



MICHAEL ONDAATJE / RUNNING IN THE FAMILY

... the more one was lost in unfamiliar quarters of distant cities, the more one understood the other cities he had crossed to arrive there; and he retraced the stages of his journeys, and he came to know the port from which he had set sail, and the unfamiliar places of his youth. . . . Arriving at each new city, the traveller finds again a part of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.

ITALO CALVINO, *Invisible Cities* (London: Pan Books, 1979), pp. 24-25.

JAFFNA AFTERNOONS

It is 2:15 in the afternoon. He sits in the huge living-room in a building which was originally the old governor's home in the fort in Jaffna. The walls, painted in recent years a warm rose-red, stretch awesome distances away from him to his left to his right and up towards a white ceiling twenty-four feet above. When the Dutch first built this house egg white was used to paint the walls. His brother-in-law Alwin has worked out that the room is over 800 square feet, and the bedrooms on either side are the same size. The doors are twenty feet high, as if awaiting the day when a family of acrobats will walk from room to room, sideways, without dismantling themselves from each others' shoulders.

The fan hangs on a twelve-foot stem, revolves lethargic, its arms in a tilt to catch the air which it folds across the room. No matter how mechanical the fan is in its movement the textures of air have no sense of the metronome. The air hits him, reaches him unevenly with its gusts against his arms, face, and this paper.

The house was built around 1700 and is the prize building in the region. In spite of its internal vastness it appears modest from the outside, tucked in one corner of the fort. To approach it by foot or car or bicycle one has to cross a bridge over the moat, be accepted by two sentries who unfortunately have to stand exactly where marsh gasses seem to collect — so one suspects their minds are utterly clouded and befogged — and enter the fort's yard.

Here, in this spacious centre of the labyrinth of 18th century Dutch defenses he now sits, in the noisy solitude of the afternoon while the rest of the house is asleep. He has come to visit his Uncle Ned and Aunt Phyllis, with his sister Gillian and her husband, to talk about his family. That convoluted web, that maze of relationships.

He has spent the morning from about 6:30 when breakfast was over, with his sister and Aunt Phyllis trying to trace blind alleys of ancestry in various rooms of this house. For a while they sat in one of the bedrooms sprawled on two beds and one chair. The twin to this bedroom, in another part of the house, is dark and supposedly haunted. He walked into that room's dampness, saw the mosquito nets stranded in the air like the dresses of hanged brides, the skeletons of bed without their mattresses, and retreated from the room without ever turning his back on it.

Later the three of them moved to the dining room while his Aunt plucked notorious incidents from her brain. He thinks to himself that she is the minotaur of his long journey back — all those preparations for travel, the journey through Africa, the recent 7 hour train ride from Colombo to Jaffna, the sentries, the high walls of stone, and now this lazy courtesy of meals, tea, her best brandy in the evenings for his bad stomach. The minotaur who is always from the place one had been years ago, who surprises one with conversations about that original circle of love. He is especially fond of her because she was always close to his father. When someone else speaks, her eyes glance up to the ceilings of the room, as if noticing the architecture here for the first time, as if looking for cue cards to recall stories about Cox Sproule, George de Silva, the wedding of Babe and 'Monkey' Jonklaas. They are still recovering from her gleeful resume of the life and death of one foul Ondaatje who was 'savaged to pieces by his own horse'.

Eventually they move out onto the wicker chairs of the porch which runs 50 yards along the front of the house. And from 10 till noon they sit talking and laughing and drinking ice-cold palmira toddy from a bottle they have had filled in the village. This is a drink which smells of raw rubber and is the juice drained from the flower of a coconut. It looks like watered down milk and one sips it slowly, feeling it continue to ferment in one's stomach.

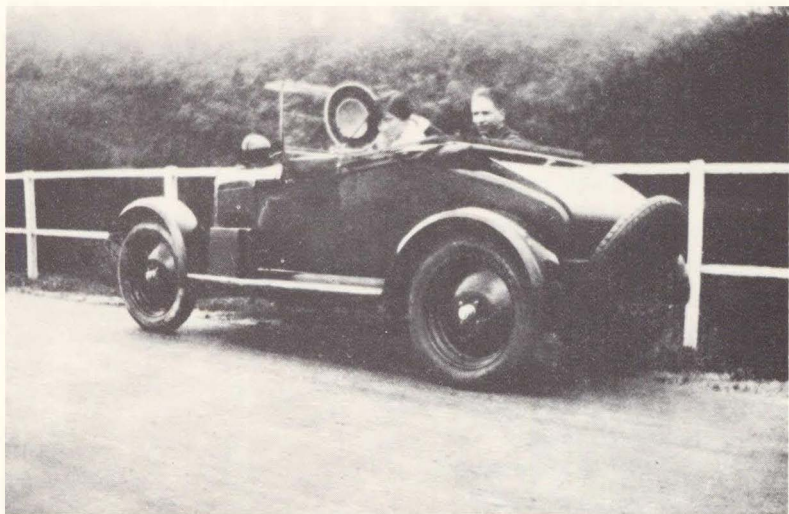
By noon he is sleepy, dozes for an hour, then awakens for a lunch of crab curry. There is no point in using a fork and spoon for this meal. He eats with his hands, shovelling in the rice with his thumb, crunching the bones in his teeth. It is very rich, and eating a little fills him. Then fresh pineapple.

But he loves the afternoon hours most. It is now almost a quarter to three. In half an hour the others will get up and intricate conversations will begin again. In the heart of this 250-year-old fort they will sit trading anecdotes, faint memories, that they will try to swell with the order of dates and asides, interlocking them all as if the hull of a ship. No story is ever told just once. Whether it is a memory or a funny hideous scandal, they will return to the story an hour later and retell it with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way the case is built, history is organized. All day his Uncle Ned who is heading a commission on race-riots (and so has been given this building to live in while in Jaffna) is at work, and Aunt Phyllis presides over the history of good and bad Ondaatjes and the people they came in contact with. Her eye, which by now knows well the ceilings of this house, suddenly breaks into a sparkle and she will turn to him with delight and begin "and then there is another terrible story. . . ."

In the cool pale rose-coloured living room he sits in the humid silence. Through the open doors he sees the dogs from the town, who have sneaked past the guards, sleeping on the porch — one of the coolest spots in Jaffna. As he gets up to adjust the speed of the fan they roll onto their feet and move a few yards down the porch. But it is a noisy solitude. The tree by the porch is full of crows and white cranes who gurgle and screech. It is impossible for silence to last more than a couple of seconds. So in his ease he sits, all the stories in his mind and the birds totally compatible but screaming at each other, sweeping now and then over the heads of sleeping dogs.

