Complete Fiction and Life Writing

Zerangi by Michael Armstrong
‘Zerangi’ is a word in Farsi meaning ‘clever’ that is used to describe one-upmanship. In hectic chaotic Gulf traffic, driving and zerangi go hand in hand.

Maengmoom by Rosemary Jackson
‘Maengmoom’ is the Thai word for spider. Twenty-five years ago many Australian families adopted children from Thai orphanages. This story explores the powerlessness of such children and one child’s approach to gaining agency in a world that threatens to overwhelm. Maengmoom’s discovery of her unique gift enables her to use this special thing to make her dreams come true.

Stepping in the River by Julie Kearney
‘Stepping in the River’ is about the cultural misunderstandings and small betrayals that arise when First World tourists visit Third World countries. It is also about the enduring love that people in these countries can inspire, imperfect though that love may be.

The Red Sari by Kavita Ivy Nandan
When two sweet-makers travel to the new world to make a better start, they find life (and death) on the sugar cane fields is bittersweet.

Wake-Up Call by Kelly Quinn
‘I taught English in Seoul, Korea, in the early ’90s. Strange things sometimes happened.’

Are Hills like White Elephants? by Sunil Sharma
‘Are Hills Like White Elephants?’ is, of course, inspired by Hemingway; the tribute reflects on the abiding relevance of serious art in a changed world and extends the boundaries of his message to other human situations.

Horizon by Vicky Tsaconas
This piece is inspired by the sea and memories. It is a reflection on my relationship to both on the connections between them.
During my four years in the Gulf there have been times when I feared for my life. When I first arrived, going out for dinner or visiting malls – particularly ones of the heavily populated, dusty, one-street-back-from-the-main-road variety – made me edgy. I still fear for my life, but I do not fear restaurants or malls. The fear comes when trying to get to them.

I admit that I am sometimes aggressive when I drive. I like to drive fast, and the speeding fines I’ve paid would probably fund a nice holiday to some exotic location. But like many who sometimes speed, I think I’m a good driver (a very good driver) and I tell myself that my speed makes me concentrate. I believe there is some research that supports this claim. Nonetheless, nothing prepared me for tackling Gulf traffic.

Of course, you must have a driving licence before you can drive, and getting your licence in the Gulf is an excruciating exercise. First of all, you must be a resident for at least two years before you can apply for one. You take written and practical tests, complete forests of paperwork, obtain the approval of your sponsor, get translations of your paperwork and attestations by your embassy, and take blood tests – even though you have already done that to get residency. If you have wasta (roughly translated as a connection to a person of influence) it is possible to circumvent the process. If you have a PhD, some of the requirements are waived. (We all know that people with PhDs are superior drivers.)

Knowing how to get a licence is only the first step – and the laws change frequently enough that sometimes the advice you receive is out-dated. I went to the police or licensing department four times. I went to the hospital to get a blood test. I waited a lot, usually in the outer office of some big cheese [at one department or other], and then pushed my way in, as though merging onto the freeway, to ask graciously if they would put their signature somewhere so I could go to the next department to get another signature. You must, for example, first get a signature from some official to permit you to have your eyes tested. Then you go to another building for the eye test. Then you go to yet another building to get another signature to have something else verified. A former colleague had wasta and used it to get most of his paperwork completed without having to attend any government department. He arrived at work one day with a stack of paperwork and said that his wasta told him he needed only to take the eye test and then collect his licence. I knew where to go so I took him … five times. Each day, someone called ‘Mariam’ was not there, the system was down, or he didn’t have the correct signature. So much for wasta.

Gulf men often accuse women of being terrible drivers – perhaps not an attitude peculiar to this part of the world – and I have heard arguments that women are bad drivers because they use wasta to avoid taking driving tests. Or, when they do take the test, they receive special treatment. A colleague said she was the worst driver of her group attempting the practical test. She did not go on roads, but took the test on a specially constructed track in the sand – but she was the only one who passed. When her name was called out, all the men clapped and congratulated her. Mabrook!

Once you have your licence, you are free to commit suicide. But if you are a timid driver, do not drive in the Gulf. If you are a courteous driver, do not drive in the Gulf. You will soon become aggressive and impatient, or you will have a breakdown of the psychological if not the mechanical kind. If you do not push your way on or off a freeway ramp, you will stay there,
unless the cars behind drive you – pardon the pun – insane by hooting their horns and telling you, with hand gestures, to put your one-and-a-half-metre-wide car into the ten centimetre gap in front of you. When people do let you pass, you are so incapacitated with shock that someone else darts in and takes your place. Every car in the Gulf is your competitor.

Locals curse the traffic and many blame expats for clogging the roads. There has even been a campaign by some parliamentarians to deport expats for minor traffic offences or to ban them from owning cars. Many Kuwaitis have three, four or more cars. It is easy to tell a Kuwaiti on the road: they drive big American SUVs, luxury European saloons or sports cars. And if you see an older American tank, like a Lincoln or a Cadillac, invariably an older Kuwaiti will be driving it, slowly, the window down even when it is fifty degrees, Arabic music playing, and prayer beads swaying gracefully from the rear-view mirror. But slow-driving locals are the exception.

It has been said by a Kuwaiti economist – and I think repeated by an Imam – that government sector employees, on average, spend only seventeen minutes per day working. Many government departments are only open from 9 am until noon, but the seventeen minutes is quite manageable even if you arrive a little late, leave a little early, drink a lot of tea (and therefore spend a lot of time in the bathroom), and have a brunch-break. This is relevant to my topic only because it makes me wonder why all these drivers are in such a hurry. Where are they going and what are they in a hurry to do? Of course, it is unfair to criticise only Kuwaiti driving habits. Without doing any formal research, I feel quite safe claiming that there is not a single Kuwaiti driving a bus in Kuwait, and bus drivers are some of the worst drivers in the country. Bus stopping. Side of the freeway. Picking up some fares. Sure. Just pulling-out into oncoming traffic. Why not? Going around a corner at 100 km/h with a full load of passengers. Zain, perfect. Cut me off, run into my lane, push in, turn without indicating. Of course. Yellah, yallah. And then there are the bi-polar taxi drivers: Wa'allah, don't get me started ...

