

DAVID PRATER

THE HAPPY FARANG



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FARANG

TWENTY-THREE POEMS

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THE HAPPY FARANG
MONK-LOVERS
BANGKOK: CITY OF ANGLES
THOMAS PYNCHON & THE ART OF ANONYMITY
MAINTENENCE
CITIES ON THE MOVE
TUK-TUK
THE POSTMAN OF KOWLOON
NON-TOURISTIC TREK
THE CHAO LE
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OH BLOSSOM
MOUNTAINS OF PAI
MR TUI
EMACIATED BUDDHA
THE BOYS ON THANON LIM KHONG
LOW SEASON, LAST DAYS
THE KIP & HOW TO CARRY IT
UNDER THE PAVEMENT, LAOS
A PHOTOGRAPHER'S WET DREAM
COCK & FOOTBALL
VISIT LAOS YEAR
TINTIN & THE PLAIN OF JARS
THE GUMS OF VIENTIANE

for R.

&

*the working elephants of
Thailand & Laos*

THE HAPPY FARANG

HELLO! I am so happy to be a *farang* in your country, relieved to discover this word that describes me & pleased to be here, spending all of my money on trinkets & going to the toilet—hooray! now even my shit is *farang!* a foreign body yearning to be assimilated! get out of Thailand i say to my ungrateful excrement, leave more room for KFC & coke. I look forward also to depositing another 500 *baht* at the airport (also *farang*) & can't wait to develop all of my excellent photos—

bye for now!

MONK-LOVER

She loved me for a matter of seconds
but her affair with the monks promises
to be a lifelong obsession. Hey, that hurts—
right there, doc! Can you lance, jab, pop it,
cut it out? Look at this: it's a postcard
she sent me—monks! You think that's
trivial? Wait till you see the photos!
Monks on bicycles; monks on *chao phraya*
river express ferry; monks carrying food
bowls; happy monks; monks sitting on the
'reserved for the monk' bench in *hualam-*
phong railway station; monks watching TV;
monks patting mutant temple dogs; monks
hanging out—oh to be a monk!

—OUCH!

BANGKOK: CITY OF ANGLES

timpani crash/*tuk-tuk*

caged verandah/air-con

little bells/squid vendor

fecund waterway/*chao phraya*

police helmet/city intersection

pollution viaduct/sky train

hardware section/chinatown

pirate tape stand/*thanon khao san*

shining *stupa*/urban *wat*

THOMAS PYNCHON & THE ART OF ANONYMITY MAINTENANCE

The choice of sunglasses is *im-por-tan'*
but on the Maple Leaf? Ray-Bans are out;
too *Miami Vice* ... Beatles specs? No, dead
giveaway (tint in sunlight) Chem-Mart?

Anonymous, average. OK. Collared shirt?
I'd prefer a gaudy Hunter S. Thompson
Hawaiian no. but beige is a city colour,
camouflage. Same with pants. A-as for
loafers? I shudder ... afraid so ... dumb

haircut also necessary. A weekday's truly
impenetrable disguise. Thus my surprised
& anxious fury in the bright

—*click!*

i shouted:

FUCK YOU PAL! on my way back to Macy's.

But on reflection, maybe the cheap fucking
sunglasses did give me away after all.

CITIES ON THE MOVE

It is the year 2542 BE—in Bangkok, the streets are flooded with people 543 years in advance of the western world but only 7 hours ahead of GMT. In the meantime, football grips the nation & entropy invades every available *thanon* & *soi*. Art flourishes in the city moving slowly north towards this exhibition of student works, the highlight of which is this collection of flower pots. The artist encourages me to take one but fearful of custom & strange vibes I decline, thinking

who knows what strange plant might emerge from this soil & what colour flower bloom?

TUK-TUK

LIFE

cough-cough go-go fast-fast slow-slow
break-break flow-flow honk-honk hel-lo
where-you go-go *tuk-tuk* hi-ho
same-same no-no *thao-rai* cheap-cheap
silk-silk *wat-wat* guess-so o-kay
go-go gem-shop strip-show no-no
go-slow wait-wait oh-ho go-go
bang-kok *tuk-tuk* cough-cough stop-go
one-two i-know left-left no-no
go-go *tuk-tuk* cough-cough *khao-san*
face-mask whiz-whiz cough-cough poi-son
cough-cough *tuk-tuk* cough-cough go-go
same-same don't-stop cough-cough car-fume
tuk-tuk cough-cough cough-cough *tuk-tuk*

DEATH

THE POSTMAN OF KOWLOON

Given the unenviable task of delivering
mail in a Cantonese walled city charged
with entropy & chaos criss-crossing its
aerial corridors (conduits they call them),
linked towers that change positions, days

—how the garbage piles up, forming strata
to be studied by future archaeologists—

he can never decipher the old city's next
move & remains astounded by the most
innocuous envelope's habit of finding a
home, scratching out deceased addresses.

