

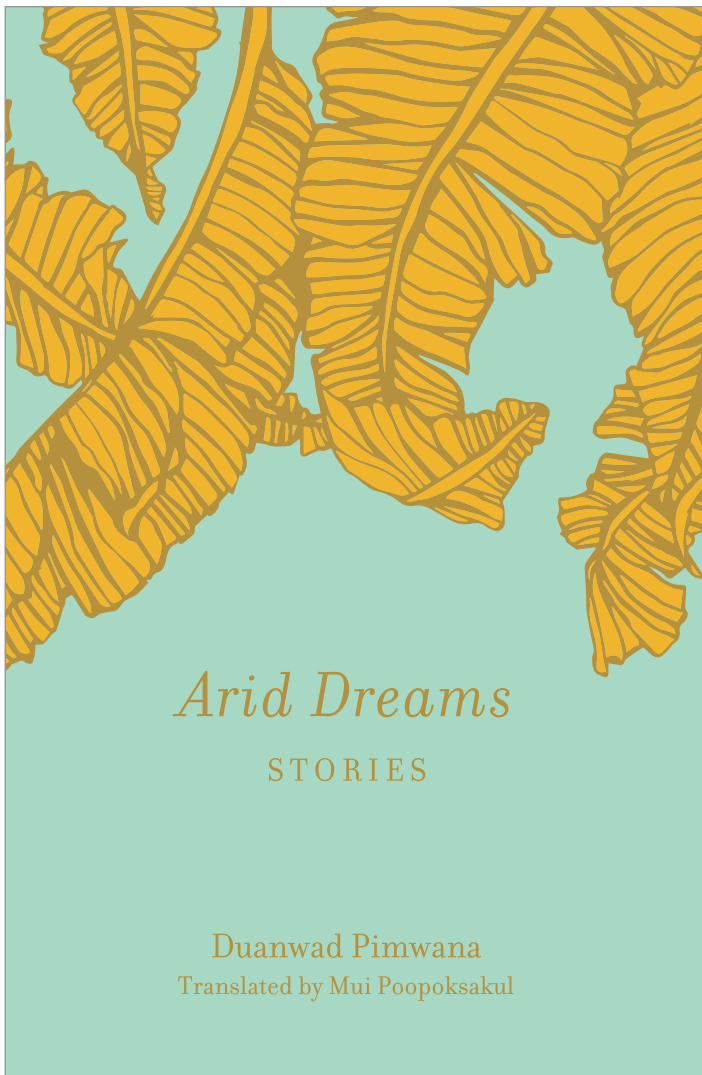
# EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

## ARID DREAMS

DUANWAD PIMWANA | Translated by Mui Poopoksakul

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



**DUANWAD PIMWANA** is the pen name of Pimjai Juklin, who is widely regarded as a significant voice in contemporary Thai literature. She won the S.E.A. Write Award, Southeast Asia’s most prestigious literary prize, for her debut novel *Changsamran* in 2003, and is one of only six women to have won the Thai section of the award. Born to farmer parents, Pimwana attended a vocational school and started off as a journalist at a local newspaper. She published her first short story at the age of twenty and quickly gained recognition, earning awards from PEN International Thailand and the acclaimed Thai literary magazine *Chorkaraket*. English translations of her work have appeared in *Words Without Borders* and *Asymptote*.

**MUI POOPOKSAKUL** is a lawyer-turned-translator with a special interest in contemporary Thai literature. Her first book-length translation *The Sad Part Was*, a short story collection by Prabda Yoon, won a PEN Translates award. Her work has also appeared in literary journals including *Two Lines*, *Asymptote*, *The Quarterly Conversation*, and *In Other Words*. She studied literature as an undergraduate at Harvard College, and holds an MA in cultural translation from the American University of Paris. A native of Bangkok, she currently resides in Berlin.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Hia** (6): a word of respect used for other men, meaning “older brother.”

**Sarong** (9): a large length of fabric wrapped around the waist, mostly worn by men and women in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Brazil, and the Pacific Islands.

**Farang** (10): a generic term for “westerner” or “Caucasian.”

**Jitney** (26): a bus or vehicle carrying passengers for a low fare.

**Rai** (52): a unit of area equal to 1,600 square meters.

**Nepotism** (87): the practice by those with power and influence of favoring relatives and friends, especially by giving them jobs.

