

THE CAPILANO REVIEW



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INTRODUCTION

Part of one person's answer to the question "Why do you write?" is, "The only way to continue is to tell a story." The work in this issue is what has been brought forward from two separate journeys back, is what "continues."

Daphne Marlatt and Michael Ondaatje discovered a coincidence of subject-matter in their recent writing — not surprisingly, since both had journeyed on separate occasions to the distant but proximate places of their childhood. Daphne's month-long visit to Penang, where she had lived for six years as a young child, took place in July of 1976. Michael's visit to Sri Lanka (Ceylon), his birthplace and home for eleven years, extended from mid-February until mid-May of 1978. Such journeys, or returns, no matter what circumstances compel them, impinge severely on the imagination. They are full of portent because they involve so much the question of who one is. What does "I" mean in such a context, and, what "I" has ever been a stranger to its context, though its context may estrange? *the foreignness of what you are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.* Personal history, gathered up in a foreignness that is yet familiar, is never just a private meaning, and the past is never really past, and so we get hungry ghosts and things running in the family.

What occasioned Daphne's journey was the death of her mother, whose presence is felt intensely throughout the writing. The account of that return to a densely populated culture where every available nook and cranny is filled with ritual tribute to people's ancestors, makes us wonder at the apparent invisibility of our own. But they are not so easily dismissed, these "hungry ghosts," for while they are the ghosts we are devoured by, they are also the ghosts we devour, in our mutual hunger for proper recognition, and our desire for mutual knowledge. Such recognition, and the insight it accrues, is painful and surprising. It is the constant surprise of seeing what is already there.

Michael's return to Sri Lanka was planned under less harrowing circumstances. More purposively, Ondaatje gathers the threads of a narrative that also composes his own life. There is not so much a sense of the ghostly, but there is that sense of surprise, delight, and dismay in the recovery. Both writers enter a narrative that is larger than and prior to themselves, and they become part of the continuing they document. For example, both wonder at that previous way of life as colonials — privileged, isolated, idiosyncratic. In Marlatt's writing particularly there is an acute awareness of class barriers and her own "privileged" position, while in "Running in the Family" that sense of privilege is subsumed to the surreality it permits, and every point of pain turns to laughter.

These works are not memoirs, nor are they autobiography. They are, rather accounts of the recovering of language and self in a context saturated with memory. This process of recovery ("re-entry") is more explicit in Marlatt's work, where the prose registers the shocks of consciousness itself and retraces the growth of some present aware-nesses. Ondaatje's prose enters a narrative that has begun before his birth, and story leads to story as things are prodded, evoked, un-earthed, re-searched. There is a monster at the heart of his writing that he nearly stumbles over in broad daylight, and whose tongue, as he then recalls, contains the gift of story-telling.

We can speak here of the circumstances motivating these journeys, of their durations and discoveries, but what the writing finally speaks of are the patterns that both compose and discompose person and writer. The present consciousness, the heart's old knowledges, and the imagination together trace their sources in the places and peoples and relationships that populate them and ground them. Marlatt and Ondaatje are two very different writers. What holds them together in this issue is a mutual concern, their friendship, and their admiration for one another's work. We are honoured to present them here, together.

SHARON THESEN

Associate Editor, Poetry



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.

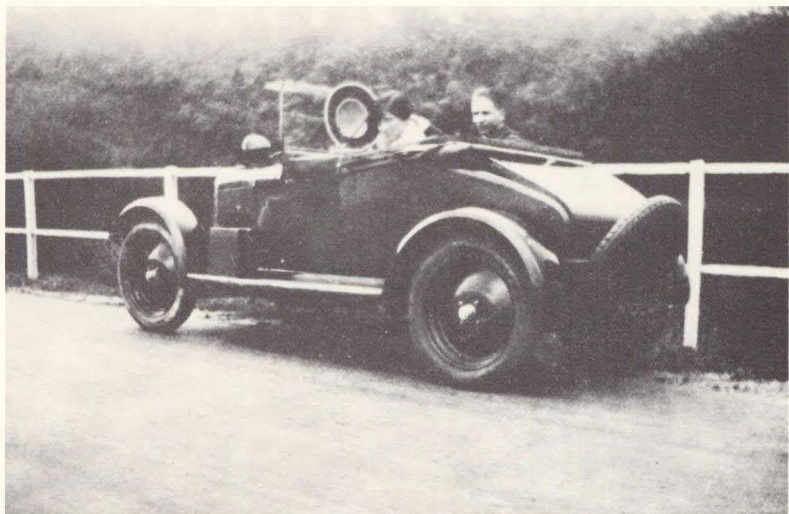
By noon he is sleepy, dozes for an hour, then awakens for a lunch of crab curry. There is no point in using a fork and spoon for this meal. He eats with his hands, shovelling in the rice with his thumb, crunching the bones in his teeth. It is very rich, and eating a little fills him. Then fresh pineapple.

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:

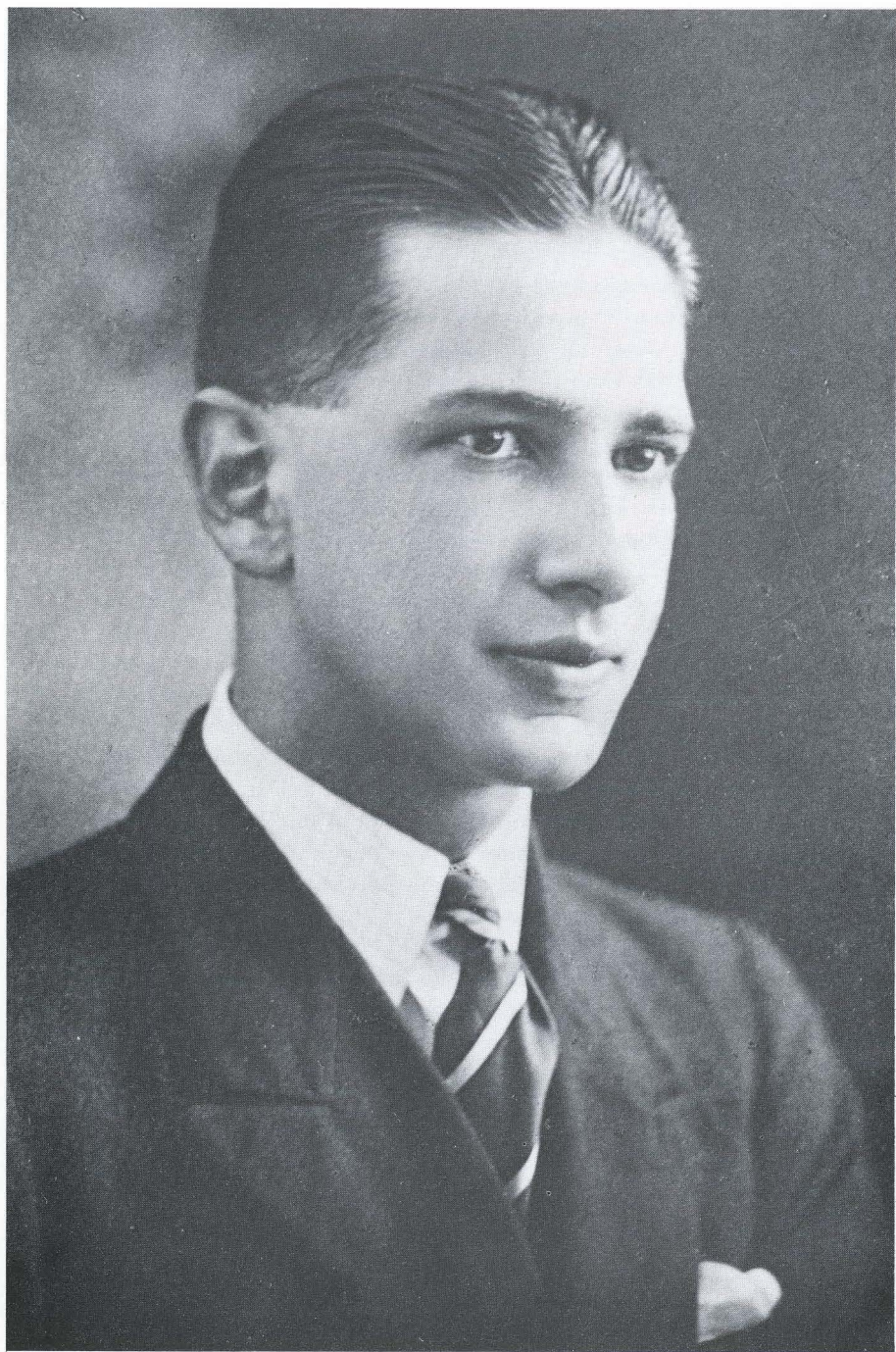
... A garden party at the Residency Grounds. ... Bertha and I sat next to the Governor and Lady Thompson. A show had been organized for them made up of various acts. First on was a ventriloquist from Trincomalee whose act was not vetted as he had arrived late. He was drunk and began to tell insulting 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 marvelous 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.

