

## Question to the Sky

Review of Experiences in the Thai Political World through Art Exhibitions

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*(Received: 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2024; Revised: 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2024; Accepted: 29<sup>th</sup> October 2024)*

### Sky beyond Geography and the Drop Image

More than two decades ago, when I was an undergraduate geography student, I was part of a group that reveled in field excursions, diligently memorizing the topography, flora, and atmosphere, particularly the formations of various types of clouds. I found joy in looking up at the sky, akin to the exhilaration of standing atop a mountaintop and gazing down at the vast expanse of forest below. This does not account for the countless explorations I undertook alone. What I share here is not a display of expertise; rather, it is an introspective reflection. In truth, my friends often remarked that I led them astray, even when equipped with maps, compasses, and modern tools, as if there were an enigma in my navigation system that eluded both them and me. After much contemplation, I find myself now tracing the remnants of those experiences and offering insights that have emerged over time.

I find greater satisfaction in the details uncovered along the way than in merely reaching the destination. To put it simply, the journey itself becomes the goal; I can revel in walking and traveling indefinitely. For me, walking and traveling signify much more than the act of moving from one locale to another; they embody pivotal “moments” intertwined with space, environment, and the formation of my unique set of experiences. In our modern society, the concept of “time” is paramount, laden with value and worth. We often construe time as a tool to regulate productive activities. Many endeavor to harness technology to accelerate production within the confines of a fixed temporal framework. Yet, what do we make of walking and traveling that disregard time and destination, instead celebrating the essence of “moments”? These acts allow our lives to flow through diverse spaces, existing in a transient state as we traverse each unique environment. What does it feel like to emerge from this existence? Beyond geography and atmosphere, artistic performance serves as one of the spheres that elicits such profound moments.

On April 2, I had the opportunity to visit Nipan Olarniwet’s exhibition, titled **F a l l**, at Jing Jai Gallery in Chiang Mai. I chose to arrive a little before the gallery opened, sitting intently in front of the entrance. As a viewer, I generally prefer to avoid attending art openings—often overwhelmed by the stimulating atmosphere, I find it difficult to concentrate on the artist’s work. Having followed Nipan’s work for some time, I believe it is best experienced slowly and thoughtfully, especially during the gallery’s quiet opening hours. In those moments, it is just us and the artwork facing one another, a deeply personal encounter that defies conventional norms for viewing art.

Nipan’s **F a l l** exhibition unfolds through four significant elements. Upon opening the door and stepping inside, I was greeted by a large, elevated space—no more than a foot high—

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covered with small wooden planks resembling those found in rural areas. From a distance, the uneven surfaces of these wooden boards scattered across the space appeared almost chaotic. Yet, as I approached, I noticed that each plank held a transparent button no larger than two centimeters, each containing a photograph within. Hundreds of these buttons dotted the floor, reminiscent of droplets of water scattered about.



Figure 1: An image of drops resembling rain of memories, but at times they look like tears

As someone who is becoming farsighted and starting to experience vision issues, I crawled on the ground to examine each photo, occasionally removing my glasses and utilizing the magnifying glass application on my phone for assistance. Each photo was unique, showcasing a diverse array of subjects: temple halls, Chinese characters, tree roots, landscapes, small plants, red stars, various fruits, and individuals engaged in different activities, among them images of historical political events, English letters proclaiming “do it,” and the plaque of the People’s Party or the constitution. These photo plaques seemed largely unrelated, likely drawn from various contexts. Some were in black and white, others in color, while some appeared to be old internet finds. Despite their eclectic nature, I found joy in crawling around, especially when I recognized a repeated photo.

Eventually, I felt a twinge in my back, prompting me to stretch and shift to the second exhibition area adjacent to the first. My thoughts lingered on the drops as I entered this next space, which was positioned at a lower level, almost level with the gallery’s walkway. Standing at the edge of the raised platform, marked by a sign that prohibited entry, I gazed down comfortably at the artwork. Before me lay an expansive depiction of the sky, with white clouds sprawling across the floor, slightly smaller than the wide platform that housed them. Nipan skillfully manipulated the viewer’s perception; while we had previously focused on minute details in each droplet, this section of his work invited us to adopt a broader perspective.

