'No, Father.' Rajapati's voice skipped. 'I'm here to torment you.'

The King's jaw dropped and he turned. He almost chuckled.

'You're even worse than I thought.'

'No, I just can't resist a singeing reply. Words are all that is left to me. My dancing tongue, my gouging steel pen.'

The King groaned and hid his head.

'Right, to business. It'll be over with soon, and you will get your wish. I'll leave you, finally and permanently. But first, a little hymn of my own composition. You, Father are Mara. Mara who came and tempted the Buddha with Kingship. Buddha turned him down. You, Father, are war. You are war and power and ruthlessness. You are oppression and enslavement and falsehood. And the summit of your falseness is that people love you for it. You are evil.'

The King's face was bleary with misery and, more amusingly, boredom. 'People aren't evil. They sometimes do evil things.'

'Such as killing their son because he left the Path?'

Silence. Then the King nodded. 'Yes. We could cavil a bit. The person who killed Suryakumara was the man who shot the arrow, but I know what you mean. I did send him to his death.'

'And killed your once First Queen in the process. I trust that her death was unintended, but with you . . . I . . . can't . . . be . . . sure.' Rajapati let the last words drip out slowly.

The King turned his bulk like a wounded elephant. 'I grieve, 'Pati. I grieve.'

Rajapati felt pity tremble. 'I know you do, Father.'

'She was so beautiful. She had such a mind, so full of light and kindness and love . . .'

'You didn't deserve her.'

'No, I didn't.' He took up her hand and squeezed it, then pressed it to his face.

'I wish you wouldn't keep agreeing with me, Father. It makes it difficult to tell you off.'

The King looked up again. 'What do you want?'

Rajapati's eyes boggled. 'Now. *That* was a surprise. First time you've ever asked me. Let's see. First and foremost, I want to die. Desperately and really and finally. I'll be finished here in just a moment, since you as always need me out of the way, and then I'll . . . I don't know . . . fire, water, a great height, something will turn up. It will hurt, but only briefly.'

The King wiped his face, calmed himself and then looked down at Rajapati on the floor. 'Can you talk seriously?'

'I try and avoid it whenever possible.'

'I know.' Slowly, as if in pain, the King shuffled forward, and lowered himself onto the stone.

'But I'll make an exception if it hurts you.'

The King took Rajapati's hand and held it, and looked into his face and said again, 'What do you want?'

'I just said . . .'

'No, no, no. You're not used to winning, so you don't recognize it. But you just won. I'm asking. What do you want?'

Rajapati tried to pull his hand away. What he wanted was too big to say, and too small.

The King spoke in a low voice, looking at the hand. 'I'd say first and foremost you want to hide. And I've been forcing you

to go out in public. I thought that was a way of making you feel part of things.'

Rajapati went cold. 'It was a way of demonstrating your ideology.'

The King paused, swallowed, made himself be patient. 'Since my ideology is to be compassionate, you're right, it was.' He sniffed. 'No one's looking now.'

Jayavarman stroked Rajapati's hair. His eyes were staring, but the smile was about to crumple into weeping. 'You want to be king. You would have been a very good king. But you never can be. Many people think what happened to you is the result of sin in a previous life . . .'

Rajapati was alarmed to hear his own voice shaking and see the world around him dissolve in water. 'What they say, what they say is that I'm the result of what happens when categories get out of order, and that what happened is like a mongrel dog mating with a civet and being shat out . . .'

 Rajapati couldn't finish.

'I can't change that.'

'You could look at me.'

'Don't I?' The King sounded small and fragile.

'No.'

The King rocked back and forth. He looked at Rajapati's hand again. 'When you were born, your mother and I were living in a Wat by the sea, and neither of us have ever been as happy again. And when you were born we looked at your face and said what a beautiful baby.'

Rajapati managed to speak. 'I hate emotion.'

The King chuckled. 'It's pretty generally a bad thing.' He breathed in again, and was calm. 'I need your help. I have a task for you.'

Rajapati hissed. 'I knew we'd get around to what you need reasonably quickly.'

'You are good with words. And I need to tell the world that the Queen is dead. Could you write the letters for me? No,

Rajapati, please understand. These letters have to come from someone high up and they must be written swiftly and Vira . . .'

 The King sighed. 'Vira is excessively formal. He'd compose an ode. You write like I would write if I could. I know that you write letters to everyone. It was one way you tried to make yourself king.'

'Don't worry. It failed.'

'It would fail as soon as they saw you.'

It really was that simple. 'Yes it did.'

'So write to them all. Well and truthfully and simply. Tell them I grieve.'