Another day, another old map to discard.

Notice how randomness thrives within
the most carefully chosen boundaries.

NON-TOURISTIC TREK

COME & SEE THE HILL TRIBES PLOUGHING UP THEIR OPIUM FIELDS IN PREPARATION FOR NEXT YEAR'S CROP OF NESCAFE! THIS TREK HAS BEEN APPROVED BY THE THAI & US GOVERNMENTS. ALONG WITH JOINT MILITARY EXERCISES IT WILL CONSTITUTE THE MAIN THRUST OF THEIR WAR AGAINST DRUGS. NO RAFTING, ELEPHANT, HIKING OR SOUVENIR-SHOPPING EXPERIENCE REQUIRED; JUST A WILLINGNESS TO ACCEPT THIS ONCE IN A LIFETIME OPPORTUNITY TO JOIN A NON-TOURISTIC TREK. REPEAT: THERE WILL BE ONE TREK ONLY, AFTER WHICH THIS ENTIRE REGION WILL BE DECLARED 'FREQUENTED BY TOURISTS' & CLOSED TO ALL NON-TOURISTIC ACTIVITIES, THUS CAUSING A MASSIVE RISE IN BOTH PRICES & TOURIST NUMBERS. HURRY UP. THIS IS THE LAST CHANCE TO SEE UNTOUCHED & AUTHENTIC HILL TRIBES IN THEIR NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS! REPEAT: ONE TREK ONLY! ENQUIRE WITHIN! CREDIT CARDS WELCOME!

THE CHAO LE

Housed in two human zoos constructed for their survival's sake on the east & west coasts of Koh Lantah, it's good to know that the *Chao Le* are still allowed to play football on the beach at low-tide. Its wave sounds mimic the crowd-roars of Wembley coming down the submarine cable ... all the young men & boys clip their finger & toenails in preparation for the referee's inspection. Tomorrow they will collect these clippings & together with various haircut-offcuts launch their offerings upon the Andaman Sea in a special wooden boat (after which they gaze longingly, half-hoping the tide will bring it back, knowing also that some small part of themselves has escaped both the zoos & the fickle sea-spirits' protection

TAKRAW MONKEY

My name is 'Mud', as in 'good'. I help you with Thailand translation. I am monkey & I am crazy-good at *takraw* & at *takraw* kicks. Do you see me when I am practicing? Yes? Down at the beach with a ball of flotsam-styrofoam & a piece of string tied to a tree so that I can kick & jump like a crazy monkey. There is no end to my energy for the game & no one can tell what I am thinking at any given moment. Monkey! Ha! Your name? David? David Beckham? Ha! Football!—*Takraw!*—Monkey!—You think I'm crazy? I am Mud, as in good—good at *takraw*. See you next year. You want Sprite? 1000 *baht!* Yes! You want room? 1 million *baht!* Yes! Time to practice again! & off he goes into the innocent night-night. Relax Bay, Koh Lantah, Thailand—

keeping the peace.

OH BLOSSOM

Come here, blossom. Fall down
here on my lap & let me
run my fingers through your
delicate pink petals, the way
you used to like it in spring-
time, when you were all in
bloom. Oh, blossom, remember:
every season is another reason
to love you, tender blossom. Come
on back over here, don't let
the wind blow your fragrance
in another direction, blossom.
Let me be the lucky little bee
climbing ever so carefully
towards your sweet sticky
centre, oh blossom: who'd dare
pluck your perfect beauty?

amazing farang

happy farang

hello! i am happy
to be a farang in
your country. believed
to discover ^{the} ~~the~~ great word
~~that~~ describes me + pleased
to be here spending my
money on trinkets. ~~at~~ paying
to go to the toilet / even yay!
now ~~even~~ my shit is ^{my} a farang - ~~is~~
a foreign body yearning
to be assimilated gahh!
get out of thailand i tell
my ungrateful excrement
leave more room for
kfc + coke i look
forward to leaving
another 500 B at
the airport (also farang)
+ developing my photos ^{every} beach has
~~the~~ the same way ~~that~~ you been
~~country~~ have been developed
to appear just like me