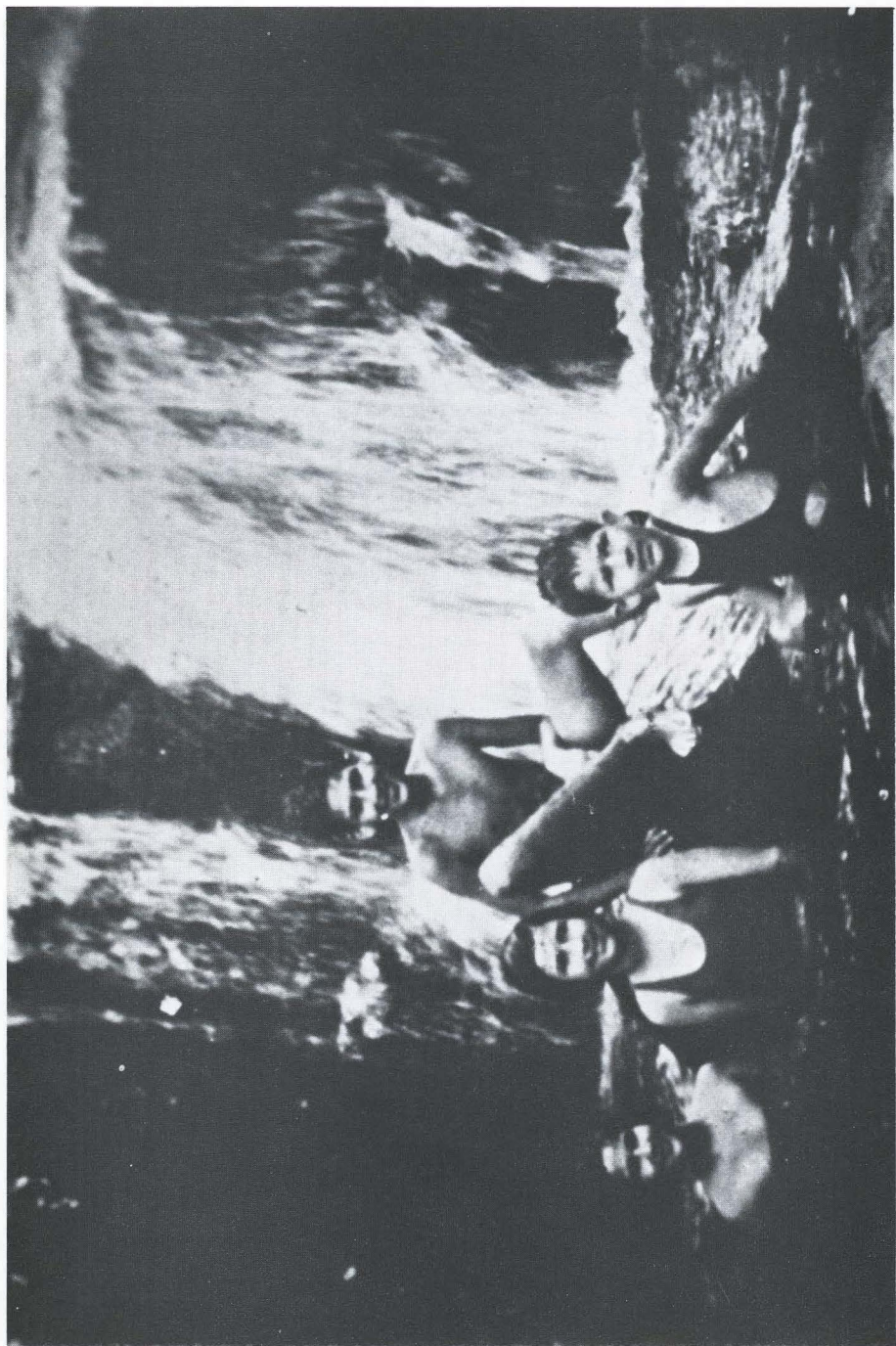
The gardens were perfumed with cyprus, rhododendrons, foxgloves, arum lilies, and sweet pea; and people like the Van Langenbergs, the Vernon Dickmans, the Carl Modders, the Henry de Mels, the Philip Ondaatjes, the Christie Driebergs, and the Paynters were there. There were casual tragedies. Lucas Cantley's 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.

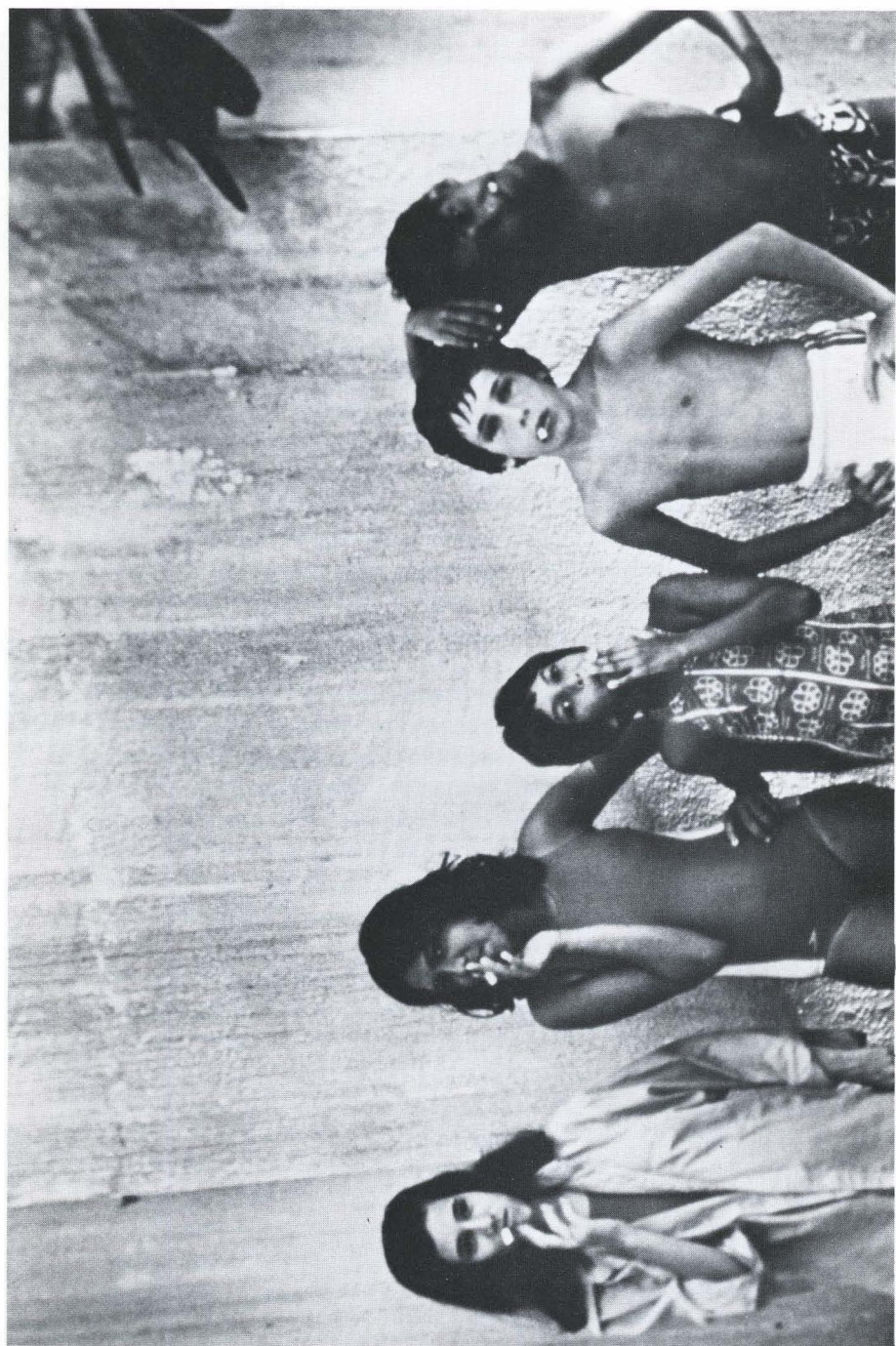
It was in Nuwara Eliya that Dick de Vos danced with his wife Etta who fell flat on the floor; she had not danced for years. He picked her up, and on depositing her on a cane chair came over to Rex Daniel and said, "Now you know why I gave up dancing and took to drink." Each morning the men departed for 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.

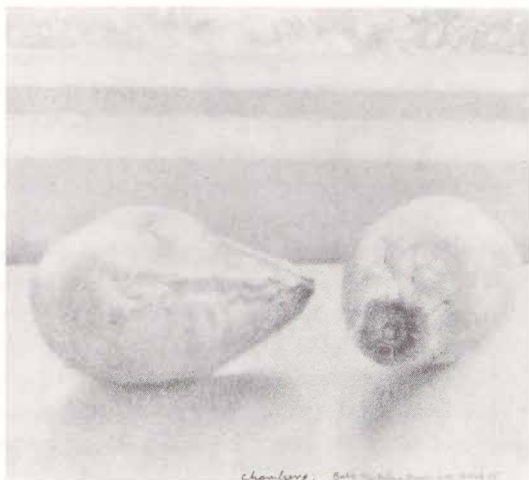
Sir John's breakfasts are legendary, always hoppers and fish curry, mangoes, and curd. A breeze blows magically under the table, a precise luxury, and I stretch my feet to its source as I tear apart the first hopper. My sandal is wrenched off my foot and goes flying down along under the length of the 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.



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 Boralessgamuwa; 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.



DAPHNE MARLATT /
IN THE MONTH
OF HUNGRY GHOSTS

*We cannot retrace our steps,
going forward may be the same
as going backwards.*

— GERTRUDE STEIN

22nd July 1976

Bangkok 8:00 a.m.

Snakes. Woke up dreaming of the striking head of a cobra — pok — into me, my hand over breast. Snakes at the Temple of the Reclining Buddha where we stopt, latter part of the floating market tour. A snake pit, the “doctor” a young Thai in boots & white medical jacket, who poked at the snakes with stick, getting them to raise their heads, spread their hoods — cobras all colours from black to brown but with same diamond markings on hood. He’d pick up one by tail, slap it on table, poke it til erect & facing him, ready to strike, then wd fascinate it with one hand as he went with the other for its neck, grabbed, just below head, immediately flattening hood. Assistant handed him flat dish which he inserted in cobra’s mouth, forcing the edge of it back against the jaw & poison glands (you could hear the teeth scraping on the plastic) & squeezing the head so that drops of poison were forced out onto the plate — transparent liquid. Poison goes to victim’s heart & stops it, the announcer (an old grinning Thai with dirty turban & microphone in hand) announced, “and our doctor never misses, he is very quick, he has to be.”

Then yesterday in the Temple of the Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Keo) on the palace grounds, our guide pointed out a picture of Buddha sitting under a tree, his body wrapt in the coils of a snake & his head canopied by the 7 heads of the snake, a nagah, watersnake. When he sought enlightenment by meditation under the baobab tree, he vowed not to move, even though it rained so hard the rain came up to his navel & after a week of sitting the watersnake wrapt itself around him, holding its 7 heads over him to protect him & at that point he gained enlightenment. That's why, guide said, Thai temples always corner their roofs with heads of snakes, as protection (flaming? crests I'd thought). To be wrapt in that other, that so non-human, & not suffer revulsion but see the snake's gift of protection — must be what we call "grace."