He stroked Rajapati's hair and, damn him, it worked. Rajapati was moved.

'I could do that, Father, yes.'

'I have another long task, that I never thought could be done. I have a long story to tell, Rajapativarman.'

Their eyes met finally. The King said, 'Could you tell it for me?'

The park in front of the terrace was full of people and candles and prayers.

The King walked to the edge of the platform to acknowledge them.

On the deck, before a statue of Yama, the pyre burned. Silken banners danced alongside the flames. The people chanted her name.

Jayarajadevi! Holy! Holy! Holy!

Cremation was a long process. The royal household sat on the deck, quiet and respectful in the hammering sun. Heat from the fire billowed over their faces. All of the King's many sons and daughters were on the terrace. As First Queen, Rajendradevi sat in the very first rank and had the satisfaction of seeing her son and the King sitting in meditation together by the fire.

Even Fishing Cat was there, disguised as the handmaiden of the Queen-elect.

'I don't know if I can bear it,' Princess Indradevi murmured to Cat. Her face was both plump and collapsed. 'Why couldn't he just leave the situation as it was and let Rajendradevi stay First Queen?'

Cat answered, 'He wishes to reward you. And his kingship depends on him having a holy wife. The people know you. They will be reassured that they have another Jayarajadevi. It will do good for the Kingdom.'

Indradevi's shoulders seemed to dip under a heavy weight. 'Policy, policy. It leaves no space for people.'

Fishing Cat regarded her. She had never been as close to Indradevi as she had to Queen Jaya. But over time, they had become allies. 'This policy allows you to fulfil a royal destiny. It allows you to continue to lead your people along the Path.'

Indradevi looked up at her, her eyes dead. 'I loved him for years. Now finally he has offered, and I find it is the last thing in the world I want. He is not the young man I knew.'

'It is not for me to advise, but Princess, I would say: marry him. Become Queen. There will be no need to look happy; quite the reverse. If you looked happy people might say: see how she rejoices in her sister's death. Look sad, and no one will begrudge you. They'll say: thank God she was there to take over.'

Out in the park the chanting had changed.

Indradevi! Indradevi! Indradevi!

Cat smiled. 'You see? You are beloved. Your people need to know you are still here.'

The King turned around, smiling, and held out a hand towards his sister-in-law. The hot air wavered, as if from uncertainty.

Indradevi said wistfully, 'If I go, it will mean I have accepted him.'

Cat considered. 'Yes. But think. You are not one to starve yourself to death.'

The Princess's eyes flicked back at her. 'You are right there,'

she said. She took in a deep breath. 'All right, Sister.' She squeezed Cat's hand and stood up.

Oh! thought Fishing Cat. Indradevi has been trained since birth for something like this and does not even know it! The way she casts her eyes down, the way her feet take tiny, delightful, rustling steps. Her unfeigned modesty, the way she cannot help looking gracious, reaching out for the King's hand.

He held hers aloft. Yes! The people jumped up and danced and waved. Oh, they loved it; they would love this marriage; they would love this stability, this restoration, and this seeming victory over death. Their voices came in waves.

The King took the hand of Prince Indravarman on his other side, and the sound of the crowd re-doubled.

The air shivered, the flames were hauled straight up into the air. The revelation in the heat of the fire, in the collapsing logs, was that the pyre already contained nothing. Everything had already been burned.

Finally, as dusk descended, the King signalled that it was seemly for them to leave.

The household stood, making soft, suppressed cries as stiff joints straightened. They all went separate ways. Prince Indravarman was taken to a meeting of ministers and officials. Prince Rajapati was borne away on his bier to the library. Cat got herself to the kitchens to make sure there was food. The Queen-elect sat until the end, staring into the cooling grey pile of ash, already being stirred by evening breezes. Her skin felt stretched from sunburn, and was greasy and gritty from ash. She wanted to wash; she wanted to sleep; she wanted to break out into a run. All her wants cancelled each other out. She sat.

Stars came out. Insects and lizards made night noises. Just as they had done when she and her beloved sister were children, and had slipped out in the evenings. The stages of life: childhood, beautiful adolescence, then the wonderful task, building the City of the Eastern Buddha. Their real home.

How like a fire was life. It started small, with just a spark. It fanned to a mighty flame. Then it greyed to ash and cooled.

The night grew chilly and damp. Finally, Indradevi stood.

She retreated to the upper floor of the palace, where all was polished, bathed and scented. The musicians made idle tinklings like waterfalls or bird cries. A cousin from Mahidharapura came to offer condolences, and tried to settle on the cushions for a long session of family grief. Indra made it plain she wished to be alone. From down below came the scent of roasted meat. Food! Who could eat? The day was ending like any other.

