



## **New Boy, An Excerpt: On the Sensorial Tropics and Queer Consciousness**

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### **Abstract**

This excerpt of a chapter seeks to employ the tropic as a presence shaping the queer protagonist's consciousness. The novel, from which the chapter is taken, riffs on two genres: the campus novel and boys' love. Conventions and motifs from these genres (discussion of ideas, rediscovery of the self, foes turning into lovers, among others) are adapted and merged. As he tries to settle into his temporary residence, a Filipino exchange student in Bangkok discovers that he is infatuated with a Thai classmate. Meanwhile, the heat, working as a sensorial mirage, tricks him into feeling uncannily at home—a feeling which the unmistakably local disrupts, casting him as the foreigner that he truly is. His growing affection seems to present a way to live in the moment. Or is he daydreaming through homesickness? The chapter hopes to recast the *homo tropicus*,<sup>1</sup> whose yearning is framed by time that is distinctively tropical, within a fiction that has fortuitously allowed Filipino queer spectators and Thais, who perform the “queer” in boys' love, to regard one another.

**Keywords:** queer fiction, boys' love, campus novel, Thai queer, Filipino queer, homo tropicus, sensorial tropics, queer tropical consciousness

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobo, Jaya. “Homo Tropicus: A Yearning.” *Kritika Kultura* 16, 065-083, 2011, pp. 66-83.

During those first few days, each time I stepped out of the condo, the sticky air tricked me into thinking that I wasn't somewhere else. What I saw around me kept the illusion going, until something commonplace—the garlanded roof of a spirit house, high school boys in blue shorts, an unreadable sign—placed me where exactly I was. Past the first block, I spotted the bright pink taxi that always parked in an adjacent alley. The gray-haired driver was leaning on the hood of the taxi, reading something on the screen of his phone. When he saw me, I bowed slightly to greet him. He had already figured out that while I wasn't local, I wasn't a tourist either, and so he'd stopped asking if I wanted a ride. The grin on his face said, *I know you live here now*.

Walking to the highway, I had to sidestep a loose wire or two, as I normally would in a random street in my hometown. If not for the new smells and the faint sounds of a language that I didn't speak, I could have sworn I was walking down a subdivision in Tagum. Even the plants were identical: a tamarind tree growing out of a garden in front of someone's bungalow, vines nearly engulfing a firewall, white petals from a kalachuchi dotting the wet pavement.

Up ahead, a food stall that I still mentally labeled a "carinderia" sold rice bowls to a few early customers sitting on plastic stools. The aproned woman, who ran the stall with its large rainbow umbrella and two foldaway tables, always put up shop in the same spot. She'd nod whenever I walked by. Sometimes, she'd smile.

Once I was out of the neighborhood, the city revealed its vast coruscating self. The heat making me squint as it pounded against my head almost didn't want me to see. It had only been a few weeks since the semester began. I crossed the hair-raising intersection and walked to the nearest MRT Station in Khlong Toei. Sometimes I would ride a "motorcy," but I usually woke up early and walked. The scent of some unfamiliar ingredient—cinnamon? cumin? or both?—seemed to follow me to the train station.

On the train, a sparsely forested park zipped by the window, a swath of green popping between high rises, as I began to get lost in my OPM playlist again, my thoughts drifting along with the blur of leaves and steel. My appreciation for Pinoy music had recently magnified tenfold. In another country, music from home felt like a layer of clothing, a comfort, the lyrics more meaningful and urgent. I'd think of home, even though almost every night Mama and I would video call each other. Sometimes she'd update me about the latest episode of a drama she was following. Most of the time, she'd ask me about my day, what other dishes I'd tried.

My heart leaped. Two stops before mine, I saw someone I knew getting onto the train. Tall frame, clean and narrow face, thick mass of hair styled with matte paste, the haughty gait of the boy who always came late to photography class and yet acted as if we were the ones taking up his precious time.

As he sat in one of the vacant seats, I felt relieved. He was just another lanky boy in black pants and white long-sleeved shirt. It wasn't Mitr Kritayakon.

When I got off at the station in Silom, I walked the short distance to uni. The buildings in the neighborhood that had those latticework sliding or roll up doors hadn't even opened shop. The smaller structures, judging from the signages in large stylized Thai script in gold, looked like they'd been around for years.

