

11 Thai short stories – 2011

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AS IF IT BEGAN WITH THE RAIN

JADET KAMJORNET

...if someone happens to walk past the room and looks inside they'll think a pupil has just got up to go to the toilet...

As his elder brother pedalled, Thong rode pillion. Destination: the car park in town. Let's say this is where the story begins.

April, the month of separation, had come. Years later, Thong still remembers well the sight of Mother, suitcase in hand, walking away. Leave stems were giving the trees up. The rubber trees on both sides of the track were left with balding branches while the ground was strewn with dead leaves. Parting, that time, had no tears. Thong was too young then to know the cruelty of separation.

Until in later years the yearning for his mother's embrace taught him.

Fallen leaves, dry wind, dry grass smell, sultry air, forest fires, and tears: they all came together.

'I won't be gone for long.'

'What?'

'Your tears: they're wetting my back.'

'Who's crying? It's the stinging of the wind.'

Thong wasn't bluffing. What came out of his eyes was just water of some kind from who knows what.

In a few months there was to be a soccer game for the youth league world title. His brother, as the soccer player representing the province, had to go for training to make it into the national team. Even though he still had to be selected, everybody already called him a champ, a young man carrying on his shoulders the hopes of everyone in the village. Now the car caravan was waiting at the square in front of the town hall.

On this morning of the fifth lunar month* the air was nippy before turning torrid by midday. The earth track wending its way around rubber tree plantations disappeared beneath dull brown leaves. Thong brushed his feet against those leaves, enjoying the strange feeling of parting them, like someone would part water with his hand while sitting on a boat.

His brother gasped for breath as he pedalled up a slope. He used his elbow to nudge Thong lightly as he pointed ahead with a jerk of his head. Thong looked ahead too. A few steps away a thin body in a soiled school uniform was limping along the earth track. His ungainly walk was due to his artificial right leg.

His brother smiled at Thong.

‘Get ready, soldier.’

‘Engage in combat...’

Now that so much time has passed, Thong almost doesn’t want to remember that scene. The boy with the artificial leg tried to hobble out of the way of the bicycle that was charging at him for fun. Thong’s brother made as if to run him over only to turn the front wheel away at the last second, but the narrowness of the path left the boy with no choice but to walk faster, the bicycle still prodding him. Thong and his brother laughed merrily.

Thong knew that boy. He was Burmese, on the same side as those who had burnt a temple and then taken Naresuan** hostage, on the same side as that armed group that had invaded a hospital and taken the patients hostage. That’s what Thong’s brother had told him. The two of them had talked about these two cases to their hearts’ content for a whole week counting from the seizure of the hospital.

* The lunar month is roughly one month ahead on the solar calendar. So, the fifth lunar month is April.

** King of Ayutthaya (1590–1605), who may or may not have been captured by the Burmese before his death.

The two gave up when they saw that the foe was thoroughly defeated.

‘Take good care of it.’

‘Care of what?’

‘Our country.’ His brother smiled. He meant the two hillocks just passed. They were the rubber plantation of the two of them.

‘Bring back a championship title for us, okay?’

Let’s skip over the time at the car park. It’s not as interesting as the story of the Burmese boy whose right leg was made of wood. He was in the same class at Thong.

It should have been a morning without rain, but who could bank on it?

Thong and his father sat having their morning meal together. His father complained about the rain. Thong understood as much as that it would mean of loss of income. The rain brought moisture to the soil, to every plant, to every rubber tree, but rain was a friend that always came at the wrong time.

His father began to complain louder as he widened the scope of his discontent. He complained about political events as if he didn’t know that the boy who sat listening was only a sixth-former. He took the case of the armed group that had invaded a hospital several days ago. He called them Burmese, and was still incensed, even though the soldiers had shot them all dead and helped release the hostages.

‘Before long Burma will invade our country, and we’ll become their slaves.’ ...



Jadet Kamjorndet, born in 1975 in Surat Thani, is an artist and a songwriter as well as a writer. His first collection of short stories, *It's too hot this morning...*, won him the 2011 SEA Write Award.