- monk-lovers

she loved me for a matter
of seconds but her affair
with the monks promises
to be a life-long obsession
that hurts - right there, doc,
can you lance it/jab it/pop
it/cut it out? - look, here's
the postcard she sent me -
monks! you think that's
trivial? - ~~to~~ check out ~~the~~ the
photos: monks on chaya
phaya river barge; monks
with food bowls, happy
monks; monks sitting on
"reserved for the monk" bench
in Hua Lamphong Station, monks
watching tv; monks riding
bikes, hitching up skirts,
monks ^{that temple} patting a dog ^{primitively} changing out -
oh to be a monk! [ouch!]

folk song don't stop

~~The~~^a questhouse deserted this
is morning there's no music
night ~~the~~ brings ~~the~~ the dead
guitars out to play despite
the atmosphere's mischief
with ~~the~~ strings how the
damp air sends them flat pay
no mind now tune into ~~them~~

evening's ~~the~~ ~~song~~ ^{song} ^{repeat} mai pen rai, mai pen rai
its long black hair ^{+ gentle voice} awakes the young

girls ~~the~~ swoon + sing along ~~mai pen rai~~ (x2)
They know all the words they've
heard ~~the~~ ^{this} song a thousand

times before so many times now
they no longer ~~the~~ ^{feel the need to} clap
because the folk song don't stop

for no one till morning ~~comes again~~ baby
(repeat to fade...)

Sed gypsies

~~We no longer afforded
the same protection
from the three great
spirits we once enjoyed
the spirits' protection~~

The reggae house,
Bob Marley or Baha Baha

~~down at the reggae house
its opening night every
day + night ~~especially~~ for the group of
the dehard stoners ~~from~~~~

determined to roll joints as big
as sausages we smoke them,
twirl fire sticks + dance
idiotically to ~~the owner~~ laughs, ~~knowing~~ ~~they will~~ ~~laugh~~ ~~of the reggae~~

The reggae the dj ~~is~~ mix ~~up~~
with plenty of dub ^{or} four
turntables in all a vinyl
fanatic who wears sometimes

hi-fi walkam CL 931

i was made in china please
do not ask any further
questions of me simply ^{press} play
fast forward or stop insert
tape ~~to play~~ ^{or adjust volume} ~~again~~ granted
my electronics are suspicious
of the slightest movement
on ~~your~~ your part thus
i am unsuitable for off-road
conditions, ^{however} i do possess a
sophisticated speaker system
^{that} ~~which~~ allows your friends
to enjoy the ~~sounds~~ happy sounds
i issue without the need for
headphones on this subject
i ~~admit~~ ^{otherwise} simply no. 1. "congee"
it is only a slight distance
from here to congee which i
have often devoured to the
detriment of my internal
workings, ^{never fear} in the event of mal-
function i will simply +
automatically stop thank you
+ have a nice day

under the pavement, laos

a footprint's
massage the
only respite from
a weight made
of pavements
& laos

under the pavement laos

in dissent: its skin ~~is~~ full of ~~prints~~ of

massage ~~under a~~ worn bones, ~~this~~ footprints, ^{the} ~~warmer~~ massage for
~~under the~~ skin ~~made~~ of fists its muscles bunched
full of pavements + laos under fists

under laos, the mekhong's

predictions: of swallowing bombs

dearly ~~part~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~dammer~~ ~~and~~ ~~dammer~~
belching ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~dammer~~ ~~and~~ ~~dammer~~
under beer laos of ~~the~~ ~~men~~
full of laos + mekhong's

under the mekhong, ~~the~~ ~~cat's~~ ~~the~~ ~~cat's~~ ~~the~~ ~~cat's~~? ~~stags~~?
advancing ~~the~~ ~~cat's~~ ~~the~~ ~~cat's~~ ~~the~~ ~~cat's~~
chance ~~on~~ ~~viper's~~, ~~the~~ ~~cat's~~ ~~the~~ ~~cat's~~ ~~the~~ ~~cat's~~ upon an unknown beach, a silent
rows of mekhong + buffalos ^{Indian file} ^{porous}

under the buffalos, the skin's

~~half~~ ~~the~~ ~~skin's~~ half-furthers: imprints of bottles
where eyes should have ~~stages~~ ~~down~~

~~above~~ ~~the~~ ~~skin's~~ yawning mouths under temples
full of ~~the~~ ~~skin's~~ + ~~the~~ ~~skin's~~ skin

MOUNTAINS OF PAI

Pai bursting through the fog to fly in low
across the rice paddies, dumping its deadly
load & setting the pond a-tremble with
aftershocks the size of frogs (now skipping).

