

SECOND PRIZE IN THE BOATHOUSE WRITING CONTEST

UNPACKING

By Barbara Ransom (USA)

For the past ten years she has had irrational fears. The first, at the age of eight, was the fear of being in a bathroom alone. She would always ask her mom, her sister, a friend to “keep her company”. This recent fear she has just realized, though she’s had it too since she was eight: she has never been able to fully unpack, no matter where she has lived. Full suitcases hide under her dining room table; half empty boxes litter every room of her apartment. They are neatly marked and arranged, and she can find something if she needs it. But she’s never been able to put it all away, into the cupboards or her dresser, to make anything permanent. It is this fear she feels she needs to solve in some way when she boards the plane for Phuket.

It is sometime around midnight twenty hours later when Amanda stumbles in a haze through the Phuket airport. The sound of a language she learned ten years ago penetrates her ears and seeps into her mind. Nothing, and yet everything, has changed. In the dim yellow neon lights, hustling white-faced tourists, pulling large rolling suitcases, speed past her. Loud groups of Chinese tourists search for the right Thai tour guide, holding the right sign to direct them to their tour bus. People are busy and excited to embark into paradise. There is a sweet pungent smell in the air. She passes the small shops that sell dried fruit, jewelry, and other trinkets of Thailand, remembering being rushed past them before, wishing she could go in.

“Daddy, there’s Miss Robin”, she had told him. They were standing at the ticket counter. He gripped her small eight year old hand tightly. Too tightly. His hand was sweaty. She noticed there was hair on the back of it. But he ignored her. He never listened to her. “Daddy! Miss Robin!” But he just held her hand tighter. And it hurt. And he told her to be quiet. And he pulled her quickly off toward the gate.

Now, she passes through customs and then up to the taxi stand. A man with red tickets asks in broken English, “Where you go?” She pictures the trip in the taxi in her head. She will sit silently in the back of a car that is adorned with ornate stickers and gold Buddhas. It will take her along the darkened streets quickly, heading south along the left side of the road. She loves driving on the left side. They will pass the Heroines’ monument in the middle of the round-about; pass the signs for Phuket town, and eventually go up winding Patong hill. The hill that used to frighten her. At the top of the hill they will pass the *Ying Yang* glittering with white fairy lights where every

car will honk three times. Finally they will head down along the coast – the beautiful coast that she can't get out of her mind - and farther south into Kata Beach.

"Kata Beach", she answers and hands him the colorful five hundred Baht that she changed in the Bangkok airport. It's the same trip they took ten years ago, just in the opposite direction.

"Where are we going?" she had asked her dad. She knew they were going the wrong way. The pier was the other way. "I thought we were going to Phi Phi. That's what you told mommy. This is the wrong way." Tears clung to her eyes. He wouldn't answer her. She didn't understand. "I want to go to Phi Phi!" She let the tears fall.

They call her number for the taxi. The drive is exactly as she's pictured it, and soon she is sleeping off her jetlag in her room at the Boathouse on Kata Beach. When she finally awakes the next morning, the first thing she wants is mango. Not orange sweet mango, but sour green mango. The kind they used to eat at school for snack.

"My girls are turning into real Thais", her mother would brag. She was smiling. She loved watching them eat green mango. She loved sending them to ask, "Check bin, kah?" at restaurants. She loved watching them get covered in sand. She loved seeing them play in the warm waves. She loved watching them play barefoot in the park. She loved Thailand. She loved them.

Amanda spends hours walking along the beach, the warm salt water licking her feet, imagining that she can still see her own small footprints in the sand from ten years earlier. She makes sand balls like her friend Beam had once taught her, and leaves a row of them for another child to discover. She visits everywhere that she used to call home. She walks in the lush green jungles, swims in the waterfalls, and listens to the hysterical calls of gibbons. She takes trips to Phi Phi and Railay, soaking in the sun in the front of a long tail boat, enjoying places where there are no cars. At the crowded markets, she eats sweet corn, juicy dripping pineapple, and chicken on skewers in spicy peanut sauce. But she still can't bring herself to eat the fried crickets. Walking the crooked sidewalks of Phuket town in the early morning, she pets the stray dogs that meander around her, and listens to monks chanting. She compares this beautiful peaceful place to the life she has been forced to live by her father for the past ten years.

He stole them. He hurt them. He lied to them. He didn't love them. He wanted to control them. He wanted to hurt her. He hurt them instead. He took them back to a land they didn't know. To a home they never knew. A place where no one bows. He took them back to "hustle and bustle." To a school ten times the size of the one they left. Where money and greed rule. Where they got chapped lips. Where no one smiles. Where they froze.

Where no one's dreams mattered. Except his own. Where their mother wasn't. Where mommy couldn't find them.

One night while snuggled in her bed at the Boathouse she has a nightmare. She is in the house where they lived before they moved to Phuket. Only in the dream, the house is on Kata Beach, and not back in suburban America. And she is not herself in the dream, she is her mother. She stands in the kitchen, trying to cook dinner, with the face of her father (in the dream he is her husband), shouting at her. He is telling her everything she is doing wrong as she tries to make the meal as perfect as he wants it. She says nothing to stand up for herself, only cringes with each of his loud words, collapsing further into herself as he yells. She looks out the window and sees the Andaman Ocean and beach just steps away. But his face and his voice pop up again and again and she feels nothing but trapped.

It's on her last day in Phuket that she can finally bring herself to call Andrew. From her phone at the Boathouse she dials what feels like hundreds of numbers. She hears Andrew's voice, anxious, worried, as he answers on the other end, "Hello?"

Earlier in the day she had visited her old school. She was surprised at how much it was still the same. She walked the tiled hallways, touched the artwork the five year olds had made, read the poems the eight year olds had written that were hanging outside of her old classroom. She had wished she could still remove her shoes and open the door to find Ms. Robin smiling there at her desk, waiting with eagerness for her students. She had wandered through the yard, looking at the bugs, lizards, red dirt they used to play in. She remembered everything she has missed. She remembered everyone she was forced to leave, without even saying goodbye.

Just as the glowing orange sun had started to set over the immense green hill behind the school, she had headed for the playground. She sat in the squeaky swing where she used to spend hours with her friends. Rocking back and forth, she sang the Thai national anthem quietly to herself – a song that she will never forget. As the sun had gone down, the sky had burst open into a torrential rain, right on cue. She had let it drench her.

She realized then that none of it was her fault. She suddenly knew that letting go of his hand and running for her teacher ten years ago would not have made a difference. She can finally stop torturing herself for her father's wrong decisions. She can forgive his selfishness. She can finally forgive herself. She can finally unpack.

"Hi," she says back to Andrew. She puts her hand on her rounding, growing belly, "I've made my decision about our baby."