



Winter 2021

passager



APRIL 2020

Stuffing the mouth of my mind with blossoms
whose pink is so pale it's not seen but breathed,
clutching the cuticle of moon before
it's lost in a blue no pigment could produce,
I'm ravenous for this day as I lace
my way across the street and back to avoid
fellow humans in this new dispensation.
The same route each day is a time lapse film –
clots of buds become blooms become clouds
on my shoulders. Strange, this hunger
for souvenirs of the morning. Why do I try
to record tough violets stuffed in sidewalk cracks,
a man lifting his old dog up the stairs,
the window where the blue pitcher never moves?

Katherine Williams

PATHUMTHANI TALES

Dian Seidel

First Morning Chorus

Our class looks like a little platoon. The tiny children stand, arm's distance apart, toes lined up on a seam in the playground's artificial turf. Each kindergartner is in uniform – plaid shorts or skirt and blue shirt. Each shirt has a child's name embroidered on the right breast, which will make our first day at Pathumthani Prep a little easier. Some stare, some smile shyly, at my husband Steve and me, their new teachers.

Teacher Mahalia, the head teacher, calls, "Ivy and Panit, come to the flagpole." A tallish girl with long braids and a stout little round-faced boy excitedly reach up to take the rope. With her remote control, Teacher Mahalia turns on her boom box and plays a recording of the Thai national anthem. It is 8 a.m., and at this moment similar scenes are playing out at schools across the kingdom, where loyalty to country and king are taught from birth.

The opening chords bring the children to attention, as all eyes focus on the red, white, and blue striped flag rising up the pole. Ivy and the older children know most of the words, while the younger ones, including Panit, sway and nod in time with the music.

Teacher Mahalia looks at the nodders, throws her shoulders back and holds her head still, in an effort to get the children to do the same. Most get the message, but she needs to place her hands on two-year-old Panit's shoulders to straighten his posture and help him settle. Will standing at attention suffice for Steve and me? Or will we need to sing

like the older kids? I make a mental note to find a transliteration of the words to the anthem.

The next song is also in Thai. Based on the rousing chorus, and the repetition of the only Thai words I recognize in the lyrics, our school's name, this must be our alma mater song.

Steve's expression, a combination of amazement and concern, mirrors my reaction. According to the schedule Teacher Mahalia has created, we will lead the morning assembly starting next week. How will we learn these songs, and whatever others come next? Will we rely on four-year-old Ivy to lead the singing?

But the next number boosts our confidence. *Baby shark, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo!* Who would have guessed that being baseball fans would be good training for morning assembly at an English immersion school in Thailand? Inexplicably, the Washington Nationals have adopted *Baby Shark* as a rallying song, so we have the lyrics and hand gestures down pat. It's a catchy little tune – actually too catchy. It will stick in our heads all day.

The next few songs, some familiar, some not, are also in English. Learning lyrics won't be tough, but each one is choreographed, with accompanying sign language. A favorite seems to be *Let's Do the Pinocchio*, a body-parts vocabulary builder, with the kids dancing around like little marionettes. Most of the kids know the steps and gestures better than the lyrics. Ivy knows them all by heart.

Teacher Mahalia clicks for one last song. A slow, sweet melody fills the air, and, on this cue, all the children sit down. I'm impressed with their posture – no one is slouching, and their little legs are folded into beautiful lotus poses. The music swells, and the children take in a deep, audible breath. Their hands move as if to guide the air toward their faces, which grow visibly calmer as they sing,

*I'm breathing in
I'm breathing out
As flowers bloom*

A dozen pairs of little hands form petals, slowly rotate, and rise.

*The mountains high
The rivers sigh
The air that I breathe
I fly*

I watch little chests rise and fall with alternating lines of the song, as the verse repeats. At an instrumental interlude, the children gently cover their faces and turn their gazes inward. The gesture brings a flash of memory from my childhood – my grandmother is covering her face while chanting the blessing over glowing Sabbath candles. This moment in the sun on the playground seems almost as sacred.