The clouds Nipan painted resembled low-lying formations, heavy with moisture and characterized by turbulent air currents—often seen in the morning. If I’m not mistaken, these clouds could be classified as stratocumulus, a common type we are accustomed to. Amidst the clouds, I noticed small letters that read: “Then one morning they were found dead and hanged.”

Admittedly, the letters were not entirely clear upon my first glance—perhaps due to my vision issues or Nipan’s clever play on viewer perception. Yet, upon reading the phrase, I was instantly transported back to the haunting memory of the two electricians found hanged at the Red Gate (ประตูแดง) in Nakhon Pathom Province during the “Right Kills Left Era”, just prior to the October 6, 1976 incident. The “they” referred to were Mr. Wichai Ketsriphongsa and Mr. Chumphon Thummai. This piece was initially showcased at the Ubon Agenda art festival in 2020, with Thanom Chapakdee as the visionary behind it. Regrettably, I did not have the chance to attend during that time.

In that vast sky, Nipan has captured the narrative of politics. While the climate and atmosphere are in a constant state of flux, his artwork renders the letters enduring, unhindered by clouds or obscured beneath the heavens. Instead of looking up, Nipan invites us to peer down at the sky, transforming it into an ordinary yet profound expanse beneath our feet. This inverted perspective allows us to uncover certain truths with greater clarity.

This is not a low sky, my friends.

Yet, humanity cannot remain indifferent to its dignity.

When the sky holds the same value as life,

we inevitably witness the marks of shame etched upon its surface.

*(From the author's exhibition visit log, April 2, 2024)*

## Experience

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 - 1911), a pioneering German phenomenological and interpretive philosopher, made an intriguing observation: the existence of reality emerges from consciousness, which is shaped and informed by experience (Dilthey, 1976: 161). In this context, it becomes fascinating to contemplate the ways we observe or overlook aspects of our society. This phenomenon may not stem from mere concealment, but rather from a set of experiences that individuals accumulate and construct within their life world. These experiences contribute to a sense of indifference or a duality of seeing and not seeing, particularly regarding themes like death or the insensitivity toward others' suffering.

Experience, or *Erlebnis* in Dilthey's terminology, tends toward the manifestation of life through various elements—events, times, or stories that are lived through. Thus, experience serves as a fundamental basis for understanding his concept of the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) as a worldview or *Weltanschauung*. Experience not only allows us to comprehend or perceive the world but also acts as a means of bridging the distance we maintain from it. It transforms us into an integral part of a world that moves, breathes, perceives, and is perceived, while simultaneously necessitating a separation from that world to interpret and understand it, effectively propelling the world into motion. For Dilthey, experience cannot be merely divided into dichotomies of feeling versus reason; rather, it consists of a diluted reason infused with feelings, emotions, awareness, and future expectations. Therefore, human experience embodies the essence of life itself, realized through encounters with the world. However, the

horizon of our experiences can limit the expression of our humanity. Dilthey contends that transcending or breaking through this narrow horizon of experience can be achieved by reinterpreting expressions (Dilthey, 1976: 30).

Nipan's artworks resonate with this philosophy. His work compels us to embrace a new array of experiences—whether by looking down at the sky or crawling to examine closely each droplet of imagery scattered across the ground. These seemingly contradictory actions encourage us to scrutinize our perceptions and connections with the world around us. Yet, breaking free from one's horizon of experience is no simple task; human experience inherently traverses and absorbs various ideologies. It can simultaneously reproduce beliefs blindly while reflecting the power dynamics present in society. The aesthetic power of this exhibition transcends mere beauty or a straightforward reflection of reality. It strives to reorient perception, granting viewers the chance to fill gaps and dismantle the partitions within their horizons to uncover new experiences. Admittedly, we cannot anticipate that an exhibition will fully transform experiences or open the viewers' eyes; however, the act of challenging one's horizon remains a crucial process. It allows individuals to step beyond their self-imposed confines, forging connections with the experiences of others. In doing so, it reveals that each person's life experiences share common characteristics, contributing to the identity that shapes our actions and reactions (Dilthey, 2002: 216-217). This unity of life experiences represents one of the profound desires expressed in Nipan's art exhibition.