Sitting on the floor of the temple with us, our guide slid quietly from politics to religion, a spontaneous sermon. A Thai who'd had the usual Buddhist training including 3 months as "yellow man" (monk) has for the last 4 yrs been studying Mormon teachings & teaches in the Mormon church. "Maybe you go by bus & you go by train & I go by plane but the important thing is our destination & that is the same point." A dualist, said Christ (pronounced Kreest) gives men a choice as to whether they follow him or not & so he stands for good in the world but Satan says you must follow *me* if you want power. Said that young men as monks are all taught to meditate & that meditation "makes you happy because you do not want food or clothes or objects, you are all the time happy inside" & that when you have meditated a lot you leave the city which is full of "objects" & go to the jungle where you have nothing because that is where you are happy.

He referred to the division amongst the Thai people between those who wanted the Americans to leave & those who didn't. Said the Govt officially wanted them to go but actually didn't "because they make corruption with them." Our afternoon guide spoke of the student upheavals, students pro-Communist & the rest of the people against them. The student headquarters, communist headquarters in Bangkok, had been burned. Police headquarters also burned to the ground. Said people didn't like Communists & if they were invaded would repel them: "We love our king." (how much of this is made-to-order propaganda?) But he also said the first democratization in 1932 when the absolute monarchy became a constitutional monarchy was sham & it's only been recently, as a result of protest, that real democratization has occurred.

The temples, their ornate imagery, colours, gilt, such a contrast to the rusted corrugated iron & wood shacks most of the people live in, live very simply, poorly ("we know no mattresses & pillows," our guide said yesterday, "only wood to sleep on," speaking of how poor the country is for bodily comforts — "inside we have enough, but not outside, for our bodies.") It's the calm in the temples, & the sense of many lives invested there — candles burning constantly, incense, flowers, food offerings, gilt leaf offerings pasted onto images & statues (temples are USED here), the strange displays of sacred power such as the 40 yr old body of the 20 yr old nun who'd died of malaria, displayed in all her white muslin garb, faded jasmine wreaths, skull on bent head visible, flesh of hand wrinkled & dark as if embalmed. Her not rotting seen as the sign of her spirituality —

Buddhism here in all its ritualism & ceremony honours the flowering of the body, even in deprivation, as it points to its invisibility — the tension of the 2 seen as the tension of life.



22nd July
Penang 11:30 p.m.

A cheecha running along the ceiling above makes a funny chirping noise — light brown almost pink legs, one beady eye upon me writing at this glasstopped desk. Waves of cricket & treefrog sounds continuously breaking outside around the house. Barking dogs in the distance. Hot. Dark.

Once out on the road by myself, walking down it — vague memories of walking down it as a child, knew where the golf course was where we used to pick mushrooms in the early morning — once out in that humming dark, the trees — one I did seem to know, spreading its great umbrella arms (sam-cha? the same?) writhing in the light (streetlamp), it's the *vividness* of everything here — I was afraid, had to force myself to walk — afraid of this life & what the night hides, bats? cobras? At the last house on the road (such huge gardens around each mansion) a tall frangipani tree dropping white blossoms on the grass (which isn't grass but a kind of low growing broadleafed plant). I came back to find Mr. Y in his pyjamas & Dad outside looking for me. Locking up. Then a to-do about locking the ironwork gate in the upper hall that separates the bedrooms from the rest of the house ("we've had a spot of trouble") . . .

Mr. Y moves like water in a conversation, either rushing forward with endless talk of company affairs or receding into not hearing much else. A habit of not directly answering questions, the servants do that too. Very kind. The old world courtesy, the constant talking about a thing to be done while doing it, the concern over little things like leaving a door open or closed — Yeats' lapis lazuli old man with a touch of the absurd. His passion is business, he's full of gossip about all the people whose lives have been involved with the company to any extent — & all the internal dissensions, inner politics — absorbing, the game business is, played with utter seriousness. He hints at many things yet overstates, "it was cruel" etc., which makes for a curious style of conversation.

Eng Kim: recognized her as soon as I saw her, but curiously didn't want to show my recognition immediately. She's hardly changed at all — so amazingly similar in appearance after 25 years. Still that almost shy, perfectly naive sweetness — how can she have lived these years so apparently untouched? She's "worked for the bank" (i.e. looked after the bank manager & family) most of the time. The perfect servant, neat & unassuming, quiet as a shadow — yet I catch a glint of humour in her smile. Will it be possible to know her better? It's so strange to be, now 25 years later, someone she serves.

O the disparities — how can I ever relate the two parts of myself? This life would have killed me — purdah, a woman in — the restrictions on movement, the confined reality. I can't stand it. I feel imprisoned in my class — my? This is what I came out of. & how else can I be here?

disparities

Song River
Cafe cuttle-
fish

dried flesh
in the dark

shine

water's edge

old bay
new road

strange
fish

res publica

each his own
how each does chant
his tributary note
to the great cantata
under the raintrees'
'thrice-canopied'

chirrup

cedes to the
trinng · trinng · trinng
bare feet pedal into
oblivion

23rd 7:45 a.m.

General sweeping going on — the kabun seems to sweep the grounds each day. sound of bamboo broom. chink of china (discreet) from kitchen. birds woke me at 7:00 with a tide of music. the old fans work well, our room cool all night tho thick with humidity.

How can I write of all this? what language, or what *structures* of language can carry this being here?

Flying in yesterday it was the size of the island that surprised me, not one hill but many, a range, all steeply wooded, overgrown. & Georgetown itself white in the sun, highrise crested now, sprawling. We came down from such a high altitude so fast the pain in my ears brought tears: the cost of re-entry? into the past?

Saturday the 24th

I have too much energy for this life, its do-nothing style — no real work to use storedup food energy. Always eating here: breakfast, lunch, dinner with tea (a meal in itself) in between. Then everyone goes to bed at 10:30. I want to get out, see the life not visible from these confines of a wellrun household. But how do it on my own? Even last night's walk with Pam down Jalan MacAllister brought us a car full of young men keeping pace with us asking if we want a ride, etc. & today Idris warns us as he lets us off for shopping alone to hang onto our purses. Tonight I have to ask Ah Yow to unlock the back door to let me in because I went out to record the chorus of frogs down the road after the house had been locked (they lock us in when they go off duty — a sealed fortress).



I'm finding out more about the taboos I was raised with, the unspoken confines of behaviour, than I am about Penang. Still, that's useful — it makes me see the root of my fears: either I obey the limitations & play safe, stay ignorant, or else I go off limits, play with "danger" & suffer the price of experience, wch is mostly unconscious anxiety that all the dire things prophesied will happen!

Saw a watersnake today in the brook I'd planned to wade down, see where it goes — about 3 ft long, striped in bands of brown & gold on black, coiling & uncoiling along the muddy edges of the stream rushing thick & fast with yesterday's rainy torrents. Snake again signals offlimits, danger to me. I can't get past the snakes in my life.

Went to market this morning with Ah Yow — lots of fish: catfish, red snapper, even shark, plus blue crabs, various types of prawns & shrimp, hermit crabs (brilliantly orange & black), squid too. Bought starfruit (yellow & ridged so that the green end forms a star), lonyons (small brown berrylike balls with flesh like rambitans & a black pip, very fragrant, delicate), a big avocado, more mangosteens (memory fruit, those hard black or brown rinds, redstaining flesh inside, inedible, then in the centre soft white segments, delicious, containing the seeds.) Little bananas here too (pisang mas), very sweet. Plus durians & some other brown fruit about the size of Yucatan papayas. Papayas here grow in the garden (along with purple & white eggplants & orchids), are large & deep orange inside like the mameys.

Another swim this p.m., all of us in the sea this time, its muddy brown waves lifting us onto coarse shale above sand where the surf comes in. No jellyfish yet, tho Dad told us not to touch the slimy bottom further out because ikan sembilang with poison spines lurk there. Pam & I swim lengths of the pool for energy, but it's the salt of the sea revives me, or memory, some further dimension. Stood in the clubhouse after with an ayer limau (fresh limejuice & water) & watched the sea breaking on the sand & rocks below, the foamy edge of wave curling around the rock, soaking into sand as it withdraws drawing lines immediately effaced, & the long recession of the wave only to be thrown up again & again, reminded me of some, the same, watching long ago. Must get out to the lighthouse at Muka Head.

* * *

Today was filled with birdsong — meditating at noon it was the birds came through, their shared public space a song arena where each declares itself, insists on its presence, full of life & brilliant there with (just jumped up in fright as a black beetle ran up my skirt!)

... liquid
& metallic rings, trills, calls . . . Mr. Y. comes by in pajamas & robe, looking for the paper . . .

Want to get this down: this morning such a beautiful awakening to curtains of rain falling around the house off the open verandah outside our room (which is the room we used to sleep in, the “nursery” — Pam recalls running around the verandah, it’s familiar to me too) & that wet noise dense with a thicket of birdsong, jubilant, joyous, in the wet, & the falling rain transformed into falling notes, falling & ascending, crossing the rain in darts of melody — wooden shuttle of the Thai silk weaver — running across & through the warp of the rain. I didn’t want to wake up but to rock there between sleep & waking in the cool, in that liquid & musical world, so deeply familiar I was hardly present anywhere, just to be, in that long child-being, sentient, but only just, skin (not even ‘mine’) merging with an air that is full of melody & rain-breath, breadth, sound enwrap —

“abandoned”

memory, *memor*, mindful
mer-mer-os, one
anxious thought

grey flats signal
not cement, not broken
glass

BUNGAH / banged up
sea, its glint
broken

waves coming in
sand shock, rock
'd asleep in the arms of
(murmurous

jellyfish
ikan sembilan & things
pinch in the dark
where feet go

landmark!

road coming up
at once unknown
& plain
as concrete

flower
's

BEACH

crossing by

yellow blue
Butter to George
worth town
 ferry —

Pulau Pinang Pulau Jerejek Pulau Rimau

& the light plays
surface

Pulau blue distance leper
haze, the Straits

of Malacca, your grandmother

silver rack for toast
for tennis, & the
gardens of night-blooming
kengwah

 orchids, once
every five years, the place

"we see with alien eyes"

