

Sudhira : or The Proch of Spirits

A Story of Siam

– fiction by **Joe Darwin Palmer**

from a novel in progress

for Ratana Skulthai and

M.L. Boonlua Debyasuvarn

Soyez béni, mon Dieu, qui m'avez delivré des
idoles,

Et qui faites que je n'adore que Vous seul,
et non point Isis et Osiris.

Ou la Justice, ou la Progrès ou la Vérité,
ou la Divinité, ou l'Humanité, ou les Lois de
la Nature, ou l'Art, ou la Beauté . . .

Paul Claudel, "Magnificat"

Lady Mali Pimol was a great grand-daughter of King Mongkut, and Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Chulalongkorn University. I had met her at the University and had taken lunch with her nearly every day in the Faculties' Dining Room. And then she invited me to tea at her home in Bangkok, not long after the first semester began.

I arrived at Mali's ancestral home near the Temple of the Emerald Buddha exhausted from two hours of lecturing on individualism and the work ethic in Frost's poetry. Hoping that there would not be many people present, I removed my shoes and stepped up and over the threshold of the front door of one of the buildings of Mali's home. A huge old compound : walls of porous stone blocks, with sunken drives obviously laid out for horse-carriages, with palm trees, hibiscus, bougainvillea, and dozens of flowering plants I did not know surrounding the old houses elevated from the earth and connected by cat-walks, porches, terraces, in the front of the main building a wide stoop covered with potted plants and flowers. The front doors, wider at the bottom than at the top-double doors divided in the center-swung open with some urging by the house-girl who answered my knock. I entered bowing, and sat down on a low bench in front of a large-wheeled farm cart that dominated the front part of the enormous room.

About me were arrayed relics of Mali's family, the legacy of Old Siam. Framed photographs lined the walls that ran up to a curved ceiling supported by teak pillars that ran the length of the room; the wall boards glowed in the dim light with the soft patina of a thousand coats of polishing oil, the photographs in groups, mostly likenesses of army officers with fierce visages and severe moustaches, all with sashes and large medallions on their tunics, a gallery of souls waiting to be reborn, held in the limbo of this ancient hall, with their swords and trophies.

At the far end of the room, a stacked table with gilt legs arranged in a pyramid supported vases of flowers and photographs, and at the top a gold Buddha, small and ancient, gazed benignly on all the mementos of the dead, as if by the power of this single simple statue all the memories of centuries of experience were held in place and preserved for the delectation of current sufferers, as proof of the transitoriness of things and people, as a dumb show of the way it really is, the force of individual personality melting into the ranks of the deceased and nearly forgotten whose counterfeits stared blankly at each other down the decades, the paper yellowing and cracking, likenesses fading, like the memories of a time that had been, in brief and futile defiance of the fact of their deaths.

Lady Mali greeted me dressed in a dark-rust-coloured *pahsin* of Thai silk, barefoot and glowing with apparent joy at my arrival. She took my hand in her own.

“Would you like to see my ancestors?”

“Please tell me about them. What are all the things in this room?”

Mali led me by the hand as if we were in the receiving line of a reception for royal ghosts.

“Here is my mother. She was very beautiful, and as you can see, she died young, from a fever.”

“Why are her eyes closed in the photograph?” The face looked as though the woman had just got the point of a very good joke, and had closed her eyes to savor the humor of it.

“It was taken after her death.”

“She was indeed very beautiful.” My eyes clouded with tears, and I felt my shoulders pinching together, squeezing my heart so that the last reserve of propriety and distance from Mali was gone out of me. I shuddered and looked at the floor. Mali took my arm.

“What’s wrong, Dr. Sam?”

“Nothing...” I paused, trying to collect myself against the emotions that sentiment was forcing upon me.

“You are crying.”

I could not speak. I took out a handkerchief and began to dry my eyes. Mali took my arm and held it tight against her breast.

“What is nostalgia but love for that part of ourselves which is in Heaven, forever removed from change and corruption?” I quoted.

“Come. Let’s sit down for a while.” Mali led me to an easy-chair in the center of the room and called for the servant who had let me into the house to bring tea and a bottle of brandy. I lay back in the chair.

