Refuge

The Philippine Refugee Processing Center occupied a long, high plateau, shaped like a flattened cucumber, in the mountainous jungle of the Bataan Peninsula. It could only be reached by a four to five hour drive from Manila on tortuous roller coaster roads in buses that smelled like the vomit of the dizzy passengers, or by helicopter, although only the Pope and Imelda Marcos actually came in by the aerial route. The small town of Morong sat on the road about eight kilometers down a gradual incline from the entrance to the camp. On the western side, the plateau ended in a cliff that plunged to a valley, cut over the centuries by a stream at the bottom. The valley then sloped upward again and became a row of mountains whose sides were bright green in the rainy season, greenish brown in the hot season, and covered with huge patches of black when the local Aeta tribesmen set fires to prepare the slopes for the planting of rice. On the eastern side, the plateau was confined by a ridge, at the top of which was a rocky, narrow road that led to a fishing village on the South China Sea, about two hours’ mountain hiking from the end of the camp opposite the entrance.

The processing center had originally been designed as a means of controlling the flow of Southeast Asians to North America during the "Boat People" crisis of 1979-80. The exiles had to be matched up with voluntary agencies (known as "volags" in the acronymic argot of the U.S. State Department) that would find them homes and means of subsistence. Since they were being held in the Philippines until they could be settled in the U.S. in relatively small groups, someone in the State Department had decided that they might as well occupy their time with some kind of preparation for their New World. So, the refugees were required to attend five hours of classes, six days a week in English, American culture, and something called "work orientation" that didn't teach any actual job skills but was supposed to offer instruction in the attitudes and practices of the American workplace. Most of the teachers were Filipinos, who had gone through American-style educations in the former U.S. colony, and who spoke English that was accented, but fluent. It is true that the majority had never lived in America, but they had watched a lot of situation comedies on TV, which is almost the same thing.

When they were not patiently enduring our attempts to re-educate them, the refugees did what most people who find themselves almost naked and alone in a foreign country do. They prayed. In our small, international, continually changing community we had a Catholic church, three Protestant churches, a tiny mosque, a Cao Dai temple, a Mahayana Buddhist temple and monastery complex, and two Theravada Buddhist temple and monastery complexes.

I spent most of my free time in these last two religious sites. The Vietnamese adhere to the Northern School of Buddhism, known as Mahayana, or "the greater vehicle," because it teaches the universal availability of salvation through bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who have foregone passage into Nirvana in order to stay in the realm of suffering and help others. The Vietnamese temple grounds were dominated by an enormous statue of Kwan Am (known to the Chinese as Kuan Yin), standing with outstretched arms on the edge of the cliff against a dramatic backdrop of brilliant sky and mountains. Kwan Am is a female bodhisattva, often referred to and treated as a goddess, who is the embodiment of compassion. At her feet was a small lotus pond, inhabited by turtles, and the yard in front of her was filled with carefully tended flowers. On her right was a Chinese-style temple, with quarters for monks behind the altar. Its plywood walls looked as thin as paper, and it was painted with bright colors, emblems, and Chinese characters.

While light, air, and color were the predominant qualities of the Vietnamese temple grounds, the grounds shared by the Laotian and Cambodian temples were dark and heavy with a sense of mystery. The peoples of Laos and Cambodia both adhere to the austere Southern School of Buddhism, referred to as Theravada, or "the way of the elders," because the Theravadins attempt to adhere to the earliest teachings of the Buddhist tradition. Each individual must achieve a solitary victory over the material world through a regimen of meditation and good works in the teachings of the Southern Buddhists; the bodhisattvas do not offer mediation to the masses.

These two temples occupied the far end of the camp, where it met the foot of the mountains that separated us from the fishing village.
The cliff on the western edge rose suddenly into a row of rocky hills just behind the Theravadin grounds, covering the sacred place with an afternoon shadow. Broad-trunked mango trees joined branches over the dusty earth, so that even the morning or noon sun could only penetrate in flickers. There was a lotus pond here, too, but it was murky and beside it, leaning against the face of a mango tree, lay the frowning, foreboding face of the Hindu god Rama cast in gray concrete.

