

Esa Kero— “BANGKOK”

Esa Kero, born in 1951, is a Finnish journalist and author. In the 1980s he was one of the practitioners of the Finnish variant of Gonzo journalism. One example is “Bangkok,” originally published in 1986 in the *Monthly Supplement* of *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest newspaper in Finland. Today Kero has retired from the newspaper business, and now writes books from his home province of Punkaharju. The translation maintains the ideosyncracies of Kero’s punctuation, for which he was known. “Bangkok” is followed with a critical examination by Maria Lassila-Merisalo, a scholar of Finnish literary journalism. Reprinted by permission.

Translated by David Hackston
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I wanted to see the canals of Bangkok, on the first night, in a taxi. I made my way down to the dark shore, where the driver asked me sullenly, “why would you want to see nothing?”

This is my final night. How small the world has become! The youngest son of the Turvala cottage*—the one with the red roof, the fields nothing but rocks and marshland—now here.

I should be in Calcutta, but the Indian Embassy in Helsinki did its best to make sure I didn’t get a visa, and now I’m lying on a cheap bed in Bangkok, waiting.

If I were still a member of the church and still believed strongly in something, I might say that this was God’s will, but I’m not that crude.

But this can’t be a mere coincidence. There have been far too many coincidences between Helsinki and this bed.

*The name of Kero’s childhood home in Punkaharju, Southern Savonia, Finland.

The fan on the desk is humming. I take a swig of beer, and wish that I could smoke a cigarette, draw on it calmly and collect my thoughts . . .

Two weeks have passed. Endless humidity; the drone of the “very cool” setting of the air-conditioning unit in my hotel room; exhaust fumes from the street; traffic chaos, apparent chaos. Three-wheeled tuk-tuks and one-and-a-half-million motorcyclists.

Around me a city that it’s impossible to comprehend.

Stains on my bedspread—sperm, undoubtedly.

That I should have had to travel here, thousands of kilometres away, in order to make sense of even a fraction of my own journey, its meaninglessness, its daily pretence. The great Finnish lie.

No. Allow me to vent these matters in some semblance of an order, the order in which they bubble into my mind. This is one jigsaw puzzle that doesn’t form any tangible picture . . .

A small beggar boy on the red-hot street, no bigger than a monkey is sitting with a plastic cup—not so much sitting as lying, almost dead. I walk past. People. Beautiful, well-dressed people all around. Three hours go by, and I walk back down along the same stretch of Sura Wong Street. The boy is still lying in the same position. Is he dead? No more so than I.

I eat well, this time at an Indian restaurant. Our host is very friendly. I leave a thirty-baht tip.

To the little boy lying in the street I gave nothing.

And yet, the little boy with his plastic cup does not appear in the dreams I dream there in my air-conditioned hotel room. What we have seen and experienced has taken us so far. But what use are these sights and experiences? Maybe I should have tilled those rocky fields after all, sat on the steps of the Turvala cottage wondering when the swallows will arrive, perhaps the very same swallows that sit along the electricity cables in Bangkok, in their millions, side by side as far as the eye can see.

The idea of going to the slums of the Khlong Toei district worried me; I wanted to forget all about our trip but I couldn’t—this too was something I simply had to see. Over a million people live in slums here; that’s one in every five citizens of Bangkok.

I stepped gingerly between the low-roofed buildings—some might call them shacks—as one might walk along duckboards. Real duckboards will be needed again once the monsoon season arrives.

The slum was not how I had imagined it. You could almost call it cosy; the people were friendly, invited us in; flowers in the windows and all around a great sense of warmth that I find it impossible to define. It is hard to define this slum in any terms whatsoever . . .

That being said, everything was utterly different to the way it had been

described in the accounts of a certain missionary. Of course, there is no plumbing system. There is disease; perhaps there is crime; people drink a lot. It could be anywhere

A merchant trader, who is also a member of the district's twenty-strong "assembly", explains that many people here have jobs—temporary jobs, that is—but that life goes on nonetheless. Apparently there is no worm so small that it will not try to crawl forwards.