As someone intrigued by the atmosphere, I find the connection between the art of dripping and the sky to be compelling, albeit in a peculiar way. Typically, rain, a form of precipitation, descends in a vertical relationship from the atmosphere above to the ground, where it eventually evaporates into water vapor and returns to the sky. In contrast, Nipan's representation of the sky is horizontal, while each drop of art resembles raindrops. This juxtaposition raises questions in my mind: where do these artistic droplets originate? From what experiences and lives of ordinary people do they emerge? If Nipan does not preserve them, will they evaporate and vanish?

Moreover, if we fail to begin collecting and acknowledging our own life experiences, could our identities also dissipate one day? This concern feels particularly acute in a society where the atmosphere often lacks brightness, especially in Thailand. If these drops of art indeed fall from the lives of ordinary people, then I am grateful to Nipan for helping to preserve the sweat and tears encapsulated in those moments when their experiences fell.

### **The bodies and Memorial to the Dead**

How are experience and memory intertwined? This is a question I have grappled with while exploring Wilhelm Dilthey's writings. While it is evident that the shattering of the horizon of experience plays a significant role in questioning various powers and ideologies in life, such disruptions are likely to leave behind residues and traces. Our memories can be seen as the sedimentation of past experiences that never truly fade away. In this context, shared experiences tend to cultivate shared memories. However, a more complex question arises: can shared memories of specific objects and events facilitate the creation of shared experiences?

Nipan Olarniwet's exhibition, *fall*, at Jing Jai Gallery in Chiang Mai, exemplifies this inquiry. Alongside depictions of expansive skies and clouds, one corner of the exhibition showcases works directly related to the theme of "Red Gate."

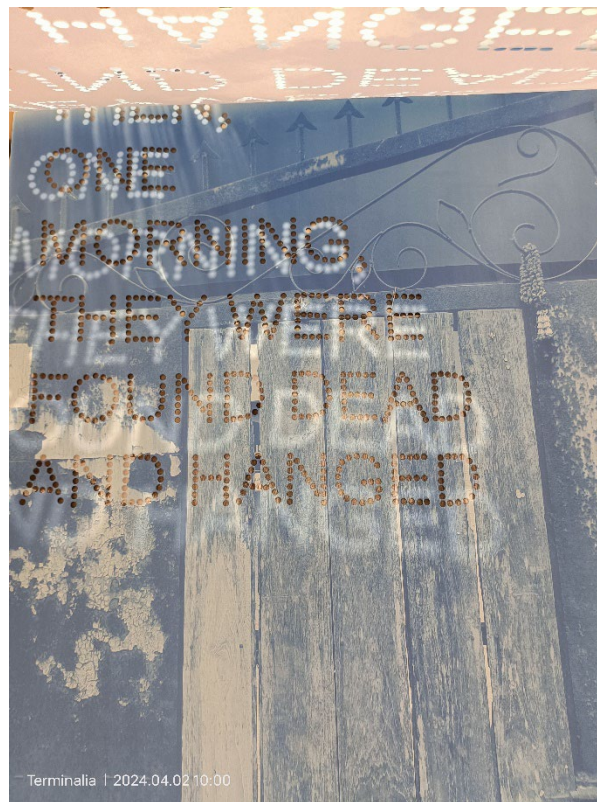


Figure 2: Then one morning they were found dead and hanged

For those familiar with Thai political history, the term "Red Gate" evokes a haunting memory: it is the very gate where Mr. Wichai Ketsriphongsa and Mr. Chumphon Thummai were found hanging, in a secluded area of Sam Yaek Krabue Phuek in Nakhon Pathom Province (สามแยกกระเบื้องเฟือก จ.นครปฐม). These two individuals had protested against the return of Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, and their grim fate transformed the once-ordinary gate into a symbol marred by time and rust, ultimately earning its notorious moniker. Their deaths, reported in the newspapers on September 24, 1976, became emblematic of political violence in Thailand, largely serving as the prototype for the haunting imagery that followed in a political play presented by students at Thammasat University on October 5, 1976. The portrayal of one actor as a corpse ignited a dangerous justification for the far-right factions at the time, facilitating the subsequent persecution of political dissidents. This event was compounded by the tragic association of their images with the Crown Prince's likeness, leading to widespread violence against students and activists.

