

Blowing West

Pharadon Phonamnuai

Translator's Introduction

Lom Dtai Bord, from which *Blowing West* is translated, means literally the air at the bottom of the lungs, and conveys both the idea of taking a deep breath and also the meaning of the English saying catch the wind in your sails. As a first-time translator I've tried to transmit the meaning and voice of the author, and otherwise get out of the way. When friends learned that I was translating Por's book, the most frequent thing I heard from them was a curiosity to see a non-western view of travelling the world. Since the author had been a friend for so long by that time I could only see a personal view. Either way, *Blowing West* is as much about an approach to travelling, and to life, as about the actual travel, and whether it's a non-western view or just a personal view is for each of us to decide. I took away this, acknowledge and give thanks for the kindness, friendship and good fortune you meet, treat bad luck with patience, and forget the rest. I perhaps couldn't have appreciated this as fully without

knowing Por well, although I think it comes across in his writing. If I can give any extra insight into the book and the thoughts of the author it is this. In passages of the book Por writes of his fear or lack of confidence in the face of events. But if you had been with him at those moments, it's very unlikely that you would have noticed. You would have been looking at someone who's fascinated by and determined to face such situations. People who take on difficult journeys might seem unusually brave, but they don't necessarily fear danger less than others. A difference might be that they're driven to overcome their fear, either by the greater fear of self-stagnation, or by the desire for self-transcendence. Their struggle is with the smallness within, not the greatness without. Por is a champion of that struggle.

Paul Sugars

Foreword

“Be thankful for time and opportunity”

“Real travelling isn’t about carrying food from home to eat along the way. Real travelling is travelling with the confidence that we’ll find food and shelter, and that we’ll survive, without knowing what we’ll meet with.”

“And in this way life will reveal the worth of our knowledge and abilities.”

Pramuan Pengchan

The Beginning, April ...

At night on the last Saturday in April I found myself sitting in front of a jazz club in the middle of Chiang Mai looking across the road at Chang Puak gate. The old city brick walls were broken and chipped after 700 years of age. From inside the double shophouse sounds of acid jazz being played on a piano drifted past a red wall painted with a vine design from Rajasthan, India. Maybe like the designs on the walls of old churches or shrines. Some people said it looked like a tattoo shop somewhere.

I'd been playing saxophone at this club for years. And until a few months ago my life was complicated and full of problems. No need to mention them all here. Inevitabilities of human relationships. Love. Or money. You probably don't want to hear it. But I think it's these problems that made me want to go out in search of inspiration, which I hardly have enough of, even just for myself.

Three months ago, Vincent, a musician friend from France, asked me to come and play two or three gigs at Le Festival music festival in Paris in June. I agreed to go immediately, but not having the money for a plane ticket I started to think, “if I can’t fly through the sky, I’ll go over the ground!” I spent a month studying the routes people use to cross from Asia to Europe until I realised that the Siberian railway looked the most feasible. Visas would be needed for only two countries, China, and a Schengen visa for Europe. I could save on accommodation while on the train, and with over twenty thousand baht, when I added it up, it should be enough for a month or more. I should make it.

I spent 2 months in total preparing the visa paperwork and sorting out various work problems as best I could, and fixed a rough date. I would leave on the last Sunday of April...

“Por San...What’s your plan for getting there?” Hiroki, guitarist in the band I played in, asked.

“My plan is, tomorrow morning I’m gonna get up early and pray that I don’t chicken out and abandon the trip... After that I’m going to go and stand on the highway outside of the city and hitchhike from Chiang Mai to Chiang Khong in Chiang Rai, cross the border into Laos, head north towards China, and so on until I get to Beijing. After that, find out how to get on the Siberian railway... The train will take me to Moscow, and from there buses and trains will get me to the European Union via Latvia, Poland, Germany and Belgium, until I get to Paris... Along the way there’ll be the adventure of meeting people, seeing great natural beauty, and in the end I’ll fall in love with a beautiful girl... Happy ending!”

“How does that sound?”

“Sounds like fun, but what if you don’t make it, or your money runs out on the way?”

“If my money runs out I’ll still have my saxophone. I can busk by the side of the road. Probably won’t starve to death.”

“How will you get back?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll get there first and then think about it.”

“I’m with you. Anyhow, good luck. No matter how many months, I’ll wait for you to come back and we’ll play music together again. Ganbatte kudasai Por San...”

Tonight it’s hot but my mind is hotter. Full of fear and confusion. In front of others I only say good things, but I confess right here that I’m afraid... Afraid I can’t do it. Afraid I won’t get there...

“Net, when are you gonna stop sniffing glue?” I half-jokingly asked the beggar who was lying down sniffing glue in his usual filthy state next to the electricity pole, before he turned to look at me, eyes spinning, and gave his usual answer.

“I’m addicted. I can’t quit.”

The First Day 26.04.09

On the morning of the last Sunday in April, with rain falling sporadically in a northern Thai mountain valley, I started walking up the winding road, determined to get to the town of Chiang Khong in Chiang Rai province by evening. The asphalt was wet and looked like a giant black boa slithering up to the horizon above mountains filled with huge trees. I walked for hours between hitching rides and started to notice that walking alone on quiet mountain roads really made thoughts flood in. Stories from the past and dreams of the future gradually came drifting in with the smell of damp earth after the rain.

“Where are you heading son?” a voice came from car as it was pulling over, a car I hadn’t thumbed down.

“I’m going to Chiang Khong... where are you going?”

“I’m only going as far as Wiang Pa Pao... get in.” His good-natured smile got me jumping happily into his car.

I sat in the back section of the cab of his truck. The two people in the front of the truck were his wife and their small son.

“What are you going to do in Chiang Khong?”

‘Actually, I’m going to Paris,’ I thought, but didn’t say, because if I had he probably wouldn’t have believed me and might have even kicked me out of his truck. So I gave him the short answer.

“I’m heading to Laos.”

“I drive from Chiang Mai to Wiang Pa Pao once a week to take my family back to our home. I’ve picked up a lot of hitchhikers but sometimes you have to check people’s faces. If I don’t trust them I don’t stop.”

“Some monks. A lot of teenagers.”

He started to tell me about his life and dreams, how he wanted to move back to where he came from and live a simple life, as the truck climbed the steep hill and the rain began to fall more and more heavily.

Then, while he was trying to overtake the car in front, a terrifying scream came from his wife... We were going faster than you would believe!

And on the slippery roads our truck spun out of control, crossed the road and skidded to a halt on the edge of a gorge.

In the silence of that fraction of a second, which seemed like a day, my heart pounded so hard it almost burst out of my chest. Suddenly, his wife opened the door of the truck, got out and started to sob, exhausted... Life hangs by a thread. This must be the meaning of it. Forget the rest of the trip, I almost died on the first morning!

Anyway, today I did as planned and made it from Doi Saket, hitching dozens of rides (in cars, motorbikes, tricycles and trailers) through the districts of Wang Neua, Wiang Pa Pao, Mae Saluay and Mae Lao, to Chiang Rai, before the last ride, a police car, picked me up and took me to Chiang Khong. Er... and today I saw four accidents on the roads. One car really did go down the mountain (but nobody was hurt). The events of today brought me much closer to the profound philosophical truth in the words ‘when it rains, the roads are slippery!’

Chiang Khong ^{26.04.09}

Chiang Khong is a small town next to the Mae Khong river. Opposite is the town of Huay Sai in Bo Kaew province in the Lao People's Democratic Republic, which makes Chiang Khong an important port for the many tourists who want to travel to Northern Laos (Luang Prabang, Vang Vieng), China or North Vietnam. But now isn't the tourist season and the town looks quiet and less lively than it is at the end of the rainy season and beginning of the cold season.

It's in this town of Chiang Khong that I can go back and see Jib, the owner of Bamboo Mexican restaurant, which isn't too far from the old city gate. I've known Jib for years, because apart from making delicious bread, he's also a guitarist with a great sense of humour and he likes to go to the jazz club whenever he visits Chiang Mai.

"Where' you going this time young Mr Saxophone?" Jib asked with familiarity.

"A little bit far...I'm going to Laos, into China and across to Europe on the Trans-Siberian railway."

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No... I’m hungry.”

“Auntie, what have you got in the kitchen, come and bring it out here for us. This young man’s gonna travel a long way.”

“Want a beer? Don’t be shy... Tonight is on me.”

The two of us sat and drank beer, having great fun, under the worried eye of his wife (Auntie), who didn’t want Jib to drink too much. After a short while Jib grabbed two old guitars, with only five strings each, which were hanging against the wall and gave me one. We started playing and singing a 60’s blues song that came to mind.

“I don’t play well... but I don’t care” he said

And it really looked like that. Jib played with feeling and without caring about who was around (And nobody here cares.) I fingered the chords, some right, some wrong, along with him, impressed by the scene. ‘You’re so cool,’ I thought. And then I thought, ‘It doesn’t matter who you are, where you’re from or what you

do. If you do it full on, with your whole heart, I guarantee you'll be one of the coolest people in the universe.'

Destined to cross the Mekong

A cold shower stirred me from drowsiness inside the old wooden house that had been converted into a 120 baht a night guest house... Which, although it was old, also looked spotlessly clean. You could hear the morning chorus from an orchestra of crickets, cicadas, lizards, geckos, chickens, ducks, birds, dogs, cats, tigers and bears... (Well, maybe not the last two.)

Last night I had a strange dream.

I dreamt I saw a bird flying out to sea in the dark of night. Around its body was a red vest with white polka dots. In its beak it held a small piece of paper that was more than half burned, leaving charred black remnants and making it impossible to see or read anything on it.

The vest that had shown the direction of the strong wind was stripped off and blown away, but the bird remained calm, the important thing was for him to deliver that piece of paper to someone on the other side of the ocean.

The bird seemed to tire from the distance. Before it went down, it delivered the piece of paper to another bird, and that bird to yet another bird, on and on over the water and across the endless sky...

That's all I wanted to say. It's maybe nothing. Dreams come and go. But I kept thinking, 'why this dream?' And where did it come from?

'Everything has meaning, if you can understand the essence of it,' someone once said.

Because even the things that seem the most stupid still have their meaning.

What is this dream trying to tell me? Anyway, since this morning I decided to start writing down my dreams in my journal.

...

I went for a morning walk along the streets of the small town. Local style wooden buildings lined both sides of the road and I also saw wild flowers. The lions in front of the main temple stood majestic and looked deeply sacred beside the Lanna style wooden shops, the Seven Eleven

and adjacent commercial buildings. After stopping to say goodbye to Jib and his wife it was time to move on, and today I was determined to get to Luang Namtha (a northern Laos town on the border with China) hitchhiking as usual.

When I reached the border immigration checkpoint on the edge of the Mekong I looked across to far side and saw wooden houses strewn over the hills, a bouquet of orange flowers on the flame trees and a morning mist lingering over the water, waiting for the first rays of the sun to send it back to from where it came.

‘Once I’ve crossed this river how’s it going to be?’ I thought, as I stuffed the bundle of medicine Jib and his wife had bought for me into my bag.

“You have to respect and trust in your fate,” my mum once said many years ago, and still today I don’t know if it’s true, or what the word that my mum used, “fate”, means?

But I had a hunch that it was on the other side of this river.

Before I left Jib gave me a CD of Japanese group Papa Bebe for me to listen to on the road,

but I thought, ‘and how am I going to listen to it?’
I told Jib that I didn’t have a CD player... but he
persisted until I gave in and took it. (And in the
end I really did get to hear it, four months later!)

“Have you ever felt like suddenly a river looked much bigger than before?”

A foreigner asked me this as the long-tailed boat crossed the middle of the river ferrying me and a number of other travellers to the opposite side for 20 baht each.

I didn't answer, but I could see what he meant.

From Bor Kaew I started walking and hitching rides. From the pier, many good-hearted Laos people stopped and picked me up along the way, until I reached the middle of a valley quieter than I'd been in for longer than I can remember. Very occasionally an oil truck or small local bus carrying people from one village to another would pass through. I tried a few times to hitch a ride on the oil trucks but was refused every time. It reminded me of a story a friend told me about the oil companies not allowing their trucks to stop for hitchhikers because of the fear of oil theft...

Walking on asphalt roads in the blazing sun and baking heat for a long time soaked my body with sweat. My shoulders ached from carrying backpack and saxophone and my ankles hurt from biting shoes. All these things together started to make me anxious and shook me into thinking that if it went on like this I wouldn't make it to my destination by evening. In the end I decided to take a bus, even if I'd regret breaking my promise to myself to hitchhike from Chiang Mai to the border of China.

...

A bus similar to the northern Thai green buses carried me and many other passengers, as well as pigs, ducks, chickens (all still alive) and many baskets of fruit and vegetables speeding through the rugged mountains. Sometimes through small villages, sometimes over clay and gravel roads that were still under construction, creating clouds of red dust which covered the bus, especially when then there was a truck on the road in front of us, even if we weren't desperate for a hair dye. Just at that moment I noticed a

young girl holding her baby in one hand and covering the child's mouth and nose with the white handkerchief in her other hand, instead of covering her own face and nose. I'm telling this story, and I don't really know how it feels to be that mother, but this ordinary scene seemed to help me to understand her more...

...

The bus arrived at Luang Namtha in the late afternoon. I was looking for a taxi to take me into the city.

"Remember me?..." An older man asked me.

"This morning you asked me for a lift from Bor Kaew to Luang Nam Tha." I was surprised as I didn't think that I would know anyone in this place.

"I said no because I hadn't found even one paying passenger at the time... But later I got two foreign tourists and set off, looking for you all the way, so I could bring you along too. I was surprised to see you arrive on the bus after telling me that you'd set your mind on hitchhiking here?"

I felt happy and ashamed at the same time... Happy to know his generosity and ashamed that I didn't keep my promise to myself. Worse still, not keeping promises to others.

“Where are you going?” He asked.

“China.”

“If you're going to China why don't you spend the night in Bo Ten district (next to the border with China) and tomorrow morning you can cross the border into China.”

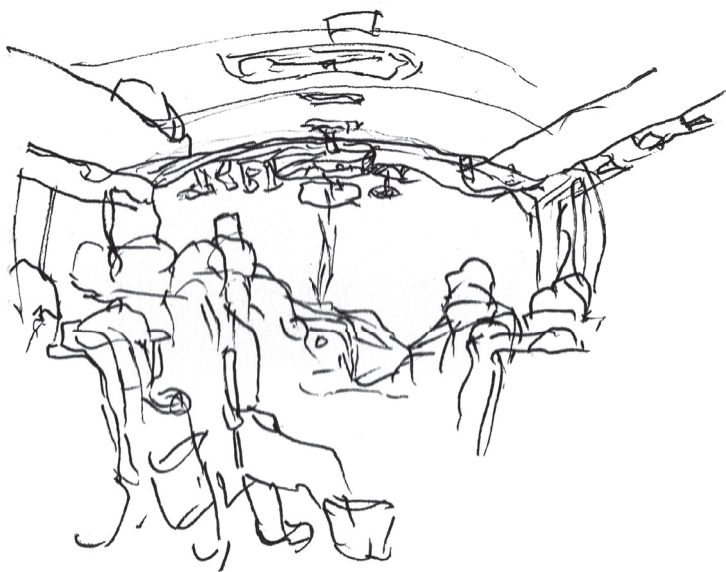
“Wanna go with me?” He said, inviting me to travel with him as he had business to take care of in Bo Ten that evening.

“Happy to.”

...

It took us about an hour and a half in the small minibus, over winding roads, to get from Luang Namtha to Bo Ten, and on the way I listened to stories from his youth. How he'd travelled by boat up the Mekong north to Jinghong, buying fruit from China to bring back and sell in Laos and Thailand. How he'd worked on the construction of the road from Bo Kaew to Bor Ten, linking the

3 countries, Thailand, Laos and China, including the tale of the corruption which caused each section of the road to be built to a different standard. And many more stories of the life and culture of the people of Laos. Anyhow, this evening I found myself enjoying the cool breeze of the lush green forests and mountains of Northern Laos at sunset.



The atmosphere this evening was filled with a dense haze. On both sides the shops were closing down.

“Try asking at the Thai restaurant in the next lane. On the second floor they have some cheap rooms.”

“But if you don’t mind, you can sleep in my van,” he said quickly, but full of sincerity.

“Thanks, but I’ve bothered you enough already. Er, but if I can’t find a place, I might have to come back and ask to stay in your van...”

Tonight I got a room at the Thai restaurant he’d recommended. Here I got to know Daeng and Wiroj (the owners) both of whom had seen that business was growing in the city and decided to open a restaurant a year before. “Bor Ten is a small city in the middle of a valley which Laos decided to rent to China on a long-term lease for allocation to casino, hotel and trade markets.” They both began to give me a brief history of the city.

“Ohh!... There’s a cabaret show from Chiang Mai opening at the new theatre on the hill. You want to go?”