There are so many ghosts here. In the dark mildewed wing where the rotting mosquito nets hang is the ghost of the Dutch Governor's daughter who has made her presence known here even during the afternoons. In 1734 she threw herself down a well after being told she could not marry her lover, and has startled generations since, making them avoid the places where she silently exhibits herself in a red dress. And just as the haunted sections are avoided for sleeping, this living room is avoided for conversation, being so huge that all talk evaporates into the air before it reaches the listener.

* * *



That night he is not so much to have a dream as to witness an image that keeps repeating itself. When he wakes up it is still precise in his mind. He sees first his own straining body which stands shaped like a star. Gradually he realizes he is a small part of a pyramid of bodies. Below him are other bodies that he is standing on and above him are several more, though he is quite near the top. With cumbersome slowness they are walking from one end of the huge living room to the other. They are all chattering away rather like the crows and the cranes so that it is often difficult to hear. He does hear one piece of dialogue. A Mr. Hobday has asked his father if he had any Dutch antiques in the house. And his Father says, "Well . . . there *is* my Mother". The grandmother lower down gives a roar of anger. But at this point they are approaching the door which being twenty feet high they will be able to pass through only if the pyramid turns sideways. Without discussing it the whole family ignores the opening and walks slowly through the pale pink rose-coloured walls into the next room.

USWETAKEIYAWA

Uswetakeiyawa. The night mile
through the village of tall
thorn leaf fences
sudden odours
which pour through windows of the jeep.

We see nothing, just
the grey silver of the Dutch canal
where bright coloured boats
lap like masks in the night
their alphabets lost in the dark.

No sight but the imagination's
story behind each smell
or now and then a white sarong
pumping its legs on a bicycle
like a moth in the headlights

 and the dogs
who lean out of night
strolling the road
with eyes of sapphire
and hideous body
 so mongrelled
they seem to have woken
to find themselves tricked
into outrageous transformations,
one with the spine of a snake
one with a creature in its mouth

(car lights rouse them
from the purity of darkness)
one that could be a pig
slaughtered lolling
on the carrier of a bike.

This is the dream journey
we travel most nights
returning from Colombo.
A landscape nightmare
unphotographed country.
The road hugs the canal
the canal every mile
puts an arm into the sea.

In daylight women bathe
waist deep beside the road
utterly still as I drive past
their diya reddha cloth
tied under their arms.
Brief sentences of women
lean men with soapy buttocks
their arms stretching up
to pour water over themselves,
or the ancient man in spectacles
crossing the canal
only his head visible
pulling something we cannot see
in the water behind him.
The women surface
bodies the colour of shadow
wet bright cloth
the skin of a mermaid.

In the silence of the night drive
you hear ocean you swallow odours
which change each minute—dried fish
swamp toddy a variety of curries
and something we have never been able to recognize.
There is just this thick air
and the aura of dogs
in trickster skin.

Once in the night we saw
something slip into the canal.
There was then the odour we did not recognize.
The smell of a dog losing its shape.

THE COURTSHIP

When my father finished school, his parents decided to send him to university in England. He left Ceylon by ship and arrived at Southampton. He took his entrance exams for Cambridge and writing home a month later told his parents the good news that he had been accepted at Queen's College. He was sent the funds for three years of university education. Finally he had made good. He had been causing much trouble at home and now seemed to have pulled himself out of a streak of bad behaviour in the tropics.

It was two and a half years later, after numerous and modest letters about his successful academic career, that his parents discovered he was living off this money in England and had not even passed the entrance exam. He had rented extravagant rooms at Cambridge and simply eliminated the academic element of university, making close friends among the students, reading contemporary novels, boating, and making a name for himself as someone who knew exactly what was valuable and interesting in the university circles of Cambridge in the 1920s. He had a marvelous time, becoming engaged to several women including a Russian countess, even taking a short trip to Ireland supposedly to fight against the Rebels when the university closed down for its vacation. No one knew about this Irish adventure except my Aunt Babe who was sent a photograph of him posing slyly in uniform.

His parents, on hearing the distressing news, decided to confront him personally, and so his mother and father and sister Stephy packed their trunks and left for England by ship. Only his other sister, Enid, about to have a baby at the time, remained in Ceylon with her husband Wilfred. (Wilfred was a mild-mannered and somewhat boring member of the English gentry — “Enid’s Bengal tiger”, as my father used to call him.) In any case my father had just twenty-four more days of high living at Cambridge before his furious family arrived unannounced at his doors. Sheepishly he invited them in, being able to offer them only champagne at eleven in the morning. This did not impress them as he had hoped, while the great row which my grandfather had looked forward to for weeks and weeks was deflected by my father’s habit of retreating into almost total silence. He had this useful habit of never trying to justify any of his crimes so that it was difficult to argue with him. Instead he went out at dinnertime for a few hours and came back to announce that he had become engaged to Kaye Roseleap — his sister Stephy’s closest English friend. This news stilled most of the fury against him. Stephy moved onto his side and his parents were impressed by the fact that Kaye came leapt from the notable Roseleaps of Dorsets. On the whole everyone was pleased and the following day they all caught the train to Dorset to stay with the Roseleaps, taking along my father’s cousin Phyllis.

During the week in Dorset my father behaved impeccably. The wedding was planned between the in-laws, Phyllis was invited to spend the summer with the Roseleaps, and the Ondaatjes, (including my father) went back to Ceylon to wait out the four months before marriage.

Two weeks after he arrived in Ceylon, my father came home one evening to announce that he was engaged to a Doris Gratiaen. The postponed argument at Cambridge now erupted on my grandfather’s estate in Kegalle. My father was calm and unconcerned with the various complications he seemed to have created and did not even plan to write to the Roseleaps. It was Stephy who wrote setting off a chain reaction in the mails, one letter going to Phyllis whose holiday plans were terminated. (My father and my Aunt Phyllis were always close but they did not speak to each other for two years after this incident.) My father continued his habit of trying to solve one problem by creating another. The next day he returned home saying he had joined the Ceylon Light Infantry.

I am not sure how long he had known my mother before this engagement. He must have met her socially now and then before his Cambridge years for one of his closest friends was Noel Gratiaen, my mother's brother. About that time, Noel was to return to Ceylon, sent down from Oxford at the end of his first year for setting fire to his room. This in fact was common behaviour, but he had gone one step further, trying to put out the fire by throwing flaming sofas and arm-chairs out of the window onto the street and then dragging and throwing them into the river — where they sank three boats belonging to the Oxford rowing team. It was probably while visiting Noel in Ceylon that my father first met Doris Gratiaen.

