CHAPTER 4

INSIDE THE INHABITANTS AND THE WORLD

Images of elephants, lizards, and farmers, and scenes of the city and the country are observable signs. There is another kind of symbol which exists in its seeming nonexistence because they are not as easily observable. This chapter looks at two sets of symbols: one is unseen killers, destroyers, protectors and thieves, and the other festering scars. Both sets of images convey a sense of lurking powers or forces which do not make themselves too apparent yet express a danger and violence that is brooding and often massive. Their mysterious quality lends them an aura of inaccessibility and invulnerability.

While the previous two chapters look at inhabitants and the world they live in, this part of the thesis delves into the mentality with which both are perceived, providing a psychological compliment to issues of ideology earlier discussed. The social and political significance of these images reside in the brutality suggested by the conjured killers, putrefying wounds, both carry strong associations with pain, death, and degradation. These symbols also evoke a certain loss of control. Why such a bleak picture of modern Thailand? Why might these symbols escape the interest of economists and historians, or have they? What are the implications of such overwhelming helplessness and intimation of blindness? These are questions that have shaped the following chapter and its two subheadings.

Unseen Killers, Destroyers, "Protectors," and Thieves

One roadside store scene in The Lizard and the Rotten Branch shows Tao, a villager, telling Pin, the village headman, that Tawin, a rubber plantation owner, is "afraid of being 'put away' so he's thinking of moving somewhere else" (30). To be put away is to be killed, wiped from the face of the earth. The potential killer is unnamed, unidentified, yet known. Both parties in the conversation seem familiar with this unseen presence. A criminal or murderer who can act at will yet escape identification and punishment by society or law embodies a power that exists outside of conventional social framework, beyond its legal reach.

Pasuk and Baker's description of the countryside being "dragged" into a closer relationship with the city earlier discussed (380) also suggests a tyrannical and violent invisible hand with the power of absolute coercion. This near personification of modernization and other institutional and systematic threats gives these forces a human-like quality and identity as if by doing so, one will render them more manageable and discussible. Through this human outline, like a silhouette or a shadow, the state or other local or foreign powers are conceived and mentioned in fear and reserve. The human shape allows recognition as an entity while the featurelessness makes it impervious to identification as specifically who or what. The combination therefore creates a blend of familiarity, mystery, and universality that has come to be associated with authority in Thailand.

Ubiquitous in the city and country, this mysterious politics affects all inhabitants of Nikom Rayawa's world. As is mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the allegorical background of contemporary symbolism from older works such as the Tripitaka and classical poetry has undergone change throughout Thai history. Along with the genre change from various kinds of poetry to predominantly prose in

the late 1900s comes a change in purpose and meaning of literature. K. S. R. Kularb, his imprisonment because of his writing, and several other similar cases throughout the century have shaped the recent political evolution of symbolism. This is mysterious politics as it touches literary lives and is symbolically expressed. The invention of nationhood, nationalism, and their symbols present a concept of self vs. other that is critiqued by Nikom's proposed set of interacting images where everything is part of a whole. This may be seen as organicist collectivism but it will have to include non-organic elements and carry an ideological side comment.

Strategic vagueness in mentioning political regimes, coups, wars, history, or external reality in Nikom Rayawa's works resemble Toni Morrison's discussion of racial abstraction in Playing in the Dark where authors resort to a symbolic vagueness that develops into a habit with political undertones. Heard and seen but unsaid events become characteristic of a poetics of evasiveness, a poetics that seems not to speak straightforwardly and avoid mentioning where and what is there because of various historical, cultural, and literary reasons.

"It's Not There": Symbolism and Self-Censorship

In this literary engagement where indirectness is a direct means of addressing threatening issues then, silence is loud and nonverbal communication must be extremely eloquent. Silence and nonverbal communication, therefore, are symbols of activism and not of submission. In response to several corrupt powers, Thai people have learned to play the game to see and not to see, to hear and not to hear. One such case is the notorious October 6 incident in 1976. Dheerayudh Boonmee writes in his book about it:

> "The thing that reinforces fear in the largest and most violent scale so that it stays in our consciousness all the time is the complete power of

> dictatorship as in article 17 in the declaration of the revolution group. It gives Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat power equivalent to that of ancient kings when he can command the beheading of anybody. But coups in this day and age bring more terror than those in any other era because any suspect under any charge can be given the death sentence—arsonists, gangsters, suspects of theft can be dragged out of bed at any time in the night to face the firing squad at the Royal Field the following morning... People of our parents' generation show terror of article 17 and this fear becomes even more deeply rooted. Children at that time whether in Bangkok or upcountry are taught to fear politics, fear people in the army, fear the police. They are forbidden to be involved in or to be interested in politics. Monks in the temple would preach to the people to be obedient and not mess with power." (Flesh and Blood 6)

In Nikom Rayawa's literature, silence becomes a theme as well as a literary technique through which such fear can be expressed and discussed. When Nikom has his characters speak the sentence "It's not there" again and again throughout the novel The Lizard and the Rotten Branch, he effectively distributes this negation, this saying by not saying, this fear, through the space and time of his book. He renders in literary form the same situation Dheerayudh describes in his recollection: "The fear comes from not knowing when it [dictatorial terrorism] will happen, where, but we are aware that it exists all the time [...] it is very frightening because it is connected in an enormous network all over the country" (Flesh and Blood 6). One climatic passage from Nikom's The Lizard reads:

> "Well it's really bad luck. If not, what do you think it is?"
> "It is *it*, *lizard*. Has nothing to do with it."
> "It does. The bad luck is inside it, that's what."
> "It's not there."
> "Then where?"
> "Well, everywhere." (224)

By saying that "it's not there," Nikom is saying it is everywhere, all the time. Reading Nikom's texts in this way makes one more highly conscious of prior text. One is made more aware that there is more not being said than is.