Juxtapose these cars, buses and taxis being driven maniacally in the left lane or the emergency lane on the freeways – flashing headlights that get bigger and bigger in your rear-view-mirror – with the dawdlers, the Rain Men, the big tanks with their swaying beads and Arabic music, the taxi drivers putt-putting around looking for a fare, and the fresh-fish Western expats who take the rental cars with the brown seats just in case. The speed limit on the freeways is 120 km/h, the fast lane goes 130-140 km/h, the maniacs are doing 160 plus as they weave through traffic, and there is Rain Man in the middle lane doing about 60 km/h – 'Gotta get to K-Mart.' Maafi mashkillah – no problem.

The Gulf Road is the spiritual home of driving in Kuwait. It is truly pretty in the morning with the palm trees against the blue of the Gulf and the green grass that is seen so infrequently in this part of the world. But if the scenery is beautiful, the driving on the Gulf Road is astonishing.

Once, around midnight I was driving home from a restaurant along the Gulf Road, the traffic heavy as usual, and I saw something ahead that my brain found difficult to process. Something, not human, was holding onto the back of a motorcyclist. Was it a back-pack of some kind? We drew close at the lights and to my astonishment I saw that the motorcyclist was taking his nappy-wearing monkey for an evening ride! I have the pictures. A few months later, a colleague was driving behind a large SUV. In the cabin behind the driver, a tiger prowled the rear seat, alternately looking through the back window or poking its head through the partially opened passenger window. My colleague has the pictures. I have watched a motorcyclist doing a wheelie for about half a kilometre as a girl on the back of a motorcycle travelling alongside took photographs; I have seen cars driving parallel across the three lanes suddenly stop in order to halt all traffic behind them, just for kicks; I have seen many drivers give up waiting for a red

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light to change and simply 'go'; I have seen cars driven so fast you'd think you were watching the Bahrain Grand Prix.

Often, the dangerous driving is a consequence of young men, many driving super-cars, wanting to race each other or to get alongside a car being driven by a girl. The zigzagging around traffic is frightening and a major reason for the appalling road toll. You wonder how the insurance companies make money after repairing all the twisted metal.

Another disturbing road behaviour is driving and texting, which is extremely common, despite warning signs and fines. You see a car swerving from side to side, pass alongside, and see the head down, phone in hand, the driver with no clue who or what is coming up. At night, you see the tell-tale illumination across drivers' faces. Using phones in cars is another attitude not peculiar to the Gulf, but it is taken to the next level here. I once stopped at the lights next to a woman and noticed her phone wedged between her ear and her hijab.

There are so many accidents that you would think drivers who see the squashed cars on the sides of the roads might alter their driving behaviour, but the road toll remains one of the worst in the world. The road designs seem grounded in some absurdist engineering philosophy. Roads merge to the right and cross another merging to the left, so people driving in the right lane are trying to turn left as people driving in the left lane are trying to turn right. There is a law that forbids combatants from moving their cars after an accident, even if that means leaving your car in the middle of the freeway, until the police arrive. Freeway drivers often have their fingers on the 'chicken-switch' or hazard light, and hit it so often that you give yourself whiplash if you are driving behind. Other drivers disregard hazard lights because drivers flash them so often or forget to turn them off. To some, the practice is insulting: 'I know how to drive; why are you warning me? I can see!'

And what of the freeway lanes, those arbitrary white lines that mean whatever one interprets them to mean? Do you put your car in-between the lines, or do you make sure one of the white lines runs down the middle of your car? It seems opinion in Kuwait is divided. And then there are the white lines that simply vanish. I don’t know if the weather causes the roads to peel each year, as some suggest, or whether the new bitumen is not given enough time to cure, as others argue. Whatever the reason, the result of all this peeling and re-sealing is the phenomenon of the vanishing freeway lane. You are driving down the freeway and suddenly the white lines disappear - blown or washed away. And when the lines run out, drivers freak and suddenly seem to lose all sense of direction, making first a forty-five degree adjustment to the right, followed immediately by a ninety degree turn to the left, all without indicating, for that would take away all the fun.

Another absurdity of road culture here is the car with the sunroof. You would think that in the desert a sunroof in a car is somewhat redundant. Even at night during the hot months it is often over forty degrees until well past midnight and daytime temperatures can pass fifty degrees. Yet people buy cars with sunroofs, perhaps because they offer passengers an alternative view of the world. You see cars being driven along with a head poking through the sunroof, the head sometimes connected to a child's body. Sometimes you see two, three or four children moving around inside a car speeding down the freeway, or hanging out of the windows or sunroof. I've seen a child looking through the window as he sat on the driver's lap.

I have tried to understand the road culture here, and one day was discussing the pushy, aggressive behaviour with my Iranian friend. He explained that I was describing zerangi, a word in Farsi meaning 'clever' that is used to describe one-upmanship. Pushing into someone's lane, cutting department store lines, or stealing a table at a restaurant are examples of zerangi. I am
not sure if there is an Arabic equivalent, but it would explain some of the driving behaviours here.

What is absurd about zerangi is that it destroys itself. Cutting lines on roads, in department stores or government offices is contagious and when everybody does it the result is gridlock. I see zerangi backfire often as I sit on my balcony and look down to get my afternoon or early evening entertainment. In Kuwait, drivers often stop alongside shops – baqalas, juice sellers, shawarma joints – and honk their horn until someone comes out to take their order. The outcome is lots of cars stopped kerbside, narrow spaces for cars to pass, traffic jams, honking horns, and arguments. Instead of conveniently sitting in their cars for two minutes while their order is completed, the combatants sit in their cars for ten minutes waiting for the road to clear before they can get alongside the store of their choice and place their order. Zerangi absurdity!

