

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?”