



# IMAGES OF THAILAND

H. S. Toshack

# *Images of Thailand*

H S Toshack

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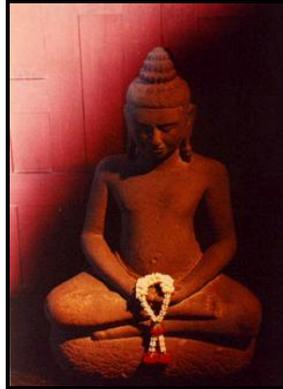
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### The Roseate Buddha

My statues are often covered in gold leaf.  
I don't mind that:  
I suppose it says something about the belief I hold –  
That we can beautify imperfect things.  
It also shows,  
Though,  
How I am esteemed by the worldly  
Whom I wish to lead away from the world.  
There's some irony there,  
You might say,  
And some failure.

I much prefer to be known like this,  
In bare stone  
Which weathers as the winds blow  
And is softened by sunlight at the end of the day.



### A Child Like This

In ten years' time  
A child like this  
Will stand here.

His name will be new  
But his job will be the same  
(He came to sell bracelets and beads)  
And so will his needs  
(In Thailand it is always time to eat).  
He will greet you still with no words,  
And his face and his baubles  
Will be as bright.

But his shirt now,  
That will be gone.  
Beaded and braided will last the years  
The fast colours of his hat  
And his clear bright eyes  
Will last the years.  
The shirt though will long have faded  
And been tossed in the mess of garbage  
We passed  
At the foot of the hill.

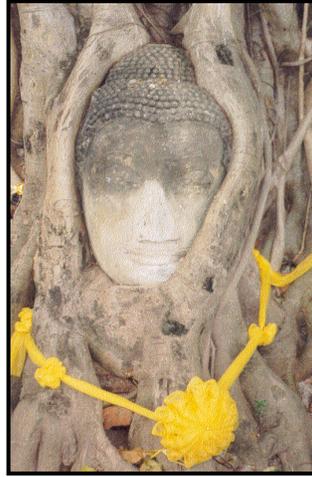


### Long-tailed Boats

The Gatling Guys,  
The rat-a-tat pack,  
Tocketing takers  
There and back.

There is where the empty beach lies in the long curved twilight of the day  
Leading into night and the open sea  
With the moon seen through trailing palms  
Like the half-closed eyes of a woman waiting.

Back is to the rising village on the early shore beneath the hanging cliff  
Coming slow and green into the sunshine  
With deep night falling behind the pinnacle of rock  
Like a black hood eased off  
And the men unloading their nets half-asleep.



### If You Come Back in Ten Years' Time

I've heard of a head being cradled  
But this is absurd.  
You'd better listen to me right now.  
If you come back in ten years' time  
It will be too late for me to talk:  
I'll only be able to brood.  
So you'll have to walk to another shrine  
If you want to hear wise words.  
Mine will be tightly locked in wood.



### Maybe Next Week

Lumps of raw beef  
Hang in a bag on the motorbike's horns.  
You'd expect them to bleed down its flanks  
And drip in the dust;  
But the day is too dry.

The wreck of a bike totters  
On the hard road  
In the hot morning sun,  
And must soon be led to the knacker's yard.

Maybe next week we'll see a cow  
Leaning in the road  
With a plastic bag of pistons and gears  
Hung from its handlebars  
And a trickle of oil on its ears.



### Santa Among the Antiques

Let me out!  
Let me out of here!  
Let me out of here before I melt in the heat  
Of the demon's leer  
And the curl of the elephant's trunk.

My snow-boots,  
Tramped on by elephants' feet  
Won't see the day out...

Is there no way out of here?

You who have stopped in the street,  
You know me,  
As a child you knew me,  
Waited for me through many a longing night  
While the white frost sparkled on your window  
And hid my coming from your sight.

Now I, too, look out and wait,  
Forlorn and out of place

In this hot shop.  
But you only stand and gawp at my plight  
While I warp in their wooden scorn.

