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When the Mountain Spirit Spoke

Anchalee Panigabutra-Roberts
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Spirits roam to protect the valleys, the mountains, and the forests

Jao Khao, the Mountain Spirits reign and haunt the valleys

Whisper their messages into your psyche.

I didn't believe in the sixth sense

But Mae Kham's death called this into question.

One day we visited a potential house to rent

There's a noisy rice mill next door, but it seemed safer,

*Not quite as isolated as the current house we rented at the edge of the
village.*

An uneasy and strong feeling grasped me--

"Don't rent this house," was the decoded message.

After the visit, I saw the same message in my husband's eyes.



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“You felt it too?” I asked

He nodded.

A few weeks passed.

It rained so hard that week in March, with constant downpours.

Ruined all the shallot crops my village sisters and friends hoped to sell to pay for their vicious never-ending debt and life cycles.

I just returned to the village from the city,

Only to find frowns, un-smiling, sunken faces greeting me.

Like some dark force took a grip on this valley district

‘Mae Kham is dead’, I was told.

Her husband took seven meth pills

He’s gone mad and stabbed her with a machete.

I could not remember the number of the wounds,

Certainly, one was fatal.

Her painful wail could be heard throughout the village.

Had I rented that other house, my husband, my four-year old daughter and I would have heard, or witnessed, and would be haunted by the sight and sound her daughter and neighbors still had recurring nightmares about.

The mountain spirit spoke, and I listened.

I wonder what it said to Mae Kham, when her husband beat her.

'I thought it was just like one of their 'normal' fights', the neighbor told me.

'I didn't know it would kill her.'

No wife-beating is normal.

I wondered what the mountain spirit might have whispered into the ears of the villagers and her family, who turned their blind eyes to the 'normal' fights.

I wondered if the whole village listened, what could have been.

About the Author



Anchalee Panigabutra-Roberts (Joy) is a Thai with a Lao paternal grandmother. She was born and raised in Thailand. She came to study in the U.S. in 1984 and continued to work and live in a few U.S. cities, with an interval of three years in London, Ontario, Canada. She is currently an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, responsible for metadata and multicultural services, and is also the subject specialist in Women's and Gender Studies. She has a faculty appointment in Women's and Gender Studies Program at UNL, as well. For her general interests, she is very passionate about Asian/Asian American issues and all women's and gender issues. Her research focus is on human trafficking in the U.S. and worldwide. Her creative forms are dances and poetry. Immersed in the world of Thai classics and modern Thai literature, her first poems were written in Thai in her high school years. She only began to write poems in English about her Thai experiences in 2009, inspired by the works of Bryan Thao Worra, who showed her and others the validity of Southeast Asian experience in the U.S. literary scene. This is her first published poem, based on her fieldwork experience in Northern Thailand.



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