Some of my Australian friends find it difficult to believe that I still live in the Middle East. They imagine I take a security convoy to work each day, bolt the doors each night after putting an AK-47 under my pillow, wear a dishdasher disguise when going out, and keep the phone lines clear in case there is a call from the embassy. It is not like that at all, but tomorrow morning I will touch wood just before I get into my car.

* Disclaimer: The author occasionally drives fast, has used the emergency lane on freeways, often flashes his hazard lights, stops for shawarma on the side of the street, and once freaked-out when the white lines on the freeway vanished.

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Maengmoom

Rosemary Jackson

Maengmoom first noticed it when she was seven years old. None of the other children seemed to have it; she knew because she’d checked surreptitiously as they’d been bathed. She was housed in what was mainly a boys’ section of the orphanage, so perhaps it was just a girl thing, this budding, this tender blooming from her navel. But when she did at last get to be bathed next to Sopa, one of the few other girls, she saw that Sopa's navel went sweetly in, and showed no signs of anything emerging from it. Maengmoom's own navel protruded ever so slightly, and was opalescent in colour. Sometimes it would throb gently and she could feel it pulsating under her fingertips as she placed her hand there. She would stand, flooded with excitement, her hand inside the band of her shorts, sure that if she concentrated hard enough, something magical would burst forth.

Last night she had dreamt that she had been floating above the large buildings where she lived, as if she were a balloon tethered to a cord coming directly out of her navel. Up there she had seen the world that was beyond the gates, and it was big. The place she was tethered to was tiny by comparison, and she saw that it would be possible to simply float away, for the world was large, and she could fly. She’d been woken by a stinging tug on her cowlick, followed by two slaps on her face.

*Lazy creature! Always the lazy creature is the last.*

Pakpao. Today's house mother. Pakpao's voice was like nails on tin. Maengmoom's hand crept back to her navel, checking to see if the cord was still attached, but she found nothing, just the small warm grape that was the middle of herself. She was in her bed, thirteen beds down on the right side wall, and the other kids were already wriggling out of theirs and shoving toward the bathing room. It was important not to be last. No one wanted to be the one Pakpao chose for Unfortunate Crane Trapped Under Water. It was Pakpao's favourite game. In the bathing room she would be the tree and would hold the legs of the child picked as Crane in her branches so that the child's head was under water. This was so Crane could fish. But the branches were strong and Crane would always get stuck. Hence the misfortune.

*Find the fish! Find the little fishies,* Pakpao would shriek with glee.

Although Maengmoom was often chosen, she never did find any. Pakpao had told her that if she'd tried really hard, she would have found a fish, and the branches would have released her sooner. But as she never did, the water would seep into all her open places. Although she held her breath for as long as possible it was never long enough and water would flood her chest. Since she didn't find any fish, there would be none in her breakfast bowl either.

She scrambled past Sopa in line for the bathing room and so, today, Sopa would be Crane. Maengmoom laughed louder than the rest as they watched Sopa's stiffened legs and stupid struggles. As she laughed she felt strength coming from her belly, and a hot sharp pain that made her sweat and left her breathless. Something was released from her. It felt like a worm emerging through her navel, which then crawled its way across her body, and sat like a cord around her waist. All day she patted it to make sure it was still there. Its presence was thrilling, and she drew power from it. She was therefore not surprised when she was able to find a quiet corner and for an entire ten minutes was alone to examine the cord and luxuriate in its wonder. It was the most beautiful thing that she had ever seen. And this silky, pliant, shimmering thing had
come from her. It was delicate, but seemed to have the strength of soft steel. She wove it round her fingers and waggled them in the sunlight. It sparkled diamonds. She held it to her mouth and licked it. It tasted like the sweets that they had been given once, by that farang couple who had taken one of the boys away to live with them over the water. Once in her mouth, it was a quick step to gobbling the cord all up. Maengmoom was replete.

Next day, she was gratified to find her navel pulsing, and the cord waiting to emerge once again. Her ability to produce this cord was not something she could imagine sharing with anyone else. The idea that it might be confiscated and banished to some dreary cupboard, forever out of reach, and that she might be examined and contained was not to be borne. But then Maengmoom discovered a curious thing: in spite of its scintillating brilliance, she was the only person who could see the cord. This meant that she was free to experiment with it. At first, she would just throw it up in the air, to observe the way it looked as it flashed through the sky, finally coming to rest on the buildings and trees, like a glorious giant web. She would wind it back in, then devour it, as its production seemed to tax her energy.

Another day during game time, Maengmoom threw it at Pakpao while her back was turned. Pakpao seemed not to notice so, with as much caution as possible, Maengmoom circled her twice, tightening the cord as she moved. Pakpao looked over at her and smiled. This was such an unusual occurrence that Maengmoom left the cord where it was, to see whether this behaviour would continue. For the rest of the games session, with the shimmering cord draped around her body, Pakpao's treatment of Maengmoom was almost kindly, although this did not appear to extend to other children around her.

For the next few days Maengmoom experimented with throwing the cord in the direction of children or other house mothers whom she wished to influence. It was rather haphazard: sometimes the cord got tangled [around things or people that were in the way]; sometimes she was unable to tie it firmly before the recipient shook it off; and other times it completely missed its mark and wafted on the breeze. But the overall effect was positive; those whom the cord encircled would give Maengmoom their attention, and favour her above others.

She'd had a particularly satisfying time weaving the cord in and around her four closest playmates one day; they'd made her boss of the game and the cord had formed a sparkling web around them, binding them to her and to each other. They'd been playing Going To Farang Family. It was her game of choice. One girl would be the child going, one would be the director bowing and preening, another would be Pakpao shedding crocodile tears at the child's departure, and the other two would be the farang parents grabbing the child and exclaiming loudly, whilst throwing toys around. This had actually happened to a few special children. So strong was the web, and so intricate the pattern, that it almost seemed a shame to reel it in and eat it when the game was over. But the trembling in her limbs and the slight fuzziness in her head made her realise that she needed its nourishment. She didn't want the game to end, and now knew that it wouldn't. With every mouthful of this web came the certainty that the magic of a farang family would be hers.