“That is an endearing thing to do, Sam. I have never before seen a Western man weep. Do you love the past so much?”

I managed a smile. “I have never seen such loss displayed in one place before. It is overpowering to think that you have such roots, that you know all of these peoples’ lives as part of your own.”

“You do not have such in America?”

“No. We do not know who we are. We have cemeteries, of course, but we know the people in them by the names on their gravestones. Otherwise they are forgotten. Their lives are seldom remembered. Here you must have more than one hundred photographs and pictures. Are they all of your relatives?”

The servant-girl brought the tea tray, and Mali poured a drink of cognac for me. “Here. This will make you relax. Do you see that large photograph above six others there,” she said pointing with her chin. “That is my grandfather. He was the captain of King Chulalongkorn’s Horse Guard.” In the photograph a heavy man

with drooping handlebar moustaches glowered sternly. "He was a handsome, vital man, and the ladies loved him. And there," she motioned toward a wide dark picture, "is a painting, a picture of the famous stallion my father brought from France to improve the blood of the royal horses."

The horse looked like Man O'War, I thought.

"My family has had to do with horses for a long time. Some of my relatives still breed race horses, and provide them for the police." Mali led me around the room and told me brief stories about many of the people whose pictures framed the room.

"Here is one of my father's brothers. He had a very fierce temper and people did not like him. One day when he was supervising the building of a road, one of the laborers killed him with an axe. My family felt very sorry for the murderer, and so we gave him money while he was in prison so that he would eat well, and when he was released he became one of our household servants. No one held the murder against him, not even my uncle's wives."

"I must say you have very different values."

Lady Mali paused. "Tell me. What time is it, Dr. Sam?"

"Nearly five o'clock."

"My niece should be here by now. She was very eager to have tea with us."

"Your niece?"

"Yes. I believe you have met her. Her name is Sudhira. She is my sister's daughter."

"Certainly I've met her. I often see her at the University, and occasionally I give her a ride home to her father's house."

"Oh? Then has she got so far with you already?"

Mali laughed and squeezed my hand. I had begun to ask Mali exactly what she had meant when the big front door swung open and Sudhira was let into the room by the servant-girl. She stood framed in the bright light of the doorway looking intently into the dim room.

"There you are," she called when she spied us in a far corner, and Mali waved to her, palm down, motioning for her to join us. Sudhira walked slowly towards us, the light following her across the room. She was wearing a cream-colored jersey midi-dress and carrying large round sunglasses and a brown bag. Her hair shone dark red from the light behind her and it enveloped her face and shoulders. As she drew nearer smiling, I saw that she had on eye-makeup but no lipstick, and then she stood in front of us and she smelled very good. I felt her presence like a geometric progression, from Mali's mother on the wall a distant point, through Mali, as big as life could ever be, to Sudhira herself, whose being drew strength from the room and enveloped me.

"I think you have met Sudhira, Khun Sam."

"Hello."

Sometimes time stops moving. Moments are elongated into another dimension when sense impressions pile atop each other and spark lines of thought that cross and re-cross and jostle for attention. They make a mess of one's composure. Most Thai girls are long-waisted and their thighs are as wide as their bottoms; not Sudhira. Most Thai girls walk like they are following a water-buffalo; not Sudhira. Her self-consciousness is absolute. She is aware of every movement she makes, every shadow, shade, nuance of gesture. Her mouth is large, her lips soft, her upper lip slightly protruding, so that it telegraphs every movement of her face. She could talk with her mouth without speaking. Her nose is straight, her eyes dark brown, luminous, the upper lids shadowed light blue, the black lines widening as they approach her nose, the lashes long, natural, the eyebrows arched, natural, the forehead smooth, unwrinkled, high, her hair parted in the middle, falling in a sweep to her breasts, her shoulders dividing the mass of hair, each strand separate and gleaming.

"Hello again, Dr. Purcell."

"It's good to see you." We stood for a moment and then Mali took us both by the arms and led us to the tea table. Mali poured tea for us from an elegant old silver pot.