Through the grime of this glass  
On the other side of the road,  
I watch the tight-bound traffic pass  
The kindly Colonel Sanders  
With a face as white as mine  
And a white beard more pointed than mine.  
He too looks on,  
Looks down through his glasses with a frown,  
Unhappy as I am;  
For he in his turn is looked down on  
By the guardians of the golden temples of Siam  
Arrayed along the river behind,  
And he shrinks beneath their sneer.

Get us out of here!



### Tastes Pretty Bad, Actually

Factually this is sort of correct:  
I do smoke a pipe;  
But it tastes pretty bad actually  
And it makes me wheeze.  
And this bonnet is hot on my head  
And these beads are hard round my neck.  
If you buy some of those (please)  
I can go into the shade  
Knock out my pipe  
And have a ciggy instead.



### Hellfire Pass

A few scattered bones are all that is left,  
Ribs of the track,  
Weft of the warp of track  
That bent into Burma  
To carry the rising sun on its back.

But there are other bones here,  
And other ghosts.  
Torn flags flutter  
And torch flames flicker at night;  
And there's the clatter of stones being thrown

From the heights above  
To drive the toilers below,  
And the moans of those men of tatters and rags.

The skeletons of teak may one day  
Be buried in dust;  
But the memory of those other sleepers,  
Those ghosts,  
Must not be lost.  
That matters.



### Opium Poppy

Just to look at it makes me swoon,  
Its colour enough to swamp my senses  
And cause me to lean a moment  
On the rough fence  
Set not to keep me out  
But it in,  
Keep them all in where they can do no harm,  
These sirens swaying in the slow wind  
Who sing a carmine song  
And drown with sweetness.

‘You want smoke?’  
Our guide asks the American with white hair  
Who, it seems, is here to stretch  
His dollars and his days  
(‘How much will it cost?’)  
Or at least to make his nights  
Red with dreams.  
He listens to the short answer,  
Then, long, to the poppies' song,  
And is lost.



### The Urn

What great oven can have fired this urn?  
What massive wheel turned it?  
How could they lift it when it was done,  
Those village people who are so small  
And delicately made,  
Loft it on their shoulders and parade it here?  
Why here?  
To take the rain from the rooftops, I suppose,  
And hold it against the dry times.

But those thin plants  
In what is hardly a garden  
Could not wait,  
Have clambered up its high sides to sip

So that their gourds can grow,  
Gourds which sit like wooden birds  
Round the edge of a child's toy,  
Tipping and pecking the surface  
Until they swell and are plucked from their perch.

They cannot steal the water's sweetness,  
The urn will keep that in its inner dark,  
Until the dry times come;  
And then the gourds,  
Scooped clean, hardened in the sun  
And turned into vessels  
Will drink again  
And hold a sweetness of their own.



### No Head for Heights

A birthday cake  
Fit for a sandalled buddha;  
But I shake at the thought  
Of climbing to the top of it  
To blow out the candle.



### Not Flotsam

It's not really.  
It's not really flotsam since it isn't floating any more;  
And it never was jetsam  
Since it wasn't thrown to lighten a ship's load.

If I'd been on board a sinking boat, in fact,  
I'd have wanted to grab this stuff,  
Not throw it in the sea –  
(It's more buoyant than any timber)  
Jam it in a sack and float with it on the tide's run,  
Hoping to reach a safe shore.  
With luck I'd have drifted to this isle  
And lain here a while in the sun.

But then what would I have done  
With these bits of polyfoam  
Torn-off bottle tops

Tar-blotched flip-flops  
Beached bottles  
Bleached rope  
And lots and lots of worn bamboo?  
If I were a castaway  
What use could I make of all of this?

Of all of it, none;  
Of some of it, only some.

But that wouldn't matter.  
I would have scattered it here  
Just like this  
To remind me of the world  
From which I'd come.



### Guardian

That's not a frown on my forehead  
Just a stain.  
But there's a stave at my side  
And a sword on my back.  
If you attack me  
You'll find I'm not flesh but stone,  
And the smile on my face will have gone.



