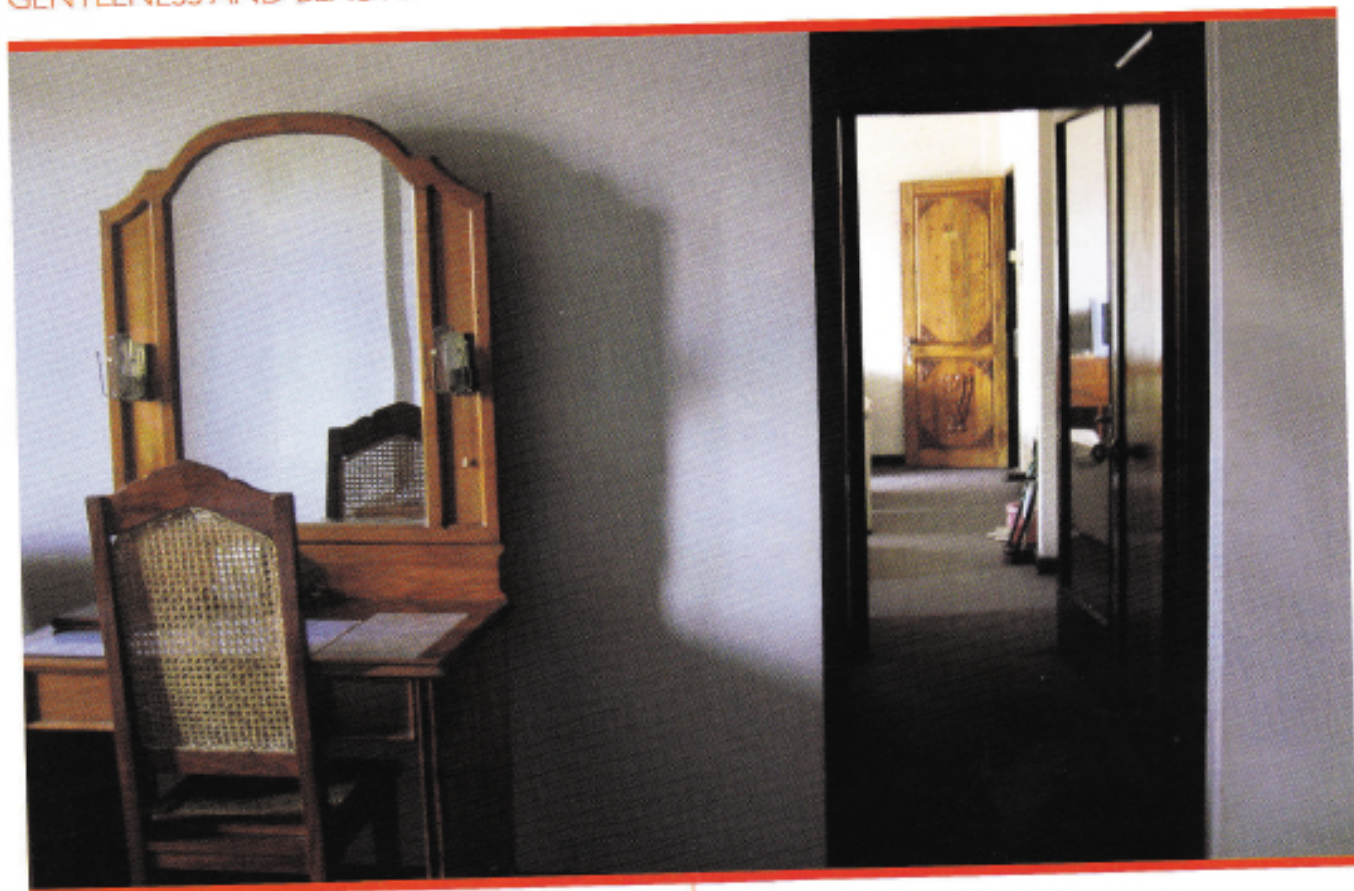


THOMPSON SEEMED TO SOMEHOW FIT  
IN LAOS' BENIGHTED STRANGENESS,  
GENTLENESS AND BEAUTY



spent time together going around Vientiane.

"I had been filing quite relentlessly from there for some weeks," Alderman told me, recalling those days. "I had, of course, heard of him. As I recall, he said that he was finishing up a major Vietnam piece and then intended to turn his attention to Laos. But I'm not sure how intense that attention was. Most of the time, as I recall, he spent trying to score the 'finest weed ever produced on the planet,' and he seemed to be quite successful."

"At the time, Vientiane was very much an open city. The bar girls still plied their trade nightly at the White Rose which Peter Kann [a *Wall Street Journal* reporter] and I closed up some weeks later, the girls going across the river to Thailand the next morning, really marking the end of the Royalist regime in Laos and the arrival in power of the Pathet Lao. For a price, and Hunter did seem quite flush at the time, there was very little that was not obtainable. Then, as I recall, Hunter vanished as suddenly and mysteriously as he arrived."

In May, 1975, only a few weeks after Thompson departed, the Vientiane government fell to the Pathet Lao. The communists isolated the country from the West and

tens of thousands of Laotians and ethnic group members were sent to prisons and re-education camps.

Of all the American writers of his generation, Thompson seemed somehow to fit in Laos' benighted strangeness, gentleness and beauty. He saw its final days, when the country had so little—only its simplicity—and lost so much.

Thompson despised and raged against dark forces wherever he found them. In the following decades, repression ruled in Laos, but a few things stayed the same. The next morning, as I ventured out of the Lan Xang, I learned that drugs, as always, were everywhere in Vientiane, in spite of the Communist government or maybe because of it.

The taxi driver turned around, grinning.

"You want ganja?"

"No ganja," I said. "Too dizzy."

He nodded, appearing to understand.

"Opium?" he asked. ●

Roy Hamric is a writer who lives in Chiang Mai, Thailand.