At that time Doris Gratiaen and Dorothy Clementi-Smith would perform radical dances in private, practicing daily. Both women were about twenty-two and were greatly influenced by rumours of the dancing of Isadora Duncan. In a year or so they would perform in public. There is in fact a reference to them in Rex Daniel's journals:

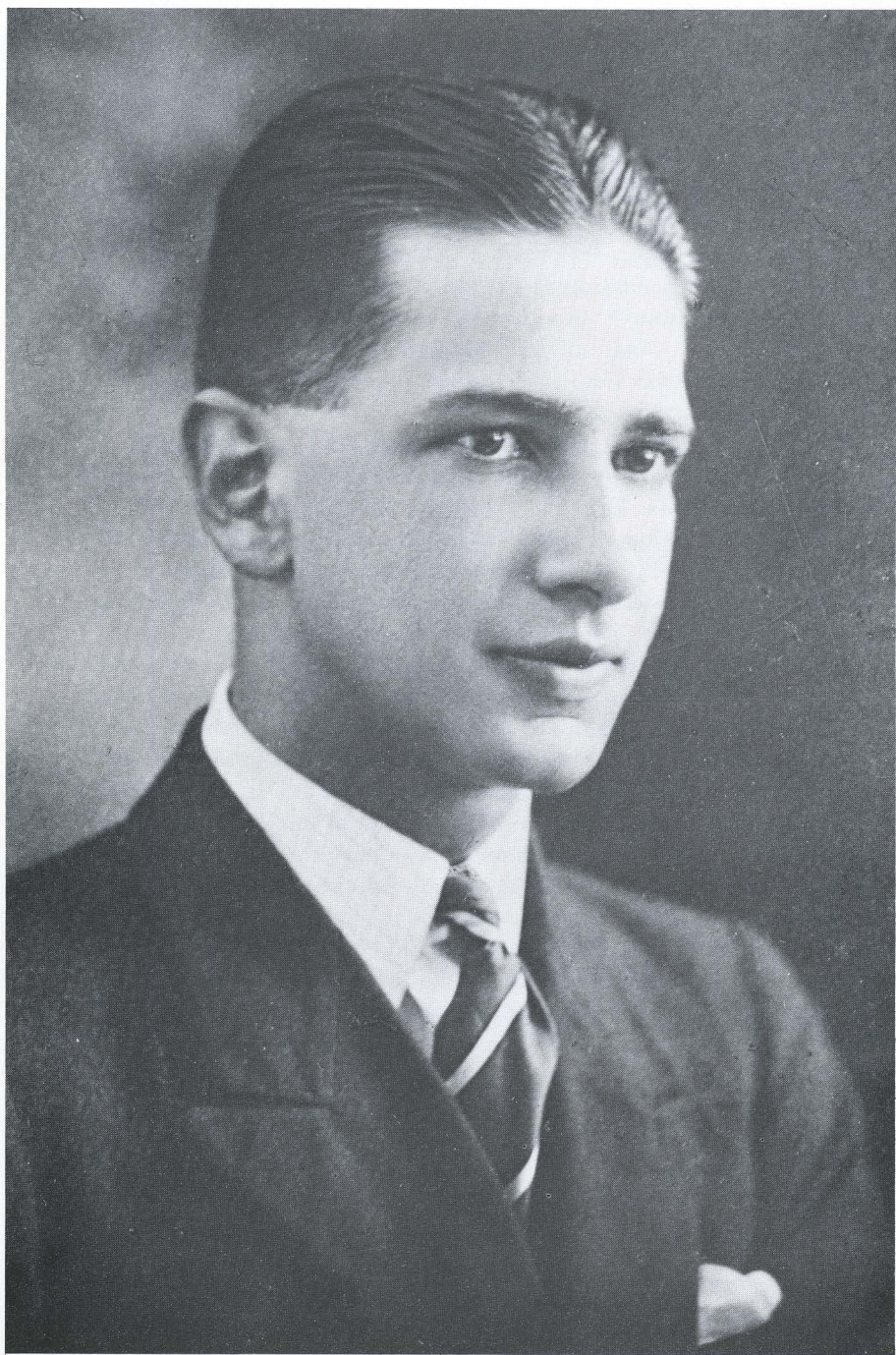
... A garden party at the Residency Grounds. ... Bertha and I sat next to the Governor and Lady Thompson. A show had been organized for them made up of various acts. First on was a ventriloquist from Trincomalee whose act was not vetted as he had arrived late. He was drunk and began to tell insulting jokes about the Governor. The act was stopped and was followed by Doris Gratiaen and Dorothy Clementi-Smith who did an item called "Dancing Brass Figures". They wore swimsuits and had covered themselves in gold metallic paint. It was a very beautiful dance but the gold paint had an allergic effect on the girls and next day they were covered in a terrible red rash.

But that was later. When my father first saw her dance it was in the gardens of Deal Place. My father would drive down from Kegalle to Colombo, stay at the Ceylon Light Infantry quarters at night, and spend his days at Deal Place where he and Noel would watch the two girls practice. It is said he was enchanted with *both* girls, but Noel was to marry Dorothy while my father a few years later was to marry Noel's sister. More to keep my father company than anything else, Noel too had joined the Ceylon Light Infantry. I have some marvellous photographs of the two women, draped in cutaway sheets, posing for the camera, enigmatic and statue-like in front of Colombo shrubbery.

This engagement of my father's was not as popular as the Roseleap one. He bought Doris Gratiaen a huge emerald engagement ring which was charged to his father's account. His father refused to pay for it and my father threatened to shoot himself. Eventually it was paid for by the family.

My father had nothing to do in Kegalle. It was too far away from Colombo and his new friends. His position with the Light Infantry was a casual one, almost a hobby. Often, in the midst of a party in Colombo, he would suddenly remember that he was the duty officer that night and with a car full of men and women planning a midnight swim at Mount Lavinia, he would roll into the barracks, step out in his dress suit, inspect the guard, leap back into the car full of laughing and drunken friends and depart. But in Kegalle he was frustrated and lonely. At one time he was given the car and asked to go and buy some fish. *Don't forget the fish!* his mother said. Two days later his parents got a cable from Trincomalee to say he had the fish and would be back soon.

His quiet life in Kegalle was interrupted, however, when Doris Gratiaen wrote to break off the engagement. There were no phones so it meant a drive to Colombo to discover what was wrong. But my grandfather, furious over the Trincomalee trip, refused him the car. Finally he got a lift with his father's brother Aelian, his cousin Phyllis's father. Aelian was a gracious and genial man. My father was bored and frantic. The combination almost proved disastrous. My father had never driven to Colombo directly in his life. There was a pattern of rest-houses to be stopped at and so Uncle Aelian was forced to stop every thirty miles and have a drink, too polite to refuse his young nephew. By the time they got to Colombo my father was very drunk and Aelian was slightly drunk and it was too late to visit Doris Gratiaen. My father forced his Uncle to stay at the CLI mess. After a large meal and more drink my father announced that now he must shoot himself because Doris Gratiaen had broken off the engagement. Aelian, especially as he was quite drunk too, had a terrible time trying to hide every gun in the Ceylon Light Infantry building. The next day the problems were solved and the engagement was announced once more. They were married a year later.





