Lom Lœ̄ng [The Dry Wind]

A Short Story by Lao Khamhawm

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The Dry Wind, was written by Khamsing Srinawk, pen name 'Lao Khamhawm', One of the goals in writing what he called his "folk tales" was to give a voice to the life experience of his people, the villagers of Northeast Thailand. His work is widely appreciated in Thailand and has been the subject of a number of critical studies. Additionally, his work has been translated into a number of languages, including Swedish, the language of the country that took him in after fleeing the political crackdown in 1976. Lao Khamhawm writes in a sparing evocative style that invites the reader to question and wonder about the lives of his subjects and the forces that drive their stories. I hope my translation has captured some of the sweet sadness of this beautiful story.

The Dry Wind

"Ooh, may you go with speed and be born again, go be born in a land that is prosperous where the gardens, fields, and jungle are broad and wide, where the earth is fertile, knowing not drought, knowing not famine. Be born again and may your body be healthy, knowing not pain, or pleading as in this life."

An emaciated old man, cheeks shrinking and sinking into his cheekbones until they curved right out to level of his nose, spoke while spreading his hands out to sweep ashes together into a ridge about the length of an arm and the width of a foot. The scrawny stalks of his arms and the lines of its sinews made both the hands that were moving on top of the dirt look like brooms.

"Now, we re-form the body... this is the head" he said, speaking while scooping with his hands the eastern side of a mound of earth making a round shape like a dried coconut. After that, he slid his hands lengthwise following the mound and continuing toward the west[1]. "These, the arms and the legs" he said, while using the edges of his palms to shape ridges of ashes into the form of arms and legs. After he was finished creating the crude figure, the old man swept the dust and ashes off his dark pants before he went back together with the neighbors who were sitting and watching quietly. A few seconds after that, the husky sound of the robe prayer like the sound of a wild duck brayed out. The quietness of the jungle in the dry season brought out the chilling loneliness of the prayers.

In truth, it wasn't just one old monk saying the prayers alone. No, there was a novice monk[2] a little more than ten years old sitting beside him. The reason there was no sound of praying coming from his mouth was that he had just been ordained two days earlier, it was an ordination specifically for the funeral and the novice monk was the only son of the deceased.

When the ceremony of gathering the bones, done in abbreviated fashion, was over the monks and small group of friends got ready to go home. At that time the sound of a voice was heard, "What about the novice monk?" Possibly because the words mentioned were not directed toward anyone in particular the people who heard them did not know if it was a question or just a remark. So, nobody answered until it was asked again, "Who will the novice monk stay with or will he stay here with the old monk?"

When the question was directed straight to the old monk, whose skin on the top of his head withered down to the shape of his skull underneath, answered

indifferently "oh, it looks like they're saying family will take him in, why don't you just ask them yourself?"

The old monk spoke and at the same time glanced the way of the man from another village who was sitting amongst the group. At first he wasn't really noticed by anyone. Even though you would think he probably was family or a friend of the deceased it looked like nobody had given a thought about the relationship between the two.

Therefore, when the monk spoke up they all attentively examined the face of the man from another village and noticed the obtuse almost square shaped face, the rather thick lips, and the tuft of eyebrows. The features all spoke to the strong resemblance between him and the owner of the remains and ashes.

"Oh, so you're family of Gong."

"I'm his older brother", he replied simply.

When he noticed that the villagers' curiosity was still not satisfied he continued, adding

"I'm Gong's real brother[3], same mother and father".

"Oh, is that so?" Then, after a brief silence, "The truth is, brother Gong was a man of few words so we really don't have anyone who knew a lot about him".

"Myself, I never really could make it out for a visit", the person who said he was the brother spoke shamedly, "and my brother, he would only come out to visit once in a while."

"Where is your house uncle?"

"Starfruit Hill."

"Starfruit Hill where?"

"Old Starfruit near the town market."

"Oh, I see. I thought it was the Starfruit Hill a little ways into the jungle."

"So, what does uncle do for a living?"

"I farm rice, plant some vegetables, do some selling. I'm also a carpenter. During the dry season I get some construction work at the market."

"Probably enough to make a living, huh."

"Yes it's enough."