"Aside from a consciousness of fear," says Dheerayudh, "dictatorship encompasses social and daily life, forbidding gathering, speaking, writing about

politics. Thai people lived in an atmosphere of fear." Nikom reproduces this atmosphere through his self-censorship in writing fiction. Enforcing inexpression in his own creative work years after dictatorial threat, in a time of relative literary freedom, he imbues the phrase "it's not there" with urgency. It is a play with history, memory, and literature where dismissal or ignorance of the unseen and unsaid element is a violence to that very history, memory, and literature.

Floating Corpses

In the short story "All She Can Possibly Do," floating corpses on the Mekong River signal unseen and unsaid aspects of history and their powerful reality despite relative "non-existence" in the text. "I have a headache," explains the woman protagonist when the boat she is paddling for herself and her husband begins to lose direction, adding later that "not the sun [...] sun and wind never give me headaches" (Man in the Tree 79). Mysterious and unexplainable pain with no apparent cause is one of the physical cues given for psychological disturbances related to this repression of straightforward information. It is an intimation of an aspect of cultural history for which there seems to be unnatural reasons. The human and the natural world are split when the "sun and wind" are cut from the why's and wherefore's of human analytical thinking. Modern history becomes human-centered, and "unnatural" seems to both describe the non-natural causes and comment that this reconceptualization of worldly connections that severs nature is abnormal or problematic.

Nikom chooses visual signs for expressing non-visual symptoms: "her face was pale and she clamped her jaw bravely" (Man in the Tree 80). The woman's pain, confusion, and conflicting feelings are expressed through that clamped jaw. Nikom also parallels unseen causes with undiscovered solutions: "I've tried it [pain

reliever]...it doesn't do it" (80). But, as mentioned earlier, apparent cause does not necessarily depend on apparent portrayal of it. The same would seem to apply for apparent cure. The historio-cultural knowledge that assists one in reading unsaid messages would seem to aid us also in looking for unoffered solutions.

Unsaid names of historical events, like the one below describing the Vietnam War, do not make the events untrue, less impactive, or less terrible:

> The Kong River is a little higher today [...] deeper into the Lao border. There was killing every day. Planes went in to dump bombs many trips per day. It was hard to find a living. It was not safe. Everyday life is filled with danger and fear...deep in the dense jungle, on the other side of the ocean, there were many times more suffering. Destruction of life and everything in Vietnam has been going on for many years. There is no sign of stopping. Bombs were dropped there like sand strewn in play. Human bodies lay dead and scattered like meaningless animals. (Man in the Tree 80)

Details of both physical and psychological effects are given but none of the producers of those effects: "There was killing every day," "planes went in to dump bombs," "everyday life is filled with fear," "bombs were dropped there," and "human bodies lay dead." In all these sentences, the actors of destruction are conspicuously absent. Unseen killers and destroyers make the terror of the events doubly frightening because faceless cruelty cannot be appealed to. It lurks in a blankness that relentlessly erupts without logic and without humanity. It produces fear and gains power through this distancing which denies intimacy. It creates distance between itself and its victims but joins its victims both spatially and temporally. Unlike newly paved roads which mark the city from the country, the Mekong River here links Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand in such a way that the political names of the countries become almost irrelevant as geo-political or conceptual delineations. National borders do not seal fear. External reality here leaks into the imagination in a manner that defies geopolitical boundaries or literary ones. Floating dead bodies, the

sound of gunfire and of warplanes cannot be contained within the constructed categories of country, and though the producers of these images are pushed to the fringes of the novel's text, they still make their presence physically and emotionally felt.

A closer view of the river reveals:

> "In the middle of the river a human corpse floated past slowly. It was bloated in decay to a puff. This image was no longer new because two months before corpses filled the river, floating along one after the other with no break. The shock and the fright made people limp and depressed." (Man in the Tree 81)

The floating corpses with no explained or justified causes symbolize complete victimization. But Nikom is also concerned with mental significance. For the living, dead bodies produce "shock and fright." People are portrayed as being almost impotent, physically and mentally weak, in the face of incomprehensible and unavoidable massive death: "the shock and the fright made people limp and depressed." The effect is described as eventually becoming almost a syndrome where repeated exposure to decayed life not only weakens people, but also familiarizes them with such products and conditions of violence. "This image was no longer new" marks an ideological internalization of foreign-imposed destruction. The man's comment, "what can we do?" (82), reiterates this helplessness and impotence, making him a complete victim with the focus not only on his life's condition, but also on his outlook.