The very next day, before sleep time, Maengmoom was squeezed into a dress instead of t-shirt and shorts. It was the kind of dress that the girls who were chosen to play at the gentlemen's houses wore. She had never been chosen and it had seemed quite a shame for, although those girls came back looking a bit hurt and strained, they also came back with sugary mouths and clutching stuffed kittens or dolls. The dress had puff sleeves and was made of soft white material, over a pink satin petticoat. She had never felt more special. Whatever was to come, she was ready. Her secret ability would safeguard her.
Not a pretty one. They choose a pity one. Pakpao enjoyed the humour of this. She repeated it, tittering. Stupid farang! When they get you, they get trouble.

Maengmoom looked up at Pakpao, at her brown teeth and at the way her mouth worked as she spat the words into Maengmoom's face.

When I wake up, I shall walk out of this place. I shall forget you utterly.

But the words were inside herself and she raised a shut face to the mother.

Sleep was a long time coming. When she did sleep, there were no dreams. It was as if a large white sheet had been wrapped around her, cocooning her from the garish pictures that were a usual feature of her afternoon rest. Plucked from her bed two hours later, in a drowsy fugue, she was taken to the bath house where her face was splashed, her hair tugged into a bow, and her dress pulled into order.

You're going to meet your farang mother, farang father. Farangs such ugly people. You will do well.

Pushed ahead of Pakpao, Maengmoom emerged from the bathing room and saw, at the end of the rows of beds, a farang man and woman staring at her. Her navel pulsed and the cord issued through the fabric of her dress. It was warm and comforting. She clasped it, raised her hands high in front of her face, and made a deep bow.

Oh, what a darling. No need to bow to us. We're your parents.

They smiled. A tear formed a small creek down the father's long face. The farang mother looked like she was holding her breath in case something came out too fast.

Maengmoom knew what to do. This is what the cord was for. She cocked her head, gave a slight smile, and lifted her arms out to the side, holding the cord in her fingers. Moving towards the parents, she bobbed up and down, creating a dance as she went. She circled them, placing the web around their waists. She drew back, then forward, weaving her way between the two whose smell was delicious to her nostrils. Round and round she went, her feet drumming rhythms on the floor, her extended arms rolling and flicking her fingers in alluring gestures. She wrapped the cord around herself too, entwining the three of them. The farang father lifted her up and the farang mother embraced them both.

Although exhausted by the dance, and by the volume of cord she had produced, she knew she would not eat this one. The web needed to be firmly in place at all times. The farang parents would always be connected to her. If this web broke, she would make another, and another, as many as necessary – each one thicker and stronger and more elaborate than the last. The parents would never be aware of its presence. They would be bound to her by her own making. The world was large and she was now flying away.

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Stepping in the River

Julie Kearney

Just as Frank promised, Vittala Temple turns out to be everything Lil has ever dreamed of. When it comes time to leave, the others have to drag her away from the honey-coloured columns to get in an auto-rickshaw with Prue. ‘See you at the Mango Tree,’ Richard calls, as he and Frank wave them off. The men have decided to walk back to Hampi and take a look at Lotus Mahal on the way.

On orange plastic seats under the striped awning of their chosen vehicle, the two women rattle along at a pace, up hills, down hills, past crumbling fortresses, past a giant statue of Hanuman the Monkey God and other remnants of the Vijayanagar empire. Dust billows behind the rickshaw, enveloping slender women bearing pots on their heads, lungi-clad men herding goats, children bowling bicycle wheel hoops, chai sellers and the odd buffalo or two.

‘We could be in a scene from A Passage to India,’ Prue says, grinning at Lil and clutching the driver’s seat to stop herself sliding about. She’s laughing, and Lil is laughing because she has to agree. After all, here they are – two middle-aged women in sun hats and lace-up shoes, being conveyed like memsahibs past quote unquote picturesque natives they know nothing about.

‘Adela and Mrs Moore without the corsets,’ Lil says, and they laugh again, hanging onto whatever will stop them from falling onto the road or each other. For some reason they are both extraordinarily happy, which just possibly is because – in a way that can never be satisfactorily explained since it concerns the spirit rather than the flesh – Sharma, or someone, or something, India perhaps, is with them.

Can this really be so?

Twenty-four hours earlier.

When the boulders appear on the horizon, glowing pinkly above a fringe of coconut trees, Lil sees they’re the same as ever, still heaped into fantastic mountains as if thrown down to earth by some playful giant. She can’t take her eyes off them. Somewhere on the other side of those improbable stones is Hampi and with any luck, Sharma. The boulders shimmer like a mirage and like a mirage they get no closer, because Thiru, their driver, is lost.

The boulders are drifting sideways now. This is too much! Wedged in the back seat between Frank and Prue, Lil tries to catch Thiru’s eye in the rear-vision mirror. ‘Thiru! Hampi’s back there, I know it is.’ Her peremptory words hang in the air-conditioned air of the Toyota. No one says anything, not even Richard in the front seat whose mediating skills have been needed once or twice on this trip. Thiru ignores Lil, but a few kilometres on he pulls over to talk to a man herding goats. They listen to the rapid-fire exchange, Thiru’s in Tamil, the goat-herder’s in some rural Kannada dialect, supplemented by gestures and one word which is repeated: Hampi. As with previous exchanges they’ve witnessed this one is successful, and an hour later the car is crunching up a boulder-lined driveway towards their hotel. The manager comes out all smiles to greet them. He is film-star handsome and says his name is Narasinga.

‘What does Narasinga mean?’ Prue asks and he tells her Lord of Lions.

He leads them to a pavilion for drinks on the house, and they’re so glad to be out of the car and so charmed by Narasinga’s smiles that no-one remembers to thank Thiru. He’s probably being fed in the kitchen, Lil thinks later, as they sip mango and lime juice under a slowly-
revolving fan. But it’s only a passing thought because she’s just registered a sound she hasn’t heard in a long time – twenty-five years in fact – and it’s coming from behind the palm trees on the far side of the pavilion. A gurgling, roaring noise that can only be made by quantities of fast-moving water.