In the mountains of Pai, untold numbers of
Karen separatists pray fervently for a rain
cloud to carpet bomb the ponds of Burma
(we saw one coming over the mountains).

Along the surface-tension's wire, as quickly
as it came the raincloud retraced the thirty
miles back to Thailand. If only the skies would
remain blackened by something like smoke ...

MR TUI

Mr Tui, you'd have to win the 'Safest Driver in Thailand' award. You were a man of few words but smooth driving actions: e.g. your easy familiarity with the nine hundred & forty two sharp corners between Chiang Mai & Pai. Mr Tui, you knew when to sound your horn around a hairpin bend, when to change down to second, when to accelerate & swerved superbly to avoid collapsed road shoulders! However, Mr Tui, the one criticism i have is that you flicked the windscreen wipers on & off unnecessarily—it really was raining quite heavily, Mr Tui & you could have saved yourself the trouble by leaving them on for the entire trip. Record time, nevertheless : 2 hrs 56 mins start to finish.

Khob khun khrap.

EMACIATED BUDDHA

Fireworks rupture the temple on the hill's
serenity, the interior's panorama suffocated
by a Buddhist vision of hell flavoured with
more than a dash of Hindu horror: here's
a massacre of men & women sawn in half
by grinning & willing fellow men & women.
Here's old Buddha himself: count his ribs.
This is before he discovers the middle
Path. Still, there are thousands of hungry
children in the Buddhist world: & more than
a thousand monks & nuns forced to cross
the Burmese border in search of alms today.
They are all still hungry: count their ribs.

THE BOYS ON THANON LIM KHONG

Armed with their hideouts & slingshots
& smiles, they gather at nightfall beside
a rocky river road to compete in monied
contests & dodge *tuk-tuks*. Their flurries
of laughter as they pull the old notes from
their pockets & place them on the road's
riverbrown surface, throwing their thongs
from line-marks towards these jackpots of
fluttering cash. See the worn thongs skim!
Of course the bigger boys win but a stream
of lao words stutters onwards. It's 8 in the
pm & time to go home now. Everyone seems
happy. Somebody just became a millionaire.

LOW SEASON, LAST DAYS

Depressed as the prices; no longer
deluded by smiles, passing signposts
kilometres; coming no closer to what
were once called destinations—border
crossings & pass-outs: different games,
same rules. Waiting for the photo-op
that might make the cost of the ticket
worthwhile. Low season, last days &
the promise of last rains that linger.
The clouds obstruct an aeroplane's view.
Let tomorrow's dawn break as high as
a season—a bright season, the first day.

THE KIP & HOW TO CARRY IT

In bundles, my friend!
In every pocket!
Stuff those notes!
Hang the exchange rate!
Just get out there &
start handing it over!
Spend it daily!
Spend it gaily!
But wait—there's more!
It's all for sale!
EVERYTHING MUST GO!
Clothes, looks, lifestyles—
out the door!
But wait—there's still more!
You can buy it—
come on & try it!
Talk's cheap—
you can buy that too!
But don't forget to bargain!

UNDER THE PAVEMENT, LAOS

Under the pavement, Laos in dissent:
a skin full of worn bones, the footprint's
masseur, a fist full of pavements & Laos.

Under Laos, the Mekhong's predictions:
swallowing bombs, reeking dimly of Lao
beer on a menu full of Laos & Mekhongs.

Under the Mekhong, the current's advance:
upon an unknown beach, a silent chorus,
from a porous row of Mekhongs & currents.

Under the current, the riverbed's half-truths:
imprints of bottles where eyes once shone,
yawns in a mouth full of currents & riverbeds.

Under the riverbed, the earth's velocity:
half-lies boring rings in fire, extinguished
by the scrutiny of riverbeds & earth.

Under the earth, the fossil's remainder:
snails that spiral, ladders of chance, scratches
in sandstone outlining earth & fossils.

Under the fossil, the stone's logic:
a dead language rehydrated then vaporised
by the closeness of fossils & stones.

A PHOTOGRAPHER'S WET DREAM

A-ha! Luang Prabang, ancient capital: UNESCO world heritage area, magnificently preserved & in pristine condition. Please bring cameras, film & Kleenex for the mop-up—*click!* & we're off & away, through the view-finder: monks, kiddies, grannies, trannies ripe for developing when you get back to your secret laboratory! *National Geographic* is definitely interested. Oh I'm spent! /I'm spent again! / How the stock churns just like spectators through a turnstyle! I can feel it! The money shot's in my sights! I'm getting warmer now! I can't hold off much—

oh!

click /click
/Jeeeesus!

click /click

oh!