"we walk with alien feet"

lifts/

 no rickshas now but 'teksis'
& K. Tinderoomy found
in the railroad yard
his hand, his right leg severed

Butterworth a name

 "we commit
 to memory"

a life not of our own
 making



mem sahib

“mistress
of her own
house”

loved
mah mee, ordered
chicken for dinner
eased

deaths & small
wounds, cure-all,
any sepsis, except
her own

still played, gaily
mummy, mah jong, didn't
know what to “do”

(it mattered
apart from the children's
small world to move into
& lost, finally, found off-
center, *mata*, her unruly
self

unloved, locked
up in a picture, trembling
under the mask

mata hari, sun
sun through all her rooms she
closed the curtains on

planters

liquid white latex
drips from the tree's
girdled trunk

no, he says, no
cause of death a
tapping, they
milk, these women in
gummy pants transporting
"even the women drive now"
churns

down those hill
sides he climbed
refusing a guard, knows
"his people" she
feeds
children of the crèche
cod liver oil each morning
legs so swollen now they
climb the drive, opening
mouths like
birds

"we'll carry on
til we can't walk
any longer"

as the buildings stand, *they*
fade into the land, unceasing
estate

*"in which the whole
household of nature swings"*

trees
they go on standing

Friday July 30th

This morning Mr. Chu from the office took the 3 of us to the Khoo Khongsi, the Khoo clan house, biggest in Penang & highly ornate, all intricately carved wood that's been gilded & the tall interior sides covered with magnificent drawings of the gods riding mythical beasts: unicorns, giant turtles with rhinoceros heads, winged panthers. The Sikh jagar (the Indians as a class seem to be watchmen & gardeners) turned out to be also the Scout commissioner for the island. Mr. Chu is small & round & loves Johnny Cash, which he plays loudly on cassette tape in his Toyota.

Yesterday we drove out to the Sungei Ara estate owned by a fine old English couple, must be in their 70's now, they've lived out here 50 years. She's a trained nurse & still administers first aid & looks after the health of the workers & their children on the estate. He speaks Malay and Tamil fluently. She probably does too as she established a day care ("crèche") for the children of Tamil workers who are mostly tappers. We watched 2 girls tapping rubber trees & later saw the liquid white latex (caught in drips from the tree by an inserted metal spout & clay cup) transported in churns to the factory where it is mixed with water & an acid that makes it congeal into long white sheets which are pressed & then smokedried, turning them amber.

Their "bungalow" a very airy open house, one whole wall of living room open to the outdoors, a lifetime of mementos & curios collected, from silver sailing trophies to a stuffed tree rat, pest on the estate as it eats into coconuts which are grown for sale, as are cocoa beans, nutmeg & cloves.

All the workers we met, in their facial expressions & manner of speaking, indicated affection & respect for him. He himself is very unassuming, they both are, & positive in outlook — doesn't worry about the "odd behaviour" of other races. When they were reminiscing about the war, we learned she'd sent her only daughter to friends up Penang Hill as the Japanese were advancing, to free her to set about finding rice reserves to feed their workers who had very little food. During the postwar emergency period when communist guerillas were setting up road ambushes & taking over estates, he refused to be accompanied by a policeman in his work about the place because the policeman "walked so slowly, just plodded along, I'd never have got to the top of the hills." They relied on their own guards about the house & the loyalty of their workers. One of them

reported being approached by a man who'd offered \$50 for information regarding Hugh's daily activities: "he said his tuan lived in town & only came out when he felt like it so he was very sorry but he couldn't oblige the man because he didn't know."

She's a tall gangly woman with poor hearing now & badly swollen legs but when I asked her whether they had any plans for selling the estate she said oh no, they were going to carry on until they couldn't walk any longer & then somebody else would do the work for them — they had no desire to go back to England. They seem to be more in touch with the land & the people than anyone else we've met — perhaps it's their age that stops them from the kind of social small talk of the others, a curious jaded brilliancy that seems quite rootless. She especially is silent, probably because of her hearing, but they both seem to fade into their land. It's a humanly dense world too, with its Malay kampong & mosque, Tamil housing, & Chinese stores forming a small village most of the buildings of which he himself has kept up or had rebuilt. They don't seem to close off from any of it, a kind of empathy that would probably make them vulnerable if they weren't British to begin with & committed to a paternalistic system (she still administers cod liver oil daily to all the day care kids who must walk up to the house to get it now she has difficulty getting around). They really do represent the moral best of the old system — what Mrs. Khoo complained of missing when she said the Chinese long for "the good old days of the colonial system where there was real democracy & the fittest man won, regardless of race." Which no doubt reflects more on the difficulties of Malay nationalism than the virtues of the caste system of British colonialism.

* * *

Palms so far: betel palm (the tree of Penang, sez Hugh), coconut palm (coconuts here are green), atap palm (they use for thatching roofs), oil palm (whole plantations of), toddy palm (toddy from flowers). & hands, palms — of the man sliding down the tree so fast, who with one blow of his machete offered us a drink — sweet, slurped from inside glistening walls, split to the light, of coconut well.



July 28th

Dear Cille,

... It's not so much a holiday as a curious psychic re-dipping in the old font, & most of the time I'm kicking against it. Because it's so insidious, the English habits of speech & perception, English patterns of behaviour. (Suppose I got the longest conditioning anyhow, of the 3 of us kids.) But what's amazing is that it still exists, much as it has done, tho obviously it's the end of an era. It ain't *my* era, or Pam's, tho everyone we meet seems to want to suggest it is, implicate us in it. I've never before understood what a big move it was for them, to come to Canada.

Sometimes I panic — I want to rush home, as if I might get trapped here, this honeyed land. Mrs. J. saying how she didn't want to leave Penang, "it's such a beautiful place." It is, & yet it all feels unreal to me — there's no authentic ground here for "Europeans." I want to rip out of myself all the colonialisms, the taint of colonial sets of mind. That's why as kids we hated everything "English" — not because it was English but because we equated what was English with a colonialist attitude, that defensive set against what immediately surrounds as real on its own terms — because to take it on as real would mean to "go native" & that was unthinkable to them.

July 29th

Dad speculates, as we peer over the bridge into the rushing darkness of the brook, cicadas trilling all around us, that in some previous life he must have been a rich Chinese in Malacca with a fleet of junks trading spices to China. Says he always feels at home here, loves the smell of camphorwood chests, the songs of birds, the plants. I ask him has he never felt alien, never felt there were places he couldn't enter, wasn't welcome in? He says only recently, with the political situation the way it is, but that before, the only animosity he remembers encountering was in the Indian temple where he filmed the Typoosum rites & he could understand that. That leads to the further comment that he's never liked Indian temples anyhow.

What we make our own — or separate from us. The interests of the Chinese middle class here as commercial as the British, & the same sense of formality, & pragmatism.

Earlier, as we rode a trisha down to the Chartered Bank Chambers, Pam wondered how people on the street regard white women (she herself thinks English women look "dumpy") & whether they found us sexual or not, commented on the looks various people gave us as we passed. We both felt separate & visible in our hired trisha pedalled by someone else (an incredibly skinny man) — uncomfortable parodies of the leisured class. Is this the only way to be a white woman here? Or is this the condition of being a member of an exploitive & foreign moneyed class?

& yet the sun shines on all of us alike — everywhere the flare of colour, glint of metallic thread running thru a sari, shining flesh, oil gleaming off black hair — we feel pale by comparison, & immaterial (living always in our heads?) It's the same feeling I had coming home from Mexico, that people walk the streets of Vancouver mostly as if they are invisible. Here people sleep on the sidewalks, piss in the gutters, women nurse their babies by the roadside, everyone selling food & eating it, or fingering goods, or eyeing each other (likewise tactile) — but not separate. The press in the streets is almost amniotic, it contains & carries everyone.

Today I've heard both an Indian (the cloth salesman in the market whose son is training to be a doctor in England) & a Chinese (Catholic convert, committed to both Christianity & the English language, living in a nation devoted to advancing Islam & teaching Malay) protest against the unfairness of the Malayanization policy of the govt (e.g. how 65% of all university entrants must be Malays, the other races compete for what's left). & yet this *is* Malaysia & the largely rural & labouring Malays have a lot to catch up on, fast. I can't believe the stereotype passed on to us that they're "lazy," don't want to work, don't have a head for business, etc. & yet how long, how many generations these Chinese & Indian families have lived here, feel they belong, & then are separated off on the basis of race. All the separations.



BAHASA MALAYSIA

sungai, bukit, tanjung
river, hill, cape

“sometimes i panic
i want to rush home
as if i might get
trapped here”

pulau cantik
this beautiful island only
the coarsest of maps
show

jalan jalan, roads
to the heart of

(Ayer Itam, black
water

“all
*people know that
the sea is deep”*

red backers
bad hats

“I have not read the
newspapers yet”

i see
flame trees rain
trees still flower
unnamed, out of that earth

bumiputra
sons of,

inhabit

hujan, angin, ribut
rain, wind, storm
clouds are gathering

& the sacred island of Potoloka
Throne of Kuan Yin in
the China Sea of

T. Poh's Guidebook
to the
Temple of Paradise

is not, is overlaid
like Paradise itself
on this place

*"Dang, dang, kong
Kuching dalam tong . . ."*

"Raju also likes to read fictions"

& pulling
the cat out of
the well

name
what feet dig into
each day's sewage
& all that shit

inter-
national finance
leaves

a trail
under the trees
(*pokok pokok*

say, "Jalan Peel"

Penang
July 23/76

Love,

frangipani fading on the desk, Eng Kim just ran by in bare feet, so quiet in pajamas, it's 6 p.m., post-tea, post evening rain like a monsoon, mosquitoes out in the fading light (dark here by 7) & what i've tracked in the birdbook as the black-naped oriole (a yellow as brilliant as the saffron robes of the yellow men monks) trilling from the trees, flame of the forest just outside my window . . .