The Tungabhadra. The holy river.

‘Thank God we’re here,’ Prue says, putting down her glass. ‘I couldn’t take any more of those potholes.’

‘How’s your back?’ Richard asks, without his usual show of solicitude. It’s been a long morning and he seems more interested in the waiters padding about, setting out dish after dish on a circular buffet table.

‘I’ll feel better if I can get a massage,’ Prue says, yawning. ‘Excuse me, Narasinga, but what’s this?’

Narasinga has just placed four small bowls on their table. He waggles his head in a minuscule figure of eight. ‘Ma’am, we are giving you refreshment before lunch. Wild honey from forest, gathered only at new moon.’

‘Is that right?’ Frank asks. ‘That’s the best time is it?’

‘Yes sir, very good honey. You will like.’

And they do like. Never before have they tasted such delicious honey and Richard asks Narasinga if guests are allowed to join the honey-hunts. Lord of Lions laughs handsomely, not bothering or unable to hide his amusement. ‘Full moon is tomorrow so not possible,’ he says. ‘But we are giving our guests moonrise-viewing party instead.’

The Australians beam at him. ‘Sounds great,’ Richard says. ‘Better than hunting for honey in a dark forest, eh?’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Prue tells him. ‘They wouldn’t collect it at night.’

Frank and Lil nod wisely because Prue is always right when it comes to practical matters.

‘We had some honey in Toulouse that was very good,’ Prue says. ‘Remember, Richard? How nice it was.’

This is the only downside to travelling with friends. You have to listen to them talk about other countries at the drop of a hat, and Lil doesn’t like it. She believes it dilutes their experience of India. She hasn’t been to the countries Prue talks about because she prefers India. This is her sixth trip to the sub-continent and Prue’s first, and she wants her friend to find it as wonderful as she does. Hampi particularly, because Hampi is special. Though they aren’t actually there yet.

The hotel they’ve chosen (high end, of course, because Richard and Prue don’t fancy staying in dives and nor, for that matter, do Frank and Lil anymore) is several miles from Hampi, tucked away among elephantine boulders on the banks of the Tungabhadra. A far cry from the fleapit she and Frank stayed in when they met Sharma.

Dear Sharma, she thinks, hoping he’s still alive, which possibly he isn’t given that terrible cough he had. On the other hand he was fit enough to lead her and Frank a merry dance on his ‘little nature walk’. They walked all day and half the night and nearly got drowned in the Tungabhadra and it was so dark, not full moon like now . . .

‘Aren’t you eating?’ Frank says, and she sees he is standing up and the others are over at the buffet table. She gets up stiffly, hearing her joints creak.

Next morning, after breakfast, the couples sit out on the veranda of their secluded bungalow to enjoy the view of the Tungabhadra. It flows below the stone balustrade, coiling into the distance through a surreal landscape of boulders which change colour as they watch. Slatey blues become ethereal mauves and eventually glowing pinks. Everyone exclaims about the eerie but wholly calm light that morphs the boulders into a bestiary of hybrid animals. At dawn they
were suffused in hallucinatory bluish light; now monkeys with dignified black faces scamper across their flanks and fishermen in reed-woven coracles glide past on silken, pastel-coloured water.

‘Better get on to Thiru,’ Richard says, pulling out his mobile and keying it. ‘Oh? Did he? Uh-huh ... see you later.’ He raises his eyebrows at the others and clicks off the phone. ‘Narasinga’s sent Thiru across the river to stay in Hampi, and he’s not happy. Says he’s staying in a car-park full of badmash men.’

The others look at one another. They know Thiru sleeps in the car; they’ve got used to this disquieting fact, but so far he’s been allowed to park it in the compound of whatever hotel they happen to be staying at. Lil suspects that to their super-conservative driver badmash means anyone different from himself. But she can’t be sure and he will be there three days.

‘Good, I could do with a break from him,’ she says and catches a quick exchange between Prue and Richard. She knows they disapprove of her inability to get on with Thiru but she can’t help it. Everything he does seems to rub her the wrong way.

‘If Thiru’s on the other side of the river, how do we get to Hampi?’ Prue asks, practical as ever.

‘The hotel people will drive us to the ferry apparently. I’ll ring them now.’

An hour later they’re sitting crammed between back-packers in a tiny boat, put-putting across the eddying channels of the Tungabhadra. The river swells out at this point and becomes almost a harbour – an impressive, even magnificent sight, but it doesn’t stop Lil feeling confused. Nothing is as she remembers. Last time she and Frank were here they crossed the river from Hampi, now they’re heading towards it. Last time they were in a coracle with Sharma, now they’re in a motorised dinghy whose carefree young passengers are the age she was then. She doesn’t recognise the approaching steps at all. Sharma brought them back to Hampi on foot, wading in the dark through flooding waters, and if the ghat was there she certainly didn’t see it. Listening to the happy chatter around her she’s keyed up, half-expecting, half-hoping Sharma will magically materialise when they reach the other side.

Plenty of people come up to them after they climb the stone steps but none is Sharma. They escape the clutches of the postcard and ganja sellers, then fall prey to the hypnotic eyes of three magnificently-robed magicians who treat them, and a small crowd of amused locals, to a not very convincing display of stone-swallowing, followed by a more convincing attempt to relieve Frank and Richard of the contents of their wallets. After that they’re left alone by the laid-back locals, free to wander as they please. Prue and Lil enjoy an hour of pleasurable plunder in the bazaar, and when they’re laden with minuscule soapstone elephants and sandalwood fans they go in search of the men. There they are, waiting outside Virupaksha Temple. How drab they look among the women in their brilliant saris.

There’s plenty to see and do once they step through the gateway into the temple compound. Prue and Lil get blessed by Laxmi, the temple elephant – a curiously uplifting experience – then drift off separately to explore. Lil bends her head to enter a small dark room set like a cave in the outer wall of the complex. Darkly ancient, its walls encrusted in centuries of incense and candle smoke and what look like gobs of blackened wax, the room is dedicated to Pamppa, the lake goddess, and has a resident priest who puts out his hand for Lil’s coin and decorates her forehead in workmanlike fashion with a dab of tikka paste.