The violence of that era did not merely result in untimely deaths; the bodies of the victims were subjected to unimaginable brutality—hanging, sexual assault, beating, and even impalement (Weerapong, 2018; Thotsapol, 2022; Amnesty International Thailand, 2021).

From the corpses at the Red Gate to the stage representations of lifeless bodies, and the numerous victims of violence at Thammasat University, it appears that Thai society has become desensitized to death and brutality. These occurrences seem alarmingly normalized, as if such horrors can unfold at any moment. The status of these corpses and lifeless bodies becomes central to the questions posed in this article, bridging my reflections to contemporary anthropological inquiries about death. Specifically, I seek to understand the corpse from a perspective that transcends mere ritualistic or cultural interpretations.

In this vein of inquiry, the corpse emerges as a weighty symbol imbued with power and agency, despite its lifelessness. This holds particular significance for bodies associated with political death: the corpse is immediately entangled with issues of interpretation and meaning (see Engelke, 2019 for more discussions on this topic). A pertinent case study is that of Vladimir Lenin, the theorist, revolutionary, and first leader of the Soviet Union. After his death in 1924, his corpse was displayed in a manner that ensured recognition as the body of Lenin, the revered leader of the Soviet state. This presentation raises crucial questions. The display of “Lenin’s body” serves as a veneer, masking the complexities inherent to the funeral process, which encompasses scientific, medical, and preservation efforts, as well as the use of inorganic substances. Consequently, the organic body of Lenin becomes increasingly estranged from the life he once led. Scholars who have explored this phenomenon in depth assert that Lenin’s body transcends being merely “his body.” Rather, the spectacle is an assertion of sovereign power, a means to solidify state authority that continues to exert influence long after his death (Yurchak, 2015).

If the case study of Soviet society feels distant, we can draw parallels to experiences within Thai society, particularly exemplified by the royal funeral ceremonies held at Sanam Luang. Amidst the grandeur of craftsmanship, the sovereign’s body is presented alongside a spectrum of emotions, especially the public expression of grief. In this context, the body is not merely a physical entity; it embodies social and political significance that seems impervious to decay. Time appears unable to diminish the intensity of the life represented, reinforcing a seemingly eternal presence.

Nipan's work on the Red Gate is striking in its simplicity. Rather than depicting the bodies of the two young men, it features only a garland hanging quietly. Nipan chooses to focus on the Red Gate itself, steering clear of old photographs that show the grim scene of hanging bodies. As Thanavi Chotipradit notes in an insightful article, the Red Gate serves as an essential historical landmark and a monument commemorating the lives of Mr. Wichai and Mr. Chumphon, who met their tragic fate there (Thanavi, 2019). From this perspective, while the Red Gate may appear to be just an object, it carries a profound connection to the political violence that claimed the lives of these individuals, transforming it into a “memorial to the dead.”

Every time we gaze upon the Red Gate, we perceive layers of meaning beyond its corroded iron and rust. This abandoned gate in Nakhon Pathom Province resonates with the bodies that suffered violence during the events at Thammasat University, as well as the countless others who fell victim to the state's actions. Nipan, as an artist, astutely understands the significance of these objects, approaching their representation with meticulous care.



His installation resembles an old paper calendar, its dimensions roughly equivalent to an A0 sheet, “hung” at eye level, thus inviting viewers to engage with it easily. The first sheet features a vivid sky and clouds—an arresting focus of the exhibition—along with the stenciled text: “Then one morning they were found dead and hanged.” When we peer beyond the sky, we encounter a black-and-white image of a red gate, through which light filters, illuminating the text underneath. For me, this simplicity carries a profound emotional impact. The interplay of light and shadow, combined with the stark imagery, evokes a sense of both loss and memory, urging us to confront the historical weight that the Red Gate symbolizes.



Figure 3: Sky of Murder

### question to the sky

In general, the sky profoundly influences our perception of existence within both the physical and social realms. On one hand, we are drawn to the brightness that shines down from the sky, which illuminates our surroundings and enhances our awareness of the world. The vivid blue of the sky and the whiteness of the clouds can evoke feelings of inspiration, enabling us to envision ourselves and our place within that world. On the other hand, there is a simultaneous awareness of the sky’s vastness, creating a sense of distance that makes it feel unattainable. This relationship between the sky and humanity is marked by a duality of closeness and distance—a paradox that is ever-present.

