Chapter 15 from Dragon Sutra by Richard Marranca (Oak Tree Press)

“It’s always been a dream to go to Angkor, but not like this,” she said.

Our plan was to take a boat from Phnom Penh to Angkor Wat, the ancient capital of the great empire, one of the world navels.

We traveled many hours on the bloated river. Rachany carried sadness like a bag of rice. Sometimes birds flew overhead and children ran alongside us. It was an elemental and ancient panorama.

I felt sad that one of her great desires was tainted, though she seemed pleased to take a boat. We needed time to be together, to rid ourselves of the volcanic spill of events. It would give me time to think. In contrast, she could not be consoled. She had ripened too fast and had dark rings around her mordant eyes.

I sat next to her, sometimes pointing out the sights. A village appeared. Each view was a treasure house, a gift of the river. A long boat shaped like a canoe floated alongside our boat, its deck filled with overflowing baskets of fruit. The family looked like people from hill tribes. Someone said they were the Hmong – I remembered they had fought for America during the Vietnam War. Afterwards, they were persecuted and scattered, some ending up on house boats or in jungles or anywhere they could, like Texas or LA, and a few ended up in a recent Clint Eastwood movie, *Gran Torino*.

We saw makeshift homes on stilts and rows of floating homes. People had been living this way for centuries, but were the vanguard of what would arrive everywhere, as the glaciers melted.

Finally, our boat stopped at a floating store. It had a thatched roof and an awning over the entrance, earth hued with blue etched around one window and clothes hanging from the edges. Next to it was a boat with blue paint rubbed to invisibility. This society used everything until it sank. Fish lines searched for anything that could be hooked in the depths of the mocha water.

The river had traveled a long distance, through countryside, villages and cities. Cambodia got what was left. People lived in water world, ate and slept on it, made babies on it, laughed on it, got drunk on it, died on it – everything but drown. If they lived a life of meditation, it was that of water. Thales, the great philosopher who inaugurated the West’s scientific quest, said that life came from water. In Cambodia you didn’t need a philosopher. You needed a boat.

“What would you like?” I said to her.

“Only sleep.”

“You can’t just--”

“Life is nothing.”

I gasped. When a traditional person says that, it means something. It’s not like an existentialist mouthing off at a café, coffee and cigarette in hand. Usually, she was immersed in life’s bounty, not in abstraction and depression. She hid her face in her hands, looking defeated. In contrast, I was used to dark thoughts whose authenticity I found comforting. I accepted reality and got on with it, like a fish accepts the immensity of the water, no matter how fetid.

For hours she didn’t have water or food. She appeared catatonic. I asked her to look at children sitting in a hammock, all bunched up with puppies. Rachany loved all of life equally and embodied the notion of interdependence, but it was the crazy, bouncing puppy that elicited a smile.

A woman with dark feet hanging over the house boat cooked food. I eyed the vegetables and she fried it all up with sauces and spices and placed it next to a mound of rice on a plastic container, and her daughter handed us miniature chopsticks.

I passed a room with an old woman sleeping with her mouth open, a cat beside her. For a moment I wanted to change places with this family, to live in old patterns. I’m sure they wanted my life even more.

The children were drawn like magnets to my movie camera. I showed them how to use it and they pointed it at everything, including their grandmother sleeping. They laughed until realizing they better not and aimed it at the foreigners, the ones wearing shorts and running shoes.

A few minutes later, a young man came over and bowed. “Chum reeup sooa. Hello, I can speak English,” he said. “I go to university. Would you like to stay the night? I’m getting married soon. It would be an honor. This is very propitious. I think that is the word.”

“That’s the best offer I’ve had in a while, but I have to ask my friend,” I replied.

Fortunately, Rachany saw us and walked over. They spoke while I looked at the river. A few heron sailed along the water.

Afterwards, she told me that the party would begin soon, that we could sleep on the house boat, and that in the morning another boat would stop by to pick us up.

“You will meet the village,” the young guy said.

Rachany and I walked around for a few hours and then took a nap in separate rooms. I gave pens and a notebook to the children, one of whom drew pictures of a boat.

As twilight settled, the party began. It stretched out on the house boat/store, with rows of lanterns and lollypop-colored lights glowing at the roof’s edge. The family set up tables filled with plates of meat and rice and Coke bottles filled with rice wine. A band (guitarist, organist, singer) stood on one end of the boat with a squeezed area for dance. The locals drifted in, about thirty people.

“We’re all lit up,” said Rachany. “We could be shot.”

I looked at her, chagrined. “They could have got us a dozen times. Enjoy the music then. It might be our last.”

Rachany vanished into the sleeping area, returning in a few minutes with a change of clothes – all black -- and her hair spread over her face.

The groom to be and his fiancé dragged us to the dance floor, but once there I was amused. Like demons rushing through the night, the music thundered in our ears. Luckily, the rice wine numbed my senses, for people kept filling my glass and I kept drinking, and everything felt lurid and warm, and we could forget the backdrop of our escape.

My head spun and I viewed stars and big teeth in laughing mouths. Rachany drank water and looked at me with ambiguity and fear. I realized the groom had an endearing gap between his front teeth.