“We might see friends there,” Daeng said just as I was about to go out and explore the market

...

‘I hope you don’t think I’m gay or something,’ I thought.

“Sure...We might see some friends!”

“But is it expensive?... I don’t have much money”

“Don’t worry about money. I know the Thai people’s manager... Let’s meet back at the restaurant at 8.”

...

The inside of the market looked like a warehouse that had been split into rooms. Most of the goods were imported from China. There was food, household appliances, jewellery, electrical appliances, and electronic devices of all kinds. The vendors and tourists were almost all Chinese. I walked deep inside, all the way to the casino, which was a large building that served as backdrop

to the city. The atmosphere inside didn't look as scary as my imagination had led me to think, with mafia controlling everything like I'd seen in action movies. The large hall, wide and long, had been divided into sections with screens. A corridor on one side led to several rooms of sizes differing according to the various games. The smoking areas were well furnished throughout. I noticed that everyone looked determined and focused on their games, because even though the hall was crowded, the atmosphere was packed with solitary silence...

I walked out to the market again, but as I passed the doors of the casino, a group of Chinese female staff walked over to talk to me, armed with business cards with semi-nude photos and phone numbers. Many of the stalls were closing. The sound of metal roller doors reverberated throughout. I saw an old man lying passed out in front of a stall selling preserved fruits, his tea leaves on his mattress, an old piece of burlap. A TV showing a Chinese soap opera had been left on in front of him... "What is this?" I asked myself.

...

At the set time, Daeng took me on the back of her motorbike to the playhouse which was high up on top of a hill. From there we had a great view of the whole city. Daeng introduced me to the Thai people's manager who took us both to watch the show without charge. I liked the music and dancing. The dancers' costumes, in bright colours with gold and silver embroidery, were dazzling. After the show I spoke with many of the actors and heard how their lives were, how they missed home, and how the 6 month contracts they signed felt never-ending. The sun drifted over the valley for a long while. I'd felt sad without knowing why since evening. Maybe it was from touching the spirit of a city full of unrealized ambitions and disappointed people. 'Neither Laos nor China!'

On the second night of my trip I lay down thinking of hitchhiking in silent valleys. The decision to abandon my mission of hitchhiking and catch a bus was an important lesson. The situation which forced me to choose seemed

like it happened to test whether I deserved what
I wanted or not. But what if life has no desires?
Will there still be choices?

Tractors and heavy trucks moved noisily around the border area and construction to widen the road created a cloud of dust that spread everywhere. I walked around the valley that traversed the border between the 2 countries thinking over the lesson of Wiroj and Daeng.

In the morning, before setting off, both had bidden me farewell by talking about the meaning of ‘giving and receiving,’ comparing it with pushing and pulling water towards and away from you. Wiroj explained that when you try to pull water in, it spills out, but if you try to push water away, it rushes back in. He went on to say that a simple smile is an example of giving, expressing friendliness. Eventually he talked about the interrelatedness of many things, and pointing to the tv, which was showing a football match, said, “the objective in football is to send the ball forward to try to score in the opposing team’s goal, but sometimes it’s necessary to pass the ball back, in order move forward again in a

different way.” And even though I didn’t get all of it, I wanted to write it down, so that one day I could understand it better.

...

At the Chinese immigration checkpoint the officer looked over my passport and the visa I’d made in Thailand. When it came to check my bags the officials were curious about the contents of my large black case and began to guess whether it was a violin, camera, electronic device, or a gun! So they asked me to open it, and when it was apparent that it was a saxophone all the officials present, as well as many Chinese tourists, crowded round to see it, talking boisterously in great interest.

Then one of the officers approached me and started talking in Chinese (which I don’t understand) and eventually motioned that he wanted to hear me play the instrument. And although I felt awkward at having to play saxophone in a place like this, at a time like this, inside a government building, especially since it’s

a very loud instrument, all the same, in spite of place and time, I picked it up and at this Chinese border post, started to blow. And I blew it fully as well, to welcome myself to China! And the volume drew even more people in to get a look, until the Chief of immigration himself had to come out and reprimand the officer who'd asked me to play... I was sympathetic but couldn't help. He did ask for it...

...

From the window of the bus a huge mountain range stretched as far as the eye could see, illustrating the vastness of China. I felt excitement at the new language, people and surroundings. At the same time I was bewildered to find myself in China already... because I felt like I'd just left Chang Puak Gate yesterday. From here the only plan I had in mind was to travel north to Beijing to find out how to get on the Trans-Siberian railway, but of how to get there and where to go through on route I still had no idea. After briefly studying the map, though, I decided to start by

going to the ancient city of Dali, once capital of the Kingdom of Nanzhao, in Yunnan province.

After crossing the Chinese border into La, I took a minivan to Jinghong (Xishuangbanna), changed buses, and from Jinghong to Dali was fifteen hours on a large bus. All in all I was on a bus for a whole day and a whole night, more than twenty four hours! Which helped realise that travelling in China is not nearly as quick as it looks on the map.

Dali 30.04.09

I snuggled under a thick blanket in a guest house in the heart of the old city of Dali. Foreign friends slept soundly all around in the large dormitory room, but the morning was cold and although I was tired I couldn't get back to sleep. I could only twist and turn thinking over a strange experience, this time not a dream...

The evening before, while on the bus to Dali, I fell asleep from fatigue and when I came to it was the middle of the night and the bus had made a rest stop in the middle of a valley. Outside it was pitch black and mysterious. The only light was from the dim headlights of the bus shining forwards. Huge pine trees were faintly visible behind a light fog that veiled the area. Still half asleep I walked off the bus to feel the night outside for myself, and just at the moment my foot touched the ground a sky full of shimmering stars drifted into view in front of me. It was too much for me to take in. The bright light of the stars coming through the still black veil behind.

I felt a sudden chill throughout my body, and at the same time my mind became completely calm... And it's hard to explain why, although I was neither happy nor sad, I was crying my eyes out just the same. I don't mean to bother you with this at all, it's just something that happened on the trip that showed me that our readiness to cry isn't necessarily connected with happiness or sadness.

Dali is one of China's most famous tourist destinations because of its ancient architecture, history and beautiful landscapes, and is renowned for producing many beautiful types of marble. It has the snow-capped "Cangshan" mountains along its western side and Erhi Lake, an abundant source of water, to the east (I copied all this from the internet). Actually I don't know anything about the place. I just know it's very old and very beautiful and that I fell under its spell.

And, I met an American traveller, Nate, here. Slightly built, wearing thick glasses, with a full head of messy hair, tattoos covering his body and piercings in his ears and chin... We were both

staying in the same dormitory room (with 10 beds), in the same bed! (but different bunks, don't get me wrong) and so got to know each other. He told me that many years ago, wanting to see the other side of the world, he set off backpacking on his own and came to Japan, crossing into China and travelling until he'd spent all his money. And up until now, he's been going backwards and forwards between China and Japan (working in Japan and then coming back to live in China with its much lower cost of living). He made his living tattooing and painting, sometimes busking along the roadside and in bars, and taking on any work he could get to survive. And from necessity he had to travel with a tremendous amount of gear. Two huge bags were filled with tattooing equipment, a skateboard, painting and drawing supplies, an acoustic guitar and an electric bass, plus a small amp to go with it. My back hurt thinking about it!

It must have been because we were both musicians and travellers that we became inseparable, doing little else each day than touring the city busking.

“I’d better tell you now that I don’t play guitar that well... you might not like it,” he said with a straight face and serious tone the first time we went out to busk together.

“It’s alright... I play the saxophone great, you’re gonna like it for sure!” I answered, also in a serious tone... and we both burst out laughing.

He shouldered his guitar and set off to play without a second thought. His approach was to go in and speak with the owners of bars and restaurants and say that we were musicians and would play in exchange for some food. Many times on the streets or in the markets the police would chase us away, probably for making noise in a public place, (but we only ever got a warning, there was never a suggestion of being arrested and taken to court...!) and even though the little money we made was only enough for a bowl of noodles and cup of coffee in the market, this was nothing compared with the fun we had playing, seeing the smiles of the people listening, the sympathetic eyes of the police, the sound of small coins being thrown into the open saxophone case

or the ice cream given to us by a small Chinese boy in appreciation of our playing.

Another thing I learnt from busking on the streets with Nate was a sentence he let fall casually once,

“I don’t think it’s a problem if everything doesn’t turn out like we expect.”

Dali 2

I spent 4 days in Dali, mostly with Nate, drifting through the streets, markets and cafes. Our daily routine was painting, journal writing and, when evening fell, to go out busking at our friends' bars. And because Nate had been in Dali so long he knew a lot of people and all the ins and outs of the city, which is valuable stuff for travellers. He knew where to find the best noodles and the most famous or cheapest dumplings...

"Paul..." Nate called out my name in his American accent.

"What's up?"

"You have to hold off leaving until tomorrow... Today I'm taking you to Lee's new bar... He wants us to play and there might be a cup of tea and a free meal in it for us," he said excited.

"I think you've got something else on your mind."

"You mean that half Spanish girl?"

"You said it...I didn't say anything."

"You don't want to go?" he said smiling.

“Can we get going already?...”

Lee is the owner of the guest house where we were staying. He's Mongolian Chinese and very dedicated in taking care of his family's business. I was impressed that, although he was younger than either of us, he looked to have taken on a lot more responsibility. Anyhow, Nate took me to Lee's new bar. We played there until late and in exchange ate food cooked by Lee's mum until we were thoroughly stuffed. And because Lee was planning to open a new guest house two weeks from then, he asked me to stay until the day of the opening so that I could play, and offered to take care of my board and food for as long as I was in Dali. I felt truly honoured by Lee's request, but as much as I might have wanted to stay, I had to say no, because I knew that I had limited time to get to the music festival in France by the middle of the following month. And I wasn't at all sure of making it.

In any event, that evening we met “Jorg,” a German guitarist of very advanced years who sat smoking a long Chinese cigarette with great

relish in an old Chinese bamboo chair that had been polished to a shine. His long white hair went halfway down his back and his unobtrusive attitude reminded me of the heroes in old Chinese films. The reason I mention him is because he asked us a question from the book, “Sophie’s World,” which really made me think.

“Do you know what the most important thing in life is?”

It sounds simple, but because of the impassive tone in his voice and mysterious look in his eyes I couldn’t say a word, and as hard as I searched for a reply in that moment, I couldn’t find an answer to his question (or my own).

“Well...and what is the most important thing in life?”

I’ve heard this phrase countless times, and never been able to answer it. And how could I tell you what’s most important when I don’t even know what the word “life” means. All I could do this time as well was to write the question down in my journal.

...

On the first day of the Spring festival celebrations I started out again on a minibus bound for Lijiang (270 kilometres north). The bus passed the outskirts of town and on both sides I could see rice fields, tobacco plantations and a lot of marble carving shops. I glanced back at the big mountains one more time and remembered the day I arrived. That morning I hadn't even noticed the mountains, because their size blocked half of the sky...

The four days in Dali were truly memorable. Friendship and the help of friends had raised my confidence for travelling far. I got all the rest I needed and also had time to look at the map and make a rough plan of travel in China. I had no idea if I would actually use it, but the plan was to travel north from Dali to Lijiang and then up to "Shangri-La", across the valley to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province in central China, before catching the train to Beijing... And think about the rest later.

The bus carried us north past a gorge so high it made me dizzy to look down into the ravine. In the midst of this vast mountainous landscape I suddenly recalled something from the past that might seem unimportant and unconnected with traveling. (Again)

3 years ago I spent some time kicking around the north of Kyoto, Japan, for 3 months. The high cost of living made life a bit difficult and the money I made from busking on the streets wasn't enough to pay for a guest house, so I often slept in the underground stations, in the temples or by the river... Late one day while I was waiting for a friend at a station, an elderly woman beggar approached me and asked for 200 yen. It's true that 200 yen isn't a lot of money, but for me at that time it meant a great deal. In sympathy I gave her 100 yen, but she asked me for another 100. As much as I felt for her, from fear of not having enough to keep myself going, I said no. She looked dejected as she turned back into the

crowd... And within a few moments I started to ask myself,

‘Why didn’t you give the old woman the other 100 yen?’

‘I know your life is really difficult right now but what about that old woman’s life?’

‘What have you got to worry about?’

As soon as I’d thought it I started running after her to give her the other 100 yen, but it was too late, the old woman had disappeared into the crowd. After that day, every time I passed through that station I looked for the old woman, hoping that one day I might make amends, but I never did meet her again...

In telling this story I’m not trying to convey anything special, just questioning a thought from the past? Why is it still there?... Even until today, when I’m on a bus in the mountains of southern China...

I arrived in Lijiang in the early afternoon and for 1 yuan caught a local bus to the centre of the old town, which wasn’t far. I walked the alleys looking for Mama guest house, recommended by

Lee (as good and cheap) and, probably because it was the Spring festival holiday, the city was bustling and filled with tourists. Even though I got lost I couldn't help but admire the beauty of the old city.

Willow leaves fell onto the stone bridges that lined the length of the cool clear canal. I saw Koi in the water, souvenir shops, restaurants and bars in modern urban designs cleverly integrated with the city's ancient layout and architecture.

I found Mama guest house in Wen Hua alley off Wu Yi street, deep inside the old town, 'Mama' is the name of the woman who owns the guest house and although she looked very old she was still strong. She moved energetically and when she called the guests in to eat (encouraging everyone to eat a lot), in a Chinese accented English, her voice was really loud and had all of us smiling and laughing. I stayed in a shared room with 6 beds on the second floor of the simply styled old wooden building.

Intending to stay in Lijiang for only a day (because I'd begun to realise that I would have

to economise more!) this evening I quickly shouldered my saxophone and went out to explore the city. I walked a bit, stopped to sketch here and there, and played saxophone at the foot of some of the bridges, following the mood.

...

The next morning before setting off north for Shangri-La I ate breakfast with an old Englishman called David. His nearly 70 years of age gave him an air of calm and his wrinkle-lined eyes seemed full of stories.

“Where are you from and where and you going?” he asked me in a slow steady voice.

“I’m Thai, from Chiang Mai... you probably haven’t heard of it. I’m on my way to Paris. And you?”

“I’m from Wales. Have you heard of it?”

“I’ve only heard the name, but I don’t know where it is...”

“I’m not doing anything now except travelling around Asia.”

“On your own?”

“Yes... On my own.”

“I have three hours before my bus leaves... I think I’ll go out busking. Do you want come along?”

“Sure,” he said, before slowly standing up.

We set off walking along the stone courtyard... His paces were so slow that I sometimes had to help, but he kept his smile even as he lamented the ravages of age, until we reached the foot of one of the stone bridges in the centre of the old town. I opened my saxophone case and started playing while he stood and listened in front of me, applauding (which had an effect... the people around paid more attention and a lot of coins were thrown into my saxophone case). After that David asked if he could treat me to a coffee in return for the music...

“Why are you travelling alone?” I asked him out of curiosity.

“To tell the truth I didn’t really want to travel alone but I don’t have any friends or family that want to travel with me... They all have to work, and my wife wouldn’t be able to sleep in a cheap guest house like this,” he complained, a little ruefully.

“Years ago I sold some of my land and business interests to get money for travelling... And every time I go back to the UK everything seems to have changed so much.”

“I feel distant from my friends and family and nobody cares to hear my story...”

“But it doesn’t stop me travelling and I’m happy being a strange face to all the beauty of this world.”

I felt elevated by this story from another side of the world, told through calm and determined eyes, but at the same time I could see the deep sadness in his heart. We walked back to the guest house together when it was time for me to catch my bus, and when we reached it I heard Mama’s voice scolding me loudly.

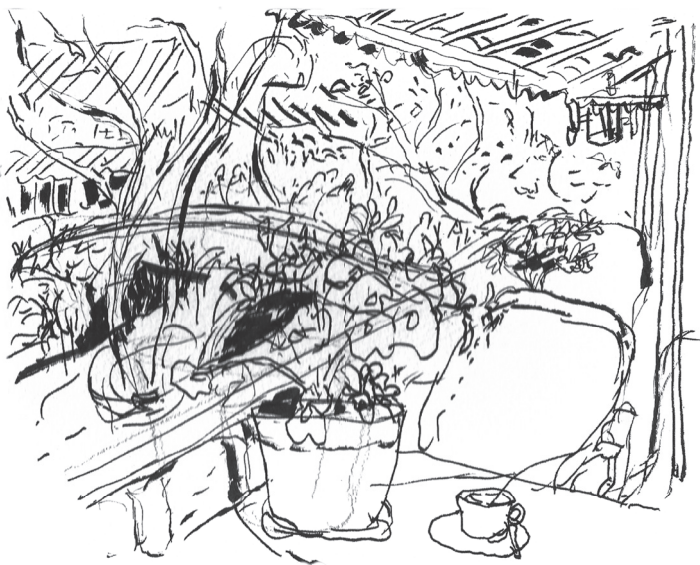
I missed the busssssss!

