

Bedford Writers' Circle Literary Supplement

Showcasing the writing of our members



Issue no. 4

21 March 2023

Memories of Thailand series by Joy Wilkinson
© Joy Wilkinson Sept 2022

Chapter 8: A Day at the Market with Mum

I opened my eyes. It was still dark, but the neighbour's cockerel was doing his best to get the day started. Muffled sounds came from the bedroom next door as Mum got up and quietly went downstairs. Just before I closed my eyes to catch the final drifts of dreams swirling through my sleep, I remembered it was My Turn.

Yes! My turn for the precious chance to join Mum in going to the market, something my brother and I vied over on the occasions Mum agreed to take us. It was worth sacrificing a few restful moments and I pulled back my thin blanket, clambered down the step ladder from my top bunk and went to join Mum. The new day started off fresh with the promise of heat, a smell of damp earth, a gentle breeze tickling the coconut palms which swirled above our heads as we left the silent house. A short ride on rough tracks, tyres crunching in the gravel. The roads edged with snakes of people making their way to the daily market, women in brightly coloured sarongs carrying laden baskets on their heads, men driving pigs before them using sticks, wagons laden with cages full of shrieking hens dragged along by young boys.

The market was a permanent structure open seven days a week, a wooden skeleton topped with corrugated iron, its shadowy interior swallowing a constant stream of people before spitting them back out laden with bags of shopping. Stalls filled the cavernous space, tables piled high with goods, people selling sacks of rice, freshly slaughtered meat, fruit, vegetables, and fish from the overnight haul. Other stalls sold plastic containers of all shapes and sizes, large yellow bowls for washing laundry, blue buckets for carrying water, green tubs for storing vegetables, an assortment of red bowls stacked like Russian dolls. And clothes, and toys, and bags, and knives, and tools, and pencils, and charcoal, and and and, an exotic cornucopia of anything you could desire. It was an exciting treasure trove, waiting to be plundered.

It was also an assault on the senses, an exciting mish mash of colours, overlaid with the sounds of squealing piglets, clucking hens, the shouts of the stall owners, nostrils hit with the smell of fish, sweat, wood, smoke, and the delicious mouth watering aroma of grilled meats and spicy curries.

"Don't go near the beggars," Mum reminded me again. There was one man I remember in particular. He used to sit cross legged at the end of a line of stalls, his eyes sightless, holding out a metal tin dangling from a stump. People dropped coins into the tin, making sure not to touch him. All the beggars I saw were blind, or lacked feet or had missing hands, or disfigured faces as leprosy ravaged their bodies. I did what my Mum told me and stayed away from them.

Sometimes I followed Mum around the stalls as she bartered good naturedly with the stall holders who thought they could pull one over a white farang. They would grin in delight when she responded in perfect Thai and prices dropped. They would then turn to me and encourage me to speak for the entertainment of hearing a foreign child speaking Thai. I usually kept quiet, looking down at my flip flops, hoping the attention would switch to something else.

We lived near the sea and fish filled many of the stalls. Though the fish came fresh from the early morning catch, the rancid smell of previous days and weeks lingered. I tried to hold my breath because this smell always made me feel sick but I stuck with my mother because I was fascinated by the Fish Lady. The Fish Lady was a large lady who wore glamorous sarongs of outrageously colourful designs wrapped around her copious flesh. But this was not the most noticeable thing about her. What always caught my attention was her hair. Normal Thai hair is pretty dark and straight. But the Fish Lady had hair that stood up on top of her head in the shape of a huge beehive, the dark hair glinting with flashes of silver and amber and ruby and emerald and gold and purple from a variety of brooches and hair grips that glittered as they caught the sunlight.

She always had an audience around her, crowds mesmerised by the unusual sight, drawn by a head of hair that seemed to shimmer as she moved around the stall to serve people fish and crabs and eels. She would look up and see the people around her and regale everyone with her tale, saying she had not washed or cut her hair for years, and, before the crowds could recoil away from her at such a revelation, she would quickly say that this was to protect her and her family from various gods and demons that would be released if she were to cleanse her hair. And the crowds would sigh and nod in recognition and understanding, before clutching their bags of fish and moving away.