(dusky pink
cheecha playing peekaboo behind a gilt frame, me not at all sure i want to feel those pale pink lizard feet suddenly land here, just shot up the wall to nab a midge then leap six inches onto a post & disappear to a ledge four feet above me) so much life here not even the walls are still . . .

it's strange being a princess again, the sheer luxury of this house, its spaciousness, its accouterments (every bedroom has its own bathroom), everything kept spacious, uncluttered, unlittered & clean by servants who pick up after you, wash your clothes, cook your food, do your dishes, ad nauseum (a little work would make me feel at home). & Eng Kim herself, oh Roy that is the strangest. I recognized her as soon as she came down the steps to greet us (old baronial family style), she's hardly changed in 25 years, still climbs the stairs with all that girlish quickness & like any good servant, utterly silent. But more her smile — it's as if i'd never gone away i know that smile so completely & love it, yes it's the love that astonishes me. That face told me as much as my mother's, by its changing weather, how the world was with me, or against, what i, as any rebellious child, was up against. I must have spent hours of accumulated moments watching it. & yet her face is not maternal in any way, at age 45 or whatever it's still utterly girlish & in our smiles i catch a little of the old mischief we shared with the servants, playing our own peekaboo with all the rules.

& my god, the rules of the house & how it's been explained to Pam & I several times that we mustn't "upset the routine," how difficult it is to finally "get things done the way you want them" (breakfast at such & such an hour, for instance, & how the toast or coffee should be etc.), & how "they" get confused if you alter things, so that the routine becomes itself a prison. As the women of the house, Pam & I are supposed to "look after things,"

give the orders, make sure the system functions smoothly. Both of us dislike the role &, like children, rebel by acting dumb. What we want is to break down the wall the separates us from Eng Kim in the very fact of our roles & yet we haven't quite figured out how.

Except that tonight we began by earlier expressing an interest in the terrible durian fruit whose stench has been much mythified since we were little (& the old durian tree in the garden where our dog was buried is gone, cut down). One of the Chinese men in the office said he'd be happy to bring some durians round for us to try tonight & kindly did so. Mr. Y., when told, requested that they not be brought into the house (haven't i learned the dialect well?) so our benefactor & Pam & I regaled ourselves at an old wooden table on the walkway from kitchen to servants quarters, as he chopped them open with a cleaver (they look like wooden pineapple bombs) & split the meat to reveal the butterycovered seeds: an incredible flavour, not fruitlike, something like coffee & bitter spices compounded with onions, really strong. Eng Kim & Ah Yow (the cook) love them & when we brought Dad down to try some a little while later, they were perched on the table happily eating away & watched with amusement Dad's valiant but obviously ginger chewing & swallowing — Eng Kim's amusement in her eyes tho she'd never speak it to "the tuan."



I'm going to stop this, being haunted by echoes of earlier (age 12 etc) letters & journals, that so stilted proper English. "To the manner born." How completely i learned to talk Canadian (how badly i wanted to), & how fast it drops away here. Wonder how it sounds to you?

July 25, Sunday & the frangipani blossoms on the desk have gone all brown. Hot today, hottest yet, tho it clouded over as usual (haven't seen a sunset, been mostly cool for here, & cloudy — waterfalls of rain the other morning, woke up to its wet descent all round the open verandahs of the house, the open windows — no glass on some, for breeze).

We drove up to Ayer Itam, the Buddhist hill shrine — driving is such a trip. I love winding thru throngs of brilliant sarong & sari dressed women, children, sellers of rambitans & chinese noodles, cyclists of all sorts, young chinese youths zooming by on honda bikes, cars trucks hundreds of buses all dodging the cyclists & the goats. Went up to the reservoir above the temple & walked a path thru jungle, o the smell came back so vivid, that deep sandloam fern palm dank smell. Everybody drives on the left here so the whole car is reversed, i keep reaching for an invisible gear shift & frightening Dad & Pam by turning into oncoming traffic. But i think i'm the only one who enjoys driving. Unfortunately it's a fancy Ford Cortina the company owns so i can't just take off in it whenever i want to.

My (hardwon) independence as a Western woman is being eroded every day & of course i'm seduced by my senses into just giving in — to the heat as much as to everything else. Finally let myself have an afternoon nap today, but the swimming — every afternoon the sea takes me in, old mother sea, sand dusky (no clarity like the Caribbean), & warm.

Mostly it's a struggle, an old old resistance against the colonial empire of the mind. For all the years that Mr. Y's been here he knows almost nothing about what surrounds him, what the trees or birds are, what the fruits

are — he doesn't like native food, exists on a kind of dilute European diet that includes lots of canned food. Private hedges of the mind as complete as the locked & bolted doors, the iron schedule of the house. Living in armed defensiveness against even the earth (don't go barefoot, nevah, nevah, for fear of hookworm etc.) I remember it all from my childhood, the same. Everything tells me this is not where i

belong (including the odd intense look from Malays, boomiputras, "sons of the soil") : the tourist experience compounded with colonial history. Europeans don't live here: they camp out in a kind of defensive splendour that's corrosive to the soul.

Aug 1st

Amah, age 74, in her sarong & shirtwaist, light gauze scarf hung round her neck, hair grey underneath the black, Amah, with her deep voice, expressive ways, "yah yah," enthusiastic confirmation when Pam turned into the right road, driving her home — home to the house she works in, still housekeeping. "Daphne mari, Pamela mari," exclaiming over & over on the fact that we'd come. A lovely resilience, living in the present, genuine affection for the "tuan," being herself a complete person with physical grace, even at 74, & dignity, not heavily insistent on it, only sufficient to herself. Her grace has to do with accepting what life brings & marvelling at it, laughing much, a deepthroated chuckle, & laying claim to nothing.

Buddhism says it is want that chains us to the world, us "hungry ghosts." & I see (just as I stands for the dominant ego in the world when you is not capitalized), that i want too much, just as, a child, i wanted affection. Growing sense of myself as a Westerner wanting, wanting — experience mostly. Anxiety arises from the discrepancy between my wants & my actual condition. Why plans so chain me — wanting too much from the day, wanting too much from others who can never be more than they are. In want : in fear. The "liberated" woman in me insisting on her freedom & in terror of its being taken away. Passive resistance a better stance. Say "yes" to restraints & simply do what you need to: act in silence.

STREET OPERA

(works, or
words & deeds

“the funniest story he told
was of going to see *Hamlet*
done as a Chinese opera”

satay

buah

mee goreng

these populous
night stalls
“*already existing*
web”

“*action*
acts into”

street
play

* *

godstick
dragon in an
old man's
sight

sharpens
all night

burnt paws
ashen ears
hear

it is 'seeing'
see

memory smoke

* *

wayang a
way in
no
shadow play
but neon, new on
the old

acts
“*can be told as*
a story . . . bios”
anyone’s

robe & drums

* * *

the solitary hero
in his cups
jumps up,
challenged
god comes, that
audient

here
the act
enacts

here in the
din of the street
eating goes on
acting, speaking

heedless of all that
imitation

* * *

satay cups array
god’s house fruit heaps
this full moon night

month of hungry
ghosts

“life” invites

* * *

offer them food who
come to devour
the real
banknotes, music, fruit
we think we consume
a fury of action they
who pass beyond
"actor & sufferer" both
relinquish & remember

night stalls
satay, buah
mee goreng
relics
we transform
"acting into"



Pulau Pinang
August 1/76

Love,

how much of what we experience is made up by what we desire?! (& all my questions become exclamations, what is! or, but for the typewriter, a huge office Olympia, the other way around — what is?)

Questionings of the real, no quest. Tho it appears we're here for "the month of hungry ghosts" — a month full of chinese street operas, a form of veneration — shrines set a little way from the casually erected stages with money offerings, food offerings, & hundreds of jossticks burning in sandbowls. What is strange, even precarious, is how this is also real, this that i wake up to every morning, & as the day progresses becomes so voraciously real it eats up all the other real where you & Kit & Jan are, so that even its strangeness has disappeared, i've recovered my own language & unusually today my own thought, & the world outside the window, thick with foliage & birdsong, looks like an embroidered backdrop or the painted canvas the chinese operas use — in a minute it will all roll up to reveal the next scene.

If the world is real

The word is unreal

If the word is real

The world

Is the crevice the dazzle the whirlwind

No

The disappearances and the appearances

Yes

* * * *

(Octavio Paz, fortunately with me)

Maybe that's why the chinese venerate snakes here, tho i was told it's because snakes recall the ancient dragons of the sky, & dragons perhaps like the toltec snakemouths with the appearing or disappearing heads of priests inside them, must signal a swallowing up of the real in another real. Anyhow i didn't think you'd believe i actually held a wriggly green viper, such muscular writhings in my hands, so Pam has taken a photo as EVIDENCE — tho that too means nothing as i've discovered the whole of the last roll of film & perhaps those before it were threaded in wrong & weren't winding forward (as time is supposed to do —

Well maybe that's it, the strange conjunctions of past & present, a past that undermines the apparent newness of the present, a present that unlocks the hidden recesses of memory or dream which have also coloured it — & do i see what i haven't in some sense dreamed?

driving out to Batu Ferringhi, a beach i remember from childhood trips (it's further round the island, & was, *then*, isolated, as likely as not to have malays surf fishing with their nets or selling rambitans from bicycle carts) we found, Pam & i, big american-style hotels & even the kampong houses become boutiques for tourists, & driving further, looking for the beach i'd dreamed &/or the beach i remembered, saw another quite different one & found myself saying this is it, even knowing where the path down was; tho to the *eye* it was all new, some other sense recognized it (some sense that has to do with location, even direction, or something as abstract as contours of land) despite its discrepancy from the picture i've carried in memory all these years.