The devout had built a stone path from the arch at the opening of the temple grounds, past the lotus pond, to the circular Cambodian temple. A gold-painted seated figure of the Lord Buddha, one hand raised in the gesture of admonition, presided over the interior. On the wall to the figure's right, artists who had survived the Khmer Rouge had painted scenes from the life of Gautama Sakayamuni, the Enlightened One. On the left, they had painted the alternative to the path of Enlightenment, scenes of the damned being tortured in Hell. These could be taken as literal truth, or as symbolic representations of the nature of evil (most Buddhists will accept either interpretation with equanimity), but the agony of those being burned and skinned by demons caused shivers to run down my back every time I saw these pictures. They could have been taken from recent Cambodian history.

The Laotian temple, on the left of the path just beyond the pond, was smaller and newer than the Cambodian. It was a long rectangle, with a small room at one end that could serve as a bedroom for four or five monks. The larger room held the Laotian Buddha image, nearly identical to its Cambodian double, but the walls were undecorated except for maps of the U.S. and Laos and photographs of landscapes cut from magazines. For big ceremonies, the Laotians often used the temple of their Cambodian co-religionists.

The Mahayana site was beautiful and I often sat there in the afternoon to read or to chat with the Vietnamese who had finished their daily classes, but I never became as involved with it as with the dark place beneath the mountains. It may have been a matter of language: since I'd spent two years in the Peace Corps as the only Westerner in a small Thai town near the Lao border, I spoke Lao much better than I spoke Vietnamese, and many of the Cambodians could speak Thai, since they had spent several years in camps in Thailand. It may also have been that Rama's uncompromising grimace pulled at me more than Kwan Am's airy, indiscriminately dispensed solace. For a time, I visited the Laotian temple so often that Bounma, the acting abbot, started calling me "the white novice."

Bounma was abbot because, at twenty-nine, he was the oldest monk in the compound. Theravada monks tend to be very young men or very old men. While some do make a life-long career of monasticism, especially those with a strong inclination toward vipassana meditation or scholarship in the classical languages of Buddhism, for most being a monk is a stage in life entered as a bachelor, to earn spiritual merit before starting family, or as an elderly widower ready to leave the world behind. Laos is a poor country with a short life expectancy that has been made even shorter by warfare, so old men are scarce.

Bounma had been a monk for almost a decade. He was from a family of rice farmers in the southern province of Champassak, and he told me that at first he had only intended to enter the monastery for a year or two, but he just never cast off his orange robes. He was thinking, he said, about continuing in the religious life indefinitely. If that proved possible. He was headed for Wisconsin.

We were sitting in the shade, on boulders on the slope behind the temple compound when he told me that an organization in Wisconsin had offered to sponsor him.

"Do you know if Wisconsin has many Buddhist temples?" he asked me. I was supposed to be the expert on everything American. I was born and raised in New Orleans, which I suspect is somewhat closer in culture to Laos than to Wisconsin.

"I really don't know much about Buddhism in Wisconsin," I told him honestly, thinking that if there any famous stupas in Madison, we must have skipped them in my high school geography class.

"Well, do you think I can stay a monk there?" Behind his black-framed glasses his round, hairless, deep brown face wore a quizzical expression. It occurred to me that he was like someone who has been shot out of a cannon to fly through emptiness with a feeling of complete stillness since there are no familiar terrestrial objects to mark the passage, who knows that he will land somewhere, but has
no idea where that might be and no power to control his own flight.

It seemed unlikely to me, but I didn't know. We were sending more Southeast Asians to North America every month and their numbers were edging up toward a million. In the America of my childhood Unitarians were exotic, but I could imagine men in orange robes with begging bowls trudging through the Midwestern snow. Bounma seemed troubled for a short time and then he laughed.