"I feel sorry for Gong, he was a good person, not some who drank and gambled.

He knew about saving money, loved his child and wife, he shouldn't have had such a short life."

"This is a matter of karma", the old monk interjected.

"Yes, he was some who had sinned before and had the karma to have had a wife who was a sickly person. He nursed her for many years. Lost a good part of his orchards and fields. After his wife died I thought he had got past the bad fortune but he was struck by this illness. It just grabbed him and got into him.

Walking out from the cemetery, the old monk and the novice monk led the way. The rays of the sun started to get stronger, but it was still cool and comfortable. The jungle trail was peaceful and quiet with only the sound of a bird interrupting every once in a while.

"At your home in Starfruit Hill Village you probably have some place to take care of a buffalo don't you?"

The old man who was the leader of the ceremony asked again as they traveled out from the edge of the jungle.

"Yes grandfather, we have room." he answered, before they split up and went their separate ways.

The question and answer of the last part of the conversation was an emotional subject for both parties. The conversation abruptly ended. The people leaving the cemetery walked, following each other silently until they split up and went into the village.

The reason for what had just happened was rather widely known. So it wasn't strange at all that everyone became speechless. If you go back and think about it the truth is the story just started only a year ago or so. For people in communities of jungle villages who don't encounter complicated situations like this very often, most of them remember it well. Especially for old man Kamdee, it was like it just happened yesterday. The old man, as a neighbor who lived right next door, remembered one day when the individual for whom he just had performed the internment ceremony at the cemetery, got some advice that he should change his doctor and the medicine that he was taking. Soon after his wife died, with a gaunt and haggard face, he went to consult with his older neighbor. 'I have a something I'd like to discuss with you. Yesterday the teacher at the school recommended that I should change my doctor and my medicine. The reason is with the old doctor and the medicine he's been giving me I still haven't gotten better. Teacher said that some of his relatives who were sick with the same thing as me, once they changed their doctor and medicine they got better.'

"That sounds good brother, I think that you should give it a try." The old man examined his hopeless face inquisitively.

"But I'm afraid I would have to sell more of my land. I'm worried about Bun Gong, if I die I'm scared that he wouldn't have a place to make a living".

The old man remembered that he was speechless for a moment before answering,

'If you have to, you should sell the buffalo. The farm, keep it, you can think about it later on. It's probably a better idea.'

Now it was the turn of the man with the pallid face to be still for a bit before his colorless dry lips moved and faintly said,

'But I feel sorry for my son. He's taken care of it since he was small. He loves it. Last year I rented it out to plow fields. He still snuck off to and took care of it himself.'

'He probably loves his father just as much. How old is Bun Gong now?'

'He's coming up on ten years old already.'

'Probably old enough to talk about it and have him understand.' The old man gave a long sigh. 'The farm, keep it. Land is getting harder to come by every day. Buffalos die or can get stolen or killed by thieves.'

The old man still remembered the lifeless eyes that stared at him while he was speaking. Even though he didn't respond with anything, the elder thought that Gong probably agreed with him because three or four days after that, he heard Gong had sold the buffalo to the chief of the next village. But it looked like he sold it for only one day. The next morning he took his son and asked the chief to give it back because he couldn't stand feeling sorry for his son who had cried the whole time. He asked to exchange it and mortgaged his farm instead.

When they got to the crossroad between the village and the temple, the old man and the five or six of his neighbors split up and went back to the village. The uncle then went into the temple by himself. When he arrived he found his nephew had already taken off the monk's robe and was waiting there with a small package of clothes and some scraps of food leftover from the old monk's breakfast. Uncle and nephew paid respects to the old monk and left the village. The uncle walked, leading the way letting his nephew ride on the back of the buffalo following. It was a rather quiet journey. The entire way there was only the comforting sound bing beng bing beng that came out from the bells hung around the neck of the buffalo. The sound of the bells was unusual because normally they tend to have just one basic note. Around the middle of the day, when they stopped to have some food, the man who was uncle asked, "Bun Gong, your bell has a beautiful sound, who made it for you?"

"I made it myself, it wasn't hard at all."

When he took a closer look he saw that the sound was produced by puncturing holes in the bottom of two empty milk cans, tying them together with plastic cord, and then coiling up some large nails into a ball and hanging them inside. It became a bell that produced an uncommon sound.