That’s how it goes, I’d misunderstood the times and the bus had left half an hour ago. Mama was scolding me from concern over where I’d disappeared to? I didn’t know what to say but could only smile... Apart from having to waste money on another ticket, David also teased me.

“Even though I’m really old, after travelling for decades I’ve never once missed a bus!”

It reminded me to be careful of the time and of misunderstandings from language, as they can really cause a lot of hassles and problems when travelling.

I bought a ticket for the next bus which was leaving in half an hour and set off walking to catch it with my belongings... To be honest I didn’t feel bad about missing the first bus, though I had to pay more than 50 yuan for a new ticket, because what was that compared to getting to know an old man and hearing his story. The story of a man who has tried to bend down low to draw water from the stream of his own life...



Shangri-La 1 ^{03.05.09}

For 5 hours on a bus through the spectacular landscape of the Tibetan Plateau I sat next to a young Chinese woman. During the ride she talked on the phone to someone. Her voice shook as though she were about to cry. After hanging up she looked sad and stared vacantly out of the window. A short while later her phone started to ring again. She took it from her bag and stared at the ringing vibrating phone in her hand... She neither answered nor rejected the call but put the phone back in her bag and zipped it shut... letting it ring on... sounding far away. She put her sunglasses on and clutched her bag tightly... Outside of the window was a view of towering mountains and small Chinese villages scattered across a vast plain in the centre of the valley. You could see rice fields and terraced vegetable gardens in a multitude of nature's colours. Here harmony, there contrast... I don't know why I had to sit and notice what she was doing. I didn't even dare to look at her...

‘Pick up the phone, please... there’s not much time left,’ I pleaded internally... She can’t have heard me.

Again, today I came across the scene of an accident on the road. In this very valley I saw a bus lying on its side by the road with police and rescue workers all around helping the injured. It caused a long traffic jam... I could only crane my neck and look on from the bus, with neck strain and heavy thoughts. Because it suddenly occurred to me, ‘could it be the bus I missed this morning...!?’

The bus brought us to Shangri-La by late evening. I hurried off to find Sky Guesthouse, recommended by Lee (again) as good and cheap, but when I got there it looked dilapidated and unkempt, as if no-one had stayed there for a long time...

Anyhow, in the thin breathless air and freezing cold that made my whole body shiver, I set about exploring the old town, with its earthen buildings decorated with huge timbers. Most of the people were dressed in traditional Tibetan

clothing. The Tibetan temples and stupas had 5 coloured prayer flags (white, red, blue, yellow, green), which Tibetan people believe the wind will blow in aid of their prayers. The name Shangri-La comes from the Tibetan language and means the road which the soul takes to the sun and the moon.

I took a rest by busking on a corner in the market... but after playing for only 10 minutes or so I felt I couldn't move my fingers anymore, and an old man came out yelling at me to get lost... He was probably trying to sleep as it was already nearly 9pm, and I was surprised that the sky was still fairly light.

I wandered the streets until it was dark, and only then noticed that the town had no street lights, making the way hard to see, and before I knew it I was lost and the streets were deserted. Only a few silhouettes passed now and then... 'and who am I going to ask for directions?' Having no choice I drifted on, just hoping to meet someone that spoke English.

“Hey!!” A man’s voice called in English from the dark

“Hey,” I replied, still unable to see his face.

“Are you the saxophone player from Dali?”

“I play saxophone. And I came here from Dali... But I’m Thai, I’m not from Dali.”

Then he and three friends walked closer and I could just about make out from their faces that they were Westerners, without being able to tell their nationality.

“Er... How do you know me?”

“I saw you playing in a bar in Dali and I was really impressed...”

“Are you on your way to play somewhere? I see you’re carrying your saxophone.”

“I was just playing by the road, now I’m trying to get back to my guest house... but I’m lost...” I replied, grinning.

“We’re on our way to a bar to celebrate a friend’s birthday. If you feel like it you’re welcome to come along.”

“Are you sure? I don’t know any of you... Er, and I don’t have much money... It might be awkward.”

“Don’t worry about it... My treat.”

The four of us walked in straight file through the dusk till we reached a bar where we met with light and the American woman whose birthday it was... We introduced each other, traded experiences from our travels and her friends asked me to play a song for her birthday. We became friends... And then, a minute ago, I started to question myself, ‘How did I arrive at this party with them, here?’ Even though I didn’t plan out every detail of my trip, I suddenly found myself in a place I never thought I’d be...

Shangri-La 2 ^{04.05.09}

In cold that turned my breath into steam I woke early in preparation to travel on to Chengdu. But when I questioned Mikki, the girl who owned the guesthouse, I learned that the road through the mountains I wanted to cross in the direction of Chengdu was in really bad condition. It went through deep forest, the buses ran only a couple of times a week, and the journey might take a week. She advised me to go back to Lijiang and take a bus to Panzhihua in order to catch a train to Chengdu via Liangshan...

I listened, ears open.

“Er... How was that? Lijiang, Panzhihua and then Chengu?”

“That’s right. It’s probably the safest and fastest way.”

“Thank you,” I said, still a little unsure of the route, but confident in her recommendation.

“Have you run this guest house for long?”

“Two days.”

“Before that my friend ran it, but it’s been closed for a while... I decided to buy my friend out and we just opened to visitors two days ago. It’s still a bit messy, sorry for that.”

Her words made me feel a bit guilty for having thought that the owners weren’t looking after the place...

‘Shit... How many times have I judged people from appearances,’ I thought.

“You should stay another day. Today my friend is going to Yading National Park (otherwise known as Blue Moon Mountain). If you want to go with us you’re welcome... Free!” She stressed the last word, probably noticing my poverty.

“Thank you, but I think I need to get going. I have a long way to go and no idea when I’m gonna get there.”

“Where are you going?”

“France...”

Panzhihua ^{05.05.09}

A small taxi van got me back to Lijiang by afternoon, where I immediately got on a bigger bus bound for Panzhihua... The bus took us through a gorge that was so incredibly deep I couldn't see the bottom of it down below. And the driver drove so fast on the small two lane road that I was scared and dizzy, and in fear I started to imagine the worst possible scenario... And what could be worse than our bus going off the road and falling into the gorge... And how could you survive that? I tried to think... But I got nowhere, because even if you could find a way to jump out of the bus, you'd still fall to your death in the canyon below! 'Stop messing around!' I pulled myself together with a few deep breaths, to clear my head from the road sickness, after seeing fellow travellers throwing up into the plastic bags which had been prepared for every passenger.

As the bus crossed the mountains and started down towards a vast plain below, a view of the other side revealed itself. Just as the sun

was setting, seen from the high peaks, the plain below was illuminated by an exquisite purple pink light. An incredibly beautiful scene of abundant Chinese villages and a multicolour patchwork landscape of orchards and fields engraved itself in my mind.

...

We eventually arrived in Panzhihua at after 1:30am. I awoke with a start, and still half asleep strained to look back through the window and the thick fog. I could vaguely make out a town braced between the foot of a hill and the large river below it. It looked really quiet, not a vehicle on the roads... I started to feel anxious... about where in the city I was. No map. No idea where the train station was. I spoke only 3 words of Chinese. I felt bitter that I hadn't prepared better. But it was no use repeating these thoughts. 'In any case, you have to get off the bus!'

When the bus pulled into the station (in complete darkness) taxi drivers thronged around the passengers (you can maybe picture it). It was

actually an everyday occurrence, ‘if only I could speak Chinese.’ I tried to explain to a driver that I wanted to go to the railway station, using Chinese that I had written down, “kay kwa jan... ke kwa jaan... kwǎ kě jaán... kwor jě jan.” Everyone shook their heads. I tried repeating the same sentences again and again, changing the tone every which way, and at the same time gesticulating and making train noises, “Chengdu... ke jě jan choo chooooo... Chengdu,” and eventually one guy cried out and gestured as though he’d understood my crazy language, and took me to a taxi which already had two Chinese people sitting waiting inside. I hoped they would understand... What I said might have been the name of a district, a village or the station. I didn’t want to think beyond that, and if the worst happened it would probably only mean sleeping by the side of the road somewhere, and trying again tomorrow...

...

That taxi brought us to the station at two thirty am, but for a reason I could only guess at,

the driver asked me to pay twice the fare that the two Chinese passengers were asked for... And although I could see it wasn't fair, because of the language barrier there wasn't much I could do. I could only appeal to him with my eyes, trying to bargain him down as much as possible... In the end I paid thirty five yuan (and it looked like the two Chinese people paid only twenty).

It doesn't sound like a big deal right? But it turned into one because I hadn't changed my money into yuan! Which meant that after paying for the taxi and regaining my senses I realised that I had only 95 yuan left... 'And is that going to be enough for the fucking train?'

In the middle of the big hall of the station it was dark, cold and quiet as a graveyard. I felt like I was inside of a scene from a Chinese horror movie, and with that in mind I walked over to the ticket booth, which had only one counter open.

"Chengdu..." I said, as I raised one finger.

"The female ticket vendor looked at my face before typing something into the keyboard, which raised a price and time on the monitor (250 yuan, 2:40 am).

“Is there a cheaper ticket?” I said in English, and pushed my palm down low...

She typed something else into the keyboard and this time the monitor showed (102 yuan, 2:40 am).

“Anything cheaper than this?” I said, pressing my hand even lower.

But this time she just shook her head.

I took out all the money from my bag to show her, gestured to explain that I had no more than this (95 yuan) and asked if I could pay the rest in dollars?...

She shook her head again...

I was dismayed, but who could I blame... I was tired and didn't want to wait for the next train, which could have been God knows when. But at this time where could I go to exchange money, and the train was due in ten minutes... And just as I felt my head was about to explode from trying to find a way out, a hand holding 10 yuan suddenly appeared from behind me.

An old man looked at me with a calm face as a he put the money down on the counter.

“Shie Shie Ni,” I thanked him in Chinese as I offered him my dollars. But he refused...

Confused, grateful and wishing to return the favour, but having no time to think, I accepted his money and paid for the ticket... I thanked the stranger again and ran to the platform to board the train.

On the train I met an old Chinese man behaving strangely. Strange because he wasn't wearing a shirt and walked around the train patting his stomach and talking to everyone. It wasn't long before he came to talk to me (in Chinese) ... I could only smile and try to converse with him by signs. He smiled back and went on talking, and though we couldn't understand what the other was saying, oddly, we sat talking for a long time...

Sitting talking to the old man I started to feel sorry for myself, because I was hungry, thirsty and tired... With only 3 yuan left I had to sit on the train for 13 hours or more before it would reach Chengdu.

‘Go to sleep. Don't think too much... It will soon pass,’ I thought, to calm myself.

Being extremely thirsty, though, I right then asked the old man in sign language if I could have some water from the bottle he held in his hand. He gave it to me and I drank, conscious not to drink too much. Before I could return the bottle to him, probably noticing how thirsty I was, he refused to take it and gestured to me to keep it... And then I don't know what happened to me, it was as if an invisible force entered my heart and in flooded a horde of mixed emotions. Weariness, hunger, sadness, missing home, my mum, my ex-girlfriend and many more feelings that I couldn't explain or say where they came from. Taking that bottle of water given in friendship by the old man released it all... My whole body shook as I tried to hide my pain and tears in shyness from the people sitting all around.

Have you ever had to be somewhere that no-one knows you, no friends, or anyone to tell your story to or to let off steam with. These kinds of repressed feelings seem to turn the friendliness or the offer of even a little help from a stranger into something astonishingly special.

Chengdu ^{06.05.09}

The hustle and bustle of this big city in central China was an extreme contrast with the slow pace of the small mountain towns of the south. On the first afternoon in Chengdu I felt excited by the new environment, even though I was also confused to find myself standing surrounded by so many people in the huge station... And for sure my first task was to find a place to change money. After that to find a hot steamed dumpling or two, and think about the rest later...

Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan province, which I later learned means, “slowly becoming a city,” because two thousand years ago, during the reign of emperor Jinsi, irrigation was implemented to solve the problem of annual flooding. And after the problem was solved, and the farmers could cultivate the land and improve their standard of living, an increasing number of people started to migrate into the town, and so it was called “Chengdu.” (Lui Bei and Guan Ping from the Three

Kingdoms also had their capitals in this province.) It looked a lot like Bangkok, full of tall buildings, shopping malls, buses, trains, taxis, beauty salons, noodle shops, Dim Sum stalls, Sukiyaki restaurants, monuments (Chairman Mao), beggars, Pandas, street dogs, heavy traffic and traffic jams full of people...

I started walking from the station along Singhai road looking for Mik Hostel Backpacker, which Lee had recommended (again). And here I stayed in a shared room with Webby, an English teenager, and Edward, a young guy from the Philippines. They were both travellers and musicians (and had both met each other that day as well). Webby played guitar and Edward composed and played keyboards.

...

Webby (at 18 much younger than me) said that last year he'd decided to leave the last year of secondary school and travel to Asia to learn about and see the wider world. He made a living teaching English but was often refused work because he was too young. I saw the many

thick books of philosophy, psychology and history that he'd brought with him, so it wasn't surprising that when we talked and exchanged ideas about various things he often had an unusual point of view which revealed both sides of the subject. And it taught me that whenever we look at only one side of a thing, thinking that we know, it's bound to be a narrow perspective, stiff and lifeless.

I decided to stay in Chengdu for three days, partly because the hostel was cheap (about 27 yuan for a shared room with 6 beds) and also to rest from the long journey. And for those three days I went around with Webby and Edward... Every day we went out to various places in the city, not too far from the shopping mall on Renmin West Road and the public park, the largest park in Chengdu. We tried to find places to busk, but it was too difficult. No matter which corner, they all seemed to be full of people and traffic. When we tried to play, before getting to the third song anywhere, security would always tell us to stop... Actually, I understand that public places should limit noise pollution, and my busking

could probably be called working illegally, but I couldn't help wondering why they had to chase away musicians playing on the side of the road too...

Something happened that I thought was funny. One night Webby, Edward, Andi (an American girl who was staying in the same hostel) and I went to a Jazz club in the area of Sichuan University, hoping to jam with the local musicians, but when we walked into the lavishly decorated club, it was pricey and looked beyond the means of shabbily dressed backpackers like us to buy a drink... We felt like complete misfits in the place, especially when the staff came to take our order... and we just flashed furtive glances at each other.

“Can you give us a moment to decide?”
Andi, the girl from the land of freedom said confidently.

“We'll come and order at the bar in a minute.”

And we ended up ordering two glasses of beer, which we shared between us... Thinking it over, it's curious that being out of place can make

us feel embarrassed at having to face what we lack. Maybe it's just me, but I can't deny that I really felt that way. But I didn't care that much, and I didn't expect anything from anyone... All I really wanted to do was get up and play saxophone with the band...

That night I had a great time playing with musicians of a very high level, including a French double bassist, Canadian drummer and Chinese pianist. It was a great experience for a musician who carried his saxophone all the way from Chiang Mai... in hope of exchanging... What should I call it? Ideas, feelings, experiences?... with musicians from the other side of the world, in an unfamiliar place and with unknown music... And while I was playing, following that sound, it was as though I learned something that I don't know how to explain, but that something filled me with a deep inner confidence.

(After I'd gone up to jam with the band for quite a few songs, the French manager seemed impressed enough with my playing to order beer for all of us!)

But the story isn't finished, because what I just recounted wasn't what I found funny, which is what I'm coming to now... After we left the Jazz club and headed back to the guest house, we stopped on the way to buy beer and continued drinking in the nice little park, with tables and seating, in front of the hostel. When we entered the park we saw a big group of foreigners already drinking in one corner. In another corner there was a table with plates and plates of food that had been abandoned by someone.

"Whose food is that? Why did they leave so much of it like this?" Andi mumbled.

'It looks like such a waste,' I thought.

And the moment I thought it, Andi, with her usual confidence, walked over to the group of foreigners in the other corner and asked them.

"Is the food left on that table yours?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind if we eat it? Because it seems like such a waste."

"Go ahead!... If it doesn't bother you," they answered with one voice.

Not being used to this situation and not thinking that Andi would dare to go and ask if we could eat the leftover food, Webby, Edward and I were left standing and smiling dumbstruck. And even though I found what Andi was doing funny, I was impressed by her confidence and self-assurance, and I have to admit that I was hungry and really wanted to eat that leftover food too. But would I have dared to go over and ask like Andi had done? I'd have to think hard about it, because of the impact of having been taught, "don't ask people for food," or "don't eat leftover food," which had become fixed in my mind (since when? Or where had it come from? I couldn't remember anymore), and which told me, 'don't do that!' It's wrong,' or 'it's shameful,' this kind of idea. Either way, what Andi had done taught me that the important things don't come in one specific fixed form but stand on the of truth of each moment. And that night I found myself sitting eating very tasty leftover food with my friends.