'Another Kleenex moment'.

COCK & FOOTBALL

Cock & Football! It's time to get up
& don't those horny roosters know it!
Cock & Football! Cock & Football!
Around the brown river bend comes
dawn's breaker! Rise & shine! Cock &
Football! Cock & Football! Cock & Foot-
ball! Cock-a-doodle-do! Iiiiiit's morning
once again & don't those hens know it!
Cock & Football! Your smoking pleasure!
International! Now available via satellite,
in black & white *and* colour, blasted into
your 'lounge room' with all the subtlety
of a striptease on speed! Cock & Football!
Cock & Football! Out of bed reach, for the
cold spoon & apply before rising! Cock &
Football! World cup final! & a nice pair of
legs to stare at shouting Cock & Football!
Time to get up all you frisky fat *farangs*!
Cock & Football! Cock & Football! Cock &
Football! Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Fucking cockheads.

VISIT LAOS YEAR

Visit Laos & bring your wheelbarrow.
Pretend this isn't communism gone nuts.
Ignore the poorly-organised protesters.
Turn a blind eye to the fall of the wall.
Incarcerate yourself in a touristic prison.
You're lucky to have been arrested here.
Now there's nothing left between you &
the socialist state's caring attitude towards
intellectuals & slogan-dodgers. Do not float
candle-boats on the Mekhong & don't ask
why your demonstration was not reported
in the papers. Nobody noticed in this most
'enigmatic' of nation-building nations. Being
fucked-over by every major corporation on
earth makes this a stupendous destination.
Let's hope Visit Laos Year lasts forever.

TINTIN & THE PLAIN OF JARS

Nothing to report as usual, save a badly bruised rump. Boy, the Lao sure know how to build a road!

As for the jeep, well, the driver was adamant that I ride in the back for fear of bandits who, as usual,

failed to materialise (as did Captain Haddock—having discovered the medicinal value of *sang sam*

whiskey. “Okay, I’ll see you in Phonsavan!” I tried shouting above a din of fighting cocks & MTV Asia.

“Blistering fucking barnacles!” he retorted, hotly, “you truly expect me to risk my life for a couple of

cracked fucking jars? I’d sooner meet you in hell!” Well, Captain, this sore arse is here to tell you that

Phonsavan wasn’t worth the trouble—but as for the Plain of Jars itself: I soon managed to shake off

my guide & was beginning to enjoy the serenity of my solitude amongst these thousand year old

jars of mystery when I heard a muffled explosion to the south, in the direction from which I’d come.

Being of course wary of landmines I took my time getting back to the jeep but it was too late: the poor

guide, alarmed (I suppose) at my giving him the slip in this plain of bombs had raised the alarm, only to

find his left foot on top of a rusted metal disc & one second later, his entire body was blown to the four

winds. What more could I do except commandeer the old jeep & settle into that padded driver's seat

for the long ride back to Bangkok, & there to await both my drunken Captain & his pointless expletives?

THE GUMS OF VIENTIANE

Standing at attention,
a column of white gums
awaits its commander's
final orders. Over the top!
Down the embankment!

Secure all garden plots
& fish traps! Then across
the Mekhong we go, all
in a row: sir, yes sir, sir!
Drowning at attention, sir!

Ye loyal diggers/saplings!
When were you planted,
& for what strange reason,
in dust-blown Vientiane?

In the service of *his* Majesty?

Ye brave, snow-white gums:
form a levee now. But for how
long can you hold back this
determined tide of change?

GLOSSARY

(T)–Thailand

(L)–Laos

Baht (T): Thai unit of currency (in 1999, 1 baht=AUD 0.25)

Chao Le (T): sea gypsies

Chao Phraya (T): the river that flows through Bangkok

Cock & Football (L): a Laotian brand of rolling papers

Farang (T): any western (read: white) person or tourist

Karen (T): one of the indigenous hill tribes of northern Thailand & Burma

“Khob khun khrap” (T): “Thank you very much.”

Kip (L): Laotian unit of currency (in 1999, 4000 kip=AUD 1)

Soi (T & L): lane

Stupa (T & L): pointed dome on Buddhist temples

Takraw (T): Thai game, a cross between volleyball & soccer

Thanon (T & L): street

“Thao rai?” (T): “How much?”

Tuk-tuk (T & L): small three-wheeled taxi

Wat (T): a Buddhist temple