To jungles and gravestones, reading torn 100-year-old newspaper clippings that come apart in your hands like wet sand, information tough as plastic dolls. Watched leopards sip slowly, watched the crow sitting restless on his branch peering about with his beak open. Seen the outline of a large fish caught and thrown in the curl of a wave, been where nobody wears socks, where you wash your feet before you go to bed, where I watch my sister who alternately reminds me of my father, mother and brother. Driven through rainstorms that flood the streets for an hour and suddenly evaporate, where sweat falls in the path of this ballpoint, where the jak fruit rolls across your feet in the back of the jeep, where there are eighteen ways of describing the smell of a durian, where bullocks hold up traffic and steam after the rains.

I have been to the place where fans stir in all the spoons on the dining table. And drove that damn jeep so often I didn't have time to watch the country slide by thick with event, so everything came directly to me and passed me like snow. The black thick feather of bus exhaust everyone was sentimental against, the man vomiting out of the bus window, the pig just dead having his hairs burnt off on the Canal Road and old girlfriends from when I was nine who now towelled their kids dry on the other side of the SSC pool and the tea estates that reminded me of the green landscape of a dream I had in which I was a mason, precise and slightly crazy, and my watch collecting sea under the glass and gleaming with underwater phosphorus by my bed at night, the inside of both my feet blistering in my first week from the fifteen cent sandals and the obsessional sarong buying in Colombo, Kandy, Jaffna, Trincomalee, the toddy drink I got subtly smashed on by noon and slept right through totally unaware of my dreams, and women and men with naked feet under the dinner table, and after the party the thunderstorm Kim and I walked through for five seconds from porch to car, thoroughly soaked and by the time we had driven ten minutes — without headlights which had been stolen that afternoon at the pool — we were dry just from the midnight heat inside the vehicle and the ghosts of steam cruising disorganized off the tarmac roads, the man sleeping on the street who objected when I woke him both of us talking different languages, me miming a car coming around the corner and hitting him and he pissed off, possibly slightly drunk, but perversely making me perform this action for him again and again, and I got back into the car my clothes fully wet once more and again dry in five miles. And the gecko on the wall waving his tail stiffly his jaws full of dragonfly whose wings symmetrically disappeared into his mouth — darkness filling the almost transparent body, and a yellow enamel-assed spider crossing the bidet and the white rat Quintin claims she saw in the toilet at the Muskeliya tennis club.

And what else did you see? I saw everything. One morning I would wake and just smell things for the whole day, it was so rich I had to select senses, and still everything moved slowly with the assured fateful speed of a coconut falling on someone's head, like the Jaffna train, like the fan at low speed, like the necessary sleep in the afternoon with your dreams blinded by toddy.

HISTORICAL RELATIONS

Those were happy, busy, and expensive days for my parents. Not only did my mother practice her own dancing for three or four hours every day, but most evenings seem to have been pleasantly spent going to dances around Colombo with my father, Dorothy, Noel, Babe and Vernon "Monkey" Jonklaas. During the whole month of August my mother gave up her dancing practice and went to the races. Every afternoon she and her friends would be there. Then they would go out to dinner, dance till the early morning, and then go swimming and have a breakfast of *hoppers* at the Mount Lavinia hotel. Then to bed till three in the afternoon when it was time for the races once more. The culmination of this was the Governor's Cup at the end of the month. Even during the war the August races were not postponed. Ceylon could have been easily invaded in the late afternoon as most of the Light Infantry was at the race course during those hours.

The majority of my relations owned a horse or two which languished in comfort for most of the year and were trotted out for the August race meet. My mother had a horse named "Dickman Delight" which refused to step out of the stable if it was at all muddy. She would bet vast sums on Dickman Delight knowing that one day he would surprise everyone and win. The day this eventually happened my mother was up north in Nuwara Eliya. She received a cable in the early morning which read, "Rain over Colombo" so she cabled back asking Babe to put the money on another horse. Dickman Delight galloped to victory on a completely dry turf. What had happened was that Japanese planes had attacked Galle Face Green in Colombo and the cable had been mixed up at the post office. It should have read "Raid over Colombo". Dickman Delight never won again.

"Dickman Delight" was named after my grandmother on my mother's side. Enid "Lala" Dickman married Willy Gratiaen, and in fact the Dickmans, Gratiaens and Ondaatjes, of the earlier generation had known each other well in Nuwara Eliya.

In various family journals there are many references made to the time spent up country during the hot months of April and May. Nuwara Eliya was a different world. At an elevation of six thousand feet there were constant parties, horse racing, the All Ceylon Tennis Championships, and the National Golf Championships. While the best tennis players competed up-country, they would move back to Colombo if they had to play visiting champions from other countries — as the excessive heat could be guaranteed to destroy the visitors. It was up-country, in Nuwara Eliya, that my grandparents and their friends would go. They danced in large living rooms to the music of a Bijou Moutrie piano while the log fires crackled in every room, or on quiet evenings read books on the porch in the moonlight, cutting open the pages as they progressed through a novel.