"If there are no monasteries in Wisconsin," he pronounced, "that means that we will have to build one."

It was hot season when Bounma and the group of six monks who came with him arrived, and they stayed through the rainy season of late July, August, and September. "Mistah Kahn," they called me, the tangle of liquids at the end my name being unpronounceable in Lao.

"Mistah Kahn," one of them said on a day in mid-June, "in weather like this, the best thing to do is to go to the beach."

Bounma put his hand on my shoulder.

"I would like for you to get a car to take us down to the beach."

"It isn't quite that simple," I told him, "I'd have to get permission forms from the camp director for all of you to leave, and get those forms signed by a lot of different people."

"Then we can wait until tomorrow. You can start now."

I spent the rest of the afternoon getting signatures. The next day we hiked down from the temple grounds to the camp's open air market, where the jeepneys bound for Morong waited for passengers. Odors of fresh fish and bits of conversation in Vietnamese, Khmer, Lao, and Tagalog drifted over to us from the market's stalls. Several of the monks held up umbrellas to keep the sun off their shaved heads. As we stood on the side of the dusty white road, three monks squatting on their haunches and four others standing, with me, behind them, all seven of the religious in flowing orange robes, with the busy marketplace behind us, I thought what a wonderful photograph the scene would make.

When I was a child, I used to think about myself in the third person, past tense. If I was walking to school, I would say to myself, "And then he walked to school." The hunger for the picturesque stems from the same need as the impulse for translating events into narrative, selves into characters. It is the need to escape from the incompleteness and formlessness of the present moment. If we can freeze ourselves in the swirling chaos and put up a frame around a strange, beautiful instant, then we can convince ourselves that the instant makes an intelligible composition of the objects and persons in it. So, some part of the reason I had traveled around the world and abandoned the conveniences and comforts of suburban life, and watched high-heeled prostitutes stepping over starving children on the streets of Manila's Ermita District in front of bars owned by foreigners and frequented by foreigners, and listened to shell-shocked Cambodian peasants describe how their entire families had been strangled in rice fields, was to find bits of salvation in picturesque scenes.

When I pull up this mental snapshot of the roadside, it dissolves after a few minutes, and it is replaced by the memory of seven men in Buddhist robes bouncing up and down on the parallel benches of a jeepney and laughing every time the vehicle hit an especially big bump. The jeepney, a form of transportation evolved from the jeeps abandoned in the Philippines by the U.S. Army after World War II, which the Filipinos welded to covered truck beds and painted with wild colors and designs, is an efficient way of moving people and an admirable fusion of modern technology and folk art, but it is not comfortable.

In Morong, we walked down the main street to the white sand beach, and a few of the townspeople glanced at us, but not many. They were used to the aliens from the Southeast Asian mainland. We walked past the old Spanish church at the center of town. It had been partially destroyed by a Japanese bomb during the war and the wall facing the street had been rebuilt with crude concrete blocks, so that it looked like a cross between a Latin chapel and a barn. Further, at the edge of town just before the beach, we passed the two-story Municipio, the town hall, built by the American conquerors of the Philippines during the Progressive Era. This was one of two institutions established in Morong by the Americans, the other being a public elementary school. Each group of imperialists had left architectural monuments to its articles of faith: baptisms and masses, classrooms and elections.

To reach the sea, we had to cross a rivulet between the town and
the beach by walking across one of the most minimal bridges I've ever seen; single wooden planks, about six to eight inches in width set end to end on top of poles and long boards. I've never been much of a tightrope walker and it always surprised me that I didn't lose my balance and fall in. The monks fairly danced across.

Once on the other side, they shouted and ran across the sands to the water. Laos is a landlocked country, and I don't think they had ever seen a beach before. They darted up and down the edge of the sea, with their robes fluttering like the wings of orange birds. Then, all at once, they plunged in, fully dressed.

"Mistah Kahn! Hurry up and get in!"