#### In the Parasol Factory

Her hands remember what they themselves once were  
And fashion the lines of the frame  
After their knowledge of what they were in her youth,  
Smooth and straight and fine.

The old woman thinks, perhaps  
Of the girl  
Who will buy the sunshade  
And drift with it over her head,  
Keeping her face  
And her hands  
Out of the sharp sunshine.



### Where Is My Head?

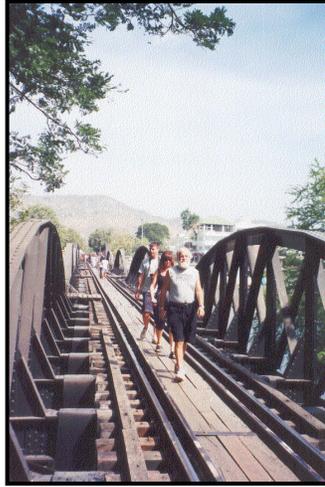
I don't care where  
So long as it's safe.  
Look at the rest of me  
And think how my head would be by now  
If it had still sat here  
On my single shoulder.  
The bricks and I lean on each other more and more  
As we get older  
And soon they'll have to shore us all up.

If it's stored in a museum – well that would be best.  
But if it's stashed in a relic thief's vault,  
(Mine among others),  
To be cashed in at some later date –  
As long as it's properly salted away

He can be my guest  
(As my head is his).  
If it's stowed under a bed to bolster a belief,  
That's fine by me.

One day, though,  
One day my head will ask,  
'Where Is My Body?'  
And will be carried back  
And reinstated.

Long before then  
I hope  
I will have been rehabilitated.



### Colonel Fogey

Left, right, left, right,  
With half-clenched fists,  
Leading a march on the cracked boards  
Through the iron arches  
Of a bridge that once was.

We're a bit out of step,  
But so's this tame bridge with its past:  
It's not the same one: that's long gone;  
And we wonder at last why we came  
To the River Kwai  
To see a bridge whose fame rests in the fact  
That it no longer exists.



### Chameleon

I've caught him in transition  
From dark to light  
Clinging tight to his position  
On the mottled trunk.  
Fast master in the art of changing colour  
He can't match the dart of my flash  
And it's too late to make a dash for it:  
I've pinned him there with brightness.

But there's no need to feign,  
No cause for fright:  
I'll soon be gone again  
Into the night  
And he'll be free to lift his slow foot  
And place it forward  
Delicate and unseen  
Up and onto the next green stain.



### The Drip of Rocks

From our small boat  
We watch the rocks slowly drip  
Into the smooth sea.

In that other boat,  
That mote between here and there,  
Are those who saw their own bare cliffs  
Which have melted more  
Drop into the low waves  
With a hiss  
And are now coming  
To watch ours fall, and grieve with us.

By the time they get here,  
There will be less.  
By the time we leave  
No rocks will show:  
There will be only slow empty water  
And we will have nowhere to go.



### After Dark

After dark the heads turn,  
Silently,  
And turn and turn again throughout the night.  
When first light comes they are caught.  
For the rest of the day.  
They stay that way:  
This one must watch,  
The other be watched and wondered at.  
The one beyond,  
Ignored,  
Is maybe bored,  
But tonight will change that.

The gilding of their faces is smooth and bright  
And their gems sparkle.  
Time will change all that.

But still the heads will turn without a word  
Throughout the night;  
And in the day  
One will always watch,  
One be watched,  
And one will be ignored.



### A Paradox Before Dying

It's one of photography's tricks:  
The sun in the water is really less bright  
(It has lost energy in the ripples of the lake)  
But is fixed more sharp on film.  
The sun in the sky is higher above the bar of darkness  
Than the one caught in the water  
But paler by far.

It's one of the strangenesses, too,  
Of life and death:  
A man who sinks towards the depths may dim  
And lose light in the stirrings of the lake which will take him;  
But he shines more clear against the coming night.



### The Big One

His pillow may be stone  
And his feet stick out  
But the bedclothes are neatly arranged.

'Roll Over,' the Big One said,  
So they all rolled over  
And the little one fell out for a change.