She wanders outside and is immediately drawn to the ancient columns of a pavilion. What is it about these worn old pillars of India? They always tug at her heart as if they’re friends she has...

‘Stepping in the River.’ Julia Kearney.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
somehow forgotten. She’d like to throw her arms around them and hug them, but doesn’t of course. Passers-by might think it a bit odd.

Her feet are starting to hurt so she sits on the pavilion steps to enjoy the passing scene. A beggar approaches, moving slowly on all fours across the hot flagstones. He’s horribly deformed, his head nearly touching the ground as he drags himself toward her on stick-like limbs. He reaches the step where she sits and raises his head. The face of a beautiful young man regards her with sombre, knowing eyes. Lil is too startled to speak and he doesn’t choose to. He has no words to spare, it seems, either to trade on her pity or rail against his fate. His dark eyes hold memories she can’t and doesn’t want to imagine. They bore into hers, reading her. Reading her puny soul it feels like. What do I know? she thinks, jittery and confused, and gives him more rupees than she’d intended. What does she know about anything in this country?

When he moves off, reduced once more to a faceless collection of misshapen limbs, she watches the monkeys forage among the banana-skins at the base of a shrine and manages to forget the trapped young man.

‘Ah, there you are,’ Richard says, appearing with the others from behind a pillar as if he’s a character in a play. ‘We’re off to find Thiru.’

Do we have to? thinks Lil.

Richard grins. ‘He’ll be waiting to see if we need him today.’

They leave Virupaksha and walk through the bazaar to the car-park cum bus-station, where they immediately spot Thiru among the throng of people, cars, cows and food-stalls.

Immaculately dressed as always, he is standing beside their hire car, looking sulky and displeased. But he brightens up when they arrive and starts pointing at Lil’s face and giggling.

‘Ma’am, so funny. Tikka is running down your nose.’

She’s annoyed by this remark but tries not to let Thiru see it. He knows though, she can tell. She peers in the Toyota’s side-mirror and discovers he wasn’t joking. Red dye trickles down her nose from what looks like a wound in her forehead, and for a split second, against all reason, she

imagines she’s been stabbed. Why can’t I take to Thiru? she worries, searching in her pocket for a tissue while he talks with the others. He’s a small, self-contained man with a ready laugh – usually at other people’s expense – but that’s not what irritates her. It hasn’t helped that she’s been reading The White Tiger in the car, and noticing certain similarities between its murderous protagonist and Thiru. Both are hire-car drivers, for instance. Both are Tamil, and both, as Lil knows from comments Thiru has made, envy their rich passengers. Each day as she reads, further new disclosures in the plot remind her of details confided by Thiru about his family, his ambitions and his opinions of the Indian economy. But as she peers in the side-mirror and scrubs at the stubborn tikka, she knows it’s not this. The comparison with Adiga’s sinister anti-hero is gratuitous, absurd. It’s because Thiru is so materialistic, the exact opposite of Sharma.

They say goodbye to Thiru and wander off to enjoy themselves. Lil can’t help glancing back. Their driver stands out, the only clean-shaven man in trousers among the moustachioed locals in their colourful lungis; a lonely man condemned to spend his day guarding their hire car, which also contains his possessions – the toilet bag and change of clothes he resuscitates daily from where they lie squashed under the back seat. It’s a sight to induce guilt and it does.

But not for long, because Frank has the good idea of enquiring about Sharma in the bazaar bookshop. Prue and Richard disappear to do more shopping while Frank and Lil mount a stoop and enter the cooler air of an ancient stone-vaulted shop. The owner, Mr Angudi, when fetched by his wife from the bazaar where he is chatting with friends, turns out to be a middle-aged man with the same scholarly sort of face you see in photos of R.K. Narayan on the covers of his books. Given that Narayan’s novel, The Guide, was Sharma’s great inspiration in life, this seems
to Lil a very good omen. And so it proves. Mr Angudi says he knows Sharma and knows where he is.

‘Oh Frank, he’s still alive!'

But Lil and Frank are disappointed by the next news, because Mr Angudi says Sharma has moved to Bangalore. A quick calculation of the hours involved in a return trip to Bangalore reveals what they fear: it’s too big a change in their itinerary to ask Prue and Richard to make.

‘And you say he was your friend?’ Mr Angudi says.

‘Yes, a special friend,’ Lil tells him.

‘A strange man, Mr Sharma. Did you know him well?’

‘Only two days,’ says Frank.

‘He was, I mean he is, an unorthodox Brahmin,’ adds Lil. ‘Is that what you mean?’

‘No, no. Nothing at all. His wife, of course, has left him.’

They nod. They know all about that business. She ran off with an Irishman.

‘But his son is still here. If you come back later I will have his telephone number for you.’

There doesn’t seem much point trying to track down Sharma’s son, given the vagaries of India’s telephone system, but they thank Mr Angudi anyway, and notice Richard and Prue waiting outside.

‘Namaste,’ they murmur, nodding respectfully over prayerful hands.

Now that Thiru’s services have been dispensed with for the day, the plan is to see Vittala Temple and then have lunch at the Mango Tree, a café recommended by a friend of Prue’s. They stroll out of the bazaar and continue up the broad walkway that was once the thoroughfare of the Vijayanagar kings. Their ruined emporia still line its sides, but are squatter homes now, patched with old bricks and red cloth. At the end of these recycled buildings, on the edge of a lunar landscape, the four discover a pitilessly high phalanx of steps chiselled out of equally pitiless granite. Away at the top of these stairs tiny stick figures of backpackers and would-be guides lounge against pillars or move about as if on a stage.

‘Good heavens,’ Prue says. ‘We’re not going up there are we?’