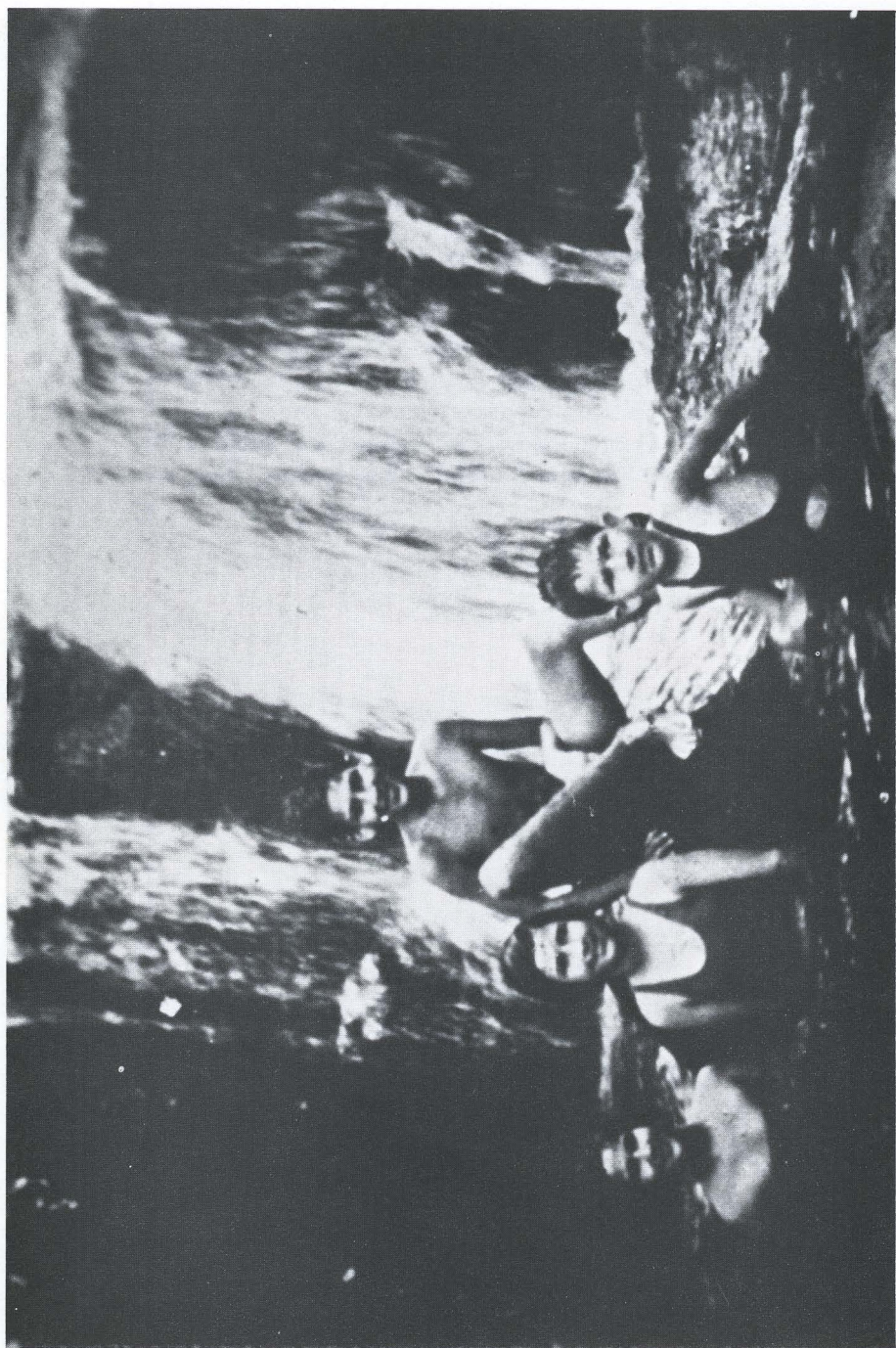
The gardens were perfumed with cyprus, rhododendrons, foxgloves, arum lilies, and sweet pea; and people like the Van Langenbergs, the Vernon Dickmans, the Carl Modders, the Henry de Mels, the Philip Ondaatjes, the Christie Driebergs, and the Paynters were there. There were casual tragedies. Lucas Cantley's wife Jessica almost died after being shot by an unknown assailant while playing croquet with my grandfather. They found 113 pellets in her. And poor Wilfred Bartholomeusz who had large teeth was killed while out hunting when one of his companions mistook him for a wild boar. Nearly every generation belonged to the reserves of the CLI and usually borrowed guns when going on vacation up-country so they could hunt.

It was in Nuwara Eliya that Dick de Vos danced with his wife Etta who fell flat on the floor; she had not danced for years. He picked her up, and on depositing her on a cane chair came over to Rex Daniel and said, "Now you know why I gave up dancing and took to drink." Each morning the men departed for the club to play a game of billiards. They would arrive around eleven in the morning in the buggy carts pulled by bulls. And they would play billiards until the afternoon rest hours while the punkah, the large cloth fan, floated and waved above them and the twenty or so bulls snorted in a circle around the hotel clubhouse. Major Robinson, the old Etonian who ran the prison, would officiate at the tournaments.

During the month of May the circus came to Nuwara Eliya and once when the circus lights failed E. H. L. Jansz drove the fire engine into the tent and focussed the light on the trapeze artist, who had no intention of continuing his performance and sat there straddling his trapeze, watched by all. At one of these touring circuses my Aunt Christie (then only twenty-five) stood up and volunteered to have an apple shot off her head by "a total stranger in the circus profession." That night T. W. Roberts was bitten in the leg by a dog while he danced with her. Later the dog was discovered to be rabid but as T.W. had gone to England nobody bothered to tell him. Most assume he survived anyway. They were all there. Piggford of the police, Paynter the planter, the Fennellis who were Baptist missionaries — she being "an artist and a very good tap dancer".

This was Nuwara Eliya in 1930 and 1931. Everyone was distantly related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burger blood in them going back numerous generations. My father was always proud to be a Ceylon Tamil though that was probably more valid about three centuries earlier. Emil Daniel summed up the situation for most of them when he was asked by the Governor, Sir Herbert Stanley, what his nationality was — “God alone knows, your excellency.”

The world of my grandparents. Philip “Bampa” Ondaatje was supposed to have the greatest collection of wine glasses in the Orient; my other grandfather, Willy Gratiaen, dreamt of snakes every night of his life. The Dickmans whose daughter Enid married Willy were so crazy that the term ‘Dickman fever’ was used when other people got too unruly or too stupid. It was Enid who told her daughter (my mother) that the 30s were “so calm — and so busy — that we were always tired.”





TONGUE

In the early afternoon Quintin, Griffin, Tory, Alexandra and I walk for an hour along the beach — from the foot of the garden at Uswetakeiyawa, past the wrecks, to the Pegasus Reef Hotel. After 20 minutes with sun burning just the right side of our faces and bodies, climbing up and down the dunes, we are exhausted, feel drunk, Tory talking about some dreams she had before leaving Canada. Spray breaking and blazing white. On our left the cool dark of village trees. Mad dog heat. Crabs veer away from our naked steps. I keep counting the children, keep feeling that one is missing. We look down, away from the sun. So that we all suddenly stumble across the body.

From the back it looks like a crocodile. It is about eight feet long. The snout however is blunt, not pointed, as if a crocodile's nose has been chopped off and the sharp edges worn smooth by tides. For a moment I actually believe this. I don't want the others going too close in case it is not dead. It has a double row of pointed scales on its tail. The head seems 'depressed', several teeth visible. The grey body is covered in yellow spots — with black centres so they form yellow rings. He looks fat and bulky. No one from the village about 10 yards away seems to have noticed him. I realize it is a kabaragoya. In English a sub-aquatic monitor. They are very dangerous and can whip you to pieces with their tail. This creature must have been washed out to sea by a river and then drifted back onto the beach, for they do not move in sea-water circles.

Kabaragoyas and thalagoyas are common in Ceylon and are seldom found anywhere else in the world. The kabaragoya is large, the size of an average crocodile, and the thalagoya smaller — a cross between an iguana and a giant lizard. Maundeville, one of the first travellers to write of Ceylon, speaks of their "schorte thyes and grete Nayles." And Robert Knox says of the kabaragoya that "he hath a blew forked tongue like a string, which he puts forth and hisseth and gapeth." The kabaragoya is in fact a useful scavenger and is now protected by law as it preys on fresh water crabs that undermine and ruin the bunds of paddy fields. It eats sand rats, crabs, and turtle eggs. The only thing that will scare it is a wild boar. It can swim well and also spends much time climbing trees.