The journey of the uncle and nephew ended with them getting home around nightfall. But it was still time before the aunt would return from the market. Bua Li and Bua Ly, older daughters who were becoming young ladies, daughters of the previous marriage of uncle's wife, were busy in the kitchen. There were only the younger children, two boys running and playing in the middle of the front yard that ran out to the gate to meet them. Bun Gong jumped off the back of the buffalo. Father called one of his sons to come take the rope and the lead the buffalo to tie it up to the house posts. The other boy ran over to get the package of clothes to keep it up inside the house. Both of the kids were full of excitement. They ran up and down the stairs many times. The faces of the two daughters appeared and they came out and greeted Bun Gong warmly.

"Younger brother is going to stay with us. If he needs something, help him o.k.?" Father turned and spoke with his daughters before turning around and sitting himself down on the porch.

Before he had a chance to sit and rest and still feeling uncomfortable not knowing where to set up a good place for the new person to sleep, just then he heard the sound of the minibus pulling up to park in front of the gate. Even though everybody already knew who was walking up to come into the house, they all lifted their heads to look.

"Father and Bun Gong got home already mom!"

"Bun Gong brought his buffalo too. Its name is Mudder."

The two sons raced each other to speak up from under the porch. But there was no sound of an answer from the mother, only the intermittent bing beng ringing out.

A little after that, Bun Gong's relatives led him by the hand outside to the front yard.

Bua Ly, the second daughter, hurried down and took the bags off mother's shoulder. After returning the children's respects, the woman who was aunt stood and stared at the face of her nephew from the jungle village for a long couple of seconds before asking,

"Hey, are we a little shy here?"

Just as if he had the feelings in his heart called out by the questioner, the small new kid lost his confidence and his lips quivered as he answered,

"No, I'm not shy."

It was dusk, too dim for her eyes to make out the appearance and complexion of her nephew from the jungle village. But it looked like his answer would help change the way that the person who asked felt about him. The aunt raised her hand and swept the sweat from her face, then cleaned off with her sarong before reaching her hand out and putting it on top of the baldhead[4] of her nephew.

"Like that, it's fine. This consumption is a disease that eats up everything you have, but your aunt doesn't really have anything for it to eat so it doesn't matter."

The short greeting and the expression of the aunt was able to reduce the pressure inside the chest of the uncle, who was sitting and listening carefully up in the house, nervously watching over the meeting between aunt and nephew. The whole time he was sitting, heart beating with fear listening to the words of the conversation between aunt and nephew, the image of the pile of ashes that were swept up and shaped into the crude figure came up again. He felt like his heart was being squeezed, he wanted to speak, to release something out but couldn't say anything. When thinking back on the truth of his life, even though he had the status of husband, in the eyes of his neighbors and the occasional ridiculing words of his wife he was just a "coming

with empty pockets" kind of husband. That's what they said about him. Even though his wife was a widow with children and wasn't well off, she still had a home, a place to stay, had a small field to rent out and had a garden big enough to plant vegetables and sell them in the market. It was enough to make a living. As for himself, his work and trade was only that of a carpenter, one who learned from being an assistant. He had just enough skill to do this type of work. But during those stretches when couldn't find steady work for a long time, the husband "with empty pockets" would then become the "reliant husband", afraid of offending her no matter what he was doing.

Forcing himself to bring his orphan nephew along therefore became the most important decision that he ever made during the whole time they had lived together. But this matter, if you were to say that it was something he did without consulting his wife first, it probably wouldn't be exactly right. Because when people came over and gave them the news about the death of his brother he brought up the issue of his orphan nephew, hinting he might have to bring him back and take care of him. His wife's answer wasn't harsh as he thought it would be. She just said 'Now he'll bring this disease in and infect my kids.' It was because he wasn't brave enough to bring the issue up right at first that he was late for the cremation ceremony of his brother. But still, he considered it a good thing that he was able to get there in time for the ceremony to gather the bones the next day.

So when he saw nephew following close behind his aunt and both coming up the stairs, the uncle breathed a sigh of relief and spoke out telling them to move the package of clothes in to the same room with his two sons.