The men were “characters” in their dancing, with one of them using fast motions and rap-like hand movements, while another did a mix of moves, even the twist and the bump and another thing that looked like a crab. The women did variations of Apsara with elegant hand gestures harkening back to early temples, harking back to the original, heavenly Apsaras who are the consorts of Indra’s servants and caretakers of heroes, intermediaries between heaven and earth.

The women seemed like animated dolls. While I stared gleefully, they moved in slow motion.

They were compact, gentle people whose joy and power was the community.

“I am so so so glad you came to my wedding. But you are a week early,” said the groom, wobbling toward me. He had meaty alcoholic breath and put his arms around our shoulders, and continued: “This is Cambodia. Here, each marriage – I can’t explain it – is like the marriage of Preah Thong and the dragon princess, Neang Nieak.”

“It recreates an early marriage?” I asked, filming with my camera. “We’re glad to be with you.”

The groom, swaying a few times, held up the peace sign and sang *I am the Walrus*.

He drank more wine, filled the glass again and handed it to me. His fiancé, appearing even younger, had long black hair with a wave and wore a silk aquamarine sarong. She was jejune and could not fathom her own elegance, her perfection.

The groom spoke to Rachany and afterwards stomped over to me. “You are being chased by men with guns?”

I nodded. “And one of them is a lady boy in clown makeup.”

“Make big joke?”

“I never joke about such things.”

Rachany cried with her mouth stuck open. I felt like clamping her mouth down, to snap the whole enterprise shut. I had had enough. I wanted to have some joy fall upon us.

The groom spoke to the others, who made guttural sounds and huddled around him. In fury, one guy slapped his knees – he turned out to be the astrologer who had sanctioned their wedding. Two of the older men said they had guns; they went into the storeroom and returned with an AK-47s and two fancy pistols. Another guy brought out a machete and a belt with rusty grenades.

In amazement I shook my head, saying “We must save Morpheus.”

I was drunk and oblivious, and everything rushed at me like famished monkeys. I tilted my head to the sky, looking for evidence of god but finding a furious silence. We danced and cavorted with the Milky Way, which sparkled across the sky’s black skull. I had a wow experience – yes, the stars were billions of miles away, some dead & others sized beyond imagination, perhaps sucking in matter on its giant black tongue, to cast time backward to the empire.

The groom gave me more rice wine, standing over me as it went down heavy like a clunky elevator.

“Watch this,” he said, extinguishing the candle with his tongue, which made a hissing sound.

After swallowing, I said, “I can catch bullets in my teeth. Ask Rachany.”

“You couldn’t catch an idiot,” she said.

I didn’t know what she meant, but I knew it wasn’t good. The groom played with that for a few seconds, humming behind his smile and burst out laughing. He opened another bottle, took a long swig from the greenish-white throat.

The groom said, “We want you on our honeymoon.”

Through glazed eyes, I looked at the uneaten rice and odd shapes of meat orbited by flies. (I hadn’t eaten meat since childhood and had grown too peaceful to deal with the underworld.)

“You are kind,” I finally said. “But I have to be fitted for a new suit in a few days.”

He exhaled, out of breath, shivering in the night air with alcoholic blood discombobulating his mind-body. “Americans are crazy. We’ll make you clothes, two suits. Okay, forget it. But you have to come and teach English.”

I agreed and emptied another glass of rice wine. It was going down easy now, and I heard the mechanical gulp and got a warm feeling in the belly that spread over my skin like a massage. I felt like a sacrifice for the god of rice wine. My head throbbed, my body drooped.

I lurched over the rail and fell into the dismal dark river -- crash, silence, surface, ha. In a flash I imagined snakes and giant fish and alligators and cutting rocks.

The groom jumped in and we returned to the boat arm and arm. We’d float or drown together. I loved these people. Again, I felt like they were the dead generations of my family I had never met. They were real. They weren’t atomized units separated by money and education. They felt real feelings.

As I dried off, an old man set up the Karaoke contraption. Rachany gave me a weird look, and reminded me that her parents never drank alcohol or smoked cigarettes. In one night, I broke centuries-old rules going back to Confucius, the old fortune cookie maker. She wore a cold mask. I had lost face, a serious transgression.

They held onto me while they conveyed Rachany to the matt next to the chatty grandmother.

Later, during the silent part of night when the stars furnished answers that are really feelings, I lost my thoughts. This twinkling of consciousness, of aloneness, began with early humans looking up at the stars – no, with chimpanzees looking up – pondering the big questions.

The boat was still, the moon the color of tofu. The water licked and gurgled like lovers, as granny recited her dream, the song of the 20th century. She was nearly 100. She babbled and moaned, fluttering her eyes: births and deaths, TV and wars, celebrations and cataclysms, came and went. Maybe she was a child running along the river.

At dawn, I surveyed the glistening water and jungle backdrop. Only a single boat drifted on the brown river. Butterflies – ambassadors from far away whose wings can set in motion events on the other side of the world – fluttered in auras. It was misty, impossible to see anything until it broke through. I looked at the parallel dirt road and the man bouncing on mist, and seconds later witnessed another. These mist-shrouded men were mahouts on elephants. After a few seconds another emerged, until there were eight, one behind the other, giants led by the trumpeting matriarch.