At the end of the story, the woman "lifted her hands to cover her face and began to cry" (Man in the Tree 82). This is a gesture of weakness that may not be so in this case. It follows descriptions of a woman who does not fear hardship or falter under adversities (79-81). Images of her clamped jaws (80), burning brow, and shaking head (81) in "trying to endure" show an individual who fights and does not

give up easily, and precede the final one of a buried face streaming tears (82). The covered crying face in this context calls attention to the cause of the outburst as well as to the woman herself. With many signs of strength informing it, the final sign of weakness becomes less straightforward and demands a certain skepticism in determining its meaning. Why is this strong person suddenly weak? What incredible force can turn a woman who regularly braves "sun and wind" into one who cannot talk, hold a boat in course, nor face anything by the end of the story? She leans helplessly on her husband's shoulder and uncontrollably cries, unable to verbally express her needs. The swollen corpses floating apathetically by seem only to give the decayed fate of victims. Yet they do tell something of the nature of the committers of the crime. Absence of similar information on *agents* of destruction seems to convey that fear, weakness, or hopelessness lingers still.

In an article on the changes in Thai social values, Suntaree Komin mentions mass media as a "powerful force in modern life. More and more people read newspapers and magazines and watch television for news, information and enteretainment," indicating even that "media elites resist efforts to tone down the content of programmes because they believe violent portrayals maximize their profits" (265). In seeming contradiction to this common and positive view of media as the integrator, speaker, and conscience of the technological age, years after the Vietnam War, Nikom chooses not to look at the agent of destruction in the face. The actors, though known, remain faceless. Bloated dead bodies are consequences of a violence that trickles into a narrative while their murderers live just beyond the fictional horizon. The corpses seem to signal that self-censorship is a form of a political literary tradition that cannot be quite shaken off. Historical reality, if

included in Nikom's work, appears in a highly mediated or indirect form as in "Change." In this short story, Wit's father

> was absorbed in the newspaper. He was reading about the fighting in Vietnam that spread into Laos and Cambodia, about American and South Vietnamese soldiers dropping napalm bombs on North Vietnam, about the United Nations accepting Beijing as a member, about America preparing to withdraw troops from Vietnam. (Man in the Tree 54)

Through media, which supposedly connects communities and the world, the puffed up corpses in the Mekong become distant, mere news of a removed event, stories on a piece of paper, not a reality being lived on the same earth by fellow human beings. The drifting bodies in the Mekong, juxtaposed to this scene of a man calmly reading about world events in the safety and comfort of his Bangkok home, then, comment on conventional views of modern media and exposes the media's inadequacy in linking communities, much less being a social watchdog or exemplifying freedom of the press, especially in Southeast Asia (Suntaree 266). Mass media in Nikom's portrayal signifies alienation rather than integration. It becomes a symbol of silence rather than speech. His reflexivity in denying himself voice even in his own writing critiques the extent of communication possible through the means, vocabulary, and conditions characterized as modern. In a society so fascinated and inundated with visual images, what does it mean not to show? Nikom's *unseen* destroyers, ironically, *reveal* other narratives being told alongside the popular one and ask who should be richer, besides the media elite, for the information.

Abandoned Bodies

The four abandoned bodies in the short story "Afternoon of Smoke and Fog" also appear mysteriously without similar physical presence of their murderers:

> On that low table were two corpses lying on top of each other. They were rotten to the point of turning into shreds. Away from the table toward

> bushes to the east was one corpse bent over on the ground. Fat white worms wriggled around all over its body. Another corpse, just as rotten, was beside a rocky crag to the south of the table. (Man in the Tree 116)

Graphic portrayal of the putrefied bodies gives a sense of the violence done to them. There is violence in terms of the unnatural death which is physical and in terms of disrespectful abandonment which is emotional. Refusal to show the action of the crime or the murderers and revealing only the irreversible rancid destinies of the four people make such violence symbolic of an incontestable force that put villagers in a passive position. The number of deaths here as well as in the previous section conveys the power of the perpetrator. Four grown village men working together cannot save themselves from the murderer(s).

The family group walking up the mountain to retrieve the bodies is in no better position. Acceptance of the fate of family members and of its own grief shows resignation rather than defiance. Deaths seem common in the story, so much so perhaps that villagers are inured to them. At one point, Uncle Piew, an elderly member of the group, warns a young mother: "Siew, watch your kid. We don't want him falling into the water and dying like others" (Man in the Tree 106). Deaths are viewed almost as a joke, something one can mention half-lightly. They do not need to be accounted for, questioned, or investigated. Unnatural deaths become natural, not only to be expected and dealt with as with other events in life, but also to be understood as an end to worries and troubles. They are quickly removed from social and political associations that may demand a less resigned attitude. Unseen killers are dangerous and significant because they are hardly ever mentioned in the story and also because villagers refrain from taking issue with them.