I dream of you & Kit, believing you exist as you usually do in a world i know but can't escape to. Here a world is dreaming me as much as i am dreaming it, a dream that's been going on too long, i want to wake up. & at the same time learn, as usual, i want too much. My impatience, my curiosity as a visitor can't consume this world because, in a curious way, i'm part of it & must act out my role to reach its end. Everyone we meet assumes another life for me than the one i actually live (Lewis Carroll must have had this experience) & since i can't escape (can't literally act on my own but am always being acted upon as this network of people from the servants to Dad's friends shape the parameters of my behaviour in the form of a hospitality as binding as any dream in the dreaming) i only act out a parody of myself, secretly reserving a part that observes, fighting lassitude induced by the heat, to jot down these odd notes retrieved from the unreal:

i've drunk clear salty-sweet liquid from the inner well
of a freshly hacked coconut;

i've eaten fried cuttlefish & jellyfish at the Song River
Cafe;

i've swum in the murky heaving body of the sea, thousands
of tiny transparent fish, ikin bilis, jumping all around
my face, no bigger than fleas;

i've heard the chirruping language cheechas speak to each
other, late at night, as they wriggle blackeyed over the
white ceiling;

i've been seduced by the voices of the cloth sellers
murmuring in my ear;

i've smelt the woodsmoke of giant allday jossticks
burning behind the kitchen of the Lone Pine Hotel, whose
casurina trees lift & fall all day in the wind that
lifts the sea;

i've outraged a tamil woman squatting in the dirt of a
banana seller's stall by pointing a camera at her,
& learned something about dignity;

i've drunk the warm foamy juice of sugar cane pressed
by diesel engine under the neon light of a street-
vendor's cart;

i've cut into a rubber tree, a malay girl-tapper's hands on
mine, & watched the white blood ooze round its girth;

i've been stopped by a stranger in the crowded stairwell of
the Chartered Bank Chambers & told he used to drive me
to school;

i've watched chinese motor cycle youths, stoney-faced;
sikh families gracious in sari & turban; sleepy-eyed
children in pajamas; old malay men in sarongs, & the
lovers of all nationalities watching us & evening pass
as the sea rolls in on Gurney Drive

later:

Dinner on a terrace above the swimming club, yellow crescent moon shimmering above a rain tree, sunset trailing pinks across a rapid sky falling into night over the sea Rat Island punctuates with its light echoed by the other off the mainland, marks the edges of the shipping channel, & i'm engaged in conversation with the widow of a planter, a New Zealander who hasn't seen New Zealand for 25 years, who sleeps alone in a big house overlooking the beach afraid that if she falls down in the night no one will hear or care, & along with her servants & the few remaining Europeans, as old & eccentric as she is, she lives out her life in an alien country, drinking coffee, talking of shopping, of the way things have changed, in this tropical heat taking her hot water bottle to bed, waiting to die — tho in her bangles & beads & tinted hair, in her gestures at independence (paying for her own drinks), utterly dependent on her servants (her driver takes her everywhere), she'd never admit it. It goes on like this. The stories, the characters. A sense of melodrama pervades everyone's life, they keep track of everyone's "end," & their lifestyle, their values are so unreal to me that i listen in, fascinated by their reality to each other, while my own recedes. These are the ghosts, they offer ghost food, & if i stayed here & partook of it long enough i'd become a ghost too, like the woman Pam tried to talk to the other night who could only yawn.

Some of them speak of "going home," to England or anywhere, & some of them have nowhere to go. They haunt the place (a kind of addiction). Having tasted hunting, i see i've spent most of my life trying to live somewhere. Which perhaps means nothing more than being at home. Or some such notion of a public space as Hannah Arendt describes (*The Human Condition* has been my escape hatch to our world), where one's life takes place in a web of relations held *in common*. Plinius speaking of the effects of slavery so long ago, "We walk with alien feet; we see with alien eyes; we recognize & greet people with an alien memory; we live from alien labour . . ." could have been writing about the Straits Settlements, now Malaysia.

Cameron Highlands
August 5/76

You're either still in To. or back home — eating at Min's or the Delightful, reading the *Sun*, or gazing up at the blue (is it blue?) above the Coca Cola plant from your studio windows. It's strange to be living a day ahead of you, which means nothing since i'm not even in your world — i'm on the "roof of the world," 5000' up, mist rising off the hills in morning sun. Here they even grow strawberries, amid the tea plantations. There are still *orang asli* (aboriginal people) who live in the jungle, wear loincloths & hunt with poisoned darts & blowguns — which all the little stores in Tanah Rata sell, along with gigantic rainbow butterflies, the largest of which is named Rajah Brooke, after the 19th C. English adventurer who ended up as Rajah of Sarawak, in perpetuity, etc. & in between the Fanta & fried mee stalls, the dusters of dyed pampas grass & piles of Cameron Highland oranges, you'll hear American rock & roll on the radios, a la Beach Boys or Everly Brothers, & even the humblest tamil shacks in Bringchang sport TV antennae — everyone's been watching the Olympics in that exotic, foreign, Canadian town.

Here, here it's
 prayer fronds of
 tree ferns
 leaf hands
 i wave toward you
 through the
 stillness of
 blue air

“HANTU HANTU”

house up the Hill not far from the Crag Hotel,
no one slept in, or fell asleep & woke in the jungle she said —
we were shown its tile roof slanting up from the trees,
licked ices on the Hotel terrace & looked, our bodies
safe on scratchy chairs, definitely there, fretting under the
straps of our sundresses, white shoes tapping toward an
acrobatic gesture off the low wall (“don’t you dare”) into
that green massif of leaf cloud, swaying below . . .

AS A CUP FILLS ITSELF IN THE STREAM

undoing it, the clasp on the trunk . . . always there were voices calling to each other in another language rising through the house, full of incomprehensible import, intent on each other, saying something even in the chatter . . . what was being told she was excluded from? did she wonder? . . . is rusty & sticks, because of humidity, but pulling it open finally there is first the smell of must, moths, all it was designed to prevent . . . no basement there under the house, no damp concrete shoring up earth, no sawdust bins, no furnace. but two stone steps up off the earth & onto tile an inescapable light falls along, all those rooms light & aery, & when the sun comes in, unrolling the chicks, her hands on the white cord uncoiling it off the little cleat, & then the bamboo mutter of the blind unrolling shadow . . . but not anything dark, nowhere the sun *didn't* come, except perhaps their rooms at the back by the dark wall of the cliff where she went slippers slapping tile & the swish of pajamas against her legs . . .

*"Betsy and Derek were making a plan
to run away from the orphanage . . ."*

lifting the old catch, a little stiff,

told to be careful . . . two mothers, two, but one mother & the other someone we had a claim to, we thought of almost as part of ourselves, her hands our hands to bathe us, dress us, & the gentle combing of our hair, & young — did we see her? & a third who cared for the house, Amah, had seven children "& they all died, my dears," who cared for us too, sloppy & merry & what did it matter? except what the Mem says. What the Mem says goes (sometimes). what the Mem says exists as a separate entity in the house, to be listened to & walked around, with suitable contrition if asked (giggling in the back rooms), but separate, separate from the way life moves, on. what the Mem says was meant to last. like mercurochrome on a cut. like the contents of a steel trunk . . .

*"They both took out of the wardrobe all their clothes and
they counted their money which was three pounds and they put it into their
suitcases. They got dressed and packed their night clothes . . ."*

lifting the lid

which was heavy, painted with the letters of her name in white, stencilled as all the linen was inked in black along one seam, the letters of our family

name & her initials, because she was the one who telephoned down the hill angry for lost sheets, shirts, handkerchiefs, "they'd rob us blind!" trying to make them understand, satu, dua, tiga, TIGA! clapping her hands, Amah! her voice & theirs, Mem? Mem?, swirling currents through the house, always something undone, always looking for someone, mana ada Eng Kim? Mum! Mum! always accident prone, tch tch, tumbang? . . . blood & mercurochrome & the big knives on the chopping block, big vats of steam, crabs lashed to the bamboo pole, slow moving pincers, slow white-eyed stalks turning, boil them alive? . . . "and here comes a chopper to chop off your head" . . .

"Derek went down to the kitchen and got thirty tomatoe, egg and honey sandwiches, all the cakes a whole tin of biskuits, a tin of tea (teh) two loaves of bread a pot of honey, a pot of jam, a block of butter, two bottles of milk and a tin of coco . . ."

lifting it there is first of all that smell, faintly mildewed (old shopping papers lining the bottom, her voice on the phone ordering Cowlac, ordering apples, *not* pisang mas, *not* rambitans), faintly mothball (Georgetown Dispensary wormpills & carbolic acid, alcohol), faintly the sweet (Chanel) smell of temple flowers gone brown. always both on her hands done with the day's ministration to the vase, to snakebite, to bloody knees. & always that stillness, rushing in to find (the dog! the chickens! my sister!) her, rapt in a bleeding fragrance of flowers' heaped cut stalks jagged toward her, setting handfuls of soft bloom in water . . . hers the "house of flowers," her first, rumah bungah, named in that talk that ran, knowing incomprehensible current from kitchen to kitchen . . . & quick angry words, impatient, & quick! emergency (kabun drunk & beating up his wife again, the dog run over, the child dying in the back room), the dying flowers, scorpion & snakebite, mad monkeys screeching in the trees, unexpected storms & penance & strange tension (always "incomprehensible") . . .

"The lady who was the head mistress was called Mrs. Granville. Betsy and Derek hated Mrs. Granville . . ."

against this, saving (a life), saving (a dress), saving a future, to be passed into our eager hands lifting the sequined bodice, lifting the promise. army surgeon's daughter off to the ball, thai-dancers round her wrist, floating handpainted scarf. shantung silk, watching her be fitted, pins in mouth, "when you grow up" . . . Abbott & Costello, too fat, i'll never look like you . . . this tender flesh, perfumed & slender, bending to kiss, cannas & cannon & nightblooming kengwah. he waited in the wings as she said goodnight, he in white, auburn & smelling of English Leather . . .

“‘And we could call the stream whith the waterfall Rushing Stream and the pond Swimming Pond,’ said Betsy. So they put the tent up in Foxglove Clearing and went to sleep on some pillos in the tent with the door shut . . .”

naming, trying to steep me in it, with the order of the day, with tiffin, naptime, & while they all slept sitting up in the lounge with the doors shut, chewing the rubber end of a revolving pencil, transparent, shines like amber in the light, pushing lead across the lined pages of Penang Kindergarten and Preparatory School Exercise Book . . . past “ini, mini, minah mari” now heard faintly from upstairs . . . past the feel of little fish nibbling at my legs when I got in the goldfish pool with Amah hitching her sarong up around her thighs, giggling kissy kissy, fishy lips nibbling at my skin under the sundress. “we’re not supposed to do this.” “tida apa, tida apa” . . . lying on the bench by the summerhouse alone, feeling lips all warm, a bellyful of power so big i walked with a stick under, the witch loving me had done it, “tell-tale tit! your tongue will be slit” . . .