The state is doing its best—how on earth do I know this?—to get rid of the slums. It has built enormous concrete apartment blocks, where it re-houses people living in the slum districts. Good God, how vividly those new houses in all their hideousness remind me of . . . But perhaps at least they have good plumbing.

Can I dare believe my eyes any longer? All I can see around me is goodness, goodness in people. The missionary told me that in these places people are killed like flies, there is crime, prostitution. . . .

We are walking along the side streets at night and end up going off with a couple of strangers.

"Let me show you something shocking!" says a pimp we meet in the restaurant at around half past two in the morning.

That's precisely what we wanted to see.

He takes us to the "Chicken Farm", a brothel. Along a side street, into a courtyard and a dark corridor, up the stairs to the upper floors of a house that looks like an old hotel.

The head pimp summons the girls and lines them up for us, all twenty or so girls working that particular shift.

"Please, take your pick."

The girls look at us eagerly. This is a world away from the wild red-light districts of Paris, where, of course, there are "real people" too.

Upon first coming here, Finnish men are full of illusions, and this is the place where those illusions are dispelled. But we don't talk about that back in macho Finland. In Finland people talk about prices and sex.

The youngest of the girls is wearing a white skirt; she is the prettiest and the most obviously nervous. Perhaps she senses that, if anyone is selected, it will be her. And if the man doesn't understand properly, it'll hurt.

The other girls are already old hands. One of them has terrible scars across her face, and is otherwise not at the more beautiful end of the scale. She looks at me as though she really wanted it too.

We sit on the edge of a bed and watch. A cockroach runs along the wall of room 126. There on the edge of the bed everything seems somehow strangely natural. Why shouldn't life be like this?

We drink beer. A young boy brings me a beer. He is available too, and presumably so is the head pimp, though he is a slightly older man.

“Of course,” he says. “Straight away, if you like.”

One of the boys is very beautiful.

It almost feels as though we were in North Karelia[†]—nobody is pressuring us, nobody is worried about what we might want here. The head pimp sits next to us on the edge of the bed as though he were a farmer whose fields just happen to be of the living kind.

He tells us about the clients and what they ask for. Some of their wishes sound rather strange, but this doesn’t seem to bother him all that much—that’s what life is like when it has the possibility to exist. Otherwise those wishes would be locked up in chunks of terraced housing.

We visit another “chicken farm”, which appears to be almost exclusively for Thai men. The girls here are perhaps a bit past their prime, but they are oh so warm, such wonderful people. People.

“What was supposed to shock me?” I ask our pimp once we’re back in the taxi.

He smiles. He wasn’t born yesterday. He’s seen the world, went out on the streets at sixteen (so late?!) for the gratification of men and women alike, but he isn’t bitter in the least. On the contrary.

In any case, he too is rather pretty.

He lies to us just as much as is necessary and tells us that he knows a woman who can get him a plane ticket to Switzerland any time he wants, but that he has no desire to go there any more:

“I’ve already seen that world. I’m happy with what I’ve got.”

He has his own “hotel”—goodness only knows whether it is actually his or not, but that doesn’t really matter. Be that as it may, he’s the one I am paying for this bed, this bed and these services—and from that sum he will take whatever broker’s fee he deems appropriate.

The desk fan whirrs, and from downstairs we can make out the rattle of passing tuk-tuks, the sound of footsteps and Thai music. Smells waft up from the street, the thick reek of fried meat.

A few hundred kilometres away a war is raging and hundreds of thousands of refugees are huddled together in tents trying to sleep.

“I almost know what it is you want,” said the pimp the first time we met, when we were left alone for a moment. He didn’t know precisely what I wanted, but I guided him in the right direction.

I didn’t ask about the price, as I guessed this would be inappropriate. We both understood the rules of the game.

When, as we had agreed, I first arrived at his hotel around midday, stone

[†]A region in Finland.

cold sober, I cannot say that I was nervous or even excited. I kept thinking that I was now taking a step forward in my life, which was now to remould and reshape itself over and over, searching and pursuing.