One villager from a nearby village asks the group, "Going to get the bodies?" (107) as if it were everyday conversation, a kind of greeting. In fact, it may very well

be. The discovery of Chod's body at the beach in The Lizard and the Rotten Branch is similarly mentioned is casual tones: "killing again?" (52). Further conversation about the abandoned bodies in "Afternoon of Smoke and Fog" reveals a mixed tension between normal and abnormal circumstances: "Heard them talking. People around here have been talking about this [the bodies on the mountain] many days" (107). On one hand, the killing is uncommon or unnatural enough to be talked about. On the other, it must occur often enough to be treated so casually. Both interlocutors seem to consciously repress the topic of who and how in their exchange, effectively blocking out the killers from discussion:

> "Why so late?" the man with sun-burnt red face said. "People rumored for many days already."
> "We've just got the news," Lode answered.
> "Probably nobody knew who the dead were," the man with sun-burnt red face said. "So how did you find out?"
> "The *kamnan* went over and told us this morning," Lode replied. "The man who went up to shoot for gibbons found the bodies since evening of the eleventh. He was afraid so didn't tell anybody. Only went and told the Kamnan the other day." (109-10)

Even when the topic of possible suspect does come up, neither side seems keen on going into specifics:

> "What's the story?"
> "Still not sure. Maybe robbing, fighting over farmland, or having to do with the boss."
> "Heard there were 4 corpses."
> "Yes," Lode answered. "There's my nephew, Siew's husband, and Uncle Piew's son."
> "What about another one?"
> "Another one is Roheem's uncle." (109)

Compared to the freely given and detailed information about how the bodies are found, this latter exchange on possible cause of death is limited. The issue is surrounded by vagueness and uncertainty. Though each of the dead people is a close relative to the search team, there seems to be no desire in any of the relations to inquire further into the cause of death. It would be easy to view resignation as

hardened emotion through frequent exposure to such incidents, but the narrative tells us otherwise. The first of the group to see the abandoned bodies "stand struck under the do tree with yellow flowers" (116). Siew's reaction at the sight of her unrecognizable husband also defy readings of callousness. She "followed the gaze of the others and slowly turned her face back, her back bending, both hands closed upon her lips to prevent sobs from escaping through." The bodies, once found, are burned to dry the bones so that they can be taken back for a proper funeral.

To the villagers, their relatives' bodies retain sentimental value and are tracked down regardless of difficulty. The image of the abandoned bodies, therefore, contrasts with this sentiment. Killed and left to rot and be eaten in the forest, they are accorded a different value by their murderers. The fact that these four men are killed in the first place indicates that they are not valueless, only their value is less than something else. The fact that the relatives do not take further action regarding the mysterious deaths suggests that an even more powerful reason prevents them.

Protectors

In chapter 10 of The Lizard and the Rotten Branch, a guard finds a piece of paper on the office door of Prawing's rubber plantation. The message reads:

> To the Manager of the rubber plantation:
>
> We would like to request cooperation from the company. We have the need for money of the amount 500,000 baht. This sum will be taken only once and will protect the company thereafter. Take a car with a red cloth tied to it and bring the money to Klong Wao Bridge at five p.m. tomorrow. Go alone. Do not tell the police. If you resist, we do not guarantee the safety of the plantation. Today, cease all work with tractors and plowing vehicles until the money has been delivered.
>
> From us,
> The Protectors

This threatening note introduces an unseen entity whose work resembles that of the police yet unidentified with it. The existence of these "protectors" as a "secular"

order keeper has many implications on society and the role of police within it. How can these bands of local order arbitrators thrive alongside police forces? A conversation between Prawing and Somkid in the chapter before suggests that protectors' existence depend on the absence, ignorance, or negligence of the police:

> "...he [village headman Pin] is probably worried and wants to help protect you."
> "Protect what?"
> "Protect bad people from making trouble."
> "Lots of bad people I've set salaries for already."
> "So set one for headman Pin too to get secure protection."
> "I don't understand," Prawing murmured. "Where do all these bad people come from? I have to hire them as protectors so they don't make trouble. They've about filled the plantation."
> "But it works, doesn't it?"
> "Who are the bad guys who create trouble? Not them? And we hire them to protect against who? Them again." (128)

Not one word about policemen appears in this exchange between Prawing and Somkid as if the police are outside local imagination as dependable or effective keepers of community peace. Oversimplified popular models of capitalist society and economy are not sensitive to or interested in these local elements that do not quite fit the framework and are not easily explainable through it. Often, cultural deviations from the Western models are dismissed as characteristics of underdevelopment or uncivilization. As money and property become more valued in an increasingly capitalistic lifestyle and a centralized government system is more keenly felt, community cohesion through values about social harmony is more intensely negotiated with Western ideology. Protectors become symbolic of the meeting of materialist culture with village politics to negative effect. These local bullies are the smaller scale village version of unseen killers, taking advantage of people's precarious position of dependency on greater scale agricultural investments for livelihood.