“‘O bother. Betsy you had better stay here while I get the tools oh yes I’d forgotten I’ll have to get the flannels to wash ourselves whith and our towels and swimsuits.’ ‘Alright,’ said Betsy because (because?) she did not like the idea of staying in the woods . . .” (di-hutan)

taking them off, these false promises . . . *because* the order changes, o my mother who should know. wetting the stems of cut zinnias against their death, their vivid heads lighting the tile in the dark heart of the house where *she* washed the dishes, staring through a little window at us in the summerhouse, Ungimah always angry. & it was always summer for us, the only dark theirs at the back, the stifling single sleeping rooms, the deep cement washpool where water was always lapping over. but *we* had words. & the words could not command their lives, only their hands . . .

“Betsy opened the two suitcases and found her paints and paintbook and started painting, but she could not concentrate . . .”

yours could not command mine, my disorderly desire, having given my word & yet sneaking out of the house . . .

“At last she put her paints away and started making the beds but she could not make them . . .”

leaving the garden, climbing the terrace where jungle was, climbing guilty toward that flower . . . but you *know* you weren't supposed to be out there! . . . for you, mother, to prove. orchids do grow wild on the terrace you said no flowers would grow. reaching to pluck, when the snake, shot across it . . .

WHY DON'T YOU LISTEN? having been told, having been told so often, such an old story . . . but it was you i lost in your word, firm as your will, your body your will, in filmy dress bending to break the spell of anger finally as you leave . . . white tulle . . . don't go . . . dress with the coffee-coloured beads . . . don't leave . . . embroidered silk, gold colour . . . "give me your word" . . . promise of the body i would grow into, if i listened, if i learned to stop breaking it, my word given to you, learned to keep to the house i was meant to inherit . . .

"At last
she went out shutting the door of the tent as she went . . ." *dan terbang pur . . .*

i broke my word,
i broke a new & muddy ground, i did, at last i went out, shutting the lid,
closing the door of your house as i went. but it was you i left. gone down
with the flowers, gone down in the mad wind of your anger suppressed. how
did you break? how was it broken in you? . . . "misi chukup chukup jahat" . . .
bad, bad with the curl, in the middle of your fore'ead . . .

"She ran out of
the woods and ran behind the bushes . . . *pokok pisang, pokok pisang . . .*

i will dance it out for you, when you left, turned out, turned out of the house
into the traffic, yes this & no that, you going the wrong way, you stay on your
side of the road, contrary, won't go along with, these proprieties. & so a
crash, so wild hysteria & the signals change, erratic. lift stout brown legs,
jump up & down for chaos in black satin bodice (o bother the hat) skirt a wild
swirl of colour, no i *won't* play it, *won't* say it, *won't* do it your way . . .
your way . . . driven down into that black river . . .

the old order
breaks, mother, those garden paths, seed beds, tiny trunks all split open at
last in the icy grip of anger, shine destruction, shine what spills over, shine
black ice all over the heart . . . & where it bubbles up, there, there at the heart
of the house a dark pool they ignored & taught you to, NOT because you thought it
was wiser, but caught, caught in the old ways, there mother-daughter, i call
you up through the spring of a new . . . word . seed . season . . . whole, it
comes back, it fills always where you were.

THIS IS NOT

this is not my world, i can't live here — lighthouse, on the far
strands i dreamt, i dealt myself a hand — this is where we were,
berthed in an alien place, light turning all around — for a while,

we were housed in it, walked *out* to it, mother, father, sisters
over the glistening sands & the light, welled out of the sky we
waded through, it shone on us too . . .

“we were never there, we never visited a lighthouse much less stayed.”

that is another world turning, o father, o ambush of the
sun . . .

THE LINE

Begin at the beginning, she thinks, there was no beginning, or only one dimly remembered from her place at the round teak table, highly polished, her sister sits opposite, a table so big they can't touch hands across, the hall (it was *all* big then they were so small) stretches its black & white tile pattern to the door, its white grille pale green plants stare outside of, staring into the amber light where they sit, inside, forming a square at the round table, her father to the left, their host to the right at what is, indisputably, the head of the table, tho it is round — he sits with his back to an electricpink screen that hides the kitchen entrance where the servants come, softly, in bare feet over the tile, carrying plates or removing them. & her father is not 'her' father, he is 'their' father, tho she thinks (like any child she is the centre of her world?) her sister looks far away, perhaps because she is not eating (eat up, she is told, eat up, tho that is not the word, not 'up' with 'eat,' that is Canadian, that is something they never said, her parents, tho now their grandchildren are spoken to in exactly those words), she sits, like a little girl in her short smock, this woman who has two children, little, her younger sister, middle, she sits in the middle of her own field of vision with her back to the door, & beyond her stretches the long hall — she remembers it dark under the stairs on her way to the door, she goes back, she remembers two bottom steps which are, inexplicably, stone after the flight of polished wood leading up, she used to sit, waiting for them to be ready, she used to sit with her feet on the black&white chequered tile, did she jump, from black to black? did she spend a long time waiting? at the bottom step, stone like those outside, & she wanted to go outside, into the world)



Are you sure you won't? he is asking, their host, he is passing the silver basket of toast to her to pass on to their father, this table so large they must pass from one to the other, & tho it is bare in front of her sister, as she requested (did she come down so as not to leave a hole in the passing?) he asks again, you won't? you absolutely won't? with that imperceptible shake of his head that is not a shake but, after all these years amid the doings of inexplicable people, a deploring & assenting nod, as much as to say, look here, she won't, she absolutely won't. & they look at her sister, they all do look at her resolute smile that glints under its grown politeness, glints with five year old implacability, even rebellion, she won't, she absolutely won't. It's the heat, he sighs, passing the salt he always passes, will you? take some? take lots of salt, & turning again, you must keep up your strength you know. She doesn't respond & her father assumes his usual role, there at the other end of the table, facing their host he explains, well you know we've all had so much to eat since we arrived that she feels she's been overdoing it a bit. Do you? he says with surprise, do you? I'm getting too fat, she says, glorying (ah she knows that glint) in the plainness of the fact.

Really! he says again, buttering the toast so white, so thin light shines thru, as it shines onto his skin, a palour of small wrists extended out of the cuffs of the silky shirt he wears with tie, a veneer of silk & silver, of silver knives that deploy the light, shining from the chandelier off his body's palour of years spent in the tropics, it's the manifest routine of silverware & glass setting his place, & theirs, each in deference to the others, a space rescued by light from the dark outside she nonetheless wants to go out in, & he, he wants the light uncomplicated by any irrational tremors, his 'really' only a punctuation mark as he lays his knife on the side of his plate & resumes his soup, resumes the conversation: that man, you know, spends all his life at the office, i should think he sleeps there (& the plants lean in from the white porch, attentive, opening pale green fronds as his voice assumes a confidential tone in the air that wafts thick & warm from the night, from the dark she hears, dimly, the sound of gongs & a drum, & glances across the orchids to her sister who seems to be listening), well, he has three wives you know, & i suppose the going gets a bit tough at home poor thing, with a smile at her, implying, you wouldn't want to be one of three would you, i mean, is it conceivable? Three! her father exclaims, are they still doing that? Well it's cruel really, he's living far beyond his means & this year he even asked for half his provident fund.

Can he do that? their father asks, frowning above the soup spoon poised halfway to his mouth as mental dossiers flick, she can see them, back thru the years (she remembers stories of stolen furniture, thieves at night, malaria — but where did it all begin, begin, when she was so small? the line that was drawn to protect them from the strange, to return them to a past she feels distinctly separate from, she & her sister, implicated at their source), o he's entitled to it of course, they all are at the age of 55 or whatever (simply then the company they keep? these two old friends from a remembered world, paid tribute to in the way he holds her chair, even her father has moved back to, a code that binds & separates as the table, at its polished surface, black, reflects the movement of their hands, these men at opposite ends who politely break their toast while outside, outside the cicadas hum in a deafening surf that crests) & yet (that falls) what can you do? he enquires of her, earnestly it would seem, they don't think of the future except as something that arrives in the end you know, without their lifting a hand so to speak — even her smile complies, complicit in its understanding. No she *doesn't*

understand, why is she part of this? except that she is here, her bare feet she is not supposed to have (hookworm, my dear, he said, you must wear slippers) flat on the tile, its black&white squares leading off where her eyes will go, over her sister's hair, her face averted, listening (is she? or dreaming of bed, bored) secretly feeling the tile that is cool, cool to her feet & worn, real. Or is that the temple of this afternoon they must take their shoes off in (& she wondered, maliciously, what he thought of hookworm *then* — unholy thoughts, she took it seriously, the tile those hundreds of feet were treading along with hers, no different, no other than, worn soles on the lotus buds their guide remarked, you too, like the buddha, dozens of buddhas, & if you pray to this one you will receive prosperity, to this good luck, to this good health, & each of them with alms slots) — well it's a gamble really, isn't it, as to which expires first, the fund or his years, & who knows what might happen, i mean they *think* this way, maybe he'll shave his head & put on yellow robes like his brother — his brother? — a director of the company mind you, just two weeks ago. Her father leans back in his chair & roars, his laugh like a thunderclap against the ultimate absurdity of things, while their host nods, that wink, that deploring shake of his head that affirms, he did, he did, tho he says, it's disgraceful really, we can't have monks running the company can we? Her sister grins, across the orchids she sees it, a grin that echoes pure delight in the breakdown of order (imp, at the edge of the terrace dancing, grinning, who long ago threw all the house keys into the jungle, Eng Kim's, from the corner of her eye she sees now hover behind the electricpink screen, dart forward in bare feet & black pants flapping at the ankles, trying to see, have they done with the soup, & should she signal, as acting Mem is there some sign she should give, as their absent hostess, as her absent mother would have done — a confusion of flowers, of roles, Eng Kim's i am so sorry (their being here instead of their mother?), & she knew the regret was real, felt, herself, a childish confusion of Eng Kim & mother extant, her sister, eyeing the orchids, where did mom learn to arrange flowers, these look so much like hers, & their father, sharp, it was your mother who taught Eng Kim, saying now, you see what an extraordinary country this is (& with that comment, clean, he separates what she wants to enter, asking how it enters her, her life which began its dim beginnings here).