It was not enough.

With sudden determination, the Queen-elect spun around on her cushion and stood up with a sweep. She scooped up the taper and shuffled through the darkness to a library area. The gold curtains were lowered against insects. She held the taper up, found an oil lamp and lit it.

Prince Rajapati was also scratching away at palm leaves. He had a job at last. Indradevi thought of his mother, and whispered a friendly greeting to him. She got a pleasant smile back. My goodness. Everything was changing.

Dropping down into a lotus position, she snatched up a steel quill. She patted surfaces, trying to find palm leaves ready for writing. She only found an old letter. She flipped the hardened strip of leaf onto its back and began to write.

She wrote with an uncharacteristic gouging motion of determination. She wrote in the high holy language of the Brahmins.

He had for his First Queen Sri Jayarajadevi . . .

They will not forget you sister . . .

By the rivers of her house, the Queen would walk, practising asceticism . . .

I will make a new thing. It will look like it honours the King, but it will honour you, it will tell your story.

Her beauty was burned by asceticism, but it was not destroyed or diminished, but made instead a thing of wonder, like a temple hidden in a forest . . .

I will have this carved in stone and set up in the temple of the Aerial Palace. It will be longer than any other inscription. And more truthful.

She planted the eminent seeds of the spirit, and waited for the opportune rain of the spirit, and the husbandly act of the gardener of the soul. She obtained the fruit of wisdom and grace.

For what is the self but words? And what are words when they are set in stone? They become a kind of eternal self. Oh Kansri, my sister, your star will shine bright for ever. The words will burn.

The cripple Rajapativarman worked as well.

He had gathered up all the treated palm leaves to himself. He was writing letters to minor officials now, people for whom getting any kind of personal communication at all, even after the cremation, would leave them indebted. Sweet-voiced, skilled Rajapati cut and carved.

I write to your grace on the King's behalf as he is stricken with grief. He asked me to make sure you had been informed personally by the family of the death of the matchless 'Sri Jayarajadevi and the observances that were made of it . . .

At last I am getting towards the end of them, Rajapati thought. There have been hundreds of letters. And each one of

them bore my name, too. I have my princely head and my thin active hands, and I will be known for something even yet.

That very morning, in the midst of all the funeral plans and acts of statecraft, the King had taken time to sit with him beside the small family reservoir. To begin their secret project.

'I have no idea how to begin,' the King had said.

'I should say who you are and what you intend to do,' said Rajapati.

'I want to bring the past to life.'

'Then that's what we'll say.'

And they began their new adventure. The words were beautiful.

There was a cough behind him. Rajapati turned. There was the boy Indravarman, smiling, looking a little uncertain. 'Am I disturbing you?'

Rajapati wanted to say something like: no, I only have twenty-five letters to write, you do know how to write don't you?

Then he thought: it might be wiser to play the kindly uncle.

'Not at all,' he said to the boy, and patted a cushion. 'Sit here.'

Fishing Cat chatted with the other slaves, collecting up the reed bowls, and the enormous urns in which the noodles were carried to the tables.

One of the old kitchen maids, who had followed the young Jayarajadevi from their old home, broke down in tears and hid her face in her shawl.

Fishing Cat comforted her. 'She was a good, good woman.'

'Yes, indeed, Lady. It has been a long story, Lady.'

'Indeed,' said Fishing Cat. 'Indeed it has.'

Cat and the woman collected up a tray of dirty bowls and shuffled with them back to the reservoir. There weren't many vessels to wash. Grieving people don't eat. This had not been the usual sociable funeral feast. There had been little exchange of gossip and connections, and no need to excuse

laughter by saying, oh, she would have wanted us to carry on with life.

Cat and the woman climbed down the stone steps to the water and began to scrub.

How grateful I am for simple chores. Indradevi sits and frets and worries. I clean bowls. Somehow that puts everything in place. Crickets chirp. Stars glow. The world comes and says: here I am.

'You go on, Cat, there's not much else to do,' said the other slave.

'It will all be there to do again tomorrow.' Cat said it with anticipation.

'Oh, yes, we can always rely on our work,' said the slave.

'I'll start on the upper floors. I'll take these clean things with me,' said Cat, carrying one last burden into the kitchens.

Then she climbed the stairs up into the royal house. She could hear the entire family writing, scratching away behind lowered curtains.