Neither Frank nor Lil can remember these formidable steps and no-one wants to climb them so they follow a path leading down to the river. But this proves hard going as well because it’s made out of tilting slabs of the same granite interspersed with house-high boulders. They have reached a place that is empty of people – nothing but looming hot boulders with occasional glimpses of river – and Lil’s feet are giving her serious trouble. Richard and Prue have gone on ahead, owing to her slowness.

‘I’ll sit here,’ she says, collapsing under the first available tree. ‘I can’t go any further. Sorry, love.’ With difficulty she holds back tears. First Sharma being in Bangalore and now this.

‘Drink some water,’ Frank says. ‘You look like a beetroot.’

‘Oh Frank, to think this is the same walk we went on with Sharma. And only just begun. Oh God, if only Thiru was here he could drive me back.’

The irony of this wish doesn’t escape her – she is nothing but a rich tourist who bitches about her underpaid driver. Remembering that it’s the travel company that underpays him in no way lessens her guilt.

‘Thiru wouldn’t be able to get the car down here,’ Frank reminds her.

Frank is a master of the obvious. Lil doesn’t reply, lost in a vision of Thiru descending through the air in a golden chariot, like god Krishna does in Hindu comic-books, to carry her back to the hotel. She can’t see how else she’ll get there.

‘You’ll be alright, just rest up a while. You don’t mind if I go on, do you?’

She shakes her head.
‘Are you sure? Okay, I won’t be long. I’ll have a look at Lotus Mahal while I’m at it.’
And he’s gone in a flash, a last wave of the guidebook before he disappears behind an enormous boulder.

It’s nice here under the trees, she realises when Frank has gone. Nice looking down at the river that she hadn’t even noticed was there. She can see the old river pavilion where she and Frank and Sharma once stopped, at the beginning of their long-ago walk. After a time she stands up and finds she can hobble down the embankment.

It’s cool inside the pavilion, and pleasant among the water-lit columns – singing columns Sharma called them, carved in some special way with a special chisel to make musical notes when struck with the palm of a hand. They tried that, of course, but twenty-five years later Lil finds the sound of rushing water is music enough. She props herself against a pillar and dangles her feet in the river. Heaven! No longer does she care about Sharma, or anything else for that matter, just the chill of the clear green water flowing over her swollen feet and the rippling reflections of the river chasing one another across the low stone ceiling. Beautiful Tungabhadra, let her stay here forever, she wants nothing more. And she means it, so much so that when Frank appears among the dappled columns and watery light she’s not at all grateful.

‘What’re you doing here?’ Frank advances between the columns. ‘I came back,’ he announces. ‘When I saw Vittala Temple I knew you’d love it, so I got a rickshaw and came back.’

_Her knight in shining armour._

‘Let’s stay here,’ she says. ‘It’s lovely here. Do you remember this place?’
‘I’m not sure. Maybe.’
‘It was lovely then, too.’
‘Why don’t you come? Vittala’s great, a bit like that Jain temple we saw in Rajasthan, only not white, all honey-coloured.’

She watches the coiling green water spawn silver bubbles from her toes. ‘I don’t think I can,’ she says. ‘Not even with a rickshaw.’
‘Come on. There’s a road from the temple so you can catch another one back to Hampi. Or Thiru can fetch you from there. Anyhow, you have to come. Prue’s starting to agitate about the Mango Tree.’

‘Is she?’ Lil looks away to hide her smile.
‘I don’t know why she wants to eat all the time.’
‘It is lunchtime,’ she reminds him.
‘I can go all day without food.’

Frank is tapping the guidebook against his thigh and she thinks how lucky she is to be travelling with Prue, because this way she gets to have lunch and get blessed by temple elephants and go shopping. That sort of thing never happened before. Frank doesn’t approve of frivolous activities, but with Prue as an ally she can do more of the things she likes.

‘And we haven’t seen Lotus Mahal yet.’ The guidebook taps faster.

She moves her feet in the green torrent and sees they have become two glimmering white fishes trying to swim upstream. ‘I don’t care about seeing it again,’ she says. And she doesn’t. She’s tired of change, tired of finding everything different – everything except this old river pavilion, that is – like a dream changing shape before her eyes.

Up on the bank, under the feathery trees, the waiting driver is enjoying an ice-cream from a Kwality Icecream cart. Nearer, on the same water that surges over Lil’s fish-feet, a coracle goes by, moving fast in the current, carrying a boatman and two backpackers. It’s a vision from another time, a time when she and Frank climbed into a reed-woven bowl and sailed away with a
guide called Sharma, a small man they can’t forget. But in a way he’s still here in the persistence of memory, an after-image in the light that streams off the water and makes the coracle dance.

The coracle bobs weightlessly on the light-struck water, its reclining passengers gesturing and pointing their cameras. The boatman kneels, plying his paddle to avoid the undertow that surges around the boulders.

‘Must be hard for him coming back,’ Frank says.

They watch the coracle until it disappears round a bend, then Frank stretches out a hand and Lil lets him pull her up.

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The Red Sari
Kavita Ivy Nandan

Wearing *kurta pyjamas* and tatty jumpers, Hari Punja and Ram Prasad stood at the corner of a row of shops. Their frozen hands moved quickly, dipping into the steel pots and dishing hot *gulab jamuns* into clay containers for the half-dozen people standing about the table constructed from cartons. The steam from the pots rose into the surrounding mist.

Hari unwound the cloth that covered the top of his head. He then wrapped it even more tightly to secure any extra molecule of heat that could be trapped by the thin cotton. His bald head felt as cold as a stone. He smiled to himself. The sweetmeats had turned out especially good today. No doubt they would have many more customers before the day was over. His companion’s *gulab jamuns* were almost as good as his, but not quite. This reminder of his own superiority circulated through his body like heat from a dung-burning stove.

Hari glanced at Ram Prasad, noting how his thick coat of hair and plumpness protected him against the cold. The men were not best friends exactly but they shared two important traits: the skill of sweet-making and a perennial restlessness.