There was nobody else in the hotel lobby. The pimp smiled at me and shook my hand, said there was nothing to worry about—in half an hour She would be here.

I climbed the staircase up to my room, took off my shoes and lay down on the bed to wait. I assumed that this was the moment when all my illusions would be shattered, my dreams crushed, my desires stripped away. I knew in advance that this was going to happen. I would breathe deeply and feel the touch of that brown skin against my hand.

There are so many ways of doing things. Just like in the sex club where a few dozen girls danced like performing dogs for the tourists—shooting bananas into the air, masturbating. Their final number was always called “romantic”.

You could do it in a Japanese nightclub, where the girls cost at least a thousand Finnish marks. An old Japanese businessman is sitting at a table drinking “the best cognac” straight from the bottle. He goes up on the stage and sings a few songs with the orchestra, songs so sorrowful that I didn’t know such music could exist. He has his arms around two very beautiful young women, and they belong to him, him and nobody else! But it’s hard to believe that such sorrowful songs can really exist; compared to those songs, the most melancholic of Finnish tangos sound like a wedding waltz.

We paid a few hundred baht for two small glasses of beer each, admission to the club, and permission to touch with our fingertips only. We weren’t even being ripped off.

Then again, you could do it like we did on our first night in Bangkok. Our Thai friend Virabat, whose friendliness and hospitality are beyond words, asked us whether we would be interested in a massage. Well, after such a long flight a soak in a spa might be just what the doctor ordered.

At that he and his beautiful girlfriend Lek led us in front of a large building. And it was then, upon seeing a few dozen Thai girls waiting for clients behind an enormous glass window, that we knew what this was all about.

Virabat negotiated a price for me and we stepped inside. The whole operation immediately assumed comical proportions. It was one minute before the massage parlor was due to close for the evening, and there were only three official masseuses on offer—apparently. No matter, I was sober and I was left with the least attractive of them, if I may call her that.

We took the lift upstairs, stepped into a private washroom. Clothes off and into the bathtub. The brute of a woman even took my glasses off. She then proceeded to wash me like a baby, though she did pay somewhat excessive attention to certain areas. Boing! You guessed it.

I found it all very amusing; I laughed out loud and wiped tears from my eyes. Here I am, sitting in a bath in my birthday suit, with soap commercials blaring from the nearby television. Then on to the rubber mattress for the massage. This the girl did with her body using the so-called “slide technique”.

After that, I rinsed off and moved over to the circular bed for the dry massage. Nothing more interesting than that happened, though anything would have been possible. The girl massaging me, who every now and then would stop to adjust the television, didn’t really do it for me. And I may as well admit it: I came right there on the mattress.

At about two o’clock that same night, after my hair had dried and the show places in Patpong[‡] had closed, we were sitting in a small bar that wasn’t going to rip us off. We found ourselves sitting at the same table as a sometime pimp and DJ from a local girl bar. His face was covered in scars and his expression was one of anger. He was drunk. The only really angry person I met on this entire trip.

I was pretty drunk too, and I can’t quite remember what we were talking about, but sometimes you can simply trust your intuition and compassionate warmth. When I’m drunk, I can be quite endearing, human even.

By the time morning came he had shaken my hand and given a smile. Even his scars seemed to have disappeared. He told me about how miserable his life was, watching tourists fritter away more money in a single evening than he earns in a year—legitimately, at least. It’s hard to find the words to describe such levels of debauchery.

The man had spent a year working in a hotel where “towel heads”—oil sheikhs, that is—spent their holidays. He found their frivolous use of money unbearable.

“Ten thousand baht in a single day,” he explains.

“What about the Americans during the Vietnam war?” I ask.

He proceeds to tell me stories about the Americans that, in their sheer horror, seem unfathomable.

“Soldiers! Think about it, murderers out on holiday with their dollars!”

I see. Was everything about sex? Was that what all those trips to Bangkok were really about?