Three days in a city as large as Chengdu seems too short a time to know anything much about it, but the society reflected in the lives of the people in this huge bustling city was a bit too uniform. Even though the sights and sounds of the city were tantalizingly hopeful and spoke of dreams of better things to come, these dreams seemed vague and full of ambiguity...

Beijing ^{08.05.09}

It was twenty six hours on the train from Chengdu, via Xian, across the Huang He river (Yellow river) to Beijing. I patiently and tolerantly bore my exhaustion, watching many people share food, exchange seats, sleep standing up or sleep sitting in the aisle hugging their knees. A girl cradled her small baby in her lap and they slept together like this. I saw lively scenes of people playing cards, together with the sipping of tea and the instant noodles which seemed to be the staple food of all of us... But when the train arrived at its last stop in Beijing, everyone suddenly looked fresh and full of energy. Smiles and laughter from excitement seemed to wipe away all the weariness from the long journey.

I set off walking to find a guest house in the Qianmen area, not far from Tiananmen Square, but I when arrived there were no free rooms. One of the staff suggested I try another guest house which had just opened on the same lane. I walked past a market far down the lane until

I came up to an old wooden building which on the surface didn't look remotely like a lodging, because it was very old and seemed in disrepair. There was only a small vinyl sign set out in front that read, "The Emperor Guesthouse". I entered through the carved wooden archway into a large hall that reached up to the roof of the building. Things were scattered all around and a fine dust covered everything, giving the impression that it was abandoned.

Deep red coloured pillars supported a second floor raised walkway made from dark green fretwork boards. Above that, just under the roof beams, there was a red wooden mullion framed window. The light from above made the hall as bright as if it was under the open sky. Large guest rooms line the veranda on both floors. The tiny staircase makes it necessary to tread carefully and the low door frames force you to bow your head as you cross the threshold to enter the rooms. In this way the architectural details of the building lead me to imagining the way of life and proportions of the people of the past, and I pictured myself entering a tavern in Ancient China.

“This building has a more than two hundred and forty year old history,” said the slightly built Chinese girl who was the manager of the guest house.

“The Emperor Qian Lin used to stay here and built a secret underground tunnel from here into the Forbidden City. After that it was abandoned for a long time, until recently when it was rented and converted into a guest house.”

She went on to say that the guest house had only been open for three days and was still in the process of being renovated, which was why there were no people here, and said it looked like I would be the only person staying there that day...

“Really!?”

‘And how about ghosts?’ I thought.

...

But that afternoon, Ron, an Israeli traveller came to stay for the same reason that I had. And we stayed in the same room for the price of 35 yuan...

Ron looked around 24 or 25 and at 190 cm tall with a big build he made me, at 184 cm, have to look up when talking to him. Ron told me he was an exchange student in Moscow and during this summer's break of term he'd decided to take the Trans-Siberian railway to see Beijing, then head to western China and cross the border into Kazakhstan before catching the train back to Russia. But when he arrived by train in one of the towns in the west he was arrested by the police for having gone into a restricted area (probably the forbidden area of a Tibetan refugee camp) without having permission!!... And not knowing what was happening he was locked in a dirty cell for a day before being released and allowed to travel back to Beijing.

"I didn't have a chance to say even one word in my defence because nobody spoke English!!... And why did they have to go as far as putting me in prison!?" he said bitterly.

"What are you gonna do now?"

"I think I'll spend four or five days in Beijing and then take the Trans-Siberian train back to Moscow."

“I’m going to Moscow, too... Er, I have a question.”

“Where can you buy a ticket for the Trans-Siberian railway?”

Ron explained that actually the Trans-Siberian trains had many different lines. From Beijing you can take a train to Moscow on either the Trans-Manchurian line which goes via the Chinese city of Harbin and joins the Trans-Siberian train in the Russian city of Taskaya, or you can choose the Trans-Mongolian line which runs through Mongolia, stopping at Ulan Bator, before joining the Trans-Siberian train in Irkutsk.

“Do you know which line is the cheapest?”

“I don’t...”

“But I think you can take the local trains (economy) from Beijing to the China - Mongolia border at Erenhot. After crossing the border there take Mongolian trains to Ulan Bator... And in Ulan Bator catch the Trans-Siberian train to Russia... It’s probably the cheapest way.”

I listened without being able to picture all of it, but at least managed to write down the details in my notebook.

“Er... Where can I buy tickets for the local train you mentioned?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take you there...”

“Ron was sometimes difficult to work out and I wasn’t always sure how I felt about him... But I am very grateful to him for all the help he gave me, because apart from taking me to buy the ticket for the local train to Erenhot, he took it upon himself to be my guide around many of the cultural attractions of a city as large as Beijing, with its many thousand years of history melded together with a new way of life and a people addicted to modernity.

Over the past four days Ron took me to see the Chinese and Russian traders market, which had some very novel merchandise, and the strange way of life of the university students, one of whom was Ron’s friend. And most importantly, I got to feel the power of the empty Tiananmen Square, which is a part of the honour of being born human. One night we went to “Lui’s East Shore” Jazz club on the east side of Houhai lake in central Beijing (which is what I really wanted). There I met and

got to play with saxophonist, Liu Yuan, who was one of the early pioneers of Jazz in China. He looked strong in spite of his advanced age, had a kind face, and after we'd played several songs together, I had a chance to talk with him about my travels backstage. He asked if he could treat me to some food and drinks and offered me money for a taxi back to my guest house, because it was already very late and he knew that I didn't have much money for travelling. But, already grateful for and moved by his kindness, I didn't want to abuse his generosity and so refused. I felt very grateful for the opportunity to play with a man of his ability and to get to know someone with the spirit to have shown such hospitality, generosity and willingness to help a stranger like me.

Apart from all this there are two other places I particularly want to mention, the 798 arts community and the Olympic stadium.

798 Art District ^{10.05.09}

I learned about 798 from reading Art 4D magazine ten years before, when I was an architecture student, and because the story of the place interested me so much I thought to myself that if I was ever in Beijing I would have to visit this community.

The number 798 comes from the buildings, and from the time when a group of Beijing artists were looking for affordable studio space with a good atmosphere for work, and found a disused factory in Chaoyang district in the north east of the city which had been abandoned since 1990. And because the buildings of the 798 Art District had been built in 1951 and had been designed and built using East German plans and technology, at the time of the government of Zhou Enlai, architecturally the buildings resemble the Bauhaus. A distinguishing feature is the pitched roof with its sawtooth feel that looks really outstanding and very tall since having been converted into artists' studios and galleries, and allows for the showing of very large artworks.

A suspended sculpture displaying the number 798 in front of the main entrance clearly announced the substance of the place, and the encircling fence and guards gave the impression that it was some kind of institution. Just inside the entrance was a noticeboard with a plan of the of the building and grounds, showing the locations of numerous galleries, cafés, bookshops, handmade crafts shops etc. I explored the many galleries, which came in all sizes and had many differing concepts, revealing the diverse origins of the artists.

Deep inside one of the old buildings of the 798 area I came across a powerful work of photographic art that cut right to my core... It was a black and white photograph depicting the exhaustion of a Chinese construction worker glimpsed sitting taking a break from work in the surroundings of the workers filthy shelters. Stagnant water and mounds of rubbish revealed the impoverished conditions of their lives against the gigantic indistinct backdrop of the Birds Nest Olympic Stadium, which was in the process of

being built... It was a stark contrast. As I allowed my mind to drift into the meaning of the piece, it was as though I was seeing the connections of a work of art which could fuse human emotions together...

Birds Nest Stadium 11.05.09

On the morning I was due to leave for Erenhot I used my remaining time in Beijing to go and see the actual Olympic Stadium, which wasn't too far from the city. It took about 30 minutes to get there from my guest house in Qianmen, taking the underground to the end of the line in the north of the city. After a short walk further north I could see the Birds Nest Olympic Stadium standing imposingly in the centre of a huge open area, and to one side of the great plaza the Beijing national swimming pool (The Water Cube). Both were on the same level and a broad central avenue connected them with other sports venues. The Birds Nest was like a powerful solid red energetic structure that was gracefully enclosed in a soft woven shell which made it look like a ball of energy that was in constant motion. In contrast the Water Cube created a cool and peaceful presence with its bright blue colour and soft structure, but on the other hand had a simple and bold form. Before the wonder

of both buildings could carry me away, I couldn't help but return to the image portraying the life of the Chinese construction workers who had made this huge achievement possible.

Er... There's another story I've been forgetting, because I haven't known where to put it... After Ron and I had spent several days together in Beijing and had become closer, we made a decision to travel to Moscow together, but two days before we were to leave, Ron fell ill with a serious stomach bug. (Actually I had also begun to get a fever but it wasn't that bad.) All that night Ron groaned from the pain in his stomach, and then as he was walking to the bathroom for the tenth time in the middle of the night, in the darkness of the room (and also because of his size), he walked straight into the wooden door frame!! The sound reverberated around the entire building and I woke with a start, and when he cried out in pain I jumped out of bed in alarm... Ron was forced to rest and recover in Beijing for three or four more days. Half of me felt like waiting for him because I wanted a friend and guide, but my

money was disappearing day by day and I couldn't really ignore the problem any longer. So I decided to set off on my own the following day...

Mongolia Bus to Erenhot ^{11.05.09}

The bus left Beijing at five in the evening and stopped at a rest area at ten. Many other buses were parked next to ours and I found myself amidst a very ancient atmosphere. The low rumbling sound of spoken Mongolia, foreign to my ear, the calm and reserved faces, and the size and height of the people, combined to paint a picture of a very unusual country. It was freezing cold and the wind whistled over the barren hills... And maybe because I couldn't grasp my surroundings, or because I didn't really understand my own feelings, either way, it's hard to describe the uneasy feelings that arose within me...

"Secrets only reveal themselves when life encounters the truth of experience," I recalled someone having said.

The bus brought us to Erenhot at about four in the morning. The sky was pitch black and the starlight only made the weather outside seem colder... And because I didn't know anything

about this place I felt afraid, not knowing what to do next.

...A number of small taxis were waiting and jostling for position in the hope of picking up the passengers in the earthen floored station. I looked around for someone who could speak a little English but it was hopeless and I had to try explaining to a taxi driver (using hand gestures) that I wanted to go to the China-Mongolia border. He signed back a 'no' and seemed like he wanted to take me to a hotel or guest house somewhere (his movements were those of someone half asleep). When he typed '9:30' into his mobile phone I guessed he meant to tell me time that the border would open, but as much as I tried to communicate to him that I wanted to go to the border anyway, he kept refusing.

We talked (without understanding) for a long time, until all the other passengers had trickled out. I reluctantly decided to get into the taxi and he took me to a hotel and to a room on the second floor, before charging me 30 yuan and leaving.

I fell onto the bed completely worn out and starting to feel the effects of a fever, which depressed my mood more with each passing moment. Before I fell asleep a thought from my mother grabbed my heart. She'd warned me to take paracetamol with me but I'd stubbornly thought they weren't necessary and had even been afraid they would make my bag heavier!

I left the hotel early for the immigration checkpoint at the China-Mongolia border in a desert jeep (with 4 seats) that wasn't hard to find as they were lined up along the road, and it looked as though it was well known that most of the travellers that came through the town wanted to cross from China into Mongolia in this way only. And this time I spoke to the guy driving the jeep using only one word 'Mongolia'. He nodded in acknowledgment and gave a price of 60 yuan.

It wasn't far from the town but the procedures for crossing the border were much more complicated than I'd assumed they would be, because we had to drive to 3 separate government buildings to ask for various permits.

Only when these had been taken care of could we drive on to the Chinese immigration checkpoint to get an exit stamp. Afterwards the jeep carried us across the border for about two kilometres, under a cloudless sky, through the ice-cold wind, over a black asphalt road, and on either side the resplendent light of the sun reflected by the desert.

“Goodbye China, hello Mongolia!!”

Said Uru, a middle aged Mongolian man who had come across the border with us, looking overjoyed. I tried to follow his thought, but right then I didn’t feel all that prepared to leave China. When we arrived at the Mongolian border control it didn’t take long to stamp our passports and clear immigration (Thai passport holders don’t need a visa if staying for 30 days or less), after which we got back into the same jeep and headed for the not too distant train station.

By this time I could see why the taxi driver of the previous night had so persistently refused to take me to the border, because it was not nearly as easy a crossing as the one I’d experienced in

Bor Ten (on the Laos-China border). I realized the thanks I owed him and regretted my obstinacy. And I was forced to admit that what really led to my foolish behaviour was concern over money, and the fear that that taxi driver was going to try to cheat me some way... All in all these thoughts caused me to feel pretty dissatisfied with myself, and although I didn't want to think too much over it, I couldn't help wondering why such fears and worries returned over and over again in life. Wasn't the recurrence of help, love, friendship and the kindness of so many people in my past enough to strengthen my faith in and love for other people? The reason must be in something like the words of the many philosophers who have said, 'the error of man knows no bounds'.

Jamingwood is a small town and it looked like the station was the centre of town. Honestly, I'm not all that sure of the name of the town. I just saw a sign in front of the station on which was written Jamingwood in English, and so I've named it after that.

The Mongolian people are tall and well built, like people from the west, but have Asian

features. They are very polite and reserved, which made me feel respectful and a little wary. The cut and colours of their clothes are simple and natural, and their houses, which have a mixture of western and eastern influences, give the same impression, combining colourful oriental mouldings or cornices, large arched doorways and western styled light inlets and chimneys. The written language is a combination Cyrillic characters. The sounds are a mixture of central Asian and Russian, but the tones are Asian. In any case, I felt the strangeness of my surroundings on the platform, which was unusually quiet... Even the people the people who were sitting together in groups waiting for the trains, with piles of boxes of their belongings all around, sat silently without uttering a word. The only sounds were from some children chasing plastic bags being blown around by the northerly wind.

Uru lead me into the station to change money and to buy a ticket for Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia. The price of a second class sleeper berth was 9,600 Tögrög, and this time I

didn't forget to change enough money to leave me a little for the expenses ahead.

The train would take about 16 hours to reach its destination and while we waited for it to arrive Uru tried to teach me the basics of Mongolian and Russian, so that I might be able to talk a little with other people... He also told me about the travelling he'd done in his life and of the responsibilities of being a father of two.

"I'm a trader. And me and all the others you've seen are carrying all these things that we bought in China to sell them in Russia," Uru said in a calm voice, with his hands tucked into the pockets of his large dark brown jacket.

"And the things from China, what are they mostly?"

"Just general consumer goods... Clothes, food, various appliances. It's the most popular profession in Mongolia... Because there's not much other work to choose from."

"Buy low, sell high, make a good profit... But you have to travel all the time with this kind of work."

“So you just go back and forth like this?” I asked.

“Yes... For me it’s only Beijing.”

“But many others have to go all the way down to the south of China and lift a lot of stuff on and off of many buses, trucks and trains before they can sell it in Russia.”

“If you don’t believe me ask Muku!” He said, turning towards a young Mongolian Man of 26 years who was sitting with us.

Muku was well built, came from Ulan Bator, and after getting married he and his wife had a son. It seemed like his responsibilities were increasing and followed him like a shadow.

“I’ve done this for two years,” said Muku coolly.

“This time I went to buy in Guangzhou (a city in southern China, next to Hong Kong) because some of the goods there are cheap and there’s more to choose from. Then I have to sell them in central Russia... If you calculate the whole trip it’s more than 20 days without seeing my son and

wife, but after less than a week's rest I have to get back on the train to go and buy more stuff."

"It sounds tiring."

"Yes... I'm very tired of it, and I don't like the hustle and bustle of China, but there's not much choice."

After hearing the stories of Uru and Muku my journey on the Trans-Siberian railway, the longest journey of my life, was suddenly shorter. If I compared it with their travels, having to sit on the same train over and over again until who knows when... I didn't want to think about it! The train was almost their home. The only difference was this home didn't have their loved ones in it. And then I understood better where the quiet and strange atmosphere came from, because unless I'm wrong it's from loneliness and the missing of family and loved ones... I started to feel sad from these stories, because they made me homesick, but this Trans-Siberian railway was still the great unknown, and I had just a short wait to go in search of its legend...

Trans Mongolia ^{12.05.09}

This evening the Trans-Mongolian train carried us through vast plains interspersed with low hills. Far out on the horizon I now and then saw hills with groups of trees that were no more than trunks and bare branches, and very occasional groups of 2 or 3 Yurt's (the traditional Mongolian tent-like round houses) surrounded by herds of grazing cattle and horses... The place was really no more than the ground and the sky.

Uru, Muku and I sat in the same area of the train compartment. We chatted casually and Uru kept on trying to teach me Mongolian and Russian, worried that I wouldn't find anyone who spoke English in Russia. And even if I met a few people who could, it wouldn't be many and I'd have a difficult time!! Uru guaranteed it.