When we seek to question the existence of the sky, we often find ourselves feeling uneasy. The Earth, enveloped by the sky, represents our safest refuge. The phrase “don’t pull the sky down” conveys more than a simple admonition against engaging with lofty aspirations; it serves as a warning against disrupting the social structures and dominant ideologies that govern our lives. In an academic context, these warnings often manifest not merely as words but as actions, frequently enacted through violence.

A poignant example of this can be seen in the political witch-hunts that ensued following the death of King Rama IX. During this tumultuous period, those who sought to uphold the existing societal order directed their aggression toward political dissidents (Unno, 2016; Schaffar and Naruemon, 2019).

Metaphorically, the sky's brightness, proximity, and seemingly accessible nature can obscure the underlying political tragedies and violence. In this light, the majesty of the sky may serve as a veil—an illusion that conceals the darker realities of societal oppression and the brutal consequences of maintaining the status quo. Nipan's work, seemingly devoid of content, invites us to invert our perspective and uncover hidden realities. The light that filters through the apertures plays a crucial role, allowing the audience to inscribe a historical note upon the red door: "Then one morning they were found dead and hanged." These inscribed letters, though temporary—formed solely by the light cascading through the holes in the sky—forge a vital connection between viewers and the violent chapters of Thai political history.

This act of turning the sky over creates new experiences for us. The angle of light and the distortion of the letters on the red door serve to animate the object, embedding its meaning within our lived experience. Importantly, this reminds us that without effort and initiative, we risk remaining blind to the harsh realities that the sky obscures. Some might argue that I am imbuing the beauty of art with excessive political weight, a judgment that ultimately hinges on individual perspectives.

From my time following Nipan's work, I have observed that he "plays" with various objects in subtle yet profound ways. In this context, "play" transcends mere enjoyment; it encompasses a meticulous crafting of expertise for both himself and the viewer through seemingly simple forms. Nipan's Red Gate and Blue Sky resonate with texts beyond his artwork, establishing relationships that go beyond intertextuality. Instead, they weave meanings that blur the lines between the living and the inanimate. This ontological perception embodies a continuous interplay between material and immaterial forms, intricately bound to the political and social contexts that both surround and sustain them (Mueggler, 2018). Viewed through this lens, the Red Gate, the corpse, sovereign power, and the violence inflicted upon the corpse emerge as interconnected elements. In the moment I turned my gaze toward the blue sky depicted in this piece, I felt an undeniable pull toward a profound realization, drawn in by the interplay of light and shadow. I yearn to articulate this discovery in its entirety, yet I find myself hesitant, fearing that over-explanation might diminish the rawness of my initial emotions.

In the context of Thai society, the lofty ideals of heaven and the reality of death share similarities; both are constructed to evoke a belief in impermanence that needs neither doubt nor questioning. Curiosity often devolves into gossip, confined to private spheres, while the establishment of hegemony through death manifests in the public realm—expressed through rituals and offerings that involve lifeless bodies of political dissidents sacrificed by the state.

On one hand, the case of the Red Gate and the deceased within the Thammasat University compound, along with the deaths of figures such as Mr. Nuamthong Praiwan<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Nuamthong Praiwan (Thai: นวมทอง ไพรวัดย์; RTGS: Nuamthong Phraiwan; October 21, 1946 – October 31, 2006) was a Thai taxi driver known for his dramatic act of protest following the military coup in Thailand in 2006. He drove his taxi into a military tank as a statement against the coup. Tragically, he was later discovered hanging from a pedestrian footbridge. Authorities found a suicide note and subsequently classified his death as a suicide. Praiwan's actions garnered recognition and praise from various democracy advocates who viewed him as a symbol of resistance against military rule



Mr. Amphon Tangnoppakul (Ah Kong)<sup>2</sup>, Mai Nueng K. Kunttee<sup>3</sup>, and most recently Ms. Netiporn Sanesangkhom (Bung)<sup>4</sup>, serve as stark witnesses to the violence exercised by sovereign power through the body. Their corpses have become “correctional bodies,” utilized as warnings—a means of compelling subjugation to an authority that looms like an unreachable sky.