Teacher Mahalia has the children line up to go inside. Without the turf seam as a guide, the line lacks discipline. Panit runs ahead to the classroom door, and Steve dashes to catch him. I look up to see the Thai flag in the hazy sky lift in a soft breeze and marvel at the idea of morning meditation for kindergarten. A little finger taps the back of my hand. It is Ivy.

“I think you like to sing, don’t you?” I ask.

“Oh yes I do, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo,” she assures me.

I take her hand. “What else do you think we’ll be learning today?”

MARMALADE

Old maids, widows, the disgruntled
need this cheerful, slithering preserve.
More peel the better.
Pulp finds a secret channel to luxuriate in,
behind the central throat, slightly
to the left, above compartments
in the deflated heart, below the amygdala.

Yes, he left you – Yes, he died,
Stood you up, maybe at the altar –
Yes, the boss patronizes,
You didn't get the promotion –
nothing the serpentine
drizzling of the bitter
sweet orange can't minimize.

Sugar lifts cheekbones,
its smoothness,
the pulse.
All the slivers of rind
sing to hoist your solar plexus.

Wendy Hoffman

AFTER NINE DARK MONTHS AND WAITING FOR THE SPOTLIGHT

I was born with thumbs in my ears,
crooked eyes, a wagging tongue,

and bulbous nose. Twenty others
followed me out. We stacked

ourselves into a pyramid
and planted the doctor's mask

on its peak. We dismounted
to cheers, ran down corridors,

and jumped in bassinets
with steering wheels and ignition

keys dangling from the roofs.
We drove to the leather shop

for diapers and booties,
then to the Milk and Gerber's Bar.

The bartender proofed us
to ensure we were underage.

No one had a certificate
of birth except for Willy.

He was kicked out and we ran
up quite the tab. We burped,

farted, cried, and fell asleep.
We woke to cops with warrants

for our arrest. They sentenced us
to life in twenty unfamiliar homes.

I don't know about Willy and the gang,
but me, I'm busting out and going

back to from where I came to find
my birth certificate and my name.

Ain't no sense in being a clown
without a circus to call your home.

Tom Holmes

CHICKEN SOUP

Mark Harris

“*Cómasela comida!*”

Rose gazes at the plate of runny eggs and potatoes. Nauseated, she pushes the food away.