With what had developed not being as terrible as the scenario he had worried over, the uncle believed that the main reason was because his nephew had not come "empty handed" as his wife liked to sarcastically say when she was feeling bitter. After she found out that apart from having a buffalo Bun Gong also had rice at the old home, payment in kind for renting the buffalo, it looked like aunt had even more kindness in her heart toward the small boy from the jungle village. It wasn't only the uncle who breathed out a sigh of relief upon seeing the heartful meeting between the aunt and nephew, even the kids couldn't help but be astonished.

Even though the reality was they knew full well about their blood relationship, but still, the distance between them during the time that had passed had made it so they barely knew each other's faces. This was despite the fact that father and mother had talked a little bit about Bun Gong's family. They weren't mentioned in a very flattering way, especially his mother. Usually she was talked about in a tone that covered up their dislike. They remembered well one time that uncle brought aunt to see a doctor at the market and they came by and stayed overnight because there wasn't a car going back to their village. That night their aunt laid down and coughed almost the whole night. When both left the next day, mother assembled them all and they did a big house cleaning. The mat that aunt slept on, mother ordered that they take it out and throw it away. There was the sound of a big to do with father and she forbid looking for trouble and this bringing disease in to the house and contaminating it. Later, another time two or three months after they got news that their aunt had died, the uncle went out from the jungle village to buy medicine in town. When the bus stopped to drop off and pick up some people at the village, uncle came to visit father, rest and drink some water for a short while. When he left, mother made them scrub down the place where uncle sat and take the bowl he used to drink with and wash and polish it for an hour. They thought that the family from the jungle village probably had heard some of these stories because at first when Bun Gong came to move in under the same roof he looked lonesome and reserved. They sometimes saw Bun Gong hiding and crying.

At first, he would usually go busy himself with his Mudder almost the whole day. Then later, when the rainy season came, a neighbor of uncle contacted him to rent Bun Gong's buffalo to plow his rice fields. This made him even more lonesome. The neighbor spoke with the boy and asked him to accompany him and take care of Mudder. But the aunt was a busybody and asked for higher rents. The renter didn't agree so they split up. Bun Gong then worked at helping his older relatives plant vegetables.

Anyways, even though the family relationship started from a point of estrangement, with the sense of blood relations Bun Gong and his brothers and sisters got used to and close to each other in a short time. Aside from helping Bua Li and Bua Ly planting vegetables, there were many times on the days when the village bus would leave mid-morning that he would help his older sister carry the vegetables to get them to the market around at dawn. The truth was the distance from Starfruit Hill to the market was only six kilometer posts. The road from their village cut past the middle of the rice fields. It passed the row houses that were scattered about. Before entering the town, even though he felt a little excited, being a kid from a jungle village made him feel more scared of the activity and confusion of the people in the market than excited. More than that, he found the smell of the town and the rotten putrid smell of the market that wafted out almost half way to the village was like poison to his nose. It made him nauseous. But what brought him to the point of throwing up was the stinking bloody smell of the slaughterhouse located on the side of the road just outside town. At first the kid from the jungle village didn't know what that obscure building set on the edge of fields which usually had flocks of crows perched around it, was. Until one day when he asked his sisters.

"It's a place where they kill animals, Bun Gong."

"What animals?"

"All kinds of animals. Pigs, cows."

At the beginning of the season the rain poured down hard for many days in a row. It then gradually let up, and by the time they had reached the middle of the season everything had dried up. The buffalo was led back, and it was sent without any rental fees. Aunt looked more disappointed and sullen then everyone else. The lady started to complain sarcastically,

"If it's going to be like this, go ahead and die. Aside from the shit[5] under the house, I just don't see what benefit there is in it."

Everybody in the house knew well that Bun Gong's aunt was speaking of Mudder. Some days at dinner time when everyone was all together, after complaining about her troubles in making a living, the lady would finish up with the sentence that went "And...I have the problem... to go and look for food from somewhere to feed him...to feed both of them all year long."

Nobody knew if Bun Gong understood or felt anything from the constant complaining of his aunt. Only some times when he was helping water the vegetables during the afternoon, he would speak with his older sister in a simple sound, "Sister Bua Ly, around my village it rains really good. When I'm a little bit bigger I'm going to take Mudder back there and grow rice. Would Sister like to go back and plant rice with Gong?"