The thalagoya on the other hand will eat snails, beetles, centipedes, toads, skinks, eggs of young birds, and is not averse to garbage. It is also a great climber, and can leap 40 feet from a tree to the ground, breaking its fall by landing obliquely with its chest, belly, and tail. At my father's house in Kegalle the thalagoyas would climb trees and leap into the house.

The thalagoya has a rasping tongue that 'catches' and hooks objects. There is a myth that if a child is given thalagoya tongue to eat he will become brilliantly articulate, will always speak beautifully, and in his speech be able to 'catch' and collect wonderful humorous information. My Uncle Noel was given thalagoya tongue and spat half of it out, getting very sick and nearly dying. His mother, who had a habit of believing any piece of folklore, had insisted he eat it. He became a brilliant lawyer and judge and a great story teller. And that was from eating just *part* of the tongue. My father, who was well aware of the legend, suggested we eat some when we were in the Ambalantota resthouse. One had just been killed there, having fallen through the roof. All the kids hid screaming in the bathroom until it was time to leave.

There is a way to eat the tongue. The thalagoya is killed by placing it on the ground, doubling its head under its throat, and striking its nape with a clenched fist. The tongue is sliced off and should be eaten as soon as possible after the animal dies. You take a plantain or banana, remove the skin and slice the banana lengthwise in half. You place the grey tongue between the two pieces of banana so that it is like a sandwich and then swallow the whole thing without chewing letting it slide down the throat. Many years later it will result in verbal brilliance though sometimes this will be combined with bad behaviour, (the burning of furniture, etc.). I am not sure what other side effects there are, apart from possible death. My grandmother threw herself dangerously into such local practices. When her husband, the meek Willy Gratiaen, died, she saw a cobra and brought it into the house — certain this was her reborn husband. She fed it bowls of milk daily.

The thalagoya has other uses. It has the only flesh than can be kept down by a persistently vomiting patient and is administered to pregnant women for morning sickness. But as kids we knew exactly what thalagoyas and kabaragoyas were good for. The kabaragoya laid its eggs in the hollows of trees between the months of January and April. As this coincided with the Royal-Thomian cricket match, we would collect them and throw them into the stands full of Royal students. These were great weapons because they left a terrible itch wherever they splashed on skin. The thalagoya we used to scale walls. We tied a rope around its neck and heaved it over a wall. The claws could cling to any surface, and so we just pulled ourselves up the rope after it.

About 6 months before I was born my mother observed a pair of kabaragoyas 'in copula' at Palmadulla. A reference is made to this sighting in *A Coloured Atlas of Some Vertebrates from Ceylon Vol. 2* — a National Museums Publication. It is my first memory.

KEGALLE (i)

My grandfather, Philip, called 'Bampa' by his grandchildren, was a strict aloof man. Most people preferred his brother Aelian who was good-natured, casual, and helpful to everyone. While Aelian was a lawyer in Kandy, my grandfather — also a lawyer — was much more successful in Kegalle. He made a lot of money on land deals and retired as he said he would at the age of forty. He built the family home called 'Rock Hill' on a prime spot of land right in the centre of the town of Kegalle. Kegalle is an hour's drive southwest from Kandy and about an hour and a half by road from Colombo.

'Your great Uncle Aelian was a very generous man', says Stanley Suraweera. 'I wanted to learn Latin and he offered to tutor me from 4 till 5 every morning. I'd go to his house by cart every day and he would be up, waiting for me'. In later years Aelian was to have numerous heart attacks. In one of his hospitals he was given so much morphine that he became addicted to it.

My grandfather lived at Rock Hill for most of his life and ignored everybody in Kegalle social circles. He was immensely wealthy. Most people considered him a snob. But with his family he was a very loving man. Aunt Phyllis remembers the whole family kissing each other goodnight and good morning, and this was a constant tradition in the house — no matter what chaos my father was causing at the time. Family arguments were buried before bedtime and buried once more first thing in the morning.

So here was 'Bampa', determined to be a good father and patriarch, who spread his protective wing over his more popular brother Aelian, living in his empire — the forty acres of choice land in the heart of Kegalle. He was dark and his wife was very white, and a rival for my grandmother's hand remarked that he hoped their children would be striped. After my grandfather retired he seldom put on a suit and tie again — except when he went, every two years, to England for a holiday. The rest of the time he strolled around the estate in a sarong and vest, seldom allowing anyone onto the property, very concerned about who his children would marry. He was also a great dancer. Aunt Phyllis remembers him inviting her out in London and taking great pleasure in performing the most recent dance steps with a natural ease.

My grandfather died before the war began and his funeral was spoken about with outrage and envy for months afterwards. He thought he had organized it well. All the women wore long black dresses and black lace vests, and imported champagne was drunk surreptitiously from teacups. But his hope of departing with decorum collapsed before he was put into the ground, for my grandmother and her daughters Enid and Stephy got into a loud furious argument whether to pay the men two or three rupees to carry the coffin up the steep slopes to the cemetery.

Awkward mourners who had come from Colombo waited silent as my supine grandfather on the periphery while the argument blazed from room to room and down the halls of Rock Hill. My grandmother peeled off her long black gloves in fury and refused to proceed with the ceremony then peeled them on with the aid of a daughter when it seemed the body would never leave the house. My father who was overseeing the cooling of the champagne was nowhere in sight. My mother and Uncle Aelian retired in a fit of giggles to the garden under the mangosteen tree. All this occurred on the afternoon of September 12, 1938.

Aelian died of cirrhosis of the liver in April of 1942. By then my father was stationed in Trincomalee with the army. After the war, having lost numerous jobs on tea estates he returned to the family home in Kegalle. He began with mixed farming and ended up in his last years concentrating on chickens. My father had brought chaos to all of my grandfather's plans. He was everything my grandfather was afraid he might become. My mother had already divorced him, he was to marry again ten years later.

The dipsomania which used to hit my father every six months or so came every two months in his last years. Between bouts he would not touch a drink. Then he would be offered one, take it, and would not could not stop drinking for three or four days. During that time he could do *nothing* but drink. Humorous and gentle when sober, he changed utterly and would do anything to get alcohol. He couldn't eat, had to have a bottle on him at all times. If his new wife Maureen had hidden a bottle he would bring out his rifle and threaten to kill her. He knew, even when sober, that when he had a bout he would need a drink, and so buried bottles all around the estate. In absolute drunkenness he would remember where the bottles were. He might go into the fowl run, dig under chicken straw, and pull out a half bottle. The cement arches on the side of the house built to allow breeze into the house hid so many bottles that from the side it resembled a wine cellar.

He talked to no one on those days, although he recognized friends, was aware of everything that was going on. He had to be at the peak of his intelligence in order to remember exactly where the bottles were in order to outwit his wife and family. Nobody could stop him. If Maureen managed to destroy the bottles of gin he had hidden he would drink methylated spirits. He drank until he collapsed and passed out. Then he would waken and drink again. Still no food. Sleep. Get up and have one more shot and then he was finished. He would not drink again for about two months, or not until whenever the next bout hit him.