By the time I reached campus, I got a message from Mint. *Party later in Lek's condo. Come join!*

I wanted to send a reply. That guy who pretends I don't exist, will he be there too? But I left the message on read.

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In class Prof. Theo gave a lecture on how photography affects the way we view events, from a small gathering in the backyard to great social upheavals, like mass demonstrations and war. He flashed slides of assorted photographs: Neil Armstrong stepping on the moon, Albert Einstein sticking his tongue out, a couple of young tourists riding a tuk-tuk, and Prof. Theo's own family during a vacation. He identified each family member in the photos, from his siblings to his uncle who had a funny lisp. Then he showed us a photo of himself with a girl, both of them in full ski gear, Prof. Theo had lifted his goggles to his head, while the girl was holding hers in her left hand, both of them had one arm on the other's shoulder, behind them the snowy alps filled the frame with feathery whiteness. They were grinning at the camera, as if someone had cracked a joke before snapping the photo. I noticed a deep dimple on the girl's right cheek. A couple of students at the back made teasing noises, taunting the professor about the girl, but he didn't play along, his face inscrutable. He showed another photo.

The black-and-white photo silenced us. Sitting still next to an empty petrol container, a monk had set himself on fire. In the background, behind a parked car, passersby and other men in robes watched him burn.

Prof. Theo showed a photo of a man standing in front of tanks. Then a photo of five children, crying and running away from the soldiers behind them. In the middle of the photograph was a naked girl, her scream frozen.

“The frame,” Prof Theo said, “holds the power to shape our opinion. A snapshot may nudge us to say, ‘Yes, I cherish this person.’ But a photo of a wounded girl can make us run to the streets and join the movement to stop a war.”

Top, a usually coolheaded kid who’d accelerated a level, raised his hand. He looked fidgety, almost upset.

“I expect no less than questions after those last slides,” Prof. Theo said, acknowledging Top.

“The picture of the monk,” said Top, “what happened there?”

“That was taken in 1963, in Saigon,” said Prof. Theo. “His name is Thích Quảng Đức. At that time in Vietnam, the government was persecuting Buddhists, so the monks staged a protest. As the photograph shows us now, their method was extreme. That this monk resorted to self-immolation suggests how bad the situation was.”

“Why didn’t the photographer stop it?” Top asked.

Prof. Theo’s face brightened, as if he’d unlocked something.

“Good question.” He proceeded with a question of his own: “Why do you think he didn’t?”

“He wanted to take the picture?” Top said. “It’s his job. Maybe it’s too late for him to do something. But if the others had done something, maybe the monk didn’t have to die.”

“He took a photo,” said Prof. Theo. “Do you think this has value considering what was happening at that moment?”

“Not more than life itself,” said a voice from the back rows.

It belonged to Mitr Kritayakon, sitting two rows away from where I was, his tone polite but confident, as though he knew about the subject as much as the professor did. He was

slumped in his chair, legs spread wide apart. He wasn't even looking up at the front but doodling on a piece of paper on his chair arm.

"But what he did was also important," said Areeya, a short girl who had fuchsia colored streaks in her hair. "They were fighting against injustice."

Prof. Theo went on talking about how the practice of photography was closely tied to questions of morality. He told us that it was important to consider the value of looking at pictures beyond the usual appreciation.

"Does a photograph take us closer to what is true?" the professor asked. "Or does it set us up to think a certain way?"

I hadn't thought of photos in that way before. I usually took pictures because there was something pretty to look at, a sight or view you'd want to keep and take home with you. Pictures, I thought, helped us remember that we had once seen things, places, people, who had become part of our lives. I hadn't thought about how morality played a part in taking photos.

The photo of the burning monk seemed to have struck a chord. Then I remembered—outside, monks walking along the streets, inseparable from everyday life in this country. Prof. Theo knew how to stir up a discussion.

"He should have done something," said a girl named Prim who sat in the middle rows. "He should have been a human first, photographer second." "The response should have been to prevent the monk from taking his own life," Prim was saying, "no matter the point he was trying to make."

And yet I was thinking that the photo was also necessary. Maybe for the monks, at that particular time in their lives, they were already being burned down, one by one, and so this monk sent a message. He wanted to be looked at, to be seen. A long hard look, but not only at what took place in that moment caught by the camera, but at what had been done to him and his kind.