The burning of Tao's plantation is one example of the destruction protectors can cause. Again only the results, both physical and psychological, are portrayed, and not the action or actors:

> "There was a fire in his plantation."
> "How did it happen?"
> "Arson."
> "Really? Who'd have the heart to do it to him? A hard-working man like him won't get into trouble with anybody."
> "The arsonist probably didn't intend to hurt Tao. The person was going to get foreman Uan next door but it burned into the plantation adjacent." (The Lizard 39)

The plantation fire, with an invisible entity behind it, is understood as bad luck. Reliable yet dangerous, known yet unknown, familiar yet foreign, protectors reside in a complex niche in the characters' imaginations. In any case, the priority accorded to their significance in the community over the police tells of the former's local relevance. Each concern or conversation about security or threat of danger edges out the presence of policemen in the narrative. Other government-associated people like the kamnan (the sub-district head) live outside the village (The Lizard 14) and seem to provide no solace or protection against fear and local maliciousness. They are not symbols of security and dependency despite their job position.

The Police

The following introduction to two police officers in the short story "Afternoon of Smoke and Fog" gives a less than ideal picture of these problematic community members:

> The sound of car engine came from below and quieted at the edge of the forest at the foot of the hill.
> "Probably Roheem and the police," Lode spoke softly.
> They waited a long while before Roheem and two policemen walked up there. One was fat with pudgy cheeks and the other had a thin curving moustache. He walked with his shoulders hunched like a tin soldier.

> "Very hot," the fat policeman said the moment he arrived. He unbuttoned his white shirt, used his hand to fan the air back and forth in front of his chest. "Any water to drink?" he turned to Lode who was looking on silently.
>
> The red-faced man reached out toward a bowl from the log beside him and handed it over.
>
> "What kind of water is this?" the fat policeman said after taking a large gulp and making a terrible face, handing back the bowl. "Cuts the throat."
>
> . . .
>
> ... the fat policeman's voice again:
>
> "Why do they have to make trouble for other people?"
>
> "They probably didn't intend to," Roheem spoke sharply. "They probably didn't plan to come up here to die, and make trouble for anybody." (Man in the Tree 111-12)

The two policemen are asked to join the trip to find the abandoned bodies more out of routine procedure than out of any actual need for assistance: "You [Uncle Piew] told him [Roheem] to go get the police" (105). They are sent for as part of a ritual rather than because of their having any significant practicality or efficacy. Like culturally illiterate imposition of modern materials and elements into village life in Khamsing Srinawk's earlier comment, the police seem extraneous to the community. They act and are treated as outsiders. There seems to be no incentive or desire on either the villagers' or the police's part to work more closely with and to understand each other. For the policemen who are unwilling to adapt to the landscape and heat, village life is uncomfortable. They view villagers as a nuisance: "Why do they have to make trouble for other people?" For the villagers, accommodating these government officials is cumbersome: "Contacting the bosses, how can it be fast like you want?" (106). Categorizing the police with "bosses" puts them in a group outside of the villagers' own and above them. Policemen, thereby, join a class of modern lords who eventually rule over people's lives.

Being part of the village community yet not a part of it, the police in this short story typify the conflict and confusion of society's negotiating of modern signs.

They also resemble previously discussed unseen killers and protectors in that they mainly exist on the fringes of the text, occasionally driving in and out of the frame to perform petty tasks. Their influence, however, like that of Kham-ngai's boss or other mentioned unseen forces, is more often felt and does not usually depend on physical proximity for impact. The end of the short story shows how this "protector of citizens' peace," as the Thai slogan for them goes, has a different role in action:

> When they reached the highway, the fat policeman told them to load the lead onto the truck.
>
> "Are you going to drop us off, Officer?" Uncle Piew asked after putting all the bags of lead on the truck.
>
> "Catch the bus. Wait a while and it should be by," the fat policeman said. "I'd like to take you but have to hurry back. There's lots of other work to be done."
>
> The two policemen got in the truck and drove away. (Man in the Tree 124)

Instead of serving the people, these policemen ask the people to serve them. The confiscated lead will probably earn the officers a good sum of money. Discrepancy between the policemen's duty and their real actions make them a hypocritical figure, symbolically representing unreliability and untrustworthiness that asks us to rethink the narrative we are asked to believe about one of the most powerful networks of civil authority in late 20th century Thailand.

In The Lizard and the Rotten Branch, the police are also routine ("Has the police arrived?" 45), and they are also suspect ("perhaps it is the police [who killed Chod the villager]" 48). The authority whose job is to protect is itself suspect for committing crime. Such a circumstance indicates the end of the villagers' security and support; the shelter they are dependent upon is corrupt and turns against them. Instead of promising safety and peace, the police as an idea evokes unrest, danger, and imprisonment. Police officers in this novel attend mysterious meetings with local strong men and generally stay away from the village except when called for (29, 38).

The distance between the police and the people makes the police feared because they are strangers: "Can't buy any [lead]. The police will arrest me. I don't have a mining permit" (The Lizard 151). At the same time, this non-identification allows corrupt police to take advantage of the villagers with fewer qualms. Lack of intimacy and sympathy between the people and their protectors keep them apart and perpetuate stereotypes about each other.