They splashed me as I tried to ease gradually into the cold water. One of them grabbed my arm and pulled me off of my feet. I fell, and wars, armies, and government bureaucracies receded into the distance somewhere beyond the sharp line between the light blue air and the darker blue of the South China Sea.

About a month after our trip to the ocean, the weather began to change. First, the dark clouds rolled in, and it rained at unpredictable intervals throughout each day. Then, a steady drizzle began to cover all the daylight hours, stopping for only brief periods after dark. Finally, the clouds gave up all efforts at restraint and let everything inside them fall out. For almost two weeks we waded through the depths of a downpour, and even under shelter the atmosphere was weighty with dampness.

I wore a pair of knee-high rubber boots to slosh in the mud to the classrooms. The goats that wandered around our plateau sought to escape the rain under the overhang of the tin roofs, so that goat droppings littered the pavement alongside the classroom buildings, and if we left a door unlocked in the evening, the goats would push it open, and in the morning we would enter to find the room filled with little brown pellets and a smell that couldn't be swept away.

I visited the temple only once in those two weeks; trudging up the hill after classes under a huge golf umbrella, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat for additional protection. All of the monks and a couple of laymen were crammed into the little bedroom at the end of the Laotian temple.

Keo, one of the laymen, moved over to make room for me to sit on the floor. He was wearing only a pair of gym shorts, a cluster of amulets on a string around his neck, and tattoos that covered his body from his collar bones to his feet. Most of the tattoos were scriptural passages in Pali, taken from the Theravada holy writings known as the Tripitaka, but there were also fierce snakes writhing around his arms and a tiger with fangs bared on his chest. These elaborate designs were a kind of magical armor, designed to protect the flesh they covered from knife cuts, bullet wounds, and shrapnel. According to popular wisdom, the wearer of a powerful tattooed incantation can walk away unharmed from the point-blank fire of an AK-47.

Keo was an anti-government insurgent in Laos, so maybe he'd needed the protection. He looked like a guerrilla. His thick, straight black hair fell below his shoulders and he wore a sparse beard. A soft voice belied his fierce appearance. Every morning before dawn he ventured out into the monsoon to bring food to the temple.

The other layman was a typical village headman. He was in his fifties, with gray hair and a pair of black-rimmed glasses. This was the kind of person who would be called upon to settle minor quarrels and make long-winded, rambling speeches on important occasions back in the homeland before Liberation (even the most dedicated opponents of the new regime referred to the assumption of power by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party as "Liberation," as in the bizarre but common statement, "After Liberation, I was sentenced to re-education camp").

They were all drinking hot tea and Keo filled a cup and placed it in front of me.

"Mistah Kahn," said one of the monks, "do you have rainy season in America?"

"Not like here. Where I come from, it rains a lot all year round, but never this much. I think in the summer it rains more than in the winter, but it mostly just rains hard in the afternoons for a short time and then stops. But, remember, America is really a lot of different places. From my home to New York, it's about as far as it is from the Philippines to Russia." I wasn't sure about this estimate, but experts should always sound like they know what they're talking about.

A chorus of grunts showed how impressed they were with my
native country's great size, although most of them may have had no idea of the distance between Russia and the Philippines.

"How do you grow crops without a rainy season?" asked the headman.

"They have different types of crops, and different ways of growing them. Anyway, only a few people are farmers. Most people have other jobs."

The headman sighed.

"I have never had any job but growing rice. I’m afraid I’m too old to learn anything else. I hope I don’t starve in America."

"I can fix cars," Keo said, "any kind of cars—trucks, jeeps, motorcycles. Even in America, people always need a mechanic."

"If I could speak English as well as you speak Lao," said one of the monks, "I wouldn’t be as worried."

I felt both flattered and self-conscious, since I was vain about my knowledge of the language, but also painfully aware of my peculiar accent and continual mistakes.

"I don’t really speak your language that well," I said, trying to be honest with myself, as well as with them.