But in the twilight, as the light on the horizon was becoming pink, I didn't have the mental wherewithal to study a language that had the most difficult pronunciation I'd ever heard! And so I sat and stared into the distance, at a scene of such beauty as I had never set eyes on before in my life...

Ulan Bator 13.05.09

I arrived in Ulan Bator in the afternoon the next day feeling sleepy. I'd hardly slept at all the previous night because it was freezing cold on the train. My one thin jacket barely helped at all and Uru's loud snoring stopped me from dropping off. The only thing that saved my life was the tiny thin (but so warm!) red blanket that I borrowed from a guy who was just about to throw it in the bin at the guest house in Chengdu. The worst thing was that by the time I remembered that the blanket was in my bag it was already morning.

From the station Uru put me on a bus into town to find Kongor Guest House, recommended by Ron (not Lee this time), on Enkh Taivny Örgön Chölöö road or Peace Avenue, which is well known among travellers.

And then something happened that I'm not sure what to feel about, but I want to tell it anyway... On the way into town on the small bus, I was sitting at the front next to the driver and got talking to him, and when the bus reached an

intersection I saw that the road ahead was blocked off by many police cars and a convoy of vehicles sped past the intersection in front of us.

“Whose convoy is that?” I asked the driver.

“Er.. It belongs to the ex-President of Russia, Vladimir Putin.”

“He’s here for some kind of meeting.”

“There, he’s in that car there..” He pointed to a bigger more luxurious car than the others.

I stared after the car, trying to peer inside, hoping for a glimpse of him, but all I could see was the blurry silhouette of someone... That’s all I wanted to say, just because I wanted to share the excitement of the people on the bus, and one day be able to tell someone around Chang Puak Gate, “Hey!... I once saw Vladimir Putin’s shadow!”

...

Ulan Bator is set in the middle of vast plains punctuated with hills. The ground is sandy brown and free of large trees in every direction, making the atmosphere feel really dry. A grey dust, stirred up by vehicles passing over the potholed roads,

fills the air. And when the frequent strong gusts of wind blow the dust into your eyes you have to squint, and from time to time raise your hands to wipe them.

From Enkh Taivny Örgön Chölöö road I walked out in search of the guest house, which wasn't difficult to get to but a bit tricky to spot because it was on the second floor of a building with a mini-mart on the ground floor, and the entrance was at the back of the building, not the front.

The guest house may have been small but it looked really popular with backpackers, because as soon as I was inside the place was bustling with young people of many nationalities and languages, talking over plans for camping out in the Mongolian countryside.

After deciding to stay in Ulan Bator only one night, while asking the staff at the counter how to book train tickets to Irkutsk for tomorrow, I noticed a strange instrument hanging on the wall behind. It had a trapeze shaped body, a long thin

guitar-like neck, 2 long round string made from horsehair and a violin-like bow (also made from horsehair).

“It’s called a Morin Khuur... It’s the national instrument of Mongolia,” the owner of the guest house said with a smile as he held up his 5 year old daughter, hugging and kissing her on the cheek.

“How does it sound? and would it be possible for you to play it for me a bit?”

“I don’t know how to play it... All the instruments you see hanging on the wall here belong to my son... He’s a musician.”

“Is there any chance that I’ll be able to meet him today? I’d like to hear how it sounds just once.”

“He’ll probably be here later in the evening... I’ll ask him.”

But before he’d even finished speaking, his son opened the door and cheerfully walked into the hall. After sufficiently introducing ourselves, and expressing my hope, he wanted to hear the sound of my saxophone too, so we agreed to get together after dinner that night.

...

In the deepest part of the kitchen there were 5 or 6 spectators waiting for us, including tourists, staff and the little sister of Kongor (his name was also the name of the guest house), having heard that there would be a music event at the guest house. Before playing Kongor explained the meaning and origin of Mongolian folk music, which involved life on horseback and raising livestock...

As the music started I felt my hair stand on end from the reverberating sound, which was unlike anything I'd ever heard, as if something was hidden in the sound. Even though only music in a kitchen, I could feel his intensity, and the atmosphere put a spell on me, affecting all my senses and banishing the image of a kitchen or of any other place on earth, leaving only the sound waves streaming from his instrument. This vibration overcame me with its wonder, and I started to feel both joyful and disconcerted, both elated and despondent, altogether. Part of it was maybe the simple folk melodies expressing the feeling of this distant legendary people, through

the mountains, animals, rain, sunshine, day and night, across the vast Mongolian grasslands. I heard the surging cries of wild horses proclaiming the state of their being.

When it was my turn to play my, I felt a crushing lack of confidence and didn't want to pick up my saxophone! Why did I have to feel like that? Because at that moment I felt like the saxophone had nothing to do with my nationality or culture (of my beloved Thailand), unlike Kongor who played his country's national instrument... And I can't play beautiful simple melodies filled with the stories of life. I can only play a few tunes that I don't even know the origin of... 'This is what happens when you compare yourself to others' ...

But when the time inevitably came, 'you have to play!' Half because I didn't want to lose face, but also because I didn't want to waste the opportunity to be a part of the moment.

Before I began I could only pray to myself to play a song, even if it had no meaning and no connection with the, for me, unknown land of Mongolia... As I played I recalled the endless scrub

landscape bathed in purple-pink evening sunlight, my mistake with the taxi driver in Erenhot, the friendship of Uru and Muku, and the never ending train travel of all those who have to leave their families with, inaudible sobs coming from the depths of their hearts, like little birds that have to leave the nest for distant lands...

...

The night was a deeply treasured musical “thankyou” between us. Afterwards Kongor and Sakae, Kongor’s girlfriend, offered to take me out in search of a club where I could maybe jam with some Mongolian jazz musicians, but we couldn’t find it, because it didn’t exist!! So we drove up to the viewpoint on a mountain south of the city, and in the gusting wind and freezing cold on top of the peak Sakae started to tell me the story of her love at first sight romance...

From where I stood as far as the horizon the moon lit up the land below and I could see shimmering lights that looked like the night stars reflecting off the sea. In that moment I felt so fortunate to have that once in a lifetime chance

to stand on this hill, which in spite of the bitter cold, was incredibly beautiful.

p.s. I found out later that Kongor was a nationally acclaimed musician in Mongolia and had travelled the world singing and playing the Morin Khuur as a representative of Mongolian traditional music.

Russia, Irkutsk 1 ^{14.05.09}

After waking up early I went to pay my respects and sketch at Gandan Temple, the most important temple of the city, until afternoon when I hurriedly packed my things and went to the station to head north for Irkutsk in Russia. On the train I made a new friend, Sai Wang, a Chinese-Mongolian man who was sitting in the same car. And because there was only one train for Irkutsk that day I no choice but to buy a ticket in a private cabin. The car was split into cabins which were clean and well fitted, but also more expensive.

Sai Wang was middle aged and not big like Mongolians, but fatter and more of a Chinese build. He told me he was a trader like others but different in that he didn't have to carry goods anywhere, because his product was ATM machines from China. His job was to contact banks in Russia to sign them up to contracts for pre-order. And as he spoke English well I was really glad to have a friend to talk to. He also gave me good advice

and all sorts of help for the whole of the train journey.

In the evening the train yet again took us through spectacularly beautiful hills and pastures as the sun sank low, creating strange patches of dark shadows intersected with strips of light. The blue of the sky was paler than I'd ever seen, and in the middle of the pasture a small village with little houses grouped together. The roofs of the houses were in various bright colours, like a garden of flowers dotting the pasture.

Once, as the train passed a hillside with a small stream meandering through moss coloured rocks, far out atop the distant cliffs I saw an old man standing majestically with a big white dog. He was looking quietly down at the open fields full of livestock, and when the train passed closest to him, for a fraction of a second it seemed like we made eye contact and I was spellbound by those ancient eyes... As though he'd been standing on that cliff for untold ages, waiting for me to travel from a distant land just to meet his solitary gaze.

...

In the evening Sai Wang invited me to eat with him and promptly amazed me with the size of the huge piece of meat wrapped in a paper bag that he plucked out of his bag.

“My wife prepared dinner,” he said, smiling.

“What kind of meat is it?”

“Yak meat.”

“It’s huge.”

“Let’s eat, there’s too much for me to finish on my own,” he said, as he carved the meat into manageable pieces with a razor sharp carving knife. He reached into the same bag again and grabbed a big bottle of vodka, poured it into little plastic cups, and offered me one...

“This is Russian vodka... it’s good for fighting the cold.”

“Er... thank you,” I said, feeling far from ready, because I know how easily I get drunk... But after drinking some it seemed like it really did fight the cold, the 100 proof alcohol was setting my insides on fire.

While we were eating, a whole group of fellow Chinese and Mongolian passengers all

of a sudden knocked on the door and brought a load of things into the room, storing them on the shelves and under my bed! At first I had no idea what was happening because I couldn't understand either their behaviour or language. Sai Wang explained that it was because we were nearing the Russian immigration checkpoint, and they were leaving the things they were taking to sell in Russia to avoid paying tax! And because of the strict inspections of the immigration and customs officials, who board the trains to check passengers and cargo for suspicious behaviour and smuggled goods, they had come to ask to hide their goods among our bags (because the officials don't confiscate personal belongings), which if not too numerous are ignored. And if they were judged too many and the officials asked us who's things these were, we just had to answer, "no idea," so that there would be no problem for either side, since the officials would simply seize the smuggled items.

Our compartment was soon full of goods - jeans, shorts, socks. Hung on the racks (crumpled

up, as though they'd been used) or put under the bed and pillows. They even put things in my bag, including eggs!!, which one Chinese guy brought to hide. I don't know what kind of eggs they were, but they were packed in black parcels, which were later seized by the officials. And as much as I felt for him, there was nothing I could do. I saw an old Mongolian couple who came to stow things with us taken off the train for investigation by immigration officials and I don't think they made it back onto the train...

"What's going to happen to them, getting caught like this?" I asked Sai Wang, naively.

"Don't worry too much about it... At most they'll have to pay a fine to the officials, then they'll be free to get on the next train."

"The lucky ones get away with it... the unlucky ones get caught and pay a fine," he said calmly, as though it was in the normal course of events. But what I'd seen depressed me... and my mind drifted to worrying about Uru, Muku and all my Mongolian friends, and what their fate would be.

Russia, Irkutsk 2 ^{15.05.09}

Sai Wang got off the train at the previous station, but there was a chaotic scene before the train staff and I could wake him, because whether we shouted in his ear or vigorously shook him, he remained sound asleep, unmoving. ‘Should I slap his face?’ I didn’t dare to try and carry him off. It looked impossible, and there were all his bags too. Let him sleep on? The train needed to get out of the station didn’t it? ‘Ok... if you have to slap him, slap him,’ I thought, as I slapped him several times trying to wake him, until he finally got up, and sleepily gathered up his belongings before getting off the train, saying “good luck” as he left. This incident really improved my understanding of the saying, “sleep like the dead” ... And the reason he slept like the dead probably had something to do with his going to drink with his Mongolian friends in another compartment until late last night. We waited for passport inspection at the Russian immigration checkpoint at the border town of Naushki for several hours because of the

thoroughness of the search for the smuggling that I've been describing.

...

And then I was left alone in the silent train compartment...

Early morning. Through the window the sky was heavy with rain, ready to pour down at any moment. The train carried us towards peaks white with flakes of ice and dark green from the leaves of Pine trees. Villages of pine log houses, decorated with brightly coloured door and window frames and roof tiles, lined a small river meandering through the fields, with pale coloured wild flowers scattered throughout.

I wondered just how cold the water in that river was? It must have been really cold. And how would it feel, to strip off and jump naked into that river? Your blood would probably stop flowing. After that your head and body would start to ache, you'd go into shock, unable to move your arms and legs, your heart would stop beating, and then you'd sink to the bottom of the river. 'Just my imagination.' But as my thoughts drifted, the

train followed its course, bringing me to a place that blew my mind with wonder...

An expanse of blue water so vast that the far shore was out of sight, and a white beach covered with shards of ice blown together by waves of wind. The low lying clouds floating just above the water made it feel like the sky was within reach.

‘The Ocean,’ was the first thing my brain could think, but I knew that here in central Russia there were no Oceans.

‘Lake Baikal!’

I’d heard about lake Baikal from friends and people who knew that I was taking this route to Europe, and they’d mentioned its natural beauty and geographic importance. Some had said that it was the oldest and deepest lake on earth, with unmatched beauty, and had been named “The Pearl of Siberia”. Others had said that the lake had tremendous geological and ecological importance because, as well as being the largest reservoir of fresh water in the world, it is the natural habitat of over 1,000 ancient species of plants and animals found nowhere else on earth.

I remember a German woman who had taken the Trans-Siberian train in the winter telling me,

“You won’t believe that such a beautiful and vast lake can become a frozen sheet of ice that you can drive a car on... Have you ever seen that James Bond film? Like that!”

For all that, I could only press as close as possible to the window’s edge, in awe of its indescribable beauty...

The train arrived at Irkutsk at one in the afternoon... It was at this station that Uru’s words,, “You’re going to have a difficult time for sure!” looked to have finally come true.

Because I’d thought that on getting here I’d be able to find tickets for the Trans-Siberian train straight away, but it looked as though it wasn’t going to be that easy. Because of those language difficulties! There was chaos inside the station, with so many people walking back and forth, and many ticket offices for many classes, so that I had no idea which was which, and was unable to read any of the signs. When I asked people, they didn’t understand English or my sign language...

After walking around for an hour carrying my bag and saxophone until exhausted, I finally met a girl who worked for the railway who was kind enough to try and help me buy a ticket using a dictionary (English-Russian) for translation. Our method was this - she would use the dictionary to translate the questions I had written down on a piece of paper and answer me by pointing at words in the dictionary with her finger.

Until eventually I got the answer that the next train would be tomorrow evening... But that's not the end of the story, because another problem was changing money, again!!! I didn't have any Russian money on me and couldn't buy a ticket, as there were no currency exchanges in the station... And so the same female railway employee drew me a long map to a mysterious bank hidden way down at the end of maze-like alley, which took over an hour to find...

Finally, I held a Trans-Siberian railway ticket in my hand. 'What a feeling!' The price was about 100 dollars. (I don't remember exactly how much but it was definitely in the lowest class.) But that's

still not the end of the story, because after I found out that I had 30 hours to wait for the train in this square room, I met a couple who completely changed my life for a day and a night in Irkutsk...

It happened like this. As I was sitting in the passenger waiting room, I happened to hear a couple talking in English and saw that they were reading an English language guidebook to Russia. And so I went over to say hello and to ask for some information on Russian and Irkutsk. I found out that they were both English and had travelled across northern Europe and into Russia on the Trans-Siberian railway, and were bound for Mongolia.

“Do you know anywhere cheap to stay around here?” I asked John, knowing well enough that I probably couldn’t afford to pay for anything, as my finances were in pretty bad shape.

“My advice is that you should to take the local bus back to lake Baikal, which takes about an hour, and find somewhere cheap to stay around there... Because for me, experiencing lake Baikal was the most impressive part of our travels so

far,” John said earnestly, before asking me for information on accommodation in Ulan Bator.

“I’d recommend you stay in Kongor Guest House and ask the son of the owner to play the Morin Khuur for you, because that was the most impressive experience for me in Mongolia.”

As soon as I’d finished my sentence I suddenly felt that what was taking place had happened once before in a dream or, as people sometimes describe it, I a feeling of ‘deja vu!’

It may sound like a ‘surreal’ delusion, but it’s undeniably what I felt at the time.

The dream image that was taking shape in the moment allowed me to switch places with John and we were each speaking of the things that the other had felt... And whether it was a hallucination or whatever, it affected me so much that the sentence “you should go to lake Baikal,” hypnotized me.

No matter how urgent my need to save money, it had lost its importance. Why?... I don’t know.

“Here’s a map... I don’t need it anymore,” John said as he tore it out of the guide and offered it to me.

“Thanks... Here’s the business card of Kongor Guest House. I don’t need it anymore either.”

I used John’s map to guide me to Lake Baikal, which was on the outskirts of the city, taking the local bus which went every 30 mins from the central station. On the way the bus stopped to pick up an old who was in a filthy condition. The smell of alcohol clung to him and it looked like no one on the bus would let him sit near them. Although I was a bit afraid (afraid what of?) I moved over to let him sit. Probably from drunkenness he talked to me in Russian the whole time... I was confused but tried to imagine what he was saying and responded to keep the conversation going. We had many of the people on the bus laughing at us and our multilingual conversation, neither having any idea what the other was saying. Even I couldn’t hold back a smile at the situation.