LANTA, CARRIE MAY AND ME

SIRIWORN KAEWKAN

One: Lanta and Carrie May

The stench of corpses and of germicide saturating the sweltering air on the Andaman coast blends with the waves of grief and loss rushing in from every corner of the world.

Rescue quad officials transporting yet another pile of corpses help one another unload lifeless bodies from a lorry and carry them to the pavilion and courtyard at the back of the temple, where a team of forensic doctors are examining bodies and taking DNA samples for identification purposes.

The board at the front of the temple is teeming with reporters, photographers and relatives of missing persons. Some are scanning the pictures of the dead that officials have stuck onto the board; others are affixing photographs of family members, lovers or dear friends and writing down particulars about each.

Most in the latter group are foreigners.

Amid the stench of death and the pall of grief, suddenly a young woman with wavy blond hair and clear blue eyes appears in front of the temple. Her tall thin body swerves through the crowd to reach the public board. Her eyes sweep through the photos and their data.

The late morning sun bathes the golden running scrolls crowning the temple archway. She steps through the archway and enters the precinct of the temple, casts a glance up at the wooden coffin placed above head to the left, walks around the courtyard to the large container used as cold storage room for the bodies of foreigners before heading for the back of the temple.

There, white shrouds are lined up all over the courtyard. The stench of putrefaction is overpowering.

She doesn't know anyone.

No one knows her either.

The young woman tries to communicate with the officials, but no one understands or, to be more accurate, there is no volunteer or foundation official free enough to try to make sense of what the young woman is trying to convey in her mixture of Thai and English words.

When this clutter of words makes no sense in any language, the only solution left to her is to make herself useful.

From then on she doesn't speak to anyone any longer.

From then on she doesn't speak to anyone any longer unless it's really necessary, such as acting as an interpreter for foreigners at times.

Apart from that she answers the questions of whoever comes by with smiles and silence.

When she hears that a body has been found somewhere, the blonde young woman goes and helps the officials there.

When there is news that bodies have been found somewhere, the blonde young woman jumps onto a vehicle to help the officials with the bodies there.

All the officials and volunteers are puzzled and wonder.

Who is she? From which foundation?

After trying to ask her indirectly several times, besides her smiles and her silence I know nothing else about her.

Nobody knows who she is or where she comes from.

'Carrie May,' Lanta says through the mask protecting her against the stench as we help each other clean a body of mud.

I shoot a questioning glance at her.

'That crazy memsahib: her name is Carrie May.'

This is the first time I know her name and that's all there is to know about her.

In the following days the picture of Carrie May gains consistence through Lanta's statements.

‘I don’t like the English lady’s manners of that dame at all.’

I don’t know where Lanta gets her information about Carrie May. Besides I see nothing of an English lady in Carrie May.

Consider this: all officials and volunteers have masks over their mouths and noses and hoods over their heads, they wear boots, and gowns cover their entire bodies, but Carrie May wears only ordinary clothes, the same day after day. When an official told her to wear a mask against the stench, she shook her head and refused with a smile.

White shrouds, tied up, shouldered, placed at the back of a pickup.

White shrouds, tied up, shouldered, taken down from the back of a pickup like a professional.

Lanta says to me in a contemptuous tone of voice that that crazy mute memsahib is pretending to work hard and pretending to be smart even though she has no experience in handling corpses.

‘On top of it all,’ Lanta says, ‘she’s terrified of ghosts but she pretends not to.’

The more it goes the less I understand Lanta. Why does she like to gibe at Carrie May all the time? Or said another way, the more it goes the more I understand Lanta. At least when she’s in front of the famous forensic lady doctor, she tries to show how happy she is to work alongside that doctor, but as soon as the doctor’s back is turned she complains to me she’d like to go back to Bangkok or she’ll become crazy for sure because of those corpses.

Every time rescue quad officials bring a new pile of bodies to the temple, the famous doctor will alert the officials of all the units to get ready.

As soon as the squad pickup arrives, Carrie May energetically helps downloading the bodies, even though just before that she has helped place already autopsied bodies on the lorry that just left.

‘Look at that crazy mute memsahib.’ Lanta makes a face. ‘She must think she’s Mother Theresa reborn.’

I look at Carrie May and I look at Lanta.

This is the first time I'm not sure whom I know better, of a woman I share a language with and another woman with a different language, way of life and culture.