"Well enough to get by," answered one of the monks, "If I could talk to you in English like you’re talking with us now... I know everything would be all right in America."

Survival. For these people right now, knowing the words to say meant not eloquence or erudition but survival. I told myself that I should return to tutoring them in the evenings, as I had done before the rains.

"It’ll be okay. The U.S. government is bringing you in. It won’t let you starve." I didn’t think it would. But beyond that, their future was as unimaginable for me as it was for them.

"Why did you leave Laos?" I asked one of the monks. "I can understand why Keo would leave. He’d be shot. And I can understand why the soldiers who might be put in prison or re-education camp would leave. But you were in the monastery. The new government hasn’t forbidden Buddhism, has it?"

"They haven’t forbidden it." This was Somboun. Of all those in the temple, he was the most “monastic” in appearance and thinking, a very thin man with hollow, ascetic cheeks, thick glasses, and a serious manner. "They have done something worse. They have tried to take it over."

"How do you take over a religion?"

"Before Liberation, anyone who could afford to leave the fields could go into the temples, maybe only a couple of days, maybe a few months, maybe years. Now, you have to ask permission from the party. And they don’t give it to just anybody. You have to be somebody they approve of. And more and more, the temples are filled up with party members. Anything you say or do that the party doesn’t like, they’ll report you. The party tells us it’s a waste of time to study Sanscrit and Pali. They say it’s not useful to society. So, we’re expected to study party programs all the time, and teach them to the laymen, so that we’re losing the old learning. And, worst of all, they expect us to work."

"They expect you to work?" On the face of it, that didn’t seem such an unreasonable expectation.

"Yes, to work with our hands in the fields, to plant rice, and chop wood. They say that anyone who doesn’t work is a parasite."

"I don’t really understand why it’s a bad thing to work."

"It’s not a bad thing to work. It’s a bad thing to work while you’re a monk. Look, work means attaching yourself to the world. The temple is supposed to be a sacred place, not a place for politics or planting. If you break this down, the monks can’t earn merit by separating themselves from the world, and the people can’t earn merit by giving food to the monks, and eventually you live without anything holy. This wasn’t just killing our religion. It was killing our history, and the way of life we learned from our ancestors, and all our country. So, I had to leave. If my country dies, I don’t want to watch."

While we drank our hot tea, the rain drummed steadily on the tin roof. Through a sarong hung as a curtain over the one window in the room, I could see a few wet, gray, quiet buildings in a city of exiles.

As August passed into September, the rains tapered off, and toward the end of September sunshine became the rule once again. The buses from Manila were rolling in and out of the camp every day,
taking away those headed for the U.S. and bringing new refugees to take their places. Many of the new arrivals were members of tribal minorities: the Hmong from the mountains of Laos, and the Khmer and Kohor from the mountains of Vietnam. Our English classes began concentrating more on basic literacy, since many of the tribesmen were unfamiliar with reading and writing in any language. The character of the camp was changing with ethnicities, and I wondered what kinds of changes we were working in the character of North America.

Whenever a group of Lao were due to leave, they held a baci, a ceremony used to celebrate many occasions, but one with special significance for partings. Human beings, in Laotian tradition, have thirty-two spirits that connect them to one another and to their homes. When a person becomes attached to a place or to another person, the attachment is literal; the spirits of the friends or the spirits of person and place become intertwined. So, on leaving, special ritual care must be taken not to leave a part of one’s self behind or to carry away a part of a friend’s self.

The baci celebrated the evening before Bounma and his company left for the U.S. was a big one because so many people were going with them, or going in the days immediately following. When I got there, the Cambodian temple was already crammed with men and women seated cross-legged on the floor in semi-circular rows facing the altar. Most were Laotians, but there were also a number of Cambodians, some Filipino teachers and townpeople from Morong, and a few Vietnamese who had been wise enough to try and bury the age-old enmity between their nation and the Laotians. Scattered among these people were several trees, each about three feet in height, made out of banana leaves and flowers, with bits of white cotton string hanging from the leaves. Near these trees lay silver trays filled with candies, balls of sticky rice, ripe bananas, and hard-boiled eggs. In front, on the right side of the altar, Laotian and Cambodian monks sat elbow by elbow facing the crowd.