Look at the mess that other one's got himself in, he says, so easy, beginning another story (& do beginnings inevitably shape what follows?), checked as she enters, who seem to fade away as soon as she leaves the screen, fade into the tile she treads, smile eclipsed in a small salute that says, excuse me, please carry on, while the hands that used to dress her deftly remove their soup bowls. *There* is a beginning, surely, a lost place, a dimly remembered space at the back of the house where the servants live & which they tiptoed round last night, whispering, two small children, i think she's disappointed in us, wondering why they couldn't pass thru polished surfaces of wood, of tile, to the dull-lit innards of the house, each with their own guilts, she remembers how i threw her keys away, she thinks i still want my own way. failing to bridge the divide



a tileroofed corridor covers, a place to hover where the washing hangs, hand done, & every afternoon in the heat of the day that heavy iron, must be antique, she said, failing to ask the right questions, wanting to ask, what was it like for you? who evades, it is not customary, or that was her private beginning, an English family. & with the English how custom persists: 'as Mary's away will you please look after the meals, give the orders.' who used to look after *them* & now, with her english

English, acts as translator for the other, Ah Yow, who stands firmly on her flat feet, a chuckle & a shrug, well what's to be done? The meals look after themselves they found, fridge door opening to reveal what was already frozen inside, each day of the week, now thrust before them, Ah Yow frowning down at the work of her hands, pork chops & roast potatoes ('she doesn't like to cook you know, but really she's quite good'), followed by Eng Kim with two bowls, o it looks like okra, & her father, what's okra? o i remember these (& the brinjals, baskets of, eggplant piled by the roadside, white eggplant growing by the stream), Eng Kim, he persists, what do we call these? ladies' fingers, she informs, with her delicate English accent. 'We,' what a strange fabrication & yet, leaning over the stone bridge into the rushing darkness of the, 'brook' they called it, that muddy ditch, coming back was coming home he'd said, in some previous life i must have been a rich Chinese in Malacca with a fleet of junks trading spices to China, & she'd disbelieved his possession of the place. Glancing over, she sees him chasing the ladies' fingers with a silver fork & spoon &, as Eng Kim lowers the bowl a little for him, she sees, in the very thrust of his neck, in the frown of concentration, impatient sigh that evokes her concern, Eng Kim's, who would do it for him, she sees the Tuan, father, head of the household she inhabited as a little girl waiting, one foot on the white square, one foot on the black, in her white socks & shoes, waiting for them all to be ready, Daddy was taking them out.

What she wanted was outside, on streets she wasn't allowed to walk or ride down, on her new bike, wobbly & nervous into a world the sound of a gong invokes even now, in the receding splash of cricket hum, treefrogs, the same frenzy to be out, out where she imagines the lights are & the people, a fury of ghosts, of drums, a world as foreign as the streets they have no map to (he, you'd think the government would at least provide the tourists with something, & someone else had said, but they don't want any accurate maps released because of the terrorists, as if the terrorists didn't already live there, bribes & threats, 'red backers,' they said, 'businessmen confess their part in giving aid.' That was today's story & it was somebody's version, & somebody else's naming as real, as the plate she now looks down on, somebody else will disbelieve (as she, if she looks up, will disbelieve his earnestness as he always says, their host, always the last to be served, will wave his hand in the air & entreat them, please, do carry on, as if it were something new they couldn't wait to set their

teeth to). Nothing has changed, there lie the same roast potatoes, the same pork chop, same carrots & okra her mother would have served, the chop cut up in pieces for them by amah in the kitchen, carefully cut up & soaked in gravy — a world contained on her plate. She glances at her sister who is looking at her plate with an amused smile, & in the arc their eyes extend to each other, an imaginary string of little stalls, mah mee, satay, poh peah, lit up at night by kerosene lamp & steaming, delicious smells, appetites of a crowd those operatic stories play to, living & dead, her eyes point their way to . . . *take away my wisdom & my categories* . . .

O look, her sister cries, just at the moment she becomes aware of, a motion, a beating of wings coming in from the space behind their father — bat? or moth? its too big furry body beating in blind necessity against the ceiling, walls, they all sitting up to watch its staggering progress toward their host who rises, as if to hold the chair for someone's entry: good heavens, it's only a moth. But its body's so huge, she says, & they agree, watching the swollen thorax & dark wings settle, finally, rest, like some breathless flag atop a white fluted candle. Well you see, he bends to pick up his serviette & sits down again, we have these creatures, smiles, with a wave of his hand at their plates, please do carry on.

* * *

Coming in late, it wasn't the frogs plopping out of the way of the car's tires on the curving drive, entry to the house, her sister said (she'd come to expect it, ten seconds after the hedge), slow down, those frogs —, or even the air that still surprised them when they stepped out into its warmth, heavy as hands about them crossing the unlit lawn. Their host had gone to bed & even the servants' quarters shone barely a light, wan & faraway piercing the airless air that surrounded the house & them, like thieves come in the dead of night to unlock, yes, they had the key, unthieflike, the white grille door, guard door, unbolt it top & bottom, ssh, don't wake them, grinding of iron on tile, to stick the key in the lock of the inner door, unbolt that too, & thus, letting themselves in, bolting & locking up, leave the key in the brass bowl on the table — it wasn't that, but the polished wood reminded her, expanse of black&white to the chairs, futile & bleak now, dining room with its air of unspoken civility, it was the black polish of the table reminded her: let's look at the moth.

& when they switched on the light, at first the white candle masked any penetrating glance, but there it was, still hanging there, close up near the wick, a moulted, furry, furtive brown, legs oddly precise, oddly tenacious in their grip on the wax where, in spirals, suddenly they both could see, look, a mass of eggs, must be dozens of them, o easily, almost a hundred, laid in & on & over but generally conforming to the upward spiral of the stick. That's why she's so huge, her sister says, leaning forward eagerly, caught in the grip of the moth's urge, o look where they come out. They both watch the white globule forming at the tip of the appendage that slowly tenses, squeezes, dropping it precisely next in line to its sisters. What a strange place to leave her eggs, she says, a candle! thinking of the giant josssticks burning by the opera stage, & the shrine with its dozens of smaller josssticks lit & waved by handfuls toward the deity who loomed there, who unlocked the gates of the underworld in the month of hungry ghosts, they said, looming over all those cups of sauce, those piles of fruit, those offerings. & it wasn't the notion of hunger that prompted her, but the simplicity with which those sticks were offered, smoking as they were, to some unknown, to some invisible circumstance having to do with return. We should light one to *her*, she'd said tentatively. She'd like that, her sister agreed, & she knew, delighting in the unexpectedness of that homage, it was an escape from their world they wanted to offer up, & they stood there torn by difference, knowing themselves as strangers having no right.

But she couldn't have chosen a better place, her sister said, still bent forward, you can hardly see them. I was thinking of burning, she says, she thinks, does she say? this moth, the light that could be lit, a burning of white wax, white eggs. But look! & when she bends forward she sees them too, tiny grey specks, beginning caterpillars.

COMING IN, WHO

used to live here, used to
the sweep of kabun's broom
edge of a tideline morning used
to run her energy along, alone
exulting in birdsong, liquid
trills, squawks

the long
reversible arc of his arm
swept up grass, not up, around
a kind of sortilege, kabun
at the bottom of the garden, not
looking up at the under
side of sky, in the easy
sweep of his arm, the long
advance of noon, a tide

poured through his broom
she ran, through crests of song
wave on wave, recede, while the broom
continues its faroff rush, like surf
coming in, she's gone

GETTING HERE

it wasn't you was it? you not here, underlining *To-morrow*, yourself interlinear. In 1935 he gave you Shelley you took to Malacca, & what i thought was "missing you" was "wishing you" a happy birthday, i not even born, not even thought of as you used to say. he spelled Edrys with an extra s, your brother, adding the kisses, dark x's after his name underlined, insistent, covering distance to get to you

*We look before and after,
And pine for what is not*

in tropic afternoons,
with a Welsh mountain for a name, you underlining loss or other nights differently spelled, eyes under older skies. & even the mountain named for some other mind Shelley knew "Shelley" was writing to, *Children of a sunnier star, / Spirits from beyond the moon*, unearthly in white (roses against their thorns), tennis racquet in hand exercising a lunar pull, closed lids & heavy lidded eyes of Shelley amid tin talk, gin-&-tonic talk of the market, sexual too, & surreal in the eyes of a wit no one saw in you

*Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught*

your mirror
caught a glimpse of that place i hid, country of origin, clouding it over with lipstick & powder, making mouths at the face going out to be addressed, assessed by dress & manners you saw thru — you, caught out in a language that sounded strange, stranger yourself, deprived of words that spoke what you knew

"they want my life" — always a
life for a life, yours for ours. sacrifice you knew they exacted.
pruning of the rose, a kind of tax on being, familial. at what cost,
we couldn't hear the words for. erased, &

"In thy place ——"

"life's cheat,"
deprived of any truth, as you, long in tooth & nameless, recede from
imagination: one cloud of thought, one word of no earthly use,
"mother" —

you knew the dark, conspiracy, how they
keep power in their hands, unnamed (you forgot, we give ourselves up to).
you taught me fear but not how to fight. you, misspelled, gave yourself
to the dark of some other light, leaving me here with the words, with
fear, love, & a need to keep speaking

"... the thing we fled — To-day"

Vancouver 1979

MICHAEL ONDAATJE was born in Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) and came to Canada via England in 1962. In 1978, on sabbatical leave from his teaching position at Glendon College, Toronto, he returned to Sri Lanka, where his sister Gillian still lives, and wrote most of *Running in the Family* while he was in Wattale and Colombo.

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DAPHNE MARLATT was born in Australia, lived in Penang as a young child, and emigrated with her family to Vancouver in 1951. She returned to Penang in 1976 with her sister Pam and her father, and while visiting, stayed in the house of her childhood, still inhabited by Eng Kim and "Mr. Y." "Cille" in the writing refers to Lucille, her youngest sister. The title on p. 80 is quoted from Karl Siegler's translation of *Sonnets to Orpheus* (Talonbooks). Much of the quoted material in the short-line poems is from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. Lines quoted in "getting here" are from Shelley. The line quoted on p. 91 is from Phyllis Webb.

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