

Kao Yai National Park, Thailand, April 1995

Jewel of the Thai Forest

Two gibbons call nearby.
I listen trying to balance
midstream on mossy stones.
Street shoes are all I have
on this unexpected side trip
to Kao Yai National Park
in the mountains
north of Bangkok.

Wet shoe tops
are covered with leeches.
I've put my pants legs inside my socks
and sprayed with insect repellent,
but the inch-long leeches,
like self-propelled strips of rubber bands,
slip through the shoelace holes.
The wet grass was alive with leeches,
converging like an army of inchworms,
from all directions.

My Thai guide,
an off-duty park ranger
wearing shorts and sandals,
awaits without expression
as I splash ashore
and scramble up the muddy bank.

The agitated gibbons swing
from vine to branch
forty feet above.
Seeking the best vantage point,
we duck low through understory shrubs,
still gazing up.

Glancing down,
a viridian flash
shocks my attention.
There, just above the somber ground,
balancing on two branches,
the iridescent green tree viper
is coiled to strike.

The guide is one step away
looking up
when I push him hard aside.
He sprawls with a grunt
in the mud and dead leaves.
Then, seeing where I point,
he slowly smiles.

