

For Colleen McCullough

by Brian Michael Barbeito

She was reading *The Thorn Birds*. Always on her side, in a pink cotton housecoat. The Buddha rested on his side. And drank milk. We drank plenty of milk, but, being Catholic, didn't know anything about Buddha. I would sit there. Piles of books were around. I didn't read them. I used to just go out to the balcony and watch the sea. Sometimes small planes would float by. Boats in the sky. It wasn't until a long time afterwards that I found out there was a minor airport close to that area. There were palm trees all around and in the evenings colored pot lights would shine up along the length of the trees. If it would rain, there was usually wind. The wetness and the wind, a pair of natural mischief makers, continually startled the palm leaves. When it was night I would watch to the sounds of the storms and when it was day I would watch amidst the silence of the powerful sun. Not much happened there but it made the small things appear significant. There was the time a snake was hiding in the stairwell and everyone gathered around but nobody knew what to do. There were the overcast afternoons during which we lit firecrackers and put them in pipes that launched them into the vacant and good abyss sky. Mostly I remember her reading *The Thorn Birds*. She never said so, but I could tell she was happiest in those moments, amidst those pages, inside of that book.