"What could the photographer do?" I asked.

Prof. Theo glanced at me. "Yes?"

“Because he took that photo,” I said, “we’re still talking about this event.” As my own words rang in my ears, my conviction in my argument began to dissolve. I wobbled in the loop of my stream of thought.

“You’re saying that what photography primarily does is record events?” suggested the professor.

The sides of my face moistened. The light on the air-condition unit showed it was still on.

“Not just that,” said Mint sitting beside me. “I think what Pao was saying is... the photographer wanted us to look at this. He wanted people to see. Forever. This horrible thing, this injustice, as it happened. As long as there are copies of this photo, we will know about the monk, and how their government abused them.”

Prof. Theo clicked the photo back on the screen. After we talked about it, the image had acquired a starkness, as though the flames engulfing the monk were moving.

“At the least,” said Prof. Theo, “a photo as powerful as this compels us to look, and most importantly *to see*. There’s a difference. To look away is to ignore the atrocities happening around us.”

Prof. Theo showed us more photographs and later, he gave us homework. He’d email us a photo that we’d write a reflection on. “Just one page,” he said. “Single-spaced.” I liked how he added that as if it would make the homework easier. Prof. Theo read papers meticulously, every line marked, every word considered. But before he dismissed class, he flashed another picture on the screen.

“Where’s that ajarn?” Lemon asked as we gazed up at a photo of our professor lying on his belly on the beach with a blond-haired guy, both of them wearing sunglasses and laughing at the camera, their toned shoulders powdery with sand, the sky behind a tangerine explosion.

“Is that Maya Bay?” asked Areeya, her neck stretching toward the projection on the screen.

“No, that’s Patong Beach,” said Prim.

“That’s too pretty to be Patong,” Top said, snorting. “Ko Kradan.”

“How could you even tell?” said Mint, “That could be anywhere.”

“Ajarn, who is that?” Lemon, as always, asking the right question.

But Prof. Theo smirked and turned to me, gesturing in my direction. For a second, I thought he was going to say I was the guy in the photo with him.

“Definitely not here,” said Prof. Theo. “I just included this to show Pao.”

I sat mutely, baffled, sensing my classmates’ eyes on my back.

“I was preparing my lecture when I saw this photo again,” Prof. Theo said to me, although I couldn’t shake a strange feeling that he wasn’t really talking to me, but addressing someone else.

“This picture was taken in the Philippines. PA-la-wan.”

My classmates collectively made the “ahhh” sound.

“Thought I’d share since we have Pao around. That’s all. Class dismissed.”

The professor shut off the projector, closed his laptop, and shifted to that mechanical way the ajarns gathered their things after class.

We shuffled out of the room, some more quickly than others. Maybe, like me, they also just wanted some air. Or maybe it was just me who felt awkward, singled out like that. I’d never even been to Palawan, but my mixed-raced, wistful, but suspiciously sentimental professor had. For a second, I felt like my own country was foreign to me, but at the same time, yes, of course, professor, I wanted to say to him, I know that place exists. I can absolutely vouch for you to the rest of the class. It was strange how he addressed me, as if he wanted me to affirm that he had been to *that* island, as if I’d seen him there too. So strange it was that I forgot to teach Prof. Theo how to pronounce “Palawan.”

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At lunch, Mint and Lemon took me to a place a few blocks from the campus: an old building tucked away from the train tracks and the skywalks that snaked around the

shopping district. Inside the eatery, a lone electric fan, its blade and front guard furry with soot, creaked on a wall close to the cashier. The moist, heavy air was playing with my mind again. I could easily be at the wet market in our town, waiting for my rice and chicken inasal. Then Mint and Lemon chattering to each other in Thai pulled me back to an eating house somewhere along Santiphap. We could have gone to a place with air conditioning. But when I had some of the free soup they served before the main course—a smoky, delicious broth with a hint of pickled lime—I knew why the girls had taken me here.

After I put down the empty bowl, Mint stared at me from across the table, her eyes laughing.

“What?”

“You also like to have soup even in this heat.”

“It’s really good,” I said. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“They could renovate the place,” said Mint. “Starting with these walls. But their food never disappoints.”