After a while I took out my sketchbook and pretended to be sketching his portrait. He

understood this instantly, and from unremitting drunk talking he became silent and faced me straight on until I'd finished my sketch (stealing glances from time to time). He didn't look drunk at all! But as soon as the sketch was done, he returned to talking at me non-stop, the same old drunk. Strange? Some would disagree, but I find it strange that someone can display two diametrically opposed sides of their character at one and the same time... It reminded me of drunk, or sober, people who can sometimes laugh and cry at the same time. That kind of thing. As he was getting off the bus it looked like he was talking to the driver (I guessed it was that he didn't have money for the fare). It was a particularly sad scene to see a new friend getting shouted at by a bus driver as he walked away forlornly, head down, into the mist in the forest of huge pine trees along the way...

...

The bus stopped at a small community by the lake, and it looked as though just me and two other men had ridden as far as this last stop. And

even though the watch on my wrist said seven minutes past eight, the sun still shone faintly through the towering black clouds forming in the distance. Before I could start to think about my next move flakes of snow began to float down, making the already bitterly cold weather feel even colder.

I started down the damp deserted road...
‘Exactly. Who would want to be out walking at a time like this, in the freezing cold, with no let up from earth or sky?’

A strong northerly wind whipped up waves on the lake. They crashed furiously into the shore and seemed to draw my frozen self down to the icy depths. The progressively darkening sky only increased the ferocity of the weather. The biting cold penetrated to my bones. My instincts told me that my body probably couldn’t stand this for much longer, so I walked into a restaurant to ask about a place to stay nearby. I was really lucky that one of the restaurant staff seemed to notice my backpack and shivering condition, because even though we didn’t exchange a single word,

she walked over to me, beckoned me outside and pointed to a house not much further on...

...

I stopped in front of a compact single storey house. Its bright sky blue colour gave it a welcoming feeling distinctly opposite to that of the supremely cold grey sky. With big horizontal pine logs walls, a chimney on the gabled roof, a low wooden fence bordering the tiny garden, it looked like a mythical house from a fairy tale I'd read as a boy... Suddenly the snow turned into a pounding rain and my bag and clothes became soaked, pressing the cold to the limit..

I stood and shouted for the owner of the house for quite some time, but nobody answered, until just as I was about to turn dejectedly away, I saw an old man come out through the front door. He looked serious and very suspicious of the strange man I presented...

He started to speak to me looking and sounding very stern, and as hard I tried using body language to tell him what I wanted, 'do you have a guest room,' he seemed unable get it at all...

I started to hesitate, not sure if this really was a guest house. Because if it wasn't... the situation was just going to create more confusion between the two of us. Either way, he appeared to want me to leave and I didn't think it was worth pushing the matter further, because it might have been my own misunderstanding. But then the voice of the same girl yelled out a few words to the old man from the restaurant opposite. He started to look more relaxed, then opened the gate and invited me in...

Inside the house was dim from the blurry light of a hurricane lamp, making it feel like a dream, illuminating a circle only around the area were looking directly at. The old man took me to a room with three beds and showed me how to use a few of the things in the room, the mechanics of which looked strangely antiquated... Whether it was the wash basin, the towel rail or the door latch, which were made of heavy metal and were constructed like the military appliances of the second world war. The bathroom was like an outhouse shed with a toilet pit. There was no

shower or light, so you had to bring a torch or candle for each visit. The old man lit a fire in the fireplace to dispel the cold before leaving for the other side of the house, which was separated off by a heavy wooden door...

I looked around the silent room. In the pitch black outside the window I could still hear the howling wind and rain. The gloomy surroundings together with the cold damp room and my soaking wet skin depressed me. I took off my clothes before wiping myself down with a towel, hanging the wet clothes over the table and chairs, and eating the few cookies that remained in my bag, before falling down on the bed nearest the fireplace in exhaustion...

It had been the weirdest day, with all the various happenings. Some of the events were so ordinary, but it was strange that I'd been so confused by their ordinariness... 'What was it that had me sleeping in this blue house, and what was it trying to tell me?'

...

In the middle of the night, as I was sleeping soundly, I felt someone shaking me. When I opened my eyes I saw the figures of two men standing beside the bed. One was the owner of the house, the other was a middle aged man of large frame. Drowsy from sleep and in the darkness of the room I was startled by this new situation.

Both men were agitatedly saying something to me in Russian. It occurred to me that they maybe wanted my things and so I took out money from my bag and offered it to them. They refused it and continued trying to explain something. But I couldn't grasp it. As the situation was becoming more and more tense I made one last effort to understand what they wanted. Using all my senses I managed to work out from their gestures that the younger man wanted the room for his wife and three young children, who at that moment were waiting in a car outside, and so they had come to ask me to move to another room which had only one bed... When I understood this, I realised that in fact they'd both been asking for my help and had no bad intentions at all.

In the morning it was still drizzling and it was cold enough that frost clung to the windows. Lying on the low wooden table against the windowsill I saw a hardback book. The melancholy yellow paper showed the book's age as I carefully turned the pages, until I understood that it was a pictorial history of Lake Baikal. Black and white and colour photographs showed the diverse topography of the lake. There were photos of the many species of plants, flowers and animals of exotic shapes and colours, amazing photographs of sunlight reflecting off the water onto the steep cliffs, followed by photos of the lake at night under the brilliant light of the moon and stars, and photographs of local festivals taking place on the frozen lake in the falling snow.

The old man knocked on the door and came in to invite me to breakfast. His wife had prepared oats in chicken broth with bread for us. He looked friendly and smiled at me the whole time, in stark contrast to our first meeting. I still didn't know what the lake had in store for me, or what this blue house was trying to tell me? But

what I do know is that right then I felt overjoyed
to be sitting eating a delicious breakfast among
the friendly smiles of the old couple...

Prater



Trans-Siberian 1 16.05.09

From Lake Baikal I took the bus back into town. I stopped to walk around and noticed that the people there seemed to have extraordinarily difficult lives. I say this because I could see the run-down state of the town's houses, the potholed roads, the cold weather and the expensive goods (comparing the cost of the same things in China). It answered my questions about why people from China and Mongolia were choosing to trade with the Russians...

While riding the tram around the city I was unnecessarily fined one hundred roubles by the conductor because I hadn't known to stamp my ticket in the machine at the front of the tram. But who could have known, since everything was in Russian! And as much as I resented paying, and tried to explain my way out it, he just shook his head every time and held out the fine. In the end I had to pay, from fear of getting arrested and also fearing that I might not make it back to the station in time, which almost turned out to be the case!!

Not because I argued with anyone, but because I didn't have anyone to help me with everything being in Russian. Both the train timetable and the station announcements. More importantly the time on the ticket showed Moscow time, which is five hours different from the time in Irkutsk!! Why don't they show the local time? But whatever, because in the end I jumped on the train as it was pulling out of the station. And I owe thanks for this to an older man who helped me run towards the platform after I'd been standing alone and confused in the middle of the station and showed him my ticket...

This evening I finally found myself on the Trans-Siberian train... And even though it was a bit chaotic, I can't help feeling excited and proud that, 'from Chang Puak Gate I made it onto the Trans-Siberian railway'.

Trans-Siberian 2 ^{17.05.09}

My first night on the Siberian railway was spent in the freezing cold. I was again thankful for the red blanket I'd kept from Chengdu. In the morning the train passed through a white landscape with snow sticking to the blades of grass in the fields and the branches of the huge pine trees. From a distance they looked like green ice cream cones with white tips... The falling snow created the effect of a thin white curtain blowing in the wind. Occasionally the train would pass mist covered valleys of three coloured fields full of trees with tall slender white trunks, dark brown branches and fine pale green leaves.

Our car was economy class. Most of the passengers were Russian. Some were Chinese Mongolian. The space was being used as freely as on the Mongolian line train. Each compartment was designed with a long corridor connecting all areas and folding two story bunks with storage space. The upper bunks were less expensive than the lower bunks (so I was sleeping in one of those).

Bathrooms were at both ends of the cars and had 24 hour hot water dispensers for preparing food.

This time the train ticket introduced me to ‘Lena’, a Russian girl whose beautiful face and figure attracted the attention of many young men, and to Semyon and Alexey, two young travel friends, all of whom were about the same age as me, and who were travelling back home to Novosibirsk. And also to Luba, a 60 year old woman travelling from Vladivostok, the last station on the Trans-Siberian railway, on the border with North Korea, which was 6 days travel from Yaroslavy station in Moscow. The goodwill of all helped me greatly. The first day on the Siberian railway passed quickly from the exhaustion of my recent travels. I slept from early evening with the sounds of Lena, Semyon and Alexey singing merrily until late.

Trans-Siberian 3 18.05.09

This afternoon was warmer. I saw some people wearing shorts and sandals, and some even took their clothes off!! A Chinese man wore pyjamas with a brightly coloured cartoon print. It created the atmosphere of a large communal living room. Later, Luba tried to teach me the basics of Russian, and a crowd of people gathered round having great fun trying to help explain the meanings of the words using hand signs. And many times Semyon, Alexey and Lena threw in slang words which they wanted me to repeat, laughing at their choices, which I knew had to be either funny, risky, or something similar, because I'd often enjoyed teasing foreign friends who were visiting Thailand in the same way!...

Since having sketched the portrait of a beautiful Russian girl yesterday, with many of the passengers watching closely, today I had a bit of a problem. Now everyone wanted me to sketch their portraits. And so all day long I sat and sketched portraits. I had fun, because when you're

drawing on a train the cars sway and bounce around all the time and a lot of unintended dots and lines come out of a ballpoint pen which you can neither erase nor repair. All of which was great fun and amusement for both the people being sketched and those crowded around to watch. And although I didn't want anything in exchange, all those people brought food, drinks and all kinds of snacks to me in place of payment. A Russian man brought a whole dried fish called Omulu from Lake Baikal. I was so excited because I hadn't imagined that anyone would bring something like a fish, and a filleting knife!! This from another Russian so that I could fillet the fish, which for preparing the food looked at least as necessary as the bowls and glasses for hot water.

Meal times were like small parties, with groups of passengers bringing out food to eat together, particularly the Chinese, who looked especially jubilant. Everyone looked so well prepared food and living-wise, except for me! It's not that I didn't prepare... I tried, but it wasn't as easy as you'd think, because of having to shop for

food in a Russian supermarket. Everything looked strange and all the labels were in Russian. So I chose food judging by its appearance. Bread, tea (which I bought without having a cup or teapot), coffee, instant noodles, cheese, sausages, some snacks, and a big bottle of soda which I thought was water, only realising my mistake when I opened it and it fizzed up into my face! But stocking up on food isn't the biggest thing to worry about, because on the way the train stops to pick up people at numerous stations, and passengers can get off, walk around and buy things in the station shops. And vendors even come onto the train from time to time selling food. Another noticeable thing is that the men here drink Vodka all the time, maybe because of its sweet taste, or maybe because the high alcohol content fortifies the blood against the freezing cold.

...

The weather started to get colder again towards the end of the day and this evening the train took us through the middle of a valley in which a rose coloured sunlight shone through

great lines of trees onto the fields beneath white clouds. On the hill ahead I saw well-tended gravestones arranged with small plots of flowers. When I saw the graves I thought of death... And to think that in this vast expanse of nature the small light of life must merge into the eternal darkness is a mystery beyond imagination... And having thought of death, I couldn't help recalling something from the past connected with death, beside the river Ganges in Varanasi... Forgive me for leaving the plot one more time.

...

Two years ago I had the opportunity to explore India and stayed at a guest house next to the Ganges for a month. And because my main activity was sitting painting on the stone steps at the bank of the river, I got to see a picture of the life of a people who have an incredibly close relationship with death. Partly because Hindus believe that the Ganges is the sacred river of Lord Shiva and that therefore if someone has died and is cremated at the riverbank in Varanasi, and their ashes are scattered in the river, they'll be

carried to paradise. Which is why the river is full of remains, both of people and animals (and some of the bodies are not cremated due to lack of money for firewood or for other reasons related to certain deaths which I don't fully understand). There are also many people who come to bathe in the river to wash away their sins. And then there are the piles of rubbish and the dirt from all of the washing and bathing. It looks so filthy it's hard to believe that anyone could enter the water to bathe.

But one evening, from the impetuosity of youth, I was dared by an Australian friend to swim across in exchange for something or other that I can no longer remember. Anyway, not wanting to lose face, I stripped down to my boxers and jumped into the river.

After swimming out to the middle of the river I suddenly became afraid, from the exertion of having to swim against the current and in water that was both colder and much wider than it had looked from the bank. The feeling was something like, 'I can't go back, but if I go on I'm afraid I won't

make it to the far side'. In the end I swam slowly until I made it to the far bank, which was devoid of people and looked like a desert... I remember that all around me in the muddy water was dark green seaweed and corpses that were mainly bones, with the odd bits of flesh, floating on the water next to my skin. I got out onto the bank and watched a dog feed on a piece of human flesh.

I started to feel inwardly confused at finding myself surrounded by the corpses of the dead.

'Yes,' these people were really dead.

'And I'm still alive.'

'One day I'll be in the same state as them won't I?'

'And the happiness and suffering that are ever moving inside me and in the life of people, where is that in these corpses?'

In fatigue, confusion and shock at what I was seeing I vomited, and tears gently flowed.

Then I steadied myself, looked back towards the other side of the river, and saw the life of the people of a four thousand year old city casting its shadow from the light of the setting sun onto

the water. It was a glorious scene. In that second I saw, together with the nonsense of this life, the great value of a deep mystery hidden within it.

And in the distance I could still see my crazy Australian friend waving his arms about.

Trans-Siberian 4 ^{19.05.09}

The train moved along at its usual speed. This afternoon the weather was murky and not as warm as on previous days, and since half the passengers, including Semyon and Alexey, had reached their destination in Novosibirsk in the early morning, the atmosphere felt really lonely, lacking the sounds of conversation, card games and vodka parties of days past. People lay around or sat looking vacantly out of the windows.

I also sat staring out, counting the clouds that floated above a pine forest, recalling the conversations of friends of all ages. Alexey. Luba. For the past two days they'd watched attentively as I sketched, and we'd had a chance to talk while I drew their portraits. Alexey was 15 years old and from Irkutsk. He was travelling to another city for a boxing match. I asked him if the old man he was travelling with was his father. He said the man was his coach... He didn't have a father, only his mother. I noticed several scars on his body and asked him how he'd gotten them. He told me

that the scar over his eye was from a fight and the scars on his hands were from skipping ropes. After saying this he smiled and told me to put the scars in the portrait.

Alexey asked me, “Where have you come from?” “Where are you going?”... He asked about Thailand, Thai boxing, the sea (he’d never seen the sea and he wanted to swim in it), what I did for a living, the money I’d brought with me for travelling, the geography of the countries I’d been to, and he paid attention to every answer that came from my hand movements and illustrations. He seemed especially interested in New York, because his eyes filled with excitement every time he spoke or asked about it. We talked until late and watched the sun set together. (In Siberia the sun goes down at around 11pm.) And before we separated to rest, I gave him a pen which had New York printed on its side. The pen wasn’t expensive or special in any way, but he was delighted with it.

Late this morning Alexey reached his destination. I felt more than a little disheartened

when we had to say goodbye... I told him that I hoped he would get to travel to every country that he'd mentioned, especially that he'd get to New York, and to give it his all in the fight today. He said thanks and told me to keep going, "don't stop".

I wanted to tell you about the life of this young fighter and his dreams. Listening to his story made me think back to my own dreams as a boy.

...

For the past two days, without intending it, my daily routine has been to draw the portraits of all the passengers, both from my compartment and others... I sat and drew until there was no paper left in my sketchbook, and afterwards those who wanted their portraits drawn had to bring the paper themselves. One Chinese man couldn't find any paper and so handed me his old passport, which caused everyone great amusement.

As I said, I didn't charge anything for the portraits, but everyone brought something in exchange, until it became a kind of implicit fee. By the end the pay became bigger. Maybe it

was because many friends were nearing their destinations that they left me so much food!! And so today my usual table was full of food, including bread, cucumber, tea, chocolate, onions, kimchi, salted eggs, boiled eggs and instant noodles, all piled up on the table until I didn't know if I could finish it. Some invited me out to smoke a cigarette (and I'm not a smoker, but I went!). Some brought me beer or vodka. But there was one guy, a dancer, who was different. He invited me out to watch a video on his mobile phone about Central Asian folk dance, which was quite interesting, followed by some comedy sketches, and finally, best of all, a porn video!! And although it felt strange to watch a porn video with another man, I watched it, in recognition of his determination to give me something in return.

Three days and two nights on board a train may not sound like a long time, but it felt like an age. The sound of the train's wheels endlessly turning, hitting the tracks. But no matter how slowly time passed, every time I looked out of the window there never seemed to be a repeat of the scene of the second before.

Trans-Siberian 5 ^{20.05.09}

This morning the weather was fine compared with days gone by and the atmosphere on board regained its hustle and bustle after the train stopped last night at around one to pick up many new passengers at Ryadardov station, about half whom looked to be soldiers heading home. Today after drawing the portrait of an old man, he offered his family's photo album for me to look at. Inside the photos showed the stages of his life from birth. Almost all the photos were black and white, with a few in sepia, and all were old but well cared for.