Two: Carrie May and me, the first time

On the night of 25 December, Lanta and I sat drinking in a beer bar on the beach of a small island in the middle of the Andaman Sea. When we ran out of things to say, or to put it more clearly, when language was unable to make meaning conducive to understanding between us, I had nothing left to do but sit sipping beer and looking at the multi-coloured lights twinkling on the Christmas tree the shop had set up to please foreign tourists.

I had a fleeting feeling that we were sitting on a birthday party for Jesus set in Paradise.

The sky above the Andaman was spangled with stars but the Star of David at the top of the pyramidal tree turned out to be brighter than any star in the firmament. I knew that this tree was the symbol of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Even and that, after Adam and Eve stealthily ate of its fruit, mankind all over the world fell into the fault of sin and loss for disobeying God. ...



This story is a complement to 'Ariya's first voyage', which opened the 2010 selection of *10 Thai short stories*, also available at thaifiction.com. Siriworn Kaewkan, a friend and the editor of *Jadet Kamjorndet* (they are of the same age and of the same hometown in the South), is a leading writer and poet in his own right.

THE WOMAN KITE

SAKORN PULSUK

1

As he pulled his foot out of the sandpit, Thongthiao thought it was as if he was pulling a feeling of some kind out of his chest. Actually, it wasn't that he didn't like to step on a sandpit altogether, because when he was in no hurry, when he wanted to walk leisurely in the late afternoon, treading on a sandpit was rather pleasant. Fine soft grains of sand were under the sole of his foot. When he stepped on them it was as though there was something yielding underfoot, giving him a sense of spongy softness. But when he was in a hurry, walking almost at a run, sandpits pulled at his foot instead as if there was a hand waiting to prevent him from going anywhere fast.

'Hurry up or we won't make it in time for the show,' someone's voice pressed him, anxious, almost annoyed. The owner of the voice was running several strides ahead of Thongthiao yet couldn't help turning around to hurry him.

'Can't you see I've stepped on a sandpit?'

'I'm really fed up with you and your crummy excuse of stepping on quicksand.'

Thongthiao thought it was no excuse. He was small, his upper body taller than his lower body. He had short, wiry legs seemingly devoid of strength, and was always laughed at when he said he felt tired whenever he got caught in a sandpit.

'What kind of a sea urchin are you to be tired just by stepping on a sandpit?'

Thongthiao didn't like to argue but he had to admit he had a problem regarding stepping on sandpits, as his friends said.

He forced himself to speed up. He put all of the strength he had in his struggle with the sandpit. It tired him faster, and he panted so hard his ribs were visible under his thin shirt.

The house of widow Pa-nan stood not very far from the beach in the shade of a coconut plantation. The house fence was a row of overgrown Burmese Sal which looked strange at night. People passing by wondered why Pa-nan didn't fell the trees or at least trim them. They wondered, asked themselves questions they answered themselves in ways that damaged the widow's reputation.

Widow Pa-nan usually bathed outside of the house at night. She lived alone. Her husband had died years ago. Actually, nobody knew whether her husband was really dead or not. As no one had ever seen his corpse, nobody could confirm that he was dead. He might have moved elsewhere. Yet his not having come back home made it easy to surmise that he was dead.

Pa-nan being a widow was the reason why local boys ran across sandpits to get an eyeful among the Burmese Sal at night of something they pictured to surfeit, so that, when they happened to pass her, they didn't dare even look the widow in the face, but when she fell into their feverish fantasies, they grabbed and stripped her bare and played with her body no end.

Before making it to Pa-nan's Burmese Sal fence, those boys would assemble at the head of the breakwater embankment. Each would hold on to his own wooden pole, sit facing the sea and shout obscenities that all had to do with Pa-nan's body while pulling out their willies to compare sizes.

Some of those boys wore trousers for the first time and, fancying themselves war veterans, belittled those who still wore shorts.

Thongthiao sat holding his willie in his hand. He felt inferior and mute, merely sat listening to the lively chat of the others, even though in his heart he so much wanted to boast aloud about his own willie to compete with the others.