Mint could be blunt, had an unconventional style, and didn’t shy away from debate. She had known Wit, Lek, and Lemon since first year, and they treated me as if I’d also been with them since then. Just the other day, we had samgyeopsal at the Paragon Food Hall and they were swapping stories about high-school—goofy schoolmates, embarrassing moments, teachers they despised. They spoke mostly in English so I could catch up, although I’d told them that I didn’t mind if they didn’t. I knew how exhausting it was to speak a language that we seldom used. Whenever I got back to the condo, I’d feel my jaw going numb from speaking English all day.

“We had a classmate last year,” said Lemon, “also an exchange student like you. She said it was weird that we have hot soup at noon in the warmest month.”

“Where is she now?” I asked.

“In Norway,” Mint said.

“That makes sense.”

“Does it get this hot in the Philippines too?” asked Lemon.

“Same,” I said. “Sometimes I forget I’m not there.”

“That’s a good thing, right?” said Mint. “It means you’re settling in.”

Perhaps I was, but I couldn’t quite put into words the oddness of feeling like I was in two places at the same time.

“You should visit the north,” Lemon said. “It gets cold there.”

“We have colder places too,” I said. “There’s a city that we call the summer capital, but people go there to escape the heat.”

I’d never been to Baguio, but Mama had, one summer many years ago. She was in her teens and working as a nanny for a Dutch family living in Manila. They’d taken her there for a weekend. Mama had described to me the hilly town, its winding roads that made driving around so tricky, the thick fog descending over the city before the sun set, the fields where she and her ward—a little blue-eyed girl she’d always described to me as a lifelike doll—picked strawberries that her employers later made into a pie when they returned to Manila. This memory always sounded, to me, like it had been made up. How could such a place exist in the same country where I was? How did she end up working for Dutch people? But her story had made me want to go to Baguio too someday. I wanted to see with my own eyes how much of it my mother embellished, how much she misremembered, which was foolish considering how much time had gone by. It turned out I ended up going abroad first, to another improbably humid place.

Later, as we walked back to university, shielding our ourselves from the sun with umbrellas, a huge marquee made me stop. When I peered in, I saw a staircase that seemed to soar into a spacious ballroom on the second floor, three large chandeliers hovering above the lobby’s darkened interior, the floor carpeted in red.

“It’s like a mansion out of nowhere,” I said.

“It’s a movie house,” said Lemon. “There are also shops inside. Discounts too.”

“My favorite DVD stall is around the corner here,” said Mint. “There!” She pointed at a glass-enclosed booth covered with movie posters and DVDs.

“Mint loves old movies,” Lemon said. “She made me watch *Breathless*, but I fell asleep.”

“Can you believe that?” said Mint, turning to me. “She slept on Jean Seberg.”

Mint mouthing off the name of one of the actors and assuming I knew what she was talking about was one of the things I liked about her. She always assumed that the person she was talking to was equally as smart as her, if not smarter, which, as a result, made her more impatient and less generous whenever she found out that it wasn't the case.

“The ajarn talks a lot sometimes.”

“Ajarn Theo?” Mint asked.

“It's photography class,” said Lemon. “When are we going to take some pictures?”

“The class is not only about that though,” said Mint. “Anybody can find a photographer who can teach them how to adjust the settings of their camera.”

“Maybe for you,” Lemon said. “I don't know anyone who could teach me that.”

“Did the pictures he showed make you uncomfortable,” I asked.

“No.” Lemon paused. “Not really. I don't think so.”

Mint rolled her eyes, her upper lip curling slightly. Maybe she thought I was trying to catch Lemon stumbling on the point she was missing. But really, I was curious about what Lemon thought of the photos. I could've phrased my question better.

“What did you think about that last photo though?” said Lemon.

She and Mint looked at each other funny, and then at me. Then, to my surprise, they both giggled.

“Was that his boyfriend?” Lemon said.

“Ex-boyfriend,” said Mint. “Did you hear how sad he was talking about it?”

Lemon shook her head and they giggled again.

“What do you think, Pao?”

“Huh?”

“Are you still with us, or is your brain fried already?”

I didn't say anything. I was afraid the conversation would go further and one of them would say something that I wouldn't like, which made me feel awful because I was also secretly judging them. Mint and Lemon had no idea that I liked boys, and even though they had become my Bangkok friends, I struggled with letting them know. One of things I disliked about being different was the hassle of having to tell new people. The threat of unkindness was always there.