**Baht** (100): official currency of Thailand. One US dollar currently equals about 32 baht.

**Manure** (117): animal dung used for fertilization of land.

**Wai** (149): a prayerlike gesture performed with a slight bow, used in Thailand as a standard greeting and a sign of apology, thanks, and respect.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In one way or another, most of the stories in *Arid Dreams* deal with social status and class in Thailand. How do these categories enable and/or restrict the ways that characters think about others? Does gender play a role in the effects of these social stratifications?
2. In “Arid Dreams,” the narrator’s vacation is disrupted by a recurring sense of unease. What are some moments in the story that trigger this feeling for him? What is it about Jiew, her clothing, and her massages that cause the narrator to struggle with his identity?
3. In “The Attendant,” an elevator attendant remembers the time he worked on a farm and became companion to a chick. What does this comparison of occupations suggest about industrialization and labor? In what ways does the chick mirror the narrator’s suffering?
4. In the end of “Men’s Rights,” Wasu says to Boonleau, “After a certain point, you have to allow women the honor of choosing” (84). Think about the title and its significance to the story. In what ways does this statement echo male backlash against the feminist movement and its support for women’s ownership of their own bodies?
5. The narrator of “Within These Walls” realizes that she has been suppressing her desires to accommodate her husband. How does his hospitalization, and subsequent loss of control over his wife, allude to a government’s loss of control over the people it governs—for instance, in a general strike or shutdown?
6. In the story “Sandals,” parents and children clash over discipline. Kui believes his mother is meaner than all others, while his sister Tongjai imagines being someone else. What does the story suggest about the struggles of children subject to their parents’ rule? Do you sympathize with the children, the parents, or both?
7. In “Kanda’s Eyebrows,” the husband’s ugliness is not revealed until the very end of the story. What purpose does this revelation serve in light of feminist values and the conception of beauty?

8. The story “The Doctor” switches between multiple narrative perspectives. What is the significance of these changes in perspective? How does it affect your reading of the story?
9. The stories “Arid Dreams” and “Kanda’s Eyebrows” depict women trapped in bleak situations—one a masseuse in a tourist town, the other in an unhappy marriage. How do they build their lives and find modes of resistance within these given circumstances? What do you think Pimwana is trying to communicate about the effects of patriarchy and misogyny on women’s lives?
10. The ending of each story is open to interpretation, leaving the reader without clear resolution. Characters tend not to obtain the satisfaction they desire. How does the nature of this dissatisfaction relate to the collection’s title? What kind of a reading experience does it create for you?

# NOTES ON EXCERPTS

## Passage 1

conversations, sometimes without a beginning, sometimes without an end, and sometimes without either. But I listen—I *have* to listen. And why is that, when I should be able to listen to what I want to listen to and have the right to avoid everything else? Is it true or an illusion that I have that right, a right that I've been deprived of?

Torn between two identities as a social animal and elevator attendee represents the narrator's double-consciousness

DURING THE MONSOON season, our ears could pick up the sound of storm winds over a hundred *rais* away. The rustling of wild salacca leaves served as the vessel for the sound, sending a warning signal that a storm was coming. In that moment, we would be on high alert, tense down to every pore. We would sprint home as if there were no tomorrow, the fatigue from the day's work in the fields forgotten like it had been wrung out of our limbs. As my little sister and I would run ahead of the pack, our mother would yell from behind, telling us what to put away and do when we got home, and how. The house was far from the fields, but we would run without stopping. Each time, our parents probably prayed that the storm would bypass us or wouldn't be severe enough to blow the crops to the ground and cause damage. But my sister and I found it fun, although we would be dead tired. The wind might arrive first, followed by the rain, or they might arrive together at once, but not a single time did my sister and I ever reach our house before at least one of them hit, run as we did with all our might. Gray clouds would move swiftly from the west. Looking up, I used to think they resembled curtains being drawn over the sky. My sister liked to pretend that she was the one pulling the curtains. She would wait for the clouds to move a little ahead of us, and I would end up having to drag her

the elevator is a country where the narrator is not native, but also not a foreigner.

Different from his job as an elevator attendee b/c this involves communication, is a collective effort, and not a mindless job.

The narrator wants to run away from this monotonous job, which is like a dangerous storm, threatening to harm his sanity.

## NOTES ON EXCERPTS

### Passage 1, continued

along. The raindrops carried along by the storm winds were huge and fell with force. As they lashed down on us, we would feel the sting, urging us to run faster, until we arrived at our destination.

I desperately want to run. If I get to, I promise this run will be like no other in my life. I will pour all my energy into it, go as far as possible, as fast as possible, wearing myself out like never before, letting my mouth get so parched it tastes bitter. Every part of my body would join forces solely for this run. My arms would be rejuvenated, as well as my legs, my blood, and my heart. Every part of my body would come alive so that I could run, run on a path of my own choosing, run far and wide. I want to run without ever turning back. Please, don't let me run only to have to turn back. I'm not an elevator door that opens only to close again, nor am I an elevator user who steps in only to step out—oh, somebody help me, help me be able to run far and wide. Yes, it ought to be far and wide.