‘So, Thongthiao, has yours perked up yet?’ one of them asked. He was just wearing trousers for the first time, trousers his elder brother had handed over to him. They were so loose it felt like wearing a gunny bag, but he kept both his hands in the pockets to pull the trousers up so they wouldn’t flop as he walked.

‘How could it grow big? It’s asleep and won’t get up to eat anything. Must be as skinny as its owner.’ Sniggers fought with the sound of the waves reaching the shore.

Far out at sea, Thongthiao thought, there must be a couple of stingrays quietly coupling in a night of calm waves.

2

On nights of calm waves, Dr Moustache once told Thongthiao, many things happened in the sea, especially just after a squall. Rainwater made the seawater sweet. Stingrays coupled to reproduce. Dr Moustache had told him he had seen stingrays couple in their hundreds, a sight to behold. Some coupled and then drifted away with the tide, others coupled and stayed still on the sand at the bottom, others floated on the surface of the water.

‘Oh boy, the sea was like a whirlpool raging underwater,’ Dr Moustache said while stroking his moustache under eyes that had nothing but strange glimmers in them.

‘Why didn’t you spear them?’ Thongthiao asked. ...



A native of the South, Sakorn Pulsuk teaches English and is the author of four collections of short stories and a few novels, all garnering various literary awards.

BOY'S REPORTER

CHATCHARIN CHAIWAT

Actually the flat we rented before wasn't cramped. When we paid three months' rent in advance before moving in, the caretaker had warned us that because of its size he wouldn't allow more than four tenants. Without hesitation I gave him my word that we wouldn't be more than four, as there was only Somchai to share the rent with me.

Somchai was an all-round photographer like the three or four other photographers of our newspaper. They were assigned to take pictures anywhere. There was no need for them to specialise in crime, politics, entertainment and so on. There were two daily shifts: some started work in the morning and finished late afternoon; others started in the afternoon and finished at midnight and often had to stay overnight at the office. Actually, photographers didn't spend much time in the office, because when they came to work they found a work schedule with a long list of what we call 'assignments' waiting for them. The chief photographer, who also developed the films, would assign each according to what the various news desks requested. Once done with shooting politics one might have to go and take pictures for the social news desk and then turn to shots of a crime scene or in some cases travel upcountry with a reporter for feature stories lasting weeks on end.

The confusion of work according to the demands from various sources had the knack of irritating Somchai as it left him with little time to himself. Somchai had graduated in Arts and Photography. Even though his work came under the heading of Arts, he was someone who needed to get organised and who wanted to have specific responsibilities, like the reporters, who each had their own beat:

Achirawit, who had graduated in Archaeology, was assigned to cover the Industry Ministry; Satharphorn, a teachers training college graduate, handled military events; Phongsak, a Graphic Design graduate who wrote well, had been upgraded from copy editing to coverage of police news; Suwit, whose flowing beard and moustache gave no inkling that he had graduated in Diploma-cy and Political Science, had been reporting news for only a few months when the editor, for reasons of his own, promoted him to subeditor – the rather chic English term for the one who designs the pages of a newspaper.*

As for me, I didn't graduate in anything. I'd long written poems and short stories, but as chance had it, when the paper was one man short, I was called upon to handle the entertainment page, which was somewhat different from those of the mass-circulation dailies. The page I was responsible for didn't report on singers and movie stars only but carried all sorts of social news, about children, women and the multitude of human lives found themselves sandwiched into the entertainment page. That page wasn't very important, as our newspaper was deemed highbrow, the kind that emphasizes political and economic news. Entertainment and social news filled only one of the sixteen pages of the daily. The cinema and theatre programmes, listings of general services, new Thai and foreign film releases that came day after day with both pictures and text and sometimes relevant reviews took up almost half the page every day. If there wasn't enough news, I wrote a column of analysis on light topics, a new film or television programme or even trends in various social groups, and that almost filled the page. To make it complete, once in a while a feature article would be inserted about the life of children, women, singers or TV stars, but giving it the character of a daily paper required printing newly shot pictures, not those handed over for public relations but photographs that showed trends as news, be it of an artist being interviewed or of a current festival or else documentary shots, which were easy to

* Sic. In a newspaper, the main job of a subeditor is copy editing; page design is usually done by the managing editor. (Translator's note.)

take, without the scramble for news pictures on crime or politics which had to be fought for amidst the competition. Photographers welcomed work for the entertainment page as they actually enjoyed shooting pictures of a film opening ceremony, of beautiful pop stars or even of the election of Miss Thailand or Miss Songkran, since that was fun.