Though the police are mentioned in both The Lizard and the Rotten Branch and High Banks, Heavy Logs, they never physically appear. Unseen, like the killers and protectors discussed above, they function as ideologies in the fiction and in people's imagination: "the police and forestry rangers of the province came in to patrol often...the boss had to 'work around' for many days" (High Banks 99). Nikom Rayawa offers various and sometimes contrasting images of authorities, but in almost every case, the police enter the text as invisible actors like rumors—active, influential, and elusive. They shape people's thoughts and actions, and exemplify power through mere mention of the name.

Thieves

Violence to Plai-sut the elephant in High Banks, Heavy Logs is done by ivory thieves who are never seen: "both his tusks were secretly cut by someone a few months earlier" (15). Speculation, mystery, vagueness surround this invisible threat to the mental and physical health of people and animals. Only the product of its violence is revealed: "The thieves stole everything, didn't leave anything at all." The robbery is complete in the sense that it is merciless and total, taking away everything there is to take. The fact that they are not seen makes them free and invulnerable to civil punishment. They are never caught and brought under law. Their influence over

law and ability to operate outside of it expressed through their marginal existence but influential role in the text.

Plai-sut's identity is radically changed because of this evasive criminal power. As a matter of fact, the entire book, not counting the flashbacks, takes shape according to the new definitions and terms that emerge after the fatal incident of the ivory robbery. Nikom allows the thieves a special position in the novel along with other destroyers by keeping them out of the text. They are not made to act out their lives and fate in the story in the same way that other immersed characters must.

Non-appearance accords unseen killers, destroyers, protectors, and thieves a privilege in the fictional context. However, it also makes them symbolic of a lacking associated with ideas of modern Thailand. These symbols describe the transforming country as characterized not necessarily by better distributed wealth and opportunities. Modern myths about free trade and a democratic system are undermined by ubiquitous fear of impossible to eliminate powers[20] and of a new class system replacing the old. These unseen players in Nikom's fiction tell us that lacking in the emerging modern society he describes are the nation's ability to effectively investigate certain groups or individuals in power, villagers' sense of empowerment, people's security in life and livelihood, their dignity and right to equal opportunities and public services, and their sense of social harmony and community.

The censored physical presence of killers, destroyers, protectors, and thieves in Nikom Rayawa's fiction, allowing only passing reminders of their agency and contrastingly concrete results, suggests implied history and reality lurking just beyond the corners of the literary page. Bloated corpses floating into the story from a

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[20] "Itipolteemaimeetangkajuddai" ["Influential Power that Can Never be Eliminated"]. Siamrathsabdawicharn 25 Jan. 1960: 4.

historical Vietnam War (Man in the Tree 80-81), lead being transported off the page to a missile factory (The Lizard 151), and gunmen disappearing outside the paper frame after killing villagers (11) all stand for a certain uneasiness about negative conditions of modern Thai society and the role literature can play in changing it.

Nikom's symbols link the "literary" and the "historical" worlds, and are actively engaged in negotiations of meaning between them. The elusiveness of unseen agents of violence is intimation of the existence of more stories beyond the literary frame. Reading only within the paper text, therefore, gives no clear entity to be held accountable for the cruelty and violence. In order to more fully appreciate his work, the fiction demands "outside" reading in conjunction to "inside" and incorporating and assessing the different realities.

Festering Scars: What is Past is Not Past

"Forward into the Past" is the title for The Economist issue on the Tragic May incident in 1992. Nikom Rayawa's symbols to be discussed in this section explore some issues raised by this title. "Forward into the Past" makes us hesitate as it points out discrepant movements of chronological time and cultural history. Chronological time is understood to move from past, present, to future. Definitions of what is past, present, and future are not so simple when we move from the clock and calendar to mentality and memory, which, among other things, make up cultural history.

Efforts to modernize the country such as campaigns in Field Marsh Phibun's era promote concepts that translate into forward and upward trajectories on a timeline and evolutionary scale. One campaign poster from 1941 juxtaposes two illustrations, the first showing bare-chested women, naked children and turbaned men. The second

shows a similar group of people of various ages but all securely covered with clothing. The caption details the do's and don'ts of respectful dressing in public places in order to be "civilized."

Figure 4.1 A campaign poster on polite dress in Field Marshal Phibun's era displayed at the Muang District hall, Songkla Province on April 1, 1941. Source: Thai Politics in the State Symbol Era (1997), National Archives

The poster, though not explicitly labeling picture one "before" and picture two "after," basically tells a Western development narrative. It says Thai people portrayed in the first picture are not civilized and those in the second are. One message being conveyed is that clothes are symbols of advancement. Another is binary conceptualization in which difference is polarized. The version Westerners identify with is the "self," characteristically desired, good, and high, while the differing version is the "other," undesirable, bad, and low. Yet another message is that development implies abandonment of the past and orientation toward the future.

Economic planning, as with the National Economic and Social Development Plans, looks at forecasts and projections. Forward-looking plans, focusing on the future, six years at a time, seem to take little account of the past by comparison. Such

economic and political amnesia is critiqued by Nikom's various symbols of festering scars: old wounds that, once closed over and healed, should be forgotten or set aside but are not.