To me she seemed like a superhero, protecting us all from evil. I liked to think she was more than human, that the silvery glints in her hair were actually fish scales, and perhaps her flamboyant sarong hid the fact she had the tail of a mermaid. Mum would have to grab my hand to drag me away from her. I was easily consoled though. One of my favourites at the market was when Mum left me at the food stalls while she finished the shopping. The stall holders fussed over me, enjoying the novelty of a white child relishing hot chilli as I ate breakfast, usually noodles with a spicy curry sauce. Sometimes I had a cake of sweet sticky rice topped with egg custard made using coconut milk and served on a banana leaf. This was much better than having breakfast at home and I savoured every mouthful.

The market continued to swirl around me, quivering with people moving endlessly up and down, the stall holders calling out their wares, the birds nesting overhead as they waited for tidbits, the rangy cats a trap for unsuspecting feet, the caged hens, the tethered pigs, the gentle murmur of bartering, the calling of greetings between friends, the chit chat of gossip in the lilting sing song of the Thai dialect. I let it wash over me, breathing it all in, enjoying this lively slice of early morning life.

And then the sight of my Mum as she came to collect me, laden with white plastic bags, filled with supplies for the day ahead. She swung them from the handlebars of the bike as I swung my leg over the back carrier and we made our way home. I was already thinking of the stories I would tell my brother as I remembered the squealing piglets and squawking hens, the delicious coconut custard, the exotic Fish Lady, and the one handed beggar with the sightless eyes.

THE TREE THAT SIGHED by Jacquie Gulliver

I left our National Parks house long before dawn. The air, waiting for the rain, was still heavy with heat and my father was already outside. A warden, he was watching a straggled V of flamingos flying overhead, calling to one another in the dark.

My eye followed them out across the vast dry salt pan, so white that you can see it, even on the darkest night.

'When I'm a wildlife guide I'm going to tell my clients how they fly at night.' I whispered in the silence left by their passing. Before my father could scoff that a Khoisan girl could never be a tour guide, there was the

loudest sound that I had ever heard. A sudden crack that reverberated across the whole of the Kalahari. A sound I had never heard before.

'What's that?' I gasped.

'I don't know. Listen,' he cautioned.

Then came sound of something breaking. Something enormous. It was followed by dead silence as though the whole world was stunned by the noise. Another thunderclap came out of a starry sky, and another, followed by a mighty groan. As if a huge cattle truck had slammed head-on into a rock. Or a plane had crashed onto one of the boulders on Kubu Island.

The sound came from the direction of Kubu. It only becomes an island in the rainy season when the pans flood with ankle-deep water. Then the Land Cruisers come, spray flying from their wheels. Groups of South African tourist head for the island to camp overnight and marvel at the tallest baobab they have ever seen.



That night my father and I started walking towards Kubu. When it started to get light we could not see Chapman's Baobab on the horizon. Instead we found it lying down on the ground. The hollow part of its trunk, which had once served as David Livingstone's post office, I could now see through its upturned roots.

'The tourists will no longer come,' I sobbed. My dream had crashed down with the tree. My father ignored me and spoke instead to the tree.

'I noticed last year,' he said. 'That you were bleeding from one of your branches.' He had his hand on its side as if it was a relative who had been taken to hospital in the night. He stroked it and leaned in to whisper, 'And now you are letting go of your spirit.'

The enormous tree, ten times the height of my father, even lying down, gave a last great, juddering sigh. Its spirit soared up out of the dawn, taking with it my hopes of being the Chapman's Baobab tour guide.

But people did come. First to gawp at its corpse and I was always there to point out the new positions of the famous carvings. Botanists, even archaeologists came from the University of Botswana to study why it had died. They took samples and measurements then went back to Gaborone to write reports. There was even talk of trying to push it back up again. I helped an American descendent of David Livingstone to make an impression of what was left of his initials. They had been so high up that I had never seen them before.

If the Mhiri bird was calling I would tell soft looking visitors that it was saying Botswana, Botswana. To others I explained that Kubu Island had once been used for human sacrifice, and say that the bird is calling, 'Where's father, where's father.'

'Huh!' said one Tswana woman visitor. 'You think they'd have sacrificed your father? They'd sacrifice you. You're a girl!'

We laughed and I had to agree that the Great Zimbabwe rulers would definitely have sacrificed me!

She was so friendly that I became brave. 'At that time,' I giggled. 'The bird would not yet have learned to speak English.'

'And it certainly couldn't say Bechuanaland.' The woman roared with laughter and slapped her thigh. We laughed and wiped tears from our eyes. I had never met anyone like her before. She treated me like a friend, not a rough ignorant girl from the bush.