"I see that you have been giving away the family secrets," Sudhira said to Mali, holding her hand and grinning conspiratorily at her.

"Only the most interesting ones," I said.

"What do you think of this old house, *Acharn*?"

"It's marvelous. I've never seen anything like it before today. My family is very simple compared to this display."

"How can that be? I have heard that Americans are composites of all the European peoples."

"That's true. I'm more or less Scots-Irish, German, French, and English. But the oldest line in the family goes back to Schleswig-Holstein and Stockholm during the One Hundred Years War; from there to Wilmington, Delaware, a Swedish colony. But in two generations there was no male heir, and a daughter married one of the du Ponts, of chemical fame. My great-grandmother was a wealthy woman, but her daughter married a school teacher who was killed during the First War. He was an Englishman. My great-grandparents on that side were as French as the du Ponts. You see, it's complicated, and that very complication makes it tenuous for any American of long standing to say very much about his ancestry."

"It is monogamy, no doubt, which causes all the crossing of family lines," Mali said. "In our way of life, at least during the old days, any man of substance would preserve his family name by taking several wives."

"That's my last duchess painted on the wall," Sudhira said, "looking as if she were alive."

"She had a heart—how shall I say?" I recited, "too soon made glad, too easily impressed; she liked whate'er she looked on, and her looks went everywhere."

Sudhira looked hard at me and I glanced away.

"Was your mother your father's last duchess?" I asked Princess Mali.

Mali dropped her eyes, smiled at her guests, and said, "No, not at all." She thought for a moment and then said "You youngsters simply know too much for your own good. It is not wise to reflect on everything that happens to you." She looked away and the recollections of her own life seemed to pass through the room. "If you hesitate too often, eventually you won't be able to get out of bed in the morning. There are better ways of treating experience than by shielding yourself with knowledge. Learning is not wisdom, don't you know?"

"Momluang," I said, using Mali's proper Thai title, "it is rare that a man finds anyone as perceptive and concerned as you are. There is a certain beauty in your understanding, although I am as yet unable to comprehend it well enough to give it words. Let me say that I have never in my life felt as fully appreciated, and as fully at home, as I do in your house. I have lived among the Muslims, who are famous for their hospitality toward strangers and guests, but what I feel in your generosity by far surpasses what I know as Christian love and charity, much less Muslim hospitality."

"Please do not forget, Dr. Purcell, that we do not often meet a *farang* who understands us and loves us as well as you do."

"You are very kind."

"No, *you* are very kind," Sudhira insisted. "*Acharn*, we know that the way of life which you see illustrated in this old house is dying, if not already completely gone, and we know that the future lies in Western ways, and so we wait for Westerners who can show us whatever is truly good in Western life. We have known many advisors and experts and administrators who have been sent to us by the European governments and by the Americans, but seldom do we get to know a man who truly respects us for what we are, and who seems wise and just and kind." She reached for my hand, holding hers out until I took it in mine. "Besides, the Buddha taught that we 'ought to follow the wise, the intelligent, the learned, the much-enduring, the dutiful, the elect; one ought to follow such a good and wise man, as the moon follows the path of the stars.'"

"What you have said gives me much pride, which is a dangerous thing to have. I don't doubt your sincerity. I only hope that I can live up to your expectations."

"You are living up to our wishes."

"How do I do that?"

"By being yourself."

"All this collective affection is unsettling me."

"Relex, *Acharn*. If you knew the *farangs* we are comparing you to, you would not feel so flattered." We all laughed at Sudhira's Oriental compliment.

"I understand, I think. It's what to do in this situation that gives me trouble."

"Really! You two! You are so serious about everything! Would you please come for a walk in the garden, and think no more serious thoughts today? You are getting old before your time."

Mali led me and Sudhira out a back door into a flower garden that surrounded a small pool of water over which a Japanese-style wooden bridge arched, and then she excused herself "for a few minutes."

I turned to Sudhira. "You are fortunate to have such an understanding and kind aunt."

"She has always been a mother to me. People say we are exactly alike, and I think it must be true. She has taught me more than I learned in school—about more important things."