Photos of him in the arms of his mother around the time of his birth (a real contrast with his present self). Photos of him as a boy with his grandparents. Photos with friends from primary school to University. From when he was drafted into the army. Photos of his granddaughter as a little baby. To the last photo of the album, which was a photo of his mother as a young woman standing in front of a house. Afterwards

he handed me an illustrated book on the works of Dali, the Surrealist painter. The book covered his work between 1930-1970, with explanations in Russian beneath the illustrations. I looked at the paintings one by one and was struck by a painting called *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.

... In the middle of the vast barren desert in the background of the painting, an emaciated naked ascetic knelt in front of the skull of a man, one hand resting on a rock, the other holding a cross up to the sky in defiance at something strange above, a gigantic horse with contorted eyes filled with demonic wrath, which was about to stomp down on the ascetic. Behind were five immense elephants. On the backs of the elephants were a naked woman upon a fountain, a geometric figure of triangles and circles, a castle and a gigantic tower. But the thing that stood out from all of this was that the legs of these animals were as elongated and thin as spiders' legs, and looked too slight to support the weight of the strange figures...

I thanked him, returned both books, and went back to draw the portrait of the next in line at my usual table. As I sat drawing I thought about both of those books... What was I thinking about? I'm not sure...

...

In the early evening things became merry again for no apparent reason. People throughout the compartment were singing and dancing.

“What’s going on?”

I turned to ask Lena, who was busy putting on makeup and dressing herself up.

Everyone was so happy and excited because in only a few hours the train would arrive in Moscow!!

Moscow, Yaroslavsky Station ^{21.05.09}

The train arrived in Moscow's Yaroslavsky station before dawn at just after 4am. My first step on Moscow soil was incredibly exciting, because it was almost a month since I'd left Chang Puak gate and I'd finally made it to Europe, to Moscow, on the Trans-Siberian railway...

On the other hand, for some, arriving meant going home to see family and loved ones, or if going the other way, separating from home and country and returning to being more or less second class citizens and keeping a low profile. I say this because, as I was carrying my things down from the train, I saw immigration officials inspecting the belongings and passports of people they thought suspicious, and I saw many of the passengers whose portraits I'd drawn trying to take care of the things they'd worried so much over...

...

Luba took me to rest out of the cold in the waiting room, to wait for the underground trains

to start running, and as the snow fell outside Luba asked me something that made me stop and think.

“Where do you want to go?”

It sounds simple doesn't it?... But at the time I honestly didn't know where I wanted to go.

Anyhow, I asked her to direct me to the centre of town, where I figured it wouldn't be too difficult to find a place to stay.

...

Deep under the earth in the old underground the sounds of classical music accompanied the beautiful architecture. The tunnels of the different levels of the station were decorated with paintings, mosaics, marble statues, stained glass and exquisite chandeliers...

Luba sent me to Turgenevskaya station and from there I started walking and walking and walking, in search of a place to stay (and this time nobody had recommended anything!). Whatever the cause, after aimlessly wandering the streets of Moscow for half a day I still couldn't find a place. Probably the size of the city and the number of

people on the streets had completely confused me, and in fatigue from carrying my bags for so long I started to feel dejected. My brain slowed until I was completely incapable of deciding what to do next. But both my feet kept plodding on automatically. (Has this ever happened to you?) I walked as far as an intersection and realised that I couldn't go any further. If I didn't have anywhere to aim I'd just be wasting my time... 'But what should I do? What should I do?' I asked myself, as I wondered what had made me want to come to here?

Red Square ^{21.05.09}

In the middle of an intersection in Moscow, the biggest city in Europe, surrounded by thick traffic and throngs of people going this way and that. Office workers in sharp suits and ties, gourds of students chatting in front of McDonalds, a blond haired girl smoking a cigarette under a black leather jacket in the bus stop opposite, a mother with hands full of shopping bags pushing a pram in which her newborn baby slept. Inside a cafe I saw a group of people playing chess very intently, a dishevelled beggar slept on some steps beside the pavement... This is how it is, the lives of people vary, me included, a stranger in Moscow who's utterly lost no matter which way he turns.

But as the pale orange sunlight shone onto a mid-classical period building on the far side of the road, I saw a young woman standing alone looking at a map and went over to ask for her help, thinking that she might be a tourist from somewhere or other. I found out that she was from Saint Petersburg and had just moved to

Moscow a few days before to be with her fiancé and had decided today to come out and explore the city to kill time while her boyfriend was at work.

“My name is Julia... And right now I’m lost too,” she said, bright-eyed and smiling.

“Do you know of any guest houses around here?”

“I don’t know anything about this city... But I think I might be able to help you.”

She took me to a nearby bookshop to look for a Moscow travel guide and sneak down the address of a guest house. After that we used her map to find the guest house. I don’t know how she came up with it, I can only say that it was great!!

Julia had long blond hair and blue eyes and told me how excited she was about coming to live in the huge city of Moscow, which was so different from her hometown, the old city of Saint Petersburg. She told me her dream of travelling the world, meeting its people and visiting its beautiful places as I was doing...

‘Travelling in search of your dreams is great, but I hope you don’t have as much trouble as I’ve had...’ I thought.

At the guest house, Julia invited me to go and see the sights with her and volunteered to take me around the Kremlin at Red Square, which is a major tourist attraction and is thought of as the heart of Moscow. Even though I was tired to breaking point I couldn’t refuse her invitation, partly from wanting to return her favour, but also because I knew I could spend no more than a day in Moscow. Because the cost of living was so high (the highest in the world at the time), I wasn’t eating, not having the money to buy anything. Accommodation was incredibly expensive, about 25 dollars a night for a dormitory room with 10 beds, and as tired to death and sleepy as I was I wanted to make the most of my one day in Moscow.

In the afternoon Julia took me to a beautiful park in the centre of the city where ducks and white swans swam on a pond surrounded by colourful tulips in full bloom. We walked through

an arts and crafts market until we reached the huge granite mosaic paved Red Square, bordered by beautiful buildings and the bright colours and exquisite patterns of the 9 domes of Saint Basil's cathedral, which looked like a sacred object from a dream world. The high walls of the Kremlin stretched all the way to the Moscow river. The Spasskaya clock tower shone brightly in the sunlight reflected by the golden dial... It was astonishingly beautiful.

In the evening when the time came for us to separate it was inexplicably sad, because even though we were two people who'd just met, the short time we'd spent together felt of great value. We thanked each other and hoped that we'd get lost and meet again one day...

I was back standing alone at an intersection, no different from in the morning, looking around thinking about what to do next.

'A jazz club? Because tonight's probably your only chance.'

'Or go back to sleep? Because you can barely take another step.'

I stood thinking for an age. Or I stood sleeping, I don't remember.

Fuck it... Jazz club!!

But before the jazz club, not wanting to take a risk, I rode the underground to Rizhskaya Vossol to book a ticket for Riga, the capital of Latvia. As I was queuing for the ticket I met Sasha, a student at one of Moscow's universities. She was ahead of me in the queue. After introducing ourselves I learned that she was in her university's athletics team and was travelling to Riga for a race in two days' time, and so had come to book a seat that day.

"What instrument is that?"

"A saxophone..."

"Really?... Are you a jazz musician?"

"Yep... You're a musician too?"

"No... But one of my close friends loves jazz and has been learning saxophone for a while."

"Do you know any jazz clubs where I might be able to jam with a band tonight?"

"I know a few places."

"Can you give me directions?"

“No need... I’ll take you.”

“Let me call my friend in case he wants to go too.”

‘It’s that easy?’ I thought.

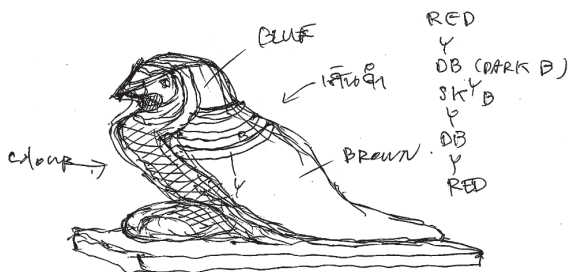
So Sasha and her friend, Nick, a square featured blond haired youth who’d fallen for the saxophone, took me to B2, a big live venue with several floors. Each floor had its own style of music. We walked up to the jazz club where a group of Russian musicians were playing... In the all-encompassing darkness a light shone onto the stage, from where the bright tones of the vibraphone and deep swaying melodies of the piano harmonised with the tight and heavy walking of the double bass. It was an amazing concert to be at. Apart from the very talented musicians, I still hadn’t gotten over sitting here with the friends that I’d met just a few hours ago.

Towards the end Sasha asked the manager if I could go up and jam with the musicians. The manager said I could play, but... “He has to play alone!”

It felt strange to have to stand and play alone on stage, but I went for it... ‘Playing alone is still playing!’”

As I was blowing at full force the piano player came up and joined in, followed by the bass player and vibraphonist... As the music swelled with the emotion, creativity and power of all, I remembered what it was that made me want to set off travelling for this distant land...

For the last event of the night Nick drove us to see the lights of the city at night, which were incredibly exotic and beautiful (even as I nodded off in the car), and in the end I got back to the guest house at after four in the morning!! Which meant that I’d spent 24 hours in the life of Moscow...



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Train to Riga, Latvia 22.05.09

I was up at 9 am for an appointment with Nick to go and practice saxophone in one of the parks... We practiced sleepily for hours. Afterwards Nick asked me to go and see the city's landmarks while we still had time before the evening train. For the whole afternoon he took me around the five beautiful golden domes of Saint Servia's cathedral, an important place of worship in the Russian Orthodox Church. The sound of the golden bells resonated throughout the great hall, decorated with beautiful murals, and helped me shake off my sleepiness.

After we went to the Pushkin Art Museum. The museum collected paintings from the Impressionist, Post-Impressionist and all the way up to contemporary periods and included exotic and intriguing archaeological finds from many places in the Middle East, from Egypt, Greece and Italy.

At 5pm Nick took me to Riskaya station, and it was with a heavy heart that I once again had to

part from a good friend. 'But what can you do?... Where there's meeting there has to be parting, over and over like this.' Something that always made an impression on me was the friendship of all the Russian friends who'd helped me along the way.

...

On the train bound for Riga I sat with Potaris, a tall and well-built Russian man, and it was he who organised the vodka party in our area, good spiritedly asking me to play saxophone for his party... Though he was fearsomely built, his face was all smiles and red cheeks (from intoxication) and his character was always cheerful. It made the freezing cold night in our train compartment full of laughter and smiles until late into the night.

It was just before dawn when the train arrived at the border. We had to wake up for immigration officials to inspect our passports. At the Russian side there were no problems, except that for me the immigration officer took much longer inspecting my passport and things than for others, because my Thai passport didn't need

a visa for Russia, and so there was no page with a visa, only an entry stamp on the day that I'd entered the country, which was small and hard to see. The official was trying to find the page with the Russian visa (which didn't exist!) ... When I came to the Latvian side, which is in the European Union, it looked as though I'd finally come across a serious problem, because the officials were suspicious of my visa and the comings and goings of my travels, and asked me to gather my things and get off the train for questioning at the immigration office, which was a little way from the platform.

An officer took me to a small room with blue grey walls, a small bathroom, two single beds, an aluminium chair and a thick glass window with bars over it. In the door was a glass hatch giving a view of the other side, but the door couldn't be opened from the inside, which made it not much different from a prison cell...

Right then I felt very alone, and started to think repetitively, 'how long will they keep me here, and will I be getting back on the train again?

And if I can't travel on what will I do? Go back to Thailand the way I came? The money I have left isn't much, probably not enough to get home.'

But then I composed myself and tried to take a clear look at the situation. A voice from within told me,

'It's nothing... Leave it.'

'Don't worry too much about problems that haven't even arrived.'

'You should feel proud of yourself, because you've already come really far, and had the chance to meet so many great people and see so many beautiful places... Which makes it worth it already, no? And if you have to stop your travels here, be grateful for it.'

And as Nate, my American friend, had said,

"It's no big thing if everything doesn't work out like you expect."

Not long after, through the dark grey steel bars, I saw the train that I came on from Moscow start to move away. It threw me back to the old Chinese man and woman who'd travelled from Mongolia and had to carry their things off the

train at the Russian border. They'd probably felt something similar...

I waited for the officials so long that I fell asleep, until I heard a knock, and someone opened the door and asked me to follow them to another room. Inside two officials were sitting waiting for me. One was a woman who acted as translator for an older man who seemed to be the office chief. After asking me to sit, he started to ask me a whole load of questions...

“What's your purpose in travelling to Europe.”

“How did you get here?”

“How did you get the letters of invitation and visa?”

“How much money do you have with you?”

“How long do you intend to stay in Europe?”

“How will you get back home to your country?”

... Etc., etc.

I answered every question truthfully, not hiding anything.

After the interview an official took me back to the first room, but this time Olga, the translator, came in to speak to me. She asked me privately about all the travelling I'd been doing, even asking me to draw her portrait and write her name in Thai. Olga was my age. She told me that when she was studying at university she'd had the chance to be an exchange student in New York, which had given her a good command of English. She had once dreamed of travelling like me, but after finishing her studies she'd married and had two children, and so hadn't had the chance to follow her plan. Now she felt happy to hear the story of my travels. I thanked her for coming to talk to me as a friend, and for translating during the interview.

"This is the first time I've seen anyone detained and in such a good mood and full of smiles as you," she said, before taking her leave.

I smiled without saying anything, knowing that it wasn't as she thought at all.

...

In the afternoon it became a lot colder from the rain that was falling outside. I can tell you that looking at the grey sky through iron bars is a totally different feeling from looking at it through an ordinary window. As I sat alone waiting hopefully, I got out my saxophone to practice, without blowing, just imagining the sound that the various keys I was pressing would make. It's incredible that just pressing the keys of my saxophone could lift me so much. Maybe the feeling of being imprisoned like this allowed me to hear the desire for freedom in the sound of the saxophone coming through my inner senses.

At around six in the evening an official came in and told me,

“You have fourteen minutes to get ready to board the next train for Riga.”

Riga, Latvia ^{23.05.09}

The train got into Riga at just after ten, and not having eaten or drunk anything the whole day, not even water, I had a bad stomach ache... Everything looked gloomy, and apart from not having a map or any information at all about Riga, or any Latvian money with me, I also didn't know where I could go to change money at this late hour.

I walked in the direction that a friend from the train had suggested I should go to find a place to stay in the old city, which wasn't far along the road I was on. As I was walking along I started to feel completely exhausted. I would have felt like laying down at the side of the road if it wasn't so bitterly cold...

...

The old city district of Riga was peaceful and beautiful. A large river flowed on the west. The ancient Saint Peter's cathedral which dominated the central square was surrounded by granite mosaic roads which wound into the small lanes,

and beautiful art nouveau works, with forms and colours taken from nature, adorned the various buildings.

I stayed at a guest house in the old city where the cost of living wasn't too high, and this relaxed me a little... My daily routine after getting enough sleep was to go out and busk under an overpass in the afternoon. When I made some money I used it to buy food in the market for my main meals each day (at the guest house there was a shared kitchen for preparing food). After this I'd go and draw for fun at a corner somewhere.

At the guest house I made many traveller friends whose lives were full of interesting stories.

Philip, a French friend travelling around the world as he built and maintained a website, and Gecko, an American guitarist who travelled looking for work around guest houses in exchange for board and some money for travelling onwards. Piggy, a small Chinese girl (who was younger than me too) had travelled alone from Shanghai, China, and was following her dream of travelling to Eastern Europe. These stories were inspiring,

letting me know that all over the world there were many more people travelling in search of their dreams.

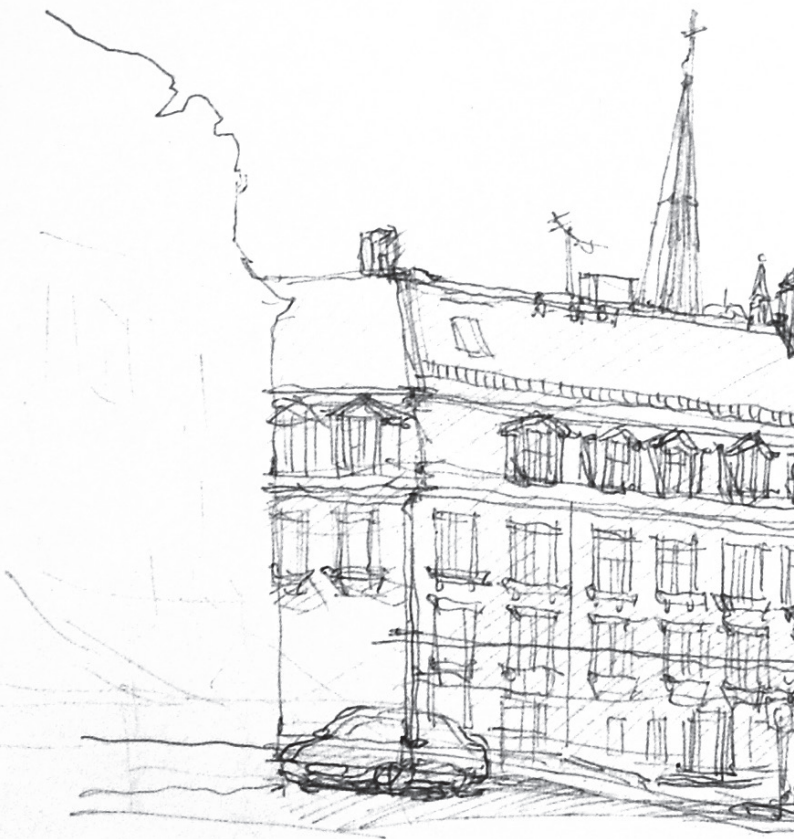
I saw something interesting once in Riga that I'd like to explain.