She asked if I would like to help with her birthday dinner out on the pan that night. I had no idea what a birthday dinner was but I jumped at the offer. She showed me her birthday cake, the first I had ever seen.

When I had finished clearing up after the meal she invited me to join them. She lit the tiny candles on the cake and then blew them all out while everyone sang a birthday song.

Slowly the conversation stopped and we were swallowed into the endless emptiness of the vast pan that surrounded us. I could see how she loved our place, especially when hundreds of flamingos flew overhead calling to one another in the dark. On and on they went and when they had passed she sighed. 'We didn't see them this year, but at least we heard them.'

I learnt so much that night. The baobab was dead but it had planted a seed in my brain that left the sharp taste of its fruit in my mouth. Maybe, just maybe I could help people with their trips and even parties...

Ten years later Pan Parties is a huge success. You would not believe the famous people I have driven out across the ghostly white of the dry, flat pan. Some are in ball gowns and some are in jeans. I drive them out in the dark with the Land Cruiser headlights off. At first our guests cannot see where my staff wait for them out there in the dark. We race through the cool night air to what becomes a pinprick of light. As we approach it starts to shimmer and slowly becomes a candelabra on a table with a long white tablecloth. It is beautifully laid with sparkling crystal wine glasses and silver cutlery. Sometimes there are even fresh flowers on a table in the middle of nowhere.

Botswana's finest fillet is seared over an open fire as wines chill in silver ice buckets.

It had all started when I walked home that first night after the birthday party, ever so slightly tipsy after my first taste of Amarula. The following morning I heard on the radio that the human race had not originated in East Africa, as had previously been believed, but right here in the Makadikadi Basin. My future client base was assured!

My father shouted at the man on the radio. 'Of course. We Khoisan have always been here.'

War and Peace by John Broadhouse

Amongst the broken tapestry of growth lies a matrix for life
Regeneration powers a new beginning from winter's harsh wrath.
It unfolds tendrils that grip the essence of survival when hope was lost
It awakens the senses to oppression, the quest for freedom, self-reliance.
It strengthens the resilience to fight back the briars of ordained despair.
So the future will blossom with all the colours and scent of peace.
A garden where human nature and nature find mutual harmony.
To carry future generations on a path void of weeds of self-destruction
Breathe fresh air, smell the heady scent of honeysuckle,
Taste the fruits of summer, touch the delicate petals of love
And remember we live on a beautiful world that was here before us.

Use nor Ornament by Matthew Goodwin

"Just a second," You said, "Five weeks ago."

The Keeper shrugged. "I've been sleeping."

It was a small house. Weatherboards, weathervane. White picket fence.

"You ought to remember," said the Keeper, "to only count the happy hours." He unscrewed a paper bag, extended an arm. "Sherbet lemon?"

His plaid suit was a few sizes too big. The sea breeze kept flicking his fringe in his eyes.

"Your trailer -"

"*Ship*," said the Keeper. A veteran machine, put out to pasture. He pointed to a scratch on the surface, mouthed the word:

Meteors.

"Has been here too long," You said. "Longer than expected."

"I expected," said the Keeper. "To be longer than expected." He grinned.

"Business or holiday?"

"Business," said the Keeper. "I Keep Time. For You, it's seconds. But Time is everywhere, and there are many. Once," he said, "I was dead."

He paused.

"Now and again, life slips a gear or two. That's when it hit me - *Time*."

"Not the spending of the thing. But the units. It was the yards. Not the yardstick. Like I hadn't seen the woods for the trees."

The Keeper frowned.

"I thought I might be dead for the rest of my life."

The Sun was out in force. You could feel the weight of it's warmth, like a blanket round Your shoulders.

"Without me, the Times would be lost." The Keeper nodded at his ship. "It's a blessing, and a burden. Something priceless. To protect."

"And what could be better, for saving the *Times*," said the Keeper, "than a clock or a watch or an hourglass."

The sunbeams bounced off the shiny surface of the Time Keeper's ship, threw the peeling paintwork into sharp relief.

"That," said the Keeper, "is my family crest. Crossed spades on saffron, and a bucket *avante*. As for the motto..." He paused. "Buckets of Time."

For a moment You just looked at the crest on the side of the ship.

"All I need is a Timepiece," said the Keeper. "To add to my collection. Then I'm gone."

"Something reliable?" You said. "Regular as clockwork?"