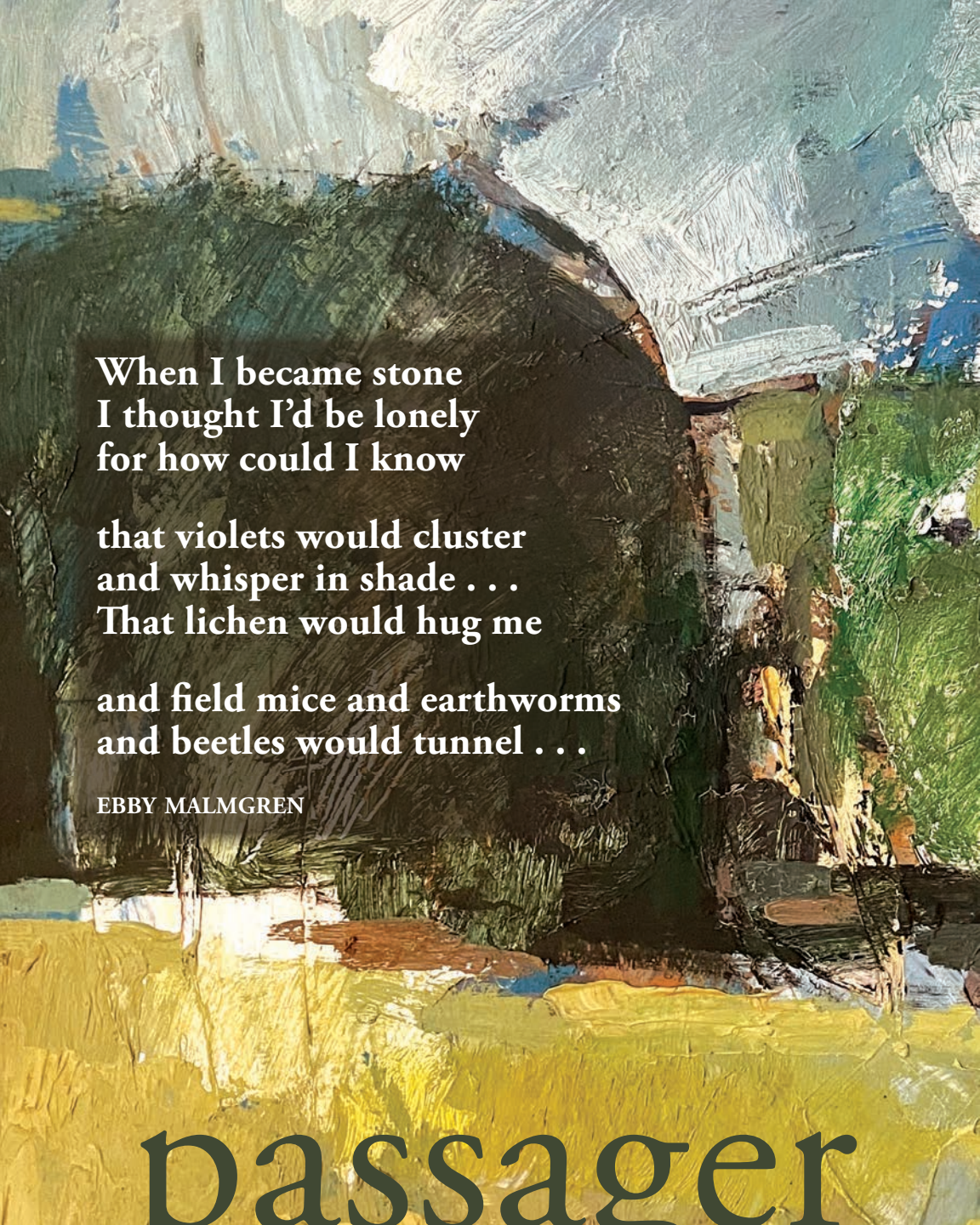
Amelia gently nudges the plate in front of her *patrona*. “Eat!” she repeats, this time in English. “You must eat!”

Rose ignores her plea and shoves the plate back again.

“I made the eggs just the way you like them,” Amelia entreats in Spanish, although she knows that Rose probably doesn’t understand. It wouldn’t make any difference if she spoke in English or if Rose wore her hearing aid. She only hears what she wants. “Breakfast is important,” Amelia continues in Spanish. “You know what they say: ‘Eat a big breakfast, a bigger lunch, and a light dinner and you will live a long life.’”

At 88, Rose has lived long enough. “You eat!” she snaps and thrusts the plate across the kitchen table to her Salvadoran aide. Even though Amelia’s already had breakfast, she picks up a fork and dutifully begins to eat what she cooked for Rose this morning. It’s a sin to let food go to waste. She thinks of the many days there were only tortillas and salt in Chalatenango.

Amelia doesn’t know what’s provoked this sudden battle over food, but Rose hasn’t eaten anything for two days now. She can’t tell whether Rose is feeling sick or just rebelling against her cooking. Even if Rose understood more Spanish, or she could speak better English, there would be no point in asking. Rose isn’t a *patrona* who shares her feelings with the help . . .



When I became stone
I thought I'd be lonely
for how could I know

that violets would cluster
and whisper in shade . . .
That lichen would hug me

and field mice and earthworms
and beetles would tunnel . . .

EBBY MALMGREN

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