Festering Wounds

Physical wounds and emotional trauma are linked in Nikom Rayawa's works. In High Banks, Heavy Logs, Plai-sut's condition after the ivory robbers' visit includes both physical and emotional suffering:

> The elephant's condition deteriorated rapidly. It wasn't interested in grass or water. It stood sadly all day, swinging its tail once in a long while. Its trunk hung still. Its ears hardly moving. Its eyes were sleepy and clouded. Flies and fruitflies buzzed around the base of the trunk that began to fester. Kham-ngai boiled herbs to rinse the wound and rubbed plai onto it every day. (16)

When the trunk wound heals, the elephant's spirit does not return. It takes several more weeks for glimpses of the "old Plai-sut" to show (24). After the body recovers, the spirit can continue to fester. Kham-ngai muses at one point after the incident: "There're no more tusks to steal" (25). Plai-sut's condition, however, shows that tusks are not the only things stolen. The robbers, acting with capitalist greed and a consumer-conscious eye for commodity, plunder identity, pride, almost an entire past history, and even prospects for the future. The animal is robbed, but so are people associated with it like Kham-ngai and Ma-chan. Even other workers and the boss are affected by this "rape" of the animal. The image of Plai-sut's wound, therefore, comments on the forward-looking sentimentality ascribed to modern capitalist world view. The robbers inflicting this pain do not seem conscious of or concerned with the wide-ranging effects of their action. Rethinking the incident, the robbers are more interested in immediate gain and temporary richness. This is a narrow and present-oriented decision and justification for action. Nikom's close look at the violence and

its consequences suggests that though the robbers get away with their instant prize, the overlooked range of outcome remains. The action is not made and done. According to the version of history paralleling the chronological one that Nikom offers here, its presence remains, acting again and again on people, animals, plants, and things though some oblivious actors think it is over.

In The Lizard and the Rotten Branch, Thao's former bullet wound continues to plague him. He limps and occasionally experiences fresh bouts of pain above his right knee, causing him to collapse and preventing him from walking as normal (79). Thao received the wound in a shooting incident where he killed the man who had shot his brother. The family of the dead swore revenge and Thao flees to a different province to escape the wrath: "I have to be careful. It's terrible. Thinking about it depresses me. I have to be in hiding like this. Pin, Pin, he shouldn't have made trouble. If not for him, I would be in that comfortable railway job in Tungsong, and not buried here" (82). Thao's daily surreptitious life shows the presence of his action many years before. His constant fear of revenge that prevents him from living a normal life is symbolized by the hidden but malicious bullet wound in his leg. Wounds are fresh and painful. Scars should be healed and painless. Nikom's portrayal of festering scars makes scars potent and present. These symbols critique the view of history and national development that depend on ignorance, dismissal, or intentional burying of the past. His comments are that it does not work: what is past is not past, and that avoiding it does not make it go away.

Frowns

Beung's famous frown in The Lizard and the Rotten Branch is a clearer focus on the mental aspect of painful experiences. His eternally grim facial expression is

another manifestation and symbolic representation of hidden memories, but the fact that he is relatively young and, more specifically, a university student and from Bangkok makes the image especially poignant. Beung comes to the southern town to escape Bangkok October 6, 1976 riots only to see more everywhere, even in the obscure village in which he has settled. His attempt to avoid the past, his own dissatisfaction, guilt, and other feelings about it is unsuccessful. He continues to frown at a repressed past and an unsatisfactory present. The frown in the young man also symbolizes disillusionment of the new generation with modern Thailand and its government. Beung's unrelenting frown sharply criticizes myths of modernity as the progressive age of the young generation because he, as part of the very generation, is denied active participation in defining it and forced to seek refuge in deep jungles and distant villages. Progress as described by this frowning image is a wheel turning backward into past despotism, or spinning in place with the same influential groups in power, and not the forward and upward mobility promised by industrialization and westernization.

In a conversation about the mysterious dead body at the beach, Beung discovers the futility of his trying to avoid facing terrorism:

> "I want it to be from another village."
> "This village or other village is the same."
> "How?"
> "Same in that it is brutality."
> "That's true but still, if it's not one of our villagers, it would be better."
> "How? If it's not our villager it's not brutal?"
> Beung's imperturbable facial expression gradually grew tense. His white face began to show color. (44-45)

Beung is caught accepting the inevitability of terrorism. He is disturbed by Choon's insistence on displacing brutality by imagining it as belonging to a different village, victimizing an "other" villager, threatening another community. The episode's

addressing of the issue of displacement is a comment on Beung's own situation. The conversation shows Beung recognizing that violence can exist anywhere, in small villages as well as in the big city, and displacing it does not change its nature or make it go away. It also anticipates whether Beung will learn that avoiding the past, as he does in fleeing Bangkok, is another form of displacing wrong.