“You're going later, right?” asked Mint as we strolled into the next alley.

It took me a second to remember where I was supposed to go later. Right, Lek's condo. I could sense the hesitation bubble in the back of my throat. Would I be the only non-local student there? Damn it, I said to myself. You need to get out and meet more people.

“Who's going to be there?” I asked reluctantly. More people they already knew from way back when. And that Mitr Kritayakon, of course.

“A few people from class,” said Lemon. “Wit insisted that you come. He's a little worried.”

Mint tapped Lemon's right arm.

I stopped walking and turned to Lemon. “Worried about what?”

“She's making it up,” said Mint.

“He is!” insisted Lemon. “He thinks you might be getting lonely.”

I felt an itch in my throat, so I tried to cough it out. The feeling stayed.

“What do you mean 'lonely'? I have you guys,” I said.

In truth, I felt mortified and relieved at the same time. I was embarrassed to find out that they had thought of me in a vulnerable state, but also appeased that locals had finally recognized what I had been dreading: I was starting to feel so terribly alone.

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In my design in arts and culture class, a class where I hadn't made friends with anyone yet, Ajarn Pimjai showed us slides of the Buddha from the Dvaravati and Sukhothai periods. Legs folded, sitting on a lotus, one palm open, palms pressed together, lounging, standing, walking. Buddha with thick lips, with unibrow, with curly hair, in brick, bronze, or in stone.

"I've seen Buddha before," I said out loud without meaning to, but their eyes were on me so I went on—"But he was made of glass, fat and laughing, surrounded by little bald children." I'd been to too many houses that had that laughing Buddha sitting on their shelves or coffee tables among family pictures and figurines.

"Technically that's not Buddha," said Ajarn Pimjai. "He's a monk called Budai. Some believe him to be the god of happiness."

He always looked so happy, no wonder. Nobody ever explained to me what those statues meant. They were just there, laughing silently inside a few Filipino houses, even the Catholic ones.

Unlike in photography class, the students only spoke when they were called, and barely. At some point, the ajarn, maybe a little fed up with my classmates' listless silence, turned to me and said that it might be the first time I'd seen so many Buddhas. She talked as if I was the only student in the classroom.

Before class ended, Ajarn Pimjai gave us an early reminder about her midterm requirement: a five-page paper and oral presentation on a Thai-authored book.

"Those who can't read Thai may use translations," Ajarn Pimjai said before I could even raise my hand to ask. "Look for that book now so you can start early with your homework." Afterward, she winked at me.

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In the library, books in English and in other foreign languages were kept in the basement floors, and so I took the elevator down to “Floor B-A.” The library had six floors; the lower I went, the lower the temperature got. Out of the lift I stepped onto a carpeted hallway that wound supposedly to where they kept the foreign books, the walls of the hallway narrow and moss green, the ceiling low. For a few minutes, I thought I kept seeing the door to the same bathroom or fire exit. Finally, I found the right room, and when I went inside, I instantly caught the smell of old paper and floor polish. The shelves were made of metal, the kind that had wheels attached to them so that they could be rolled apart or stacked together. The room looked more like a bunker than a space in a library. Standing in that basement, cool air blasting from the vents, I could swear outside it wasn’t sweltering.

I wanted something that I’d enjoy reading, so I took out my phone, logged in on the library WiFi, and searched the online database for titles authored by a Thai writer that I could actually read. I rolled a handle counterclockwise to pry open each stack. But not one of the books on that floor were written by Thai authors. Instead, I found a book by a writer whose work I’d read before—Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart*—and a book called *Empire of Signs*, which was written by the writer Prof. Theo was talking about in class. Then it struck me. Of course, bright boy. I couldn’t find anything because I was in the foreign literature section.

I took the elevator to the more spacious Arts and Humanities section in the fourth floor. The huge glass windows showed a cloudless sky. Students occupying the tables were either studying, reading, or—for those who strategically chose certain areas—taking naps. I went looking for Thai books written in English. The data base said I was on the right floor now, and staring at the right shelf, but all I could see were books whose characters I couldn’t decode. I went to the next shelf, and almost squealed. “Literature,” said the cardboard sign above the topmost shelf. I browsed the Thai literary little but couldn’t find a single one in English or in translation.