Conversely, these individuals courageously affirm their own bodies as battlegrounds, claiming mastery over their existence. Scholarly studies exploring the dynamics between the body and contemporary sovereign power converge on a fundamental point: sovereignty over one's own body is paramount. This sovereignty extends beyond life itself, encompassing the right to choose the moment and manner of one's death, free from the state's imposition over our bodies in death (Buchbinder, 2018; Bernstein, 2019). The dead bodies of these individuals represent “people's bodies,” each carrying distinct meanings and interpretations of sovereignty.

How, then, do we inscribe the stories of these deceased? Do we recognize them as the bodies of prisoners or as those of the people? The crux of these inquiries lies in the connection between ourselves and the deaths of others. Nipan's work transforms the coldness of the iron door into a dim yet pulsating link to death and the lives of many more individuals who have perished. The inscription of light filtering through the fractured sky into the phrase “Then one morning they were found dead and hanged” turns the memorial for these deceased bodies into a vehicle for rejuvenating truth.

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<sup>2</sup> Amphon Tangnoppakul (Thai: อำพล ตั้งนพกุล; RTGS: Amphon Tangnoppakul; January 1, 1948 – May 8, 2012), popularly known in Thailand as Ah Kong (อาคง; meaning 'grandpa') and in English as Uncle SMS, was a Thai citizen who gained notoriety after being accused of sending four SMS messages deemed offensive to the King and Queen of Thailand. These messages were in violation of Section 112 of the Criminal Code of Thailand, which addresses lèse majesté, as well as related computer crime laws. In November 2011, Tangnoppakul was found guilty on four counts and sentenced by the Criminal Court to four consecutive five-year prison terms, totaling twenty years. His death in prison during the first year of his sentence drew widespread national and international criticism, sparking significant public discourse regarding Thailand's lèse majesté laws and their implications for free speech and human rights.

<sup>3</sup> “Mai Nueng K. Kunttee” (Thai: ไม่นิ่ง ก.กุนที; RTGS: Mai Nueng K. Kunttee; November 1969 – April 2014) is the pen name of Kamol Duangphasuk, who was the owner of the Duck Poet's Society, a duck rice and noodle shop. He gained recognition for his political poetry published in Matichon Sudsapda and other magazines from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Originally from Amphawa in Samut Songkhram Province, he graduated with a bachelor's degree from the Faculty of Education at Silpakorn University. Kamol's extensive body of work critically examines the search for meaning and value of life under an authoritarian regime. He was an outspoken opponent of the military coup in Thailand and became active on the Red Shirt stage, where he wrote powerful poetry advocating for democracy. This earned him titles such as “People's Poet” and “Red Shirt Poet.” His notable works, including the poem “Prachathip Pitak Thai,” were inspired by figures like Nuamthong Praiswan and continue to resonate with audiences today. Tragically, Mai Nueng K. Kunttee was shot and killed in the heart of Bangkok on April 23, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Netiporn Sanesangkhom (Thai: เนติพร เสน่ห์สังคม; August 8, 1995 – May 14, 2024), commonly known as Bung (bung), was a prominent Thai political activist dedicated to advocating for monarchy reform. In 2020, Bung emerged as a leader of a monarchy reform group called Thaluwang (meaning “break through the palace”). Her activism resulted in multiple criminal charges, including lèse majesté charges. During her detention, Bung and fellow detainees protested the Thai justice system by undertaking a hunger strike, which took a severe toll on her health. They demanded reforms in the justice system and the cessation of imprisonments for political dissenters. Bung's first hunger strike began in June 2022 and lasted for 64 days. Following her detention in January 2024, she initiated another hunger strike on January 27. Tragically, Bung passed away on May 14, 2024, due to sudden cardiac arrest at Thammasat University Hospital after being transferred from the Central Women's Correctional Institution. Over the course of her activism, she endured a total of 109 days of temporary detention from the onset of her hunger strike protest to her untimely death.

This act serves as a wake-up call for the living, urging us to acknowledge the inevitability of death beneath the vast sky. It reframes deceased bodies from mere symbols of oppression to embodiments of freedom and the original will of those lives. In this shared space, our souls converge with theirs, reminding us that they are, in essence, still alive.

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