"You seem to share the same points of view."

Sudhira took my arm and led me around the garden grounds.

"Mali was the first B.A. in English in Thailand, and she has confided in me that she made many errors in her personal life when she was young, mostly sins of omission, as she would say. She wants me to avoid missing what she has missed, although sometimes I think her complaining is a form of bragging. She has had a very busy, active life—a rich and full period of sixty-two years."

"She is a wonderful woman."

"I'm glad you like her."

The late afternoon sun was playing tricks among the flowers and in Sudhira's hair, making one colour bounce off another, making her natural beauty seem something more than what I thought I knew it was, and all the while there was an unspoken conversation going on between us that only now broke to the surface. I was thinking to myself: "I do not know what it is about you that closes and opens; only something in me understands the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses."

"Aren't these dahlias lovely?" Sudhira asked.

"I want to see you again, soon."

"I wasn't born yesterday."

"What's in it, ultimately, for either of us?"

"Ultimately, who cares?,"

“Which do you find more appalling—the possibility of atomic war, or the fact of your own death?”

“How about the fact of your own life?”

“We are both arguing the same side of the question.”

I touched Sudhira’s back and slid my hand up under her hair and cradled the back of her neck in my Palm. She pushed herself against me, put her arms around me, and laid her head on my shoulder. I kissed her ear gently, and our mouths slid together, a perfect fit, her tongue on mine, mine on hers, our eyes closed, swaying slightly, the tension between us holding us upright. Then cheek to cheek we relaxed.

“Not here, not yet,” she said.

*“After the pangs of a desperate Lover,
When day and night I have sighed all in vain
Ah, what a pleasure it is to discover*

In her eyes pity, who causes my pain!” I quoted, holding her just as tightly.

“Dryden?”

“You are a marvel!” We both laughed, and arm in arm, we walked back into the house where we found Mali arranging fresh flowers at the household shrine.

“I’ll have to be going now,” Sudhira said to Mali. “I’m going to Kanchana’s wedding next week, and I have a fitting for a new dress at six o’clock.”

“May I give you a ride?”

“No, thank you. I have my car.”

“You have a car?” I smiled at the recollection of the several times she had asked for the rides I was eager to provide.

“Yes, a 1956 Fiat, just like Papa Petit’s.” She took my hand. “I’ll see you soon, *Acharn*.” She turned to Mali, genuflected, and *waied*.

“Goodbye, dear. Drive carefully.”

Sudhira left the room, taking her aura with her, and I watched the last of it slipping out of the room between the big double doors behind her. The doors closed like a bank vault, shutting out secret delights the perception of which remained like a strong taste in my mouth. I could smell her on my face. I stared at the doors, tasting Sudhira’s mouth on my own, feeling her body against me.

“You will see her again.”

“But what am I going to do with her, Mali?” I asked the beautiful old woman. “Isn’t it enough that I see her every day and talk to her after class and waste my office hours discussing everything on her mind with her?”

Lady Mali took my hand in hers and smiled, just noticeably wickedly. "My niece is not an ordinary girl, Dr. Sam. I think you go on the assumption that all your students are in love with you and so you play with them like a fish on a string. Maybe you are afraid to catch Sudhira."

"Yes, I'm afraid to catch her. Usually when one of my girl students starts talking back to me, she's only trying to gain attention, to make herself noticed."

"Do you believe that Sudhira is merely flirting with you?"

"No, you're right. I don't know what to make of it. When a girl goes out of her way to greet a professor, when he finds her sitting on the steps in the morning, when he looks up from his coffee in the Commons and discovers her sitting alone in a far corner watching him, or when she just happens to need a ride home in the afternoon, it is something more than another student flirting with the teacher."

"You get so excited too soon." Mali laughed, shaking her head. "And you make everything so serious."

"Yes, but I think love is serious."

"Sometimes you sound just like a Puritan."

"Maybe I am a Puritan." I scowled. "You know as well as I do what the problem is."

"Yes, I think I know the source of your trouble."

"What? My ethics?"