I was in the wrong place. Maybe I had to pick up something at the Kinokuniya in Siam Paragon. But remembering the small allowance I received snuffed that option. And so I looked around, combing the shelves from above and below, right to left, all the way across to the wall. I saw paperbacks in graphic typography, old chapbooks, elegant clothbound volumes that I could only admire purely as objects, instead of documents. I was pulling out a slender grey-covered book with a handsome silver script engraved on its spine when, from the other side of the shelf, I spied the sharp curve of someone’s jaw.

He was browsing a book, his left cheek turned to the shelf from which I was glancing. Then he returned the book he was perusing, facing the gap where I could see half his face. His nose was narrow, his mouth partly open. He'd probably found what he'd been searching for. The face lowered itself and I was frozen, time itself seemingly halting, until I was staring into the eyes of someone I knew.

For a second Mitr Kritayakon's eyes were set elsewhere, then perhaps sensing me watching, his eyes shifted and fixed on mine. His stare was a firm prod and I backed up against the shelves behind me, almost toppling some of the books.

"Sawasdee," I mumbled, making sure I stopped lightly at the second "so suea," as Mint had taught me to. Sa-wâ-dee.

"What are you looking at?" said Mitr Kritayakon. I wasn't sure if I heard him say it instead in a genuinely curious way, so that I thought he'd actually said, "What are you looking for?"

"Nothing," I said, holding my breath. "Just looking for something to read. I wasn't looking at you."

"Right."

"I wasn't!" I moved closer to the gap where I could see his face. Before I got there, Mitr Kritayakon returned the book he was holding to its slot, obscuring my view of him. I could feel him smirking.

Out of all of Mint's friends, this was the guy who had put up a wall since day one, not bothering to talk to the new kid in class. It was one thing to be lukewarm to someone who just got here, it was another to deliberately ignore him. If only he wasn't Mint's friend, and I wasn't, out of politeness and respect for their bond, compelled to acknowledge him when he was around with the group that had let me in. I already couldn't speak their language, and he wouldn't even pretend to be nice. And so it was strange that we were talking to each other now.

I walked briskly to the end of the isle to leave the section. I could always come back another time. But Mitr Kritayakon was already standing at the end of the shelves—and walking over to where I was.

He stopped an arm's length away from me, gave me a once over, and then turned to the books on the shelves.

"You're lost," he said, eyes still on the spines of books.

"I said I was looking for something."

He scoffed, but still not facing me. "Are you going to AI-translator your way to the last page?"

"What?"

He shook his head. Then it occurred to me that it was the first time he'd addressed me in English. Or spoken to me at all.

I walked away, but before I could leave him there, Mitr Kritayakon spoke again.

"Third shelf on the left side from the door. There's a shelf full of translated books."

I paused, absorbing the information, but also quietly surprised by the rare, although reluctant, display of charity. I was about to say thanks when he added, "Most of them are nonsense. Good luck, new boy."

*New boy*, I thought as I walked away. Was that how he thought of me? The way he said the phrase made it sound like I was the son of their household staff.

True enough, the books lining the shelf he pointed me to had been translated into English. Most of them, I noticed, were horror stories, martial arts novels, and romance. Some titles, judging from the cover art of two male figures engaged in some demurely intimate gesture—a couple embracing from behind, a guy catching another guy who looked like he was about to fall down, and so on—were yaoi books. Some of them were translations of Japanese novels, but a lot were also written by Thai authors. The nerve of Mitr Kritayakon to call these books "nonsense." What did he even mean by it? Not only was he arrogant, he was also, quite possibly, some kind of snob.

I ended up borrowing what I thought would offend him the most: a novel about a rich boy who meets and falls in love with a soldier stationed in the Northern highlands, even though

the boy's heart *literally* once belonged to a girl who died in a road accident. Ajarn Pimjai hopefully wouldn't mind organ donor fiction.

Before I left the room, I returned to where I'd been earlier, the shelves stacked with books in Thai script. But he was no longer there.

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Still somewhat baffled—and a little thrilled—after the boy who I thought had been unkind to me might not turn out to be so bad at all, I ambled to one of the gates on campus. The grass on the lawn looked freshly clipped and, at the same time, soft. A breeze shook the branches of a massive raintree. Should I stay here a bit longer? But I didn't know if I'd actually run into anyone.