Cat didn't disturb them. She knelt and dusted the floors. Top floors first, then the lower floors. The lamps drew moths, but the smoke discouraged mosquitoes. She looked out over the City, most of it blocked by the terrace, but even so, the sky swelled with light from many fires. In the distance, the canals were outlined with thousands of tiny fires, reflected on water. How large and grand it is, how many people live here, countless people.

See, Sister, she said to the spirit of Jayarajadevi, how many people come here to live in the kingdom you inspired? Can you see what you achieved?

Cat went downstairs to the cisterns to rinse her cloths to dust again. She stepped back into a long corridor on the ground floor. Night sky was reflected on its polished surface.

And Cat remembered. A little naughty running prince, sliding across her floors. Long gone. That house had long ago been abandoned and then burnt, and all her polishing wasted. But

a new floor had taken its place. And this one does look like the surface of a lake.

Cat looked around, and threw the cloth down on the floor. She stepped back and ran and jumped and skated again across the palace floor, skirts fluttering. She grinned.

Cat walked on to her little ground-floor slave's room. She whisked back the curtain. The King, round-faced, exhausted looked up at her in silent need, eyes ringed with concentric ripples, fanned with lines. His wife had died. He was an old man who had a kingdom to run, wars to fight, a new religion to drive into the hearts of his people. He was bereft, a failure, a god.

Cat lowered the oil lamp to the floor and silently took the man into her arms.

Leaf 151

My father, whose name in death is Parama Saugatapada, lay himself down to die by the fountain of Rajayasri (Neak Pean). An orchestra of wounded soldiers, lame or blind, played music that freshened the air and made the water dance. The old soldiers wept playing last songs for the King. The people came to Rajayasri, the temple my father had made for them so that they could wash away their sins. The people formed a line to say farewell to him who was still Universal King. Chakravartin they called him, bowing. Prince Nia they called him, or Catch-Him-to-Call-Him. I tell you this line extended from Rajayashri to Nagara Jayasri. This line of people extended all across the perfect City, from the Eastern Gate and all the way beyond the western reservoir. All categories mingled within it, united in grief. It was a line of one million people.



Leaf 152

Love is invisible, but it turns the sky and mills the rain and holds up the mountains. The people came to say farewell to their King whom they loved. This was not a ceremony, prescribed in ritual. It was not a thing to be repeated. It was like the flocking of birds. It was like the rising of the waters. It was like the clouds at dawn. It was like the turning of the cloud-flowers, always spinning, sensed but never seen. The mourning of the people was like a mother setting eyes on her child. It was a recognition. No text directed it. No banners preceded it. There were no elephants or candles or gongs. The people whispered their love, and covered their faces and King Jayavarman raised a hand in blessing for each of them. There never was a more beautiful thing in all the history of the City.

Leaf 153

Father, I read these leaves and you are restored to me. I see you by the reservoir walking back and forth with your heavy tread and telling me simple and undeniable things that I turned into swirling cloud-flowers of words.

Oh, Father, I wish you were here. I wish it in the dawn. I wish it at high noon. I wish it in the evening when colours swirl like fire on the lake. I wish you and my slave mother were here to do simple things and reveal their importance. I wish you and your wives were here to make sense of the world and destroy sin. For I love you, Father, Saint, King. As your people will love you for ever. I sit with my brother Indravarman in the candlelight and we talk about the old days. Indravarman has been my last and final lesson, Father. Can you read these leaves?



Leaf 154

The beautiful Indravarman started to drag his feet. Hard, unhealing sores appeared. One day he cut his thumb and did not notice and I realized the appalling thing that had happened. A king had become a leper. His hands twisted into useless curls. He did not once complain. He did not make one bitter or angry joke. His words were soft and kindly and healing. You have been the best of all to me, Rajapativarman, he said, for you understand. I wept two whole days afterwards in remorse. I sent him to Ceylon for prayer, for a cure. He came back unable to walk, his skin looking like lichen on stone. I help him rule. I do not do it badly. I write letters.

Leaf 155

Father, there are people who use us against you. Sri Jaya Mahapranjana says our misfortunes are the wrath of untended gods, the result of cross-category marriage. My brother and I are alone. They have started to cut your thousand Buddhas down from the City walls, and I fear for your images, and all your inscriptions. So I copy these leaves onto gold, which knows no decay and which no animal devours. I will wrap the golden words in orange cloth and seal them in pitch. Like a good farmer, planting the seed, I will put these words in your name into the earth. They will bear fruit. The words will come again, when your people need them most. When they cry out, tormented and disrespected, this book will flourish to shade them from the sun. But more than that, to love them.

Love, which is acceptance.