### The Day Between

I peed the bed last night.  
These are my blankets  
Drying alongside the clothes –  
Some of them mine too,  
But some not –  
All lying untidy  
Across the verandah rail  
Where they were tossed.

I may pee the bed again tonight  
So what.

The day between  
Which has just begun  
Will fall untidy also,  
With its work and daydreams and play  
All lying where they land  
Along the rail of the hours  
And drying in the sun.



### Time Will

Time will fill in the hole  
That these bricks surround,  
This kiln dug into the ground to hold the heat  
So that more bricks could be made  
And the world be covered in wats.

But the wall around the hole is tired,  
Leans and falls;  
And the faith that fired all that clay  
Will cool and totter too  
One day  
And belief will be laid low.

Only the trees will grow,  
Their shapes made hard  
In the heat of the sun;  
And our world will be one of shady green temples  
And cool palaces of jade.



### There Are Four Not Three

There is one who works with the net  
While the others play:  
He feels they are shirking  
And is about to say that.

One thinks  
About yesterday.

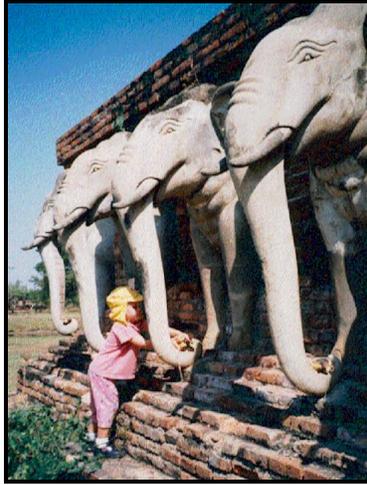
The one crouched in the middle of the log  
Laughs lightly at the one you can't see,  
Lurking behind the white tree roots.  
There are four not three.



### The Garden

Man improves what nature has made,  
Levels what would otherwise slope  
Hopes to hold back with rocks  
What would otherways run  
Balances sun with shade  
Low with tall  
Paves the top of a dam  
With flat stones  
So that when you walk it you won't fall.

But the cry has gone up,  
'Snake! Snake!'  
Something has entered this sham Eden  
And is hiding under a fat round boulder.  
It must be found and killed  
Lest the falling be older and more real  
Than just from a wall.



### The Elephants Must Be Fed

The elephants must be fed  
That's the rule.  
I don't need to go to school  
To know that.

The elephants must be fed  
Whether they're captured in stone  
And lined up to face the dawn  
Across the calm lawn of a tumbled-down wat;  
Or led in chains to the forest floor,

Held in chains on the forest floor  
And made to haul the trees  
That once gave them shade;  
Or trundled into towns  
To please a crowd.

The elephants must be fed  
That's the flat rule.  
You don't need to go to school  
To know that.



### The Squeeze of Things

There's nothing like a city  
For letting you feel the squeeze of things.  
Even the sun has to struggle up  
From the grey and greasy street  
Between concrete and glass,  
Has to pass through tight canyons  
Whose walls almost meet  
To reach the heights of the sky.

When it has arced through the day's long hours  
By and by  
It will slip down a crack  
Between stark towers  
And be squeezed back down into the dark.



### The Children Look Away

The Karen children look away,  
Unconcerned.  
Maybe the best bits happened much earlier,  
And now they've stopped watching;  
Maybe the best bit of all  
Was when they saw the poor beast fall  
And its eyes glaze  
(Or did they dull before it dropped?)

None of them seems to care much now,  
About the butchering part,  
The children or the cow – truly:  
Someone's newly arrived  
And they turn their heads to look.  
The children, that is:  
The cow can't  
And wouldn't anyway,  
Wouldn't want anyway to see itself  
Spread out like that,  
Dead flat,  
In opened view,  
Its dimensions reduced to two.

The photograph is over-exposed  
Like the cow:  
I've lost some colour;

And the heads of the standers are cut right off  
(But not quite like the cow's).  
They're maybe as bored as the boy and girl  
Who look away;  
And the elephant is nonchalant in its passing.  
Only the dog is (furtively) intent,  
The faded brown dog – can you see it?  
It's lucky to be brown:  
Black ones are eaten here,  
Like the cow will be soon.