Everyone grew quiet. The monks began to chant prayers in Pali. We pressed our palms together in front of our faces in the gesture of reverence shared by Christians and many Buddhist sects. The chanting went on and on. The sound would have been hypnotic, if I hadn’t felt a pain in my legs from having them folded under me on the hard floor, and a weariness in my arms from holding them too long in a single position. All those around me looked composed and perfectly at ease. Only the damned in Hell in the mural on my right seemed more uncomfortable than I was.

Finally, the chanting ended and we could move our arms and legs. We formed small circles around the banana leaf trees. An older man, a layman, began howling invocations in a voice somewhere between a yodel and a croon. He was calling our spirits to enter our bodies and hold fast to them.

While he called, the celebrants stuffed hard-boiled eggs, candy bars, and clumps of rice into the palms of those they wished to honor or bid good-bye. Since I was a teacher and a foreign guest, my hand was jammed with as much as I could hold. Then, those around me plucked the strings from the banana leaves, brushed the strings across my wrists, and then bound my wrists with the cotton. This was to symbolically tie my spirit to me. As they knotted the cotton, they uttered wishes of good health, wealth, and many children; all the benefits one could hope for in this life.

There are some Buddhists who object to this intermingling of Laotian folk beliefs with Theravada philosophy. Some, but not many. According to an Indian legend inherited by the Lao, the Buddha was walking in a forest once with one of his disciples, who asked, “Do your teachings contain all the truth there is?” In answer, the Buddha picked up a handful of leaves. “Are there more leaves in my hand, or in the forest?”

As soon as I could manage, I set down the fertility symbols in my hands and took some strings. There were people I wanted to wish goodbye. I worked my way through the crowd, tying up wrists, and wishing my friends, in my inelegant way, long lives and success in the new land.

I didn’t see any of the monks until I was leaving the temple. There, just outside, Bounma was waiting.

“Mistah Kahn, I am leaving tomorrow at noon.”

“You must be glad to be on your way at last.”

“Will you see me off? If you have the time…”

The next day, the departure area was full. Those leaving and
those seeing them off milled around the small cinder-block building where documents were checked before the buses were loaded. I found the monks outside in the sun. Each carried only a small orange shoulder bag holding all the possessions they were bringing to start a new life.

Someone I didn’t recognize at first approached me. It was Keo, clean-shaven, with his hair cut short. Maybe somebody had told him a haircut might help him find his mechanic’s job. Maybe he just decided he needed a change of face for a change of worlds. He held something out to me.

“Keep this with you,” he said. “It will protect you. Don’t put it in your pants pocket. Put it in your shirt pocket, or even better, attach it to a chain and hang it around your neck.”

His gift was a wooden Buddha, about the size of the tip of my finger.

“I have something for you, too,” said Bounma, and he reached into his bag and pulled out a dark brown knit scarf, which he wrapped around my throat.

“You need this more than I do,” I told him. “It gets cold in Wisconsin.” I started to take it off to return it to him.

“Please keep it. I don’t have anything else to give you. And, besides, I’ve already blessed it for you.”

A few minutes later three buses were filled with people from a small, mountainous country on the other side of the earth from my birthplace, whose children and grandchildren would be Americans, and whose descendants, eventually, might be my descendants too. They were leaning out of the windows and looking back and waving goodbye. Suddenly, the buses disappeared down the rolling road to Morong. I began walking down the same road. At my left, a row of mango trees lined the cliff and beyond that the scene was wild and jagged, volcanic mountains thrusting up from a zig-zag valley. I had the feeling that I was the one who was the exile, the homeless one, the one who was lost somewhere between an arrival and a departure. The scarf was hot, but I didn’t take it off.