"Not a bit of it," said the Keeper with a smile. "Time is fluid. Seconds come from minutes, minutes from hours. Hours, days. The day's were shorter in the past. They'll be longer in the future. No, no. Give me something weaker. A product of it's people."

You fished something out of the pocket of Your coat. "How 'bout this. I won it in a vending machine. Been meaning to get rid of it. Keeps better Time than I expected..."

"Just the thing," said the Keeper.

"But sooner or later," You said, "it'll let you down. You'll be back before you know it."

The Keeper of Time took the watch, put a hand to his head in salute. He opened the hatch to the wheelhouse of his ship, made a window to the world inside.

"Not such a bad thing."

It could have been a clock maker's showroom.

One image stood out in Your memory. A grandfather clock, as thick as a pillar, revolving, ever-so-slowly on it's pedestal.

Or was that us?

Four sides, four faces. Four Times.

Four worlds.

The Keeper sealed the hatch, took a long look at the horizon. Blue skies and surf behind the beach huts.

He sighed, tugged a baggy sleeve, and made a mental note of the Time. Nodded a nod of resignation.

"Time's up," he said.

Noon.

You could *smell* the sugar as it melted on the doughnuts. *Hear* the seagulls at war. *See* the backlash of the eddies, as they spun in tight corners, decked out in newsprint and ketchup.

"You never showed me your collection," You said. "All those other watches, and clocks. Other Times."

"No," said the Keeper. "I didn't. Some other day, perhaps?"

"You're going right now?"

The Keeper nodded. "You'll think I'm disappearing. But really the ship is just leaving very quickly."

These was a pulse, a juddering inside Your head. Then the ship was gone.

25 WORD COMPETITION

The Circle recently held a competition to write a story in 25 words. Various members contributed at least one story. The competition was judged by teacher Elizabeth Blackie who told us:

When Andrew asked me to judge this competition I was very excited and honoured although somewhat apprehensive. I am a teacher who loves to read. I love literature and the world's authors open up for me as a reader. I suppose it was these facts that brought about my apprehension. How can a twenty five word story truly take me to the places I love to travel, how can twenty five words create a beginning, middle and end and how do twenty five word stories evoke enough passion for me to truly judge them? After reading your submissions I can say that all my questions have been answered, oh how they have been answered.

The stories I read, for they really are stories, engaged me fully, caused me to laugh out loud, sigh with pathos, cry with sadness and travel to places with people as if I knew who they were and fully understood the journey they were making. I do not wish to appear as though I am offering simple platitudes for this is not what I am doing. When I say you are all really very talented writers who understand your skills I mean every word of it. I honestly wish I could have picked all of you to be winners but this is not the idea of a competition. I had in front of me stories that had no names attached and so picked the winner and the runner up purely on what clicked with me, got me thinking or took me to somewhere I recognised. I must say a heartfelt congratulation to you all and believe that you should all take a moment to congratulate yourselves on what you achieved in this competition. Anyone who reads your stories either now or in the future are certain to be treated to something quite special. Andrew was not joking when he spoke to me of how amazing you all were as a group of writers and how talented each and every one of you are. Although I have picked a winner and a runner up please all of you consider yourselves to be winners, for you really are.'

Here are the stories

FROM BARRIE HYDE

The story

First there was the beginning. Then there was the middle, and finally the end. There were tears, laughter and a sense of satisfaction.

HIGHLY COMMENDED!

Grandad's Chair

Suddenly Grandad's chair popped, everyone froze. Only the ticking of the mantelpiece clock could be heard.

That was Grandad, whispered the boy, saying goodbye.

Tears

I sighed threw some coins on the table and stood.
'Bon chance cherie' said an old man smiling.
I wandered away, holding back the tears.

The Audition

'That's fine, thank you. We start filming on Monday,
is that ok?'
'Pardon?' responded the actor in stunned amazement.
"You've got the job, well done."

Love

"I love you." She whispered, holding him tight.
"And I love you," He replied with tears streaming down
his cheeks.
Finally, they were together.

The End

The writer hit the full stop key. He smiled, four and a half
years of sweat and toil. He typed two more words,
The End.

Football

The ball flew across the goal mouth. I jumped
and headed it into the goal. Seconds later the whistle blew.
We'd won the world cup.

FROM JOHN BROADHOUSE

Estate agents sales pitch

"Its a sought after double semi detached house
at a bargain price."
"You mean, a mid terraced house that needs
renovation?"