"No, Sam, you always like to generalize and turn simple things into big uncomfortable abstractions. Did you ever think that perhaps you really are attracted to Sudhira, that you would secretly like to be her lover?"

"It had occurred to me." I laughed, and Mali nodded her head knowingly. "Seriously, I'm married. I don't know what I might be getting into if I encourage her any further. I don't know what demands such an affair would make on me."

"You are afraid to trust yourself with such a nice plaything as Sudhira."

"Oh, come on, Mali, don't treat me like a child."

"Ladies of my great age have a perfect right to treat a young man in any way they please. And besides, you obviously need something."

"What do you mean?"

"Why have you begun complaining to me about Sudhira being too much on your mind? Could it be that you have been going out of your way to be with her and you feel guilty and won't admit to yourself that you really want to be with her?"

"But I shouldn't. She's one of my students. I'm afraid of the consequences of falling in love. We are not of the same world, and I'd hoped to avoid the responsibility of taking a wife again."

"My father had three wives."

"At the same time?"

"Yes, my mother was a very kind and elegant woman, and when she grew tired of my father he married her older sister, who then came and managed our house. She was a tyrant, but very efficient. And then my father married my second cousin, a beautiful girl. My grandfather, my father's father, had eight wives. Two were Chinese."

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"Twenty-four. Fifteen are still living."

"But those times are gone, and what does the polygamy of the royal family have to do with me?"

"Don't you see? It was a good way to accommodate romantic love and still take care of everybody. People could fall in and out of love and few people were ever unhappy. Sometimes they were jealous and sometimes there was a crime of passion, but on the whole it was a much better system than the one we have now. And besides, everyone knows that it is impossible to have an affair with one's spouse. Married people have so many obligations toward each other that they cannot love one another mutually and freely. They must not refuse each other, and so there is no romance in it. And people need to have affairs, to be loved."

"'To be loved.' I think I have never known what that means," I said, and at that moment I felt as though I had stepped through a doorway into myself. I felt the experience of love that went quite past the me I had known into a part of me I had never been aware of before. Suddenly I was very happy.

"Well, what system do the Thai have now?" I asked Mali.

"The same as the Americans."

"Do you mean they have their wives one after the other instead of all at the same time?"

"That is one thing. But Thai men want more than anything else to keep a mistress or two. It is a real mark of status, particularly if she is the daughter of an important man. Sometimes I think that the only thing Thai men think about is seducing the daughter of an important man. It is like their Holy Grail. They do not seem to know that it is only through the cooperation and hard work of the girls that it gets done at all, they are such incompetents, like you. They think it all a great credit to their masculinity, while the truth is that without the girls to instigate the proceedings, nothing would ever get done."

"You talk as if women actually run this country."

"You still don't understand, do you, Sam?"

"No, I don't see what you mean."

"Sudhira is treating you the way a Thai girl treats a man. Her staying near you all the time and her solicitousness are the tricks she is using to catch you."

"But she can't have me. I'm a foreigner," I explained.

"Again you are taking it too seriously. She doesn't want you for a long time...just for a while."

"Just for a while?"

"Yes. You poor Americans. You work harder and have less fun than any people in the world. Everything is a matter of life and death to you. Can't you learn to relax and enjoy?"

"Enjoyment is something you ought to deserve."

"You are showing a slave's mentality."

"You are very hard on me."

"I am very fond of you. Why should you make the same mistakes as other Americans who have come to Thailand? If you learn quickly enough, your stay here will be the most pleasant time of your life but if you do not change your attitudes, you will be very unhappy with your situation and you will not do as much good as you could otherwise."

"What would you have me do?"

"Nothing. Stop thinking all the time. Whatever happens, happens. Don't be foolish and hurt other people and yourself. Just accept your natural impulses. Life is to be lived, not dissected and planned and then looked back on like a game you have lost."

"Sometimes I don't understand you, Mali. Your Oriental paradoxes are over my head."

"You will, Sam." Mali smiled and took my hand again. "Sometimes I wish I were thirty years younger."

"It's very sweet of you to say that."

"Professor Samuel Tristan Purcell, you are a dear boy."