The day my father died, Stanley Suraweera, now a Proctor at Kegalle, was in Court when a messenger brought him the note:

Mervyn has dropped dead. What shall I do? Maureen.

* *

We had spent three days in Upcot, in beautiful tea country with my half sister Susan. On the way back to Colombo we stopped first at Kandy and then drove through and down the Kadugannawa Pass, (Gillian complaining that I should *not* be driving down such a steep hill in neutral), to Kegalle. In his last years my father sold or gave away plots of land so that houses had gradually encroached on my grandfather's forty acres. The old wooden bridge that only my father drove over without fear ("God loves a drunk" he would say to anyone beside him white with terror) had been replaced with a concrete one. A Sinhalese family were living in the house now.

What to us had been a lovely spacious house was now small and dark, fading into the landscape. Only the mangosteen tree which I practically lived in during its season of fruit was full and strong. At the back of the kitchen was the kitul tree — tall, with tiny yellow berries which the pole-cat loved. Once a week it would climb up and spend the morning eating the berries and come down drunk, would stagger over the lawn pulling up flowers or come into the house to up-end drawers of cutlery and serviettes. Me and my pole-cat, my father said after one occasion when their drunks coincided, my father lapsing into his songs — bailas or heartbreaking Rodgers and Hart or his own version of "My Bonnie lies over the Ocean". He emerged out of his bedroom to damn whoever it was that was playing the piano to find the house empty, Maureen and kids having left, and the pole-cat walking up and down over the keys breaking the silence of the house, oblivious to his human audience; and my father wishing to celebrate this companionship, discovering all the bottles gone, unable to find anything, finally walking up to the kerosene lamp hanging in the centre of the room at head level, and draining *that* liquid into his mouth. He and his pole-cat.

Gillian remembered some of the places where he hid bottles. *Here* she said *and here*. Her family and my family walked around the house carefully avoiding the Sinhalese family's chained dog, through the depressed garden of guava trees, plantains, old forgotten flowerbeds. Whatever 'empire' my grandfather had wished for had to all purposes disappeared.



TO COLOMBO

Returning from Sigiriya hills
in their high green the grey
animal fortress rock claws of stone
rumours of wild boar

pass

paddy terraces
bullocks brown men
who rise knee deep like earth
out of the earth

Sunlight Sunlight

stop for the cool *kurumba*
scoop the half formed white
into our mouths

remove

tarpaulin walls of the jeep
to receive lowland air

on a bench behind sunlight
the woman the coconuts the knife

HIGH FLOWERS

The slow moving of her cotton
in the heat.

Hard shell of foot.
She chops the yellow coconut
the colour of Anuradhapura stone.

The woman my ancestors ignored
sits at the doorway chopping coconut
cleaning rice.

Her husband moves
in the air between trees.
The curved knife at his hip.
In high shadows
of coconut palms
he grasps a path of rope above his head
and another below him with his naked foot.
He drinks the first sweet mouthful
from the cut flower, then drains it
into a narrow-necked pot
and steps out to the next tree.

Above the small roads of Wattala,
Kalutara, the toddy tapper walks
collecting the white liquid for tavern vats.
Down here the light
storms through branches
and boils the street.
Villagers stand in shadow and drink
the fluid from a coned leaf.
He works fast to reach his quota
before the maniac monsoon.
The shape of knife and pot
does not vary from 18th Century museum prints.

In the village a woman like lowland air
shuffles rice in a cane mat.

Grit and husk separate
are thrown to the sun.

From his darkness among high flowers
to this room contained by mud walls
everything that is important occurs in shadow —
her discreet slow moving his dreams of walking
from tree to tree without ropes.

It is not vanity which allows him this freedom
but skill and habit, the curved knife
his father gave him, it is the coolness up there
— for the ground's heat has not yet risen —
which makes him forget necessity.

Kings. Fortresses. Traffic in open sun.

Within a doorway the woman
turns in the old pleasure of darkness.

In the high trees above her
shadows eliminate
the path he moves along.



SIR JOHN

Gillian and I drive south on the Galle Road, and just past Ratmalana Airport turn inland to the home of Sir John Kottelawela. The jeep dusty, covered in 3-in-1 Oil, moves through the long palatial driveway of red earth and into sudden greenery. A small man in white shirt and shorts, very thin legs, sits on the porch waiting for us. As we park he gets up slowly. We have been invited for breakfast with Sir John and it is 8:30 in the morning.

I have spoken to him on the phone but he seems to have forgotten why we are here, though he is expecting us at breakfast. Gillian and I give our names once more. Mervyn Ondaatje's children. You knew him in the Ceylon Light Infantry?

"Ahh!"

His diplomat's face is utterly shocked. "That one!" he says, "he's the one who got us into all that trouble!" and begins laughing. The last people in the world this millionaire and ex-Prime Minister probably expected to see were the children of Mervyn Ondaatje — the officer who got the d.t.'s in Trincomalee and took a notorious train ride to Colombo in 1943. This is probably the first time anyone has come not so much to see him, *the* Sir John Kottelawela, but because he happened to know for a few hectic months during the war a consistently drunk officer in the Ceylon Light Infantry.

After about ten minutes he still is not over his bizarre motive for the visit. A servant brings him a cane basket full of fruit, and bread, and scones. He says "come" and begins to stroll into the garden with the food under his arm. I gather we are to have breakfast under the trees. Thank god! As we usually eat at seven in the morning, Gillian and I are both starving. He walks slowly towards a series of aquariums on the other side of the pool and driveway. "My fish from Australia," he says, and begins to feed them from the basket. I lift my head to see a peacock on the roof spreading his tail and then we return to the lawn.

"Hell of a lot of trouble that one caused." The peacock? "You know he jumped out of the train when it was going full speed . . . luckily we were passing a paddy field, and he fell into it. When the train stopped he just climbed aboard again covered with mud." It is a Victorian dream. We are on the lawn, my sister Gillian, this frail and powerful man, and we are surrounded by four or five peacocks who are consuming my scones, leaning in jerks towards the basket he holds. And interspersed among the peacocks as if imitating them are sprinklers which throw tails of white, keeping the birds company. Now it is time to feed the deer and the sambhur and jungle fowl.

In the next half hour we ease him back into the story three times and, his memory finally alive to the forties, he remembers more and more. All through his narrative he never calls my father by his name, christian or surname, just "this chap", or "this one", and "that fellow". He is enjoying the story now. I've heard it from three or four other points of view and can remind him of certain bones — the pots of curd, etc.