The jump from past to present → effectively shows the parallel between pre-pro industrialization of the working class; between manual-hands or agricultural labor to mechanical jobs such as elevator attendee and other monotonous labor.

SPACE IS TIGHT in the elevator, too tight for running or even walking. In such a confined space, one is meant to stand. Considering its shape, the elevator is nothing more than a coffin for the living. People zip into the elevator, all of them with energy in their steps. I get a glimpse of them before they turn their bodies around behind me and face the doors, which close from both sides. Then they stand still and utter their two-word commands at my back. Lifting my right arm, I press the button of the requested floor and watch the green light move through the numbers, flashing upward, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight; flashing downward, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. When the elevator doors

Echoes the greed that accompanies desperation. Ironically, the reader knows that the narrator will tire of running.

Metaphor for coffin, because they barely interact with each other, standing side by side—often touching shoulders—with strangers, mimicking the dead in a graveyard.

## NOTES ON EXCERPTS

### Passage 2

“Yes, I lied to you, even more to myself. Look, I’d hit rock bottom. I’d lost the will to go on, so I revived that silly little dream I’d had as a boy and tried to see it through. For one thing, I pity that poor boy. It’s not like I can’t remember how much he **suffered**, not being able to read the second book and see how it ended. And he never got to build his library. I told myself that if I could **successfully** follow through on this **dream** that had been left unresolved, I would go back and start pursuing my current dream once again.”

Boonsong didn’t succeed because his success would be in confirming that he is a failure.

“Well, you **should be happy that you succeeded**. You’ve found the second book. There’s nothing left unresolved now.”

“But it’s a lie. I told you. It’s all meaningless. I was lying to myself. I fooled myself, fooled you, fooled all kinds of people that it was something important, you know? I acted like getting the second book was a matter of life and death! But do you know why? I’d assumed from the beginning there was no way I’d find that book again, and if I couldn’t find it, that would mean I failed, do you get it? I know you get it. It’s so much easier for me to keep living life as a failure, letting each day go by—like a stray dog. But you—you had to go and actually bring me the second book, **telling me to have faith. How terribly cruel.** What am I supposed to do? In my situation, what could I possibly do?” Boonsong broke into bitter laughter, his body swaying. Face flushed and hair disheveled, he turned to find the waiter and shouted for more alcohol.

Repetition of dreams, success and suffering, relays that the toxicity of the universal meaning of happiness sets a problematic bar of success which many suffer to pursue.

Boonsong believes failure is easier than trying to succeed and having hope, but the consequences of failure are harder than that of success.

The woman looked at him speechless. She wasn’t angry: in his current state, he could hardly keep himself in check. She thought back to the time she’d watched the



## NOTES ON EXCERPTS

### Passage 2, continued

shop for her sister, and, with naive faith, had sold the first book to a boy. That boy had promised that he would return to buy the second book. The memory became clearer as she called it to mind. She remembered how she had then had to buy the second book herself, so as to make her sister think that she had sold the whole set, and after that she had volunteered to watch the store for her sister every day in order to wait for the boy, and wait she did until all the unsold books from that lot had been shipped back. Bitterly, she had had to take the book home. She had kept wondering, didn't he want to know how the story ended? And then she had gone ahead and read it, even though she didn't like to read. She had read it to get even with that boy. He would never learn what became of the characters, how the story ended. He would never know—but she would, and in her head she had compared their predicaments: Who suffered more, a person who knew only the first half of a story or a person who knew only the last?

How childish, the woman thought, smiling to herself. She recalled how she had kept telling herself that she didn't want to know the backstories of the characters, had kept stamping out the urge to go look for the first book so she could read it, and had kept fooling herself that she wasn't suffering because of it. But whether that boy suffered, how could she have known? It was possible he had somehow gotten his hands on the second book and read it, and that was the reason he hadn't returned. She had vowed to put the whole ordeal behind her by hiding the book somewhere in the house out of sight. Eventually, she had completely forgotten about it, for a long, long time, until today. Suddenly that boy had

A constant / waiting for success and a feeling of content. A commentary on the nature of humans, as they are always waiting for a calm/content awakening.

They both suffered, Boonsong not knowing the end and the woman not knowing the beginning. If time is a line or even a circle, both ends must meet somewhere.

In a way, what this woman was in the past is what Boonsong is currently; Boonsong and this woman mirror each other.

## ABOUT THE FEMINIST PRESS

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