... One night after busking, as I was walking back to my place, and was passing Saint Peter's cathedral, I saw a blind man playing cello in the arched doorway. In the darkness and freezing cold, with a strong wind that blew the cold into my every nerve until I was shivering all over, the old man nevertheless looked calm and played his classical pieces with perfect emotion. Without knowing why I stood looking on for a long time as if hypnotised, until I saw some people pass by this dark corner with the clattering sound of loose change being thrown into the black wooden case... He played song after song, and made me think,

‘Maybe this is why people make the thing we call music... To connect the minds of he who is playing and he who is listening.’

old town latvia

25.05.09





Riga 2 ^{26.05.09}

Four days in Riga passed peacefully and I felt fully rested from the long journey. From here I didn't have any more complicated plans and my final destination in Paris wasn't far away.

As last night I got an email from my good friend Vincent (the same friend who invited me to come and play music with him) asking me to meet him in Berlin tomorrow morning, this afternoon I once again found myself on a bus.

The Euroline bus (Euroline is a company that operates buses and has branches all over Europe) took us over the small two lane back roads of the provinces and countryside of Latvia. The country was flat and full of fields of shining yellow flowers. Rows of dark green pine trees served as boundary markers showing whose land was whose. Small villages of European styled brick bungalows plastered with uncoloured cement were hidden in many-specied groves of trees growing all around the houses. They looked like lush green oases in a golden desert, and because

of the flatness of the landscape the sky stretched
as far as the eye could see...

Berlin, Germany ^{27.05.09}

From afternoon one day to late the next the bus took twenty two hours to travel from Riga, through Lithuania and Warsaw, to Berlin. I met Vincent in the bus station there.

Vincent, my French flutist friend, has light brown hair and a handsome face and build. At a glance he looks a bit like Jude Law. I'd known him for many years, from busking with friends on the walking street market in Chiang Mai. He came over and asked if he could join in with his flute, and because he liked improvised music as I did, we became friends and played together many times in the years that he travelled to Chiang Mai. Being able to meet up again made us both elated and happy... When you hear the first thing he said to me when we met you'll get a good idea of his character.

“Por... I'm so glad you didn't die!!”

...

Berlin is a city full of creative energy, both in the amazing ways of living and the free spiritedness

hanging in the air, making you sometimes feel sort of like you're in a future world, and sometimes in the world of hundreds of years ago...

We stayed at a guest house in the Mitte area, in the east of the city, which was full of restaurants, cafés, bars, galleries and all sorts of strange buildings that looked abandoned but were full of people working in all branches of the arts, who also lived there.

This afternoon we went out exploring the city on foot until we reached an old church in a peaceful setting. The cross shaped building was surrounded by large pine trees. Sunlight and opaque shadows thrown by the branches of the grove of trees created black and white patterns on the loose stone path which lead us to the wooden door of the domed church hall. The walls had a dirty white plaster that was cracked and peeling off in places revealing the blue grey stones underneath.

Light from outside shone through the stained glass windows, past a cross and onto a dark wooden altar, creating an oddly beautiful image.

“It would be great if we could play in this church sometime,” Vincent said.

“So why don’t we play today?”

After we’d asked permission of the church’s old caretaker, we eventually did get to play, and it was one of the most amazing experiences of the whole trip. The sound echoed around as if in an old tunnel, and the emotion it created made me feel one with the timeless surroundings.

Berlin 2 29.05.09

This afternoon Vincent took me to meet a French artist friend who'd moved to Berlin many years before. We walked far through the east of the city until we came to a derelict area on Bethaniendamm road. I saw the ruined husk of a car in front of the entrance, which looked like a dark forest, shadows cast all around. Further inside I saw a man working on a sculpture on an area of earth surrounded by houses made from minibuses, wooden framed vehicles, steel and other materials, constructed together into living spaces.

We met Halph Makso in one of the steel houses in the area. Halph said that this area was known as Wagenburg, which is the name of the way of life of an alternative culture. Wagenburg comes from the caravans and trailers that move all over Europe. But from the half gypsy lifestyle and fluctuating and ever shifting structure of the community, the members of the community have to rely greatly on mutual respect for each

other in order to live together successfully. And in this Wagenburg there were sometimes art and music events or cheap pizza parties, during which everyone in the community joined in preparing the food and helping the local poor.

Halph went on to say that this area was protected by the surrounding trees, because the law provided protection for big trees, and that no one could cut the trees in this area. But because it was a semi-independent community that didn't pay taxes or have government registration, there was no electric or water infrastructure, and even though they received support from the local community, it was still very difficult to survive in the harsh conditions of the winter months. It was interesting to know that there were communities like this all over Europe, including in the centre of Geneva, with its high social stability.

Before saying farewell, Halph said that most people travel looking to trade money for good times without regard for the life of the community (but not everyone), and when there are tourists, although the economy booms, for a section of

society life gets more difficult, because the cost of living goes up accordingly.

After leaving Halph and contemplating the lifestyles of people who have made a choice of their own we walked through the east of the city until we came to the river Spree. On far side we could see some for the surviving remains of the Berlin Wall. Vincent told me the story of the dividing of the worlds of East and West Berlin after the Second World War. Of separating families and loved ones on opposite sides of the wall. Of the brutality dealt to those who tried to flee across the wall, which meant being killed on sight, right there at the wall... I stared vacantly at the empty land behind the broken remnants. I imagined people waving to others on the opposite side with love, yearning and with tears streaming down their suffering faces.

Berlin 3 30.05.09

After arguing almost the whole night about what to do next, this morning we decided to hitchhike to Brussels!! After spending enough time studying an online map in the morning we took a train out to the suburbs to hitch a ride from a petrol station next to the highway (because it was against the law to walk on the highway). We held up a sign made from large sheets of paper with Brussels written on it and tried to wave down cars passing the junction between the petrol station and highway... Many hours passed until it was around four pm and there had been no sign of any car stopping to pick us up. Only people pointing in the opposite direction. The worsening cold and ever darkening sky forced us to decide to go into the petrol station and ask people car by car. Though it was somewhat awkward it paid off!

We hitched many rides through the city of Magdeburg until we reached a petrol station in Hanover at just after 11pm and slept in a corner

of the station, before trying to hitch further the next morning. And though we occasionally had to stray from the route, that was good too, because we got to see a lot of countryside full of farm fields surrounding peaceful villages hiding under the shade of the branches of magnificent trees, small flower gardens bursting with colour lurking behind walls green from their mossy covering, and a cool breeze carried the scent of ripening wheat from the fields.

All day long we hitchhiked from Hannover to Dortmund, through Cologne, before crossing the Belgian border and arriving in Brussels in the early evening.





Brussels, Belgium ^{01.06.09}

At just after nine pm the last bus brought us into the centre of Brussels. The sky was still faintly bright. The city had a relaxed peaceful atmosphere. We walked out in search of a jazz club in the city centre where Mama Daeng was waiting for us...

I'd known Mama Daeng since meeting her whilst playing in a jazz club in Chiang Mai two years ago. The first time we met I saw a small woman full of smiles and laughter who looked about the same age as my mother. That night she walked into the club with an alto saxophone and asked me if it would be possible for her to play with the band that night. I told her she was welcome to. Part of me was curious about how she would play... After hearing the sound coming from her open-minded spirit, I gained a totally new perspective on the saxophone. Because of that night, the saxophone, which I'd thought about in one way, suddenly seemed like it might really be something much greater.

Mama Daeng was from Chiang Mai, but had moved to Belgium many years ago. She came to Chiang Mai once a year to visit family, and so in the two years past we'd had the chance to play and practice together many times. I learned so much from seeing things with her heart, and from shared respect and feeling we started to call each other Mother and Son.

The three days and four nights we spent in Brussels coincided with the annual Brussels Jazz Marathon. There were more than five hundred free concerts on four big outdoor stages in the central square of the city, and on another fifty small stages scattered throughout the bars and clubs, and even on the public transport and in other public spaces. And so every day we drank in the music of hundreds of jazz musicians who'd travelled from all over the world. Sometimes we busked and joined in with other musicians in various public spaces of the city, which for musicians like us was like being in heaven. The music flowed full of feeling, reverberating throughout Grand Place Square, the elegant centre of Brussels.

From here Paris wasn't far but I still had a promise to keep to go and see one of my aunts who had moved to Frankfurt more than 10 years before, and so in the late morning after saying goodbye to Mama Daeng and Vincent, I boarded a bus and headed back to Germany.

Frankfurt, Germany ^{03.06.09}

The bus crossed the border into Germany in the late afternoon and made a rest stop near the university of Cologne. In the pale sky above the huge tower of the basilica white clouds floated by as the sun set gloriously over the river Rhine.

The bus dropped me off at a train station in the centre of Frankfurt in the early evening. In the huge station hall scores of trains lined up and crowds of people raced this way and that. My eyes stopped on a blind man walking with a cane along the long stretching platform...

I caught a train for Grob - Gerau about 40 minutes distant on the outskirts of the city, and as I sat with eyes closed listening to the familiar sound of the train wheels against the tracks, the image of the blind man appeared before me once more and I recalled the time when I had just started to learn the saxophone, when on Sundays my friends and I went to busk on the walking street market and listened to the band of blind musicians who regularly came to play. I

felt grateful to them every time for the inspiration they gave me to keep practicing.

...

For four days in Frankfurt my aunt took great care of me and showered me with love. The day before, she took me around the downtown area of the city where a cultural festival was taking place by the river Main. All kinds of music and performances related to the local culture proceeded by the river, which sluggishly followed its course... As I walked along the river, I started to think about the meaning of time and its sway over the possibilities of creation, forcing us to search, experiment and get our hands dirty in order to find answers and truth. Realising this I remembered something that my teacher, Pramuan Pengchan, had said to me before I set off travelling. “Be thankful for time and opportunity.”



frankfurt, Germany

Frankfurt 2 ^{06.06.09}

I sat and studied a map of the city checking the roads (for hitchhiking) out of Frankfurt in the direction of France, and learned that the sign that Vincent and I had written in English for the city of Brussels when we were trying to hitch a ride from Berlin, actually pointed to a town in Germany called Brussels that was 300 kilometres past Frankfurt, and that the name of the Belgian city in German was spelt *Bruxelle* and pronounced “Brussels”. And I understood then why, when we’d been trying to wave down cars, so many had refused and pointed in the opposite direction. They were probably just trying to tell us that the city we wanted to go to was “the other way!”

By late this morning my aunt had driven me to Saarbrücken, a city on the border with France. I then took a bus as far as a petrol station outside of the city, near the border, and tried to finish my journey by hitchhiking from there.

... Many hours passed. The feeling of waiting alone in the cold took its toll and brought

dark and depressing thoughts to my mind. I'd noticed already that the place was more like an abandoned petrol station, old and in bad repair, as if no one had been there in a long time. If a car passed by it didn't seem likely that they'd stop to pick up a strange man standing alone in such a desolate place.

I remembered once when I'd been trying to hitch a ride in northern Laos in the burning sun, and now I was standing on a highway in southern Germany in the cold... That's how it goes, 'who knows the future,' and probably no one could say when I'd get out of this place. It might be ten minutes or five hours, or tomorrow. It's interesting to notice that it's uncertainty that gives rise to fear.

And it was this fear that made me want to get back on the bus and put an end to the situation.

'Why stand around wasting your time... In this bitter cold.'

'Because this is your last test on this journey,' I started to say to myself.

‘You have to wait... If you don’t want to regret it later when you ask yourself, “did you give it your all?”’

‘Even if it seems pointless to stand around waiting like this, you have to believe that some will see the destiny in your waiting now’

I got my saxophone out and started to play. The cold made my fingers hurt so that I couldn’t move them as my mind directed and all sorts of strange sounds came out, but I wasn’t concerned and continued to play like that... In those moments when you’re all alone there’s probably nothing more important than the feeling of still having an identity in the world, and it was playing saxophone, badly, that gave me this feeling then.

France ^{07.06.09}

“Paris isn’t far now, if you take a train from here it’ll only take about 45 minutes”... This was the last sentence of the young French woman who dropped me at the train station in Reims...

Many hours before a man had given me a ride out of an abandoned petrol station and dropped me at a petrol station that wasn’t abandoned in the next town. After that many cars had given me rides, from Saarbrücken in Germany, across the border into France at Metz, through Chalons en Champagne, until the last car brought me to Reims.

It was now after 10pm. There were only a few people in the station and I put my things down and sat on the floor to wait for the last train... Having travelled this far I thought back over the whole journey, over the landscapes of each country and the many different ways of life of the people, of the never-ending change of day with night. Never tiring of seeing the rising and setting of the sun, which no matter how many times I

watched it always hypnotised and stilled my mind with its astonishing beauty... Nobody wants to be without identity, and it seems as though incredible natural beauty and the friendship of people rise far above physical suffering.

When the last train that I'd been waiting for arrived I got up, carried my things on board, and noticed that my saxophone case seemed much older. I inspected its worn-out condition as I reached into a pocket, found my remaining fifty Euros and pulled out a one Euro coin to give to a black man who was playing an African rhythm on a paint can by a pillar...

'The final destination is not as far as you thought.' Finally the sound of the train running over the tracks that I'd heard over and over as though without end came to a halt at the huge Chatelet - Les Halles station in the centre of Paris...



emmanuël to Brussel
11.06.09 2021.

2 Years Later, October 2011

On a Sunday night in the middle of October I found myself sitting in a cafe on De Buquaire road in the centre of Brussels. On the far side of the road I could see the turret of the town hall in the old Grand Place square where Karl Marx had written his Communist Manifesto.

Inside the detached building a blond haired girl in a long red skirt was singing and playing a Tango on the double bass, together with her band, in front of a wall with an acrylic painting of the face of Kafka, the famous Austrian writer. The weather was cold that night but the dancing of the Tango by the many young couples inside the room seemed to make the atmosphere warmer.

I was able to drop in on Europe again two years later (this time by plane, not hitchhiking) ... Many almost insurmountable problems had passed, and had ultimately passed without me having any idea of how, as little as I knew how the new problems that were constantly arising would end...

Only a few weeks ago the house of my good friend, guitarist Hiro Kimura, flooded so badly that he almost had to go back to Japan, and the derelict Net got so sick that he had to stay a month in hospital, and so on... ‘Anyhow, you probably don’t want to hear it.’

At this Kafka cafe I finished writing the story of my journey, after two years of stop and start writing. And the short version of it is that with around 20,000 baht and my beloved saxophone I travelled from Chiang Mai to Paris over 12,300 kilometres, through 8 countries and 17 cities, which took altogether 41 days. Afterwards I spent another month and a half playing music in Europe, before flying back to Bangkok from Barcelona, which took 13 hours (with the help of family and friends for the cost of the ticket). And from wanting to share the experience of the journey I wrote this book, partly to remember and give thanks for the friendship of the many people who helped me throughout the trip, and also to reinforce the bonds of love friendship between us. It doesn’t matter where you come from, what

nationality, whether you can speak a language or not, whether you have money or not. None of it is as important as what's in the hearts of those who have faith in friendship throughout their lives. And it's probably this that's like a signal guiding us through the stages of our long lives.

About The Author

Pharadon Phonamnui was born on the 15th of February 1981 in Chiang Mai.

He graduated with a Bachelor of Science from the faculty of Industrial Arts, Chiang Mai University

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Pharadon's first work was as a freelance architect, and he started learning saxophone on his own before joining the university big band. Later he won a scholarship to study jazz in New York. Following this he set off travelling to many countries to broaden his experience of music and art.

In 2007 Pharadon and his friend Russell opened a jazz club in Chiang Mai called the North Gate, which has become a place where musicians from around the world play together and share their musical experience.

In 2009 Pharadon decided to travel from Chiang Mai to Paris via the Trans-Siberian railway in search of inspiration.