"I was the commanding officer, you see. This one had been drinking for months. He's stationed north of Trinco (my father went back there for holidays in his later life with his second family). Then one night at two in the morning he drives into the base in his jeep. He says the Japanese have invaded. He's found one. Well I didn't think so, but I had to go so I got in the jeep with this one and drove with him. There was a man five yards out of shore in the surf standing there like a statue. This fellow says, 'There he is'. He had found him two hours earlier coming ashore, halted him, fired his pistol into the water between the man's legs and said, stay there, stay right there, *do not move* till I get back, and jumped into the jeep and came to get us at the base. I put the jeep lights on him and we could see right away he was a Tamil. So then I knew.

"Next morning I took this one with me to Colombo by train. He played hell on the way."

The sambhur has eaten all the bananas, so we go back in, join Sir John's doctor and the doctor's wife and sit down in an open dining room to the real breakfast.

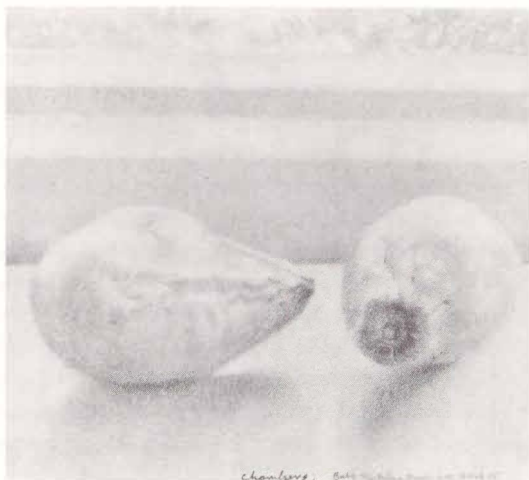
Sir John's breakfasts are legendary, always hoppers and fish curry, mangoes, and curd. A breeze blows magically under the table, a precise luxury, and I stretch my feet to its source as I tear apart the first hopper. My sandal is wrenched off my foot and goes flying down along under the length of the table, luckily not in the direction of Sir John. My foot tingling. While everyone else eats I lean back and look underneath and there is a small portable fan a few inches from my toes ready to tear into flesh this time. I could have lost a toe during one of these famous breakfasts searching for my father.

Sir John is talking about someone else now, delighting in some scandal about "one of the best liars we have." The open windows that come down to within six inches off the floor have no glass. A crow steps up as if to make an announcement, moves away and then the peacock climbs in and steps down to the light brown parquet floor. His feet give a slight click at each step. No one has seen this wonder, it seems, but me. Sir John reaches for a hopper, tears off the brittle edges of the dough, and taking the soft delicious centre, holds it out and the peacock he has not even looked at but just senses, perhaps just hears, takes a final step forward, declines his neck and accepts the hopper walking away to a less busy part of the dining room, eating as he walks.

While we eat, an amateur theatre group from Colombo which is producing *Camelot* receives permission to be photographed on the grounds. The dream-like setting is now made more surreal by Sinhalese actors wearing thick velvet costumes, pointed hats, and chain mail in this terrible May heat. A group of black knights mime festive songs among the peacocks and fountains. Guinevere kisses Arthur beside the tank of Australian fish.

The photographers outside, the idea of *Camelot*, all remind Sir John of his political tribulations. For he claims that if anything lost him elections it was the grandness of the house and his parties — pictures of which appeared in the newspapers. He tells us of one of the most scandalous photographs organized by the Opposition. A demure young couple visited him along with a third friend who had a camera. They asked if he minded them taking some photographs and he gave them permission. The photographer took several pictures of the couple. Suddenly the man dropped to his knees, lifted up the woman's sari and started chewing away at her upper thigh. Sir John who was watching casually a few yards away, rushed forward and asked what was happening. The man on his knees unburied his head and grinned at him saying, "snake bite, sir", and returned to the thigh of the woman.

A week later three photographs appeared in the newspapers of this blatantly sexual act with Sir John also in the picture chatting casually to the woman whose face was in the throes of ecstasy.



Chambers: Snake bite, sir, and returned to the thigh of the woman.

MAY 1978

Aunt Babe pulls out the album and there is the photograph I have been waiting all my life for. My father and mother together, May 1932, forty-six years ago to the month. After all this time it must be the photograph that has to shock and delight me.

They are on their honeymoon and the two of them, very soberly dressed, have walked into a photographic studio. The photographer is used to wedding pictures. He has probably seen every pose. My father sits facing the camera, my mother stands beside him and bends over so that her face is in profile on a level with his. Then they both begin to make hideous faces.

My father's pupils droop to the south-west corner of his sockets. His jaw falls and resettles into a groan that is half idiot, half shock. (All this emphasized by his dark suit and well combed hair.) My mother in white has twisted her lovely features and stuck out her jaw and upper lip so that her profile is in the posture of a monkey. The print is made into a postcard and sent through the mails to Babe and Vernon Jonklaas. On the back my father has written "*What we think of married life.*"

Everything is there, of course. Their good looks behind the tortured faces, their mutual humour, and the fact that both of them are hams of a very superior sort. The evidence I wanted that they were absolutely perfect for each other. My father's tanned skin, my mother's milk paleness and this theatre of their own making.

It is the only photograph I have found of the two of them together.



LAST MORNING

Half an hour before light I am woken by the sound of rain. Rain on wall, coconut, and petal. This sound above the sound of the fan. The world already awake in the darkness beyond the barred windows as I get up and stand here, waiting for the last morning.

My body must remember everything, this brief insect bite, smell of wet fruit, the slow snail light, rain, rain, and underneath the hint of colours a sound of furious wet birds whose range of mimicry includes what one imagines to be large beasts, trains, burning electricity. Dark trees, the mildewed garden wall, the slow air pinned down by rain. Above me the fan's continual dazzling of its hand. When I turn on the light the bulb on the long 3-foot cord will sway to the electrical breeze making my shadow move back and forth on the wall.

But I do not turn on the light yet. I want this emptiness of a dark room where I listen and wait. There is nothing in this view that could not be a hundred years old, that might not have been here when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven. My mother looks out of her Colombo window thinking of divorce, my father wakes after three days of alcohol, his body hardly able to move from the stiffness in muscles he cannot remember exerting. It is a morning scenery well known to my sister and her children who leave for swimming practice before dawn crossing the empty city in the Volks, passing the pockets of open shops and their light-bulb light that sell newspapers and food. I stood like this in the long mornings of my childhood unable to bear the wait till full daylight when I could go and visit the Peiris family down the road in Boralessamuwa; the wonderful long days I spent there with Paul and Lionel and 'Jimmy' and Aunt Peggy who would casually object to me climbing all over her bookcases in my naked and dirty feet. Bookcases I stood under again this last week which were full of signed first editions of poems by Neruda and Lawrence and George Keyt. All this was here before I dreamed of getting married, having children, wanting to write.

Here where some ants as small as microdots bite and feel themselves being lifted by the swelling five times as large as their bodies. Rising on their own poison. Here where the cassette now starts up in the next room. During the monsoon, on my last morning, all this Beethoven and rain.