I spotted one of those buses owned by the university just about to leave campus, and so I hopped in, assuming it would take me to my neighborhood for free as it once did—only to find out a few turns later that it was taking student athletes to the stadium. I felt such a rush in my head that I didn't even get peeved. When the bus slowed down by the entrance, I followed a group of passengers getting out.

After a short walk I saw a football field. Since I was already there, I said to myself, might as well see.

I went up to sit on the second tier of the roofed bleachers. In a small patch on the field closer to where I was, a group of students were rehearsing what looked like a calisthenic demonstration. Or was it a dance? On the far end, a few others were playing football around a single goal post.

Then I noticed a figure on the field, a tall surging blot of blue who suddenly stopped playing. Arms akimbo, then he lifted a hand to his forehead, peering from under his palm. Soon, the skinny guy was waving at the stands, shouting something, calling out to me.

"Khun Filipin!"

I squinted and recognized that it was Wit, his eyes narrowing under the sun's dull glare, one hand holding the football they'd been fighting over some time ago. "Khun Filipin!" he was shouting. "Bpai dtii bon gun!"

The players behind him stopped and looked up at the bleachers too, searching for the Khun Filipin Wit was screaming his lungs out at. One of them yelled at Wit, perhaps to toss back the ball so they could get on with the game without him. But Wit wasn't paying attention. Instead, he jogged closer to where I was seated and, gleaming with sweat and beaming, asked me again, "Bpai dtii bon gun!"

"Sorry," I said, laughing awkwardly. "What?"

"Come play football with us!"

"I don't know how to play."

"Football?" Wit's eyebrows nearly flew off of his forehead. "How come?"

"I don't know," I said, "it looks like it requires a lot of running. And kicking. And more running."

"That's why it's beautiful." Wit flashed his teeth. "Ah, okay. I know what you want to play now. Basketball. You want to play basketball?"

Maybe Wit wanted to say something else to me but he was too winded to find the words. Or he was just being polite, and thinking that since I was from the Philippines, I probably knew how to play basketball. He began to feel familiar, not yet as familiar as Lemon and Mint, but his thoughtfulness even with our friends not around sent a flurry of warmth to my chest. I felt a little less homesick.

"I don't play that either."

"You don't play basketball?"

"Not really."

"I thought you love the sport."

"Not me."

Wit scratched his head. One of his teammates—a tall wiry guy who was the only one wearing a purple shirt started to yell at him again. He was followed by another guy, and then another, and another.

Wit waved goodbye and motioned to run back to the middle of the field, but mid-jog he paused, as if he'd finally remembered what he was meant to say.

"Will you come to Lek's party later?" he said, looking behind his shoulder.

"I'll think about it!"

I had been missing home a lot, but there was also this strange hesitation to be around other people, perhaps because it would only remind me again of being away, of not really knowing how to talk like a local, and that the whole time, we'd be speaking to each other using a foreign language.

"Come on!" Wit shouted from across the field. "It will be fun!"

A tingly feeling started to grow in the pit of my stomach, a furry shoot of inkling slowly coiling up, opening a tiny leaf. Was I getting a crush on Wit? Although easygoing and athletic, he wasn't exactly my "type." I, fortunately and unfortunately, recognized in myself a weakness for boys who hardly seemed interested in what I had to say.

But Wit sounded sincere when he made the invitation, as if he really wanted to see me at the party. For a moment I sat with the feeling, relishing its sweetness, before I allowed myself to see it for what it was. Being away has disarmed me in the face of little acts of kindness. Every friendly gesture from a boy reads like a clue to affection. I steadied myself, and thought of Mint's initial invitation. Why didn't I think too hard about *that*?

"Everyone will be there. Even Mitr."

That was how I knew, just as Wit flashed a toothy smile before sprinting back to his game, that it wasn't because of him that I had a weightless feeling in my stomach. Since I'd arrived here, I'd been trying to drink in the newness of the places I saw, hoping that the next day, they wouldn't be so new anymore, so that I'd know I was feeling more at home.

I stared into the light softening around the field, the wind cool behind my ears, the quick-legged boys running after each other and shouting words I didn't know, all of it just so new. At that moment, I felt, *really felt*, that I was there, and I wanted it to last a while.

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