Corporate helpline

"Choose from these options."
"Are you a person I can talk to?"
"That's not an option."

Wedding plans

She. I want a church wedding.
(long pause)
He. I am a divorcee.

FROM JOY WILKINSON

FIRST PLACE!

The journey of life

From the sky, down the mountain, under the ground,
springing through forests, flowing across fields, getting
slower and wider until finally reaching the welcoming sea.

Household management in 2022

“Are you sure?” Asks Lizzie.

Typical woman, thought Kwarsiteng, questioning his
authority as usual.

“Of course I’m sure. You have fixed the mortgage rate, right?”

Genesis

And Gos said, “Let there be light!”

“Dad you know that’s not going to work! Hey Alexa,
put on the kitchen light!”

And dad smiled.

After the great flood

Scorpions. Wasps. Spiders. Snakes. Noah brushed
away a horsefly and wished for the thousandth time
that he had ignored the ‘two of every species’
command.

Exodus

Ten plagues ravished the house of Pharaoh.

“Enough!”

And Moses, the baby in the basket, now grown, parted
the red sea and his tribe escaped.

FROM JO BROOKS

Crash

It shouldn’t have mattered he’d not responded, ‘I love you too.’
Ever since shed wondered, what if he’d known it would be his last message.

School trip

It was the dreaded summer trip.
In line for Oblivion, Clare unexpectedly turned and said "jump in."
'The greatest day of my life.' Anna wrote.

Lost love

Rachel felt no pain, it made no sense.
Comprehending the red alert shed lost his prize.
She knew she wouldn't recover. He wouldn't love her.

Identical

"You've an identical twin!" Mum announced when I was four.
"She died."
"What was her name?"
"Sarah."
"Exactly like me?"
"You'll meet her in heaven."

The punch

Straightening his tie the grainy memory returned.
He'd beaten her into submission. Broke her young nose.
She'd forgiven - undeserved
Her reward - happiness twenty years late.

FROM ROSEMARY OSTLEY

Heartbreak

He caught Covid, then she did.
They were hospitalised together.
She came home.
He never did.

FROM VERONICA SIMS

On the bus the air was tinted with the smell of
alcohol.
Last bus, to avoid walking back from town.
And a sense of camaraderie.

The machine handed him a fresh cauliflower.
He slashed off the surplus leaves. The machine
handed him another. It was unyielding.
He was its slave.

Fires burned.
The people of the forest stood and watched their
world disappear in a vortex of flames.
They witnessed.
Eight billion would suffer later.

Could just twenty five words allow him to express
his love for his job? *No chance of that*, thought the
chief librarian of The British Library.

FROM ROSALINA LIONETTI

HIGHLY COMMENDED!

The Storm

“You win,” She screamed into the wind and fell to her knees. “
give in!”
Suddenly, the thunder stopped, and the clouds parted.
Blissful silence.

Poppy pawed at the glass door. Maybe today, he would let her
in.
But the grass grew taller, and every day, Poppy returned.
Scratching. Hoping.

FROM MATTHEW GOODWIN

It grew in the telling

It’s mine,” She said
“Try it on.”
“See?” She said, “The shoe doesn’t fit. That’s
why the buckle is broken
because it’s too small.”

4th wall

I’m trapped in this story.
You have to drag me out.
If you can’t, then I’m trapped forever.
And you wouldn’t like it, would you?”

Anchored in Time, behind the Observer

She DOZES
Whiskers, brindled fur.
“Ready

You spoke the spell.
She woke. Sprightly.

Forward. "...Like elastic!"
She WILL meddle....

Tea. Slippers.
She SLEEPS.
Old.
Again.

FROM CAROLINE COLEMAN

The virtual gym was hopeless. Chris my personal
android, told me I was doing so well. But he didn't know
that was only my avatar.

A handful of sweeties and a crocodile smile, a capsule of
poison, sweetened with honey. A spiteful snare and the
jerk of a gallows

SECOND PLACE!

The Train

Through the train window, their faces were crumpled,
already seeming distanced.
"Stay safe", she mouthed
Speechless, tears streaming, he placed his hand on his
heart.

The judgement was harsh - half a lifetime. I made
powerful friends; useful friends. I learnt lots. They were
the most profitable years of my life.

"Oh God", he said. "Jesus! How insanitary!"
He hung back, whistled under his breath.
There really was a baby. In a manger of all places.