Nikom's presentation of a modern Thai character who perpetually frowns also criticizes the Thai smile. Promotion of postwar Thailand as the land of smiles grew as tourism became one the country's largest income-drawing industries. The smile nostalgically hearkens back to a past ideal image of Thai character. It evokes images of a good-natured, gentle, and friendly people, always innocent and hospitable. It also fulfills expectations of an oriental country with beautiful seductive women. William Klausner writes in a 1959 memorandum about Thai villagers' views of other peoples and countries which can easily be associated with the stereotypical smile of a peace-loving people:

> The average villager harbors no feelings of resentment or suspicion against the various Asian countries or their nationals in Thailand. Even the Japanese, who occupied the village areas of Thailand, are not thought of with hatred or dislike. There does not seem to be any resentment against the Chinese or Vietnamese despite their firm grip on the economy in many of the up-country areas. (2)

Klausner's observations of Thai character in the memorandum contain descriptions that paint a congenial picture of naïve villagers which have become a stereotype for Thai people as a whole. Villagers are seen to be "non-political," "morally straitlaced" (3) individuals who "[wish] to preserve social harmony at all costs." They exhibit no "rancor" toward cultures "better" than their own, and "[avoid] open expression of anger, annoyance, dislike, hatred, etc." These ideas held by foreigners and Thais alike are embodied in the culturally loaded image of the smile. Nikom replaces this with a grim pout on the face of a young university student from Bangkok. By doing so, he at

once critiques the Siamese smile used by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) as superficial and even hypocritical. At the national as well as at the personal level, the smile is questioned by this frown of the student with an allegorical name, all signifying brewing "pasts" hidden behind a deceptively simplistic front.

Somkid's and Sao's misunderstanding of each other in The Lizard and the Rotten Branch is a cold war that also hides many stories behind frowns. Somkid nails shut the gate on his property which leads to the river, preventing Sao's family from accessing the water. This is in response to his discovery of a closed gate on Sao's family plantation that bars him from conveniently accessing a main road. He thinks it is out of the malice of Sao's father and extends this anger to his daughter Sao as well. Lack of communication prolongs the misunderstanding and feeds a festering grudge between the two people. The blocked entrances and unexplained frowns ruin a possible friendship until the very end when both clarify their actions (349).

The situation of Saman and his wife in the same novel is another case that shows frowns to be hiding misunderstanding and scars to be present and active. Saman's reputation as an influential gunman makes him a prime suspect when Prawing is kidnapped for ransom and for other local crimes:

> "What are you thinking about, 'man?" Somkid asked.
> "Why?"
> "You're worrying about something?"
> "Yeah, my wife's in pain."
> "But you're about to get money. You should be glad."
> "What money?" Saman stared at Somkid's face.
> "Don't fool me."
> "What are you talking about?"
> Somkid's face turned red, his voice full of emotion.
> "The ransom money, what else?"
> "What ransom money, 'kid?"
> "The ransom money for Prawing that you kidnapped. Quit pretending you don't know."
>
> . . .
>
> "You're misunderstanding, Somkid. About the foreman, I don't know. About Chod, too, I wasn't involved."

> "And those people in Kao Lek being killed by the bomb, you'd say you're not involved again either?" (309-10)

The scar on Saman's face from a past fight continues to mark him as a fighter and trouble-maker in the present (309). His wife's prolonged labor pain cannot be alleviated because of his fear of revenge, of the police, of his past (313). He cannot bring himself to go out into the public and take his wife to the hospital. A new life cannot be delivered with old grudges still blocking its beginnings (312).

Hiding behind fear like Saman is no protection from and no solution to problems. His scar is no symbol of past deeds but continuous doing. People's frowns on him ("People outside hate me" 313) are as much a product of his own guilty imagination as theirs ("They don't hate the real you, they hate only the stories they hear about you" 314). Nikom's several forms of festering scars symbolize a rotting from inside, an ongoing present that is shut up and labeled as the past. The implication is that if these stores of repressed history are not opened and dealt with, they will continue to grow in the limited and falsely defined space, causing needless inflammation and pain that stunts possible growth.

Mistaken alignment (intentional or unintentional) of human imagination and chronological time is critiqued by Nikom's play with images and their symbolic meanings. These "homebred"[21] symbols provide alternative readings of the Western development narrative and its signs popularly used to describe and understand modern Thailand. Wound imagery became notably prevalent during the two October riots of 1973 and 1976. Literature produced during these periods and thereafter dealing with the incidents and the issues of freedom and truth that they raise make extensive use of this imagery. The mental trauma of the tragedies, especially the latter, expressed

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[21] Chetana Nagavajara has actively spoken out on the need for Thais to develop theories of their own about Thai literature. This idea and several of his own "homemade" theories can be found in

through images of physical affliction has similarities to Toni Morrison's symbolic portrayal of American slavery and its psychological consequences in Beloved where a terrible episode in the lives of many slaves is "not a story to pass on" yet impossible to forget (Flesh and Blood 162).

Many other aspects of Thai modern history fit well into this metaphor of festering scars. The introduction to the New Year issue of Sangkomsatparitat after the October 6 massacre mentions "some national problems that the past government tried to repress," many of which stem from corruption (12). These are wrongs hidden from the people but whose reality and results cannot be erased or undone. The massacre itself is also a festering scar that needs treatment, where "pain is doubled by hopelessness, crushing pride, confidence, or any right they [former leftist students] have to their own past" (Flesh and Blood 168).

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his compilation of essays Comparative Literature from a Thai Perspective, and particularly his articles on the poetics of discontinuity and Thai portrayals of gender.