That Somchai became my partner accompanying me often as a reporter-photographer team may not be because he liked the glamour or fun of entertainment work, but rather because he liked to wake up late. Starting work in the afternoon thus suited him. There were times when he was assigned to take some important picture specifically at some ungodly hour, four or six in the morning, and this created mayhem in the photo room because Somchai hadn't woken up in time, therefore missing out on the picture in the same way as one misses out on the news. The editor would tell him off and curse him and sometimes the whole line of his ancestors for hours on end. And besides, maybe because Somchai didn't like confusion, having to shift constantly from one job to the next, scuttling from Government House to this or that ministry sometimes only to have to follow up at the police station, he became my partner, and a rather close one, going everywhere with me often lately. The work of photographers in the afternoon is heavy on social news, feature news and one-to-one interviews, which are 'dry news' and 'dry pictures', shot with little fuss. So he would be ordered to join the reporters on that beat. He became my buddy, of the kind that, once the shooting was over, was reluctant to leave the party, dawdling until we could return together, sharing taxi fare or strap-hanging in a bus. As this happened often, we both looked for a place to sleep and finally decided to rent a flat close to the office where we could spend the night when properly soused after a party or an after-work drinking session. Sharing the rent was part of the agreement.

As I've already stated, originally we thought the flat wouldn't be cramped because only the two of us would stay there. This shouldn't upset the caretaker, even though in the initial period our friends at

work, when they learned we had a flat for overnight stay so much more comfortable than lying on chairs in the office, started to pop in and ask to stay for the night, but only a few of them did, and only for a night or two. Mostly they'd neatly go back home to sleep when they weren't too drunk, but later on, I don't know if it was because our flat was too convenient or because it was more than a simple crash pad, offering something having to do with the heart, having to do with being between friends, or anything that stopped you feeling lonely, anything that made you want to stay on ... When off-licences close at midnight or one in the morning it's too early in the feelings of journalists, especially those who start on the afternoon watch. Just right to sleep at ease would be three or four in the morning, once the bottle you've bought and brought up to the flat is finished, you've belched a few times and then stretched out on the floor – sleeping soundly and senseless to regain consciousness at eleven or nearly noon, full of pep and ready for a new day's work ... That must have been the reason. As time passed, even with no more than four or at most five persons coming to sleep at the flat, which didn't occur often, the number of overnight visitors wasn't so much of a problem as their permutations. One night Satharhorn and Suwit would come to spend the night with Somchai and me, making that four of us. The next night it would be a drunken Achirawit who appeared out of nowhere to doss down instead. It was this constant coming and going which had the caretaker increasingly show some humour until he turned testy and finally ordered us to vacate the premises, alleging security concerns and what not at length.

Having to move to a new nest was what gave us – that is me and those of us journalists who were at an age blazing with energy – the opportunity to know Boy and her group of friends.

Boy: the name itself denotes the male sex, but if I use the pronoun 'her' it's because, not long after I rented a house owned by Boy, Boy's manner had Somchai and I waste no time in concluding that Boy was a transvestite. What Boy's previous occupation had been I wasn't told in

detail, but when we went to ask to rent the house, Boy was staying at home idly and could be called a housewife. I learned later that, if Boy owned two townhouse units within the same enclosure, it was because Boy's 'farang husband' came to see her there once or twice a year but for months at a time.

Harry, Boy's boyfriend or hubby, call him what you will, was an architect in Canada. He might not be very rich but had enough money to send to Boy for her upkeep, so she could settle down to the point of having a twin townhouse, too big for her, Harry and the ladyboys who liked to gang together there often or in some cases stayed for months or years. For that reason, the second townhouse unit, which was contiguous, was turned into a rented house within a housing estate which was not very far from our office. ...



Chatcharin Chaiwat, a native of the South now in his fifties, has been for over three decades an influential journalist and political analyst, as well as a prolific author of short stories.