This has been a neat and tidy job  
You must admit:  
The beast's bits are neatly arranged,  
The white shirts are still white  
And the red ones were red at the start.  
Even the hands are clean.  
And nothing will be wasted,  
Not the least piece will be wasted.

The village will feast after dark  
And sing, strangely, hymns and carols  
Around the huts and through the night.  
We will lie on thin mattresses and hard bamboo,  
And dream, strangely, until the early light.



### The River

If we hadn't just rafted down it  
We'd have wanted to wade up it  
To see what might be found  
Round the next bend  
And the one beyond.  
But we've been there  
Seen that  
And are bound to travel on.  
We won't return.  
There are some rivers  
There's no going back up  
Once you've drifted down.



### Take Care What You Say

I'm listening  
So watch what you say to that little girl.  
I'm watching  
So listen what you say to that little girl.  
For what you say to that little girl  
Is what she'll see  
When she looks at me.



### Blurred, As In a Dream

Moving slowly up the river today  
I saw,  
On a downward raft,  
Another me  
With longer hair  
As it used to be  
And more brown,  
And wearing the golden beard of my youth.

He was laughing as they came abeam.  
He had been somewhere else,  
Had gone off alone long ago,  
On a different tack  
In search of a different truth  
And had now come back.

I wanted to speak to him  
But he passed,  
He drifted past  
Blurred as in a dream,  
And by the time we had turned and caught up  
Along the sandy shore  
He was angled away from me once more.

I would like to know where he has been  
All those separate years.  
I think he recognised me  
As we slid downstream,  
And he watched me disappear  
In the water's gleam.



### What Doesn't Show

I'm buoyed and not quite beached.  
What doesn't show  
Are the bumps on the back of my neck  
Where the blackflies bit.  
What doesn't show  
Is the red in the water  
Where my precious blood  
Loosed by leeches  
Washes away  
Down the reaches of the river.  
What doesn't show  
Except in my smile  
Is the water's cool flow  
Over my punctured flesh.

I want to drift slowly downstream  
And avoid the long miles back;  
But I'm moored against the current's pull:  
The only way home  
Is the way we have come.



### I Do Not Need, I Will Not Turn

I do not need to see  
What you see,  
I do not need to see over my shoulder.

Over my shoulder  
(Which I do not have  
In any case  
And do not need)  
And through the bare window  
I know the palms are bursting  
And burn with green fire.

I do not need to turn,  
Having once turned away  
I will not turn again,  
Not even to see the green palms burn.

I will not turn,  
I do not need.



### Going Is Becoming

The old bull  
(I think he was,  
Or maybe just a gelding  
But a big one),  
Disturbed as he rolled in the steaming mud,  
Snorted as I plodged to the edge of his pool.  
Covered in gold (slime, not leaf – no god, this)  
And gleaming in the afternoon sun  
These broad and undivided sides of dressed and burnished beef  
Took a head-on step in my direction.  
So I decided it was time to leave,  
Defection in this case being no shame  
And deflection from my purpose  
(Which had been to photograph him close)  
Counting less than being trampled into the ooze,  
Nomatter how much the gilding might have become me.  
Unlike the Arhat \*  
I could not have been philosophical  
About that.

\*Divine One



### This Looks a Bit

This looks a bit like a gingerbread palace,  
All carving and curls,  
The kind of place Alice might have found herself in  
If she'd crossed again  
The narrow ground between two worlds.

We'd have to shrink like her  
To enter the shrine in front  
And grow to fit the one behind.  
But first we'd have to dodge some blows,  
Slink past those guardian trees  
Twisted like Thai boxers,  
All fists and feet and knees  
High in the air.

Many times in our travels  
We have squeezed through the tight door  
Between here and there,  
Sought strange lodging,  
Shrunk and bent and grown once more,  
And done our share of dodging;  
But whatever we may have meant to do,  
We never returned quite  
To the shape we were  
Before we went.