"Yes, I kind of would like to go."

This answer would draw a dull smile to his face. But not long after that there was an event that altered the way things were to go. Or to say, an event that caused a meeting up with the end of the line probably wouldn't be wrong. Because when two or three bombs coming from a group brawling in front of the music stage at the temple festival exploded, the result was dead and injured people scattered all over. Bun Gong and his two little brothers were in the group of people who were seriously injured. All three of them were urgently rushed to the hospital and they stayed there for a month taking in blood and intravenous fluid. After recovering from this shock, the constant complaining of the person who was aunt became even angrier, to the point of arguing. Each and every day things in the house were getting more serious. The suffering showed on the face of the uncle. He was running back and forth between the village and the hospital day after day. The more time passed by, as the condition of the patients was improving, the gloomier the face of the uncle. Finally, when finding out the day that they were going to get their patients back, the tension in the family reached the breaking point.

"I can't pay!" aunt shrieked out. "The bill for the blood, the medicine, all that. If you can't take care of it, just leave him there at the hospital. I'll pay just for my own kids."

"There's still some of his old rice and rent money from the buffalo left over. We can sell..."

"No, I won't allow it. If you sell it where do we go to get food for him to eat?"

The fighting and arguing was harsh and went on for a long time. It was the first time the husband had raised his voice in an argument. Alarmed, the two daughters fled and stayed outside the house until dark. When they came back inside they found both father and mother asleep with exhaustion. The next day the family was silent like they were in an abandoned house. Father disappeared before dawn. When he returned it was almost dusk. The standoff continued another two or three days. Father then invited his two daughters to go with him to get their brothers at the hospital without telling mother. He said it was a special job. After picking up a number of passengers, the old minibus then pulled out to go get the three sick people at the hospital. Even though they were skinny and pale, the two younger brothers looked strong enough to lean against the backrest. Just Bun Gong still had one of his legs in a cast. He couldn't sit down, so he had to lie down on the floor of the bus.

Leaving the hospital, the minibus drove back and parked near the pier for a long time. Late in the afternoon they started out from the market. They stopped and picked up and dropped off passengers continuously the whole way. The sick people and the people who came to get them sat leaning against each other quietly. The bus ran slowly. After a little while they got to the bend that would take them out of town. But before the driver was able to shift gears and increase speed, they saw another group of passengers with a big pile of their belongings. When he saw the big stack of luggage the driver turned of the engine. There was the sound of a few words asking about the fare, and then the passengers and the driver's assistant quietly transferred the stuff up into the bus.

But before the driver could start and get the bus moving again, like he just woke up from a sleep, Bun Gong opened his eyes raised his head and asked,

"Sister, are we home yet, Gong can hear..." He had yet to finish speaking when, out came the sound of him retching and throwing up.

The two young girls listened carefully. When they could catch the meaning of what Bun Gong was trying to say, both of them turned and stared at the face of father who was sitting with his eyes closed, leaning back as rigidly as a statue. The color of the afternoon sunlight smearing across the sheets of rice fields on both sides of the road came out a faded yellow. The wind from the fields blew a gust of hot air, blasting it into the bus. The two girls turned and looked back at the pale face of the owner of the question...there was no answer...except for letting the profusion of tears fall quietly onto the mounds of his cheeks.

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EndNotes

[1] Thai culture associates the east, the direction from where the sun rises with birth and the setting sun of the west with death.

[2] In Thai Buddhism *novice monks* can be children or adults but it is understood as a temporary status where after the individual studies a certain period of time they may leave and live as laymen, or decide to commit to the monkhood. In addition to being the religious center, the temple serves as a social center from where charitable activities are organized as well. Orphans often became wards of the monks.

[3] The Thai pronouns for brothers and sisters mean literally, older or younger siblings. When talking in informal settings an older person maybe referred to as *older sibling,* and a younger person as *younger sibling*. Pronouns for most all relatives maybe used with people who are not family whenever the age relations between the conversants reproduce family relations.

[4] Novice monks traditionally have their heads shaved.

[5] Buffalo droppings are used as manure.