Of course, there are plenty of temples here, wat wat wat.[§] We visited them, too. We drove along the canals of Bangkok in a little boat, for hours at a time. We visited the Chinese market district, a place where it is impossible to name half the products on sale, particularly the foodstuffs.

We ate well every day: Thai food (a dish called Mai Aou Pak Chee or

[‡]The red light district in Bangkok.

[§]A wat is a Buddhist temple.

“whatever you do, don’t use that green leaf or I’m likely to throw up”), Chinese food, Indian, Japanese, and the occasional peppered steak with French fries.

We met lots of regular people too, and they talked about perfectly normal matters: a fish researcher, an architect, a nurse, a transvestite, a civil servant. . . .

“Why is it that people only come here to write articles about the sex trade or the slums instead of writing about us normal people?” asked Mr An, a young man living in a terraced house, a soldier who was just about to be deployed to the front at the border, a man who in the line of duty had been forced to shoot “a dozen or so” spies disguised as immigrant boat people.

We visited a crocodile farm and watched a brown man riding through Bangkok’s rush-hour traffic on the back of an elephant.

And yet, not one of those gilded temples was able to make a greater impression on me than that seedy hotel room on our last night, that hard bed, and the wait for a real, living person.

This is now the most important matter in my life; after this I can move on again. Everything happens the way it does because it simply could not happen any other way. I didn’t decide to come here. I had to come here.

Each and every one of us wanders by ourselves, seeking light and comfort, suffering. I am like the lamp hanging above the bed; I burn for a while, then I am extinguished and changed for a new one. That’s all there is to it.

The first time it happened, I was ashamed of my greasy, deathly pale body; faced with such beauty I wanted to leave my shirt on. It was truly pathetic.

Finns live the same way they cross the street: clumsily or in a hurry. Here in Thailand people go with the flow.

The door opens and She is there.

On that last evening I am slightly drunk. It occurs to me that this might not be entirely appropriate but that it might just release me from my inhibitions and allow me to access pleasure all the more profoundly. But it doesn’t help.

I look at her dark eyes and she smiles. Now everything seems real again. Everything is right here, right now!

“I want to make you happy,” she says.

And You certainly tried Your best, but it isn’t going to work. I caress her beautiful face, a face that seems so perfect to me; I close my eyes, open them again, delicately kiss her lips, but I feel nothing. I look at the desk fan.

And yet I like her immensely. After that first time it felt good to get out into the street; I went to a bar, ordered a bottle of beer and felt that I was something.

For once I had proved that I could do things too. Haha! Now I can

forget about it all, once and for all, dismiss it as nothing but another way for people to satisfy themselves. What nonsense—the greatest deceit that we can tell our children, the whole world.

But a moment later I realised that I missed her, I yearned for her smile and for the kind of words that nobody—at least, nobody important to me—had ever spoken. My God, all of a sudden I wanted to own her.

I started to dream about her.

Then one morning, like a dog with its tail between its legs, I walked over to the pimp's place and ordered Her again.

"She'll be happy—she liked you," the pimp said.

Those words rang in my head for a long time—someone was happy because of me, what politeness. No! They only want my money, I told myself. And it's only right: I have plenty of money and I'm not saving it for anything. Haha! I could have bought a good sofa bed for the cost of those visits, but I'd rather lie on my Superlon mattress and remember, move on, a little at a time.

Life is like a bridge: cross it, but don't build a house on it. Nothing here is permanent, not even Her. Don't let people's gossip lead you astray.

The fan drones away and she is asleep, her head on my chest. Suddenly she wakes and asks: "What are you thinking about?"

"I don't know." The best answer I've ever given.

We get dressed and she leaves. She understands and we shake hands. It is the last time I see her.

Back downstairs I have a long talk with the pimp. He tells me that I could save that beautiful face if I wanted to—with money.

"She still trusts people; everything is possible," he says. "I was lucky when I was young."

I walk out into the street, my thoughts a blur. On the other hand, I feel almost enlightened; I know what I think and what I will do, how I will move on. And then I see something on the street. Woe, the scorpion in me!