When the last customer of the morning had disappeared, the men leant against the wall between ‘Best, Cheapest Saris’ and ‘Subramani Tailors’, sharing a *beedi*, grateful for the break before the lunch rush. Ram’s eyelids flickered, as if the thought that was forming in his brain lacked sufficient power to reach its destination. He closed his eyes and the idea was sealed within.

‘Open wide!’ Hari joked.
‘Hari, listen,’ began Ram.

Hari flicked the *beedi* away and almost leapt into the still warm pot. He tried to force one of his *gulab jamuns* into Ram’s mouth with his wiry hands. Surely this would stop Ram from sharing one of his dreamy notions with him, at least for today. He was in a sour mood because his wife had fought with him that morning. She had accused him of using too much of her *ghee* in his *gulab jamuns*. Stupid woman! Obviously the ghee was why they were so tasty.

Hari grunted. Ram always annoyed him when he started his sentences like that, as if he were privy to the most important secret in the world. He had to admit, though, that Ram had been loyal to him over the years; they had travelled together to sell their sweetmeats, *gulab jamuns*, *barfi*, *jellebi*, in most of the markets of Calcutta.

You might say that their relationship was crisp on the outside but soft in the middle, just like one of Hari’s flawless *gulab jamuns*.

Ram continued to talk with the sweetmeat dissolving in his mouth. ‘Aren’t you bored with coming here day after day and selling sweets? Let’s go somewhere else. Start a new life. There’s a ship that can take us to the new world – *Phiji*, they call it. All we have to do is turn up at the port.’

Hari was astounded by his friend’s insensitivity – typical careless bachelor attitude. What about his wife? Bad-tempered she may be, but she was still his wife. And his house? The mud-like structure was hardly a house to be proud of, but now that his father was no longer there, it was his. At least he wasn’t ashamed of his own house, unlike Ram who had never invited Hari once to his home. In a way, he felt sorry for him. Ram had neither wife nor mother to keep a house in good shape.

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Hari resisted Ram’s fantasy about this ‘amazing opportunity for adventure’ all month. One night the sorrowful image of his mother standing by her dung stove, waiting for him to return home, came to him. But soon, even mother-guilt was insufficient to contain his growing excitement. He was forced to admit that lately he had felt a sense of dissatisfaction about his life. For one thing, he was growing tired of the endless bickering between his wife and mother, and no matter how much dung his mother burnt, the blasted house just wouldn’t get warm. He asked Ram to tell him again about this magical ship that would take them to the new world.

Ram sowed seeds of desire for a different existence in Hari’s uninspired soul, just like his wife, unbeknown to Hari, squirted drops of condensed milk into his gulab jamun mixture.

Ram Prasad and Hari Punja left the Calcutta docks on the ship Leonidas for the Fiji Islands at the beginning of 1879. Once during the voyage Hari thought he recognised a distant cousin but he soon forgot him, so overwhelmed was he by thirst, seasickness and the smell of bodies. When they arrived in Levuka on the island of Ovalau in Fiji nearly two months later they were immediately put to labour in the cane fields of the Australian Colonial Sugar Refinery, nine hours a day for five days a week, and five hours on Saturdays. The coolies would return, exhausted and famished, to identical rows of residential barracks that were ten feet by seven feet.

Ram and Hari slotted seamlessly into the indenture machine. Both had been seduced by the idea of a different life, with the promise of freedom and opportunity in a new country. They signed their lives away, or at least five years of indenture, with a thumbprint, two souls out of five hundred bonded labourers transported to the British colony to work on the plantations.

One evening, after six months had passed, Hari sat with hunched shoulders on the mud floor of Ram’s hut and asked, ‘Did we make a mistake by coming here?’

Ram was silent. The day’s work had exhausted him. He had become thin and his large eyes had receded into their sockets. The overseer or sirdar, frustrated about a fight that had broken out earlier between two coolies, had been particularly brutal to him. Ram could not understand why, despite the sirdar being Indian himself, it made no difference to the way he treated them. He stared blurry-eyed at the brass goddess Lakshmi, one of the few items that he had brought with him from India. He kept his other possessions – clothes, the Bhagavad Gita, and a copper container for pouring water – neatly in a corner of the hovel. He had been so willing to leave his past behind for the sake of adventure that he had even encouraged Hari to walk away from his home and his family. But how could he have foreseen that they would end up swapping an uneventful life – that now seemed like a sweet dream – for this nightmare? Day in and day out, they planted and harvested the cane, the stalks quickly becoming blades that cut their hands and heart. The beauty of the island lay like a painted frieze beyond the compound where they were living and dying.

A palpable excitement entered the cane fields the following morning. There were rumours that a newly arrived ship, Syria, was carrying women – lots of women. In their excitement, the labourers cut the top of the cane too high or the bottom not low enough and received blows from the sirdars for their inattention. Ram's thoughts also began to drift. In India he had had little experience with women and since coming here that little had dwindled to nothing. He knew what he liked, though: women with fair skin, long hair and breasts like melons.

His daydreaming earned him a blow on the shoulder. ‘Hey, hero! Dreaming of humpy-humpy sex eh? Son of a bitch, get back to work!’ Ram struck the cane again and again, smarting from the sirdar’s strike and his vulgar remark.

Where was Hari? Today was the second time in a row that he was late. What had gotten into

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him lately? He knew, like all of them, that the penalty for being anywhere but your assigned plantation was severe. To his surprise, he saw Hari scurrying like a mongoose through the lanes of cane to reach him. He had barely managed to escape being sighted by the sirdar, whose bleary yagona eyes were darting all around the cane field to catch anything punishable.

“Ram, Ram! I’ve found a way to make a little more money on the side for us. I’ve been experimenting, and I think I’ve come up with the right recipe.”

So that’s what Hari had been up to, mixing ingredients, at least the ones that were available to them on this savage island. Ram looked at Hari in amazement. Had the despair of this place finally made him stark raving mad? But before he could give his friend a good shake, the two of them were distracted by a line of women walking along a nearby road that led to some empty barracks. Their faces were weary and they carried their bodies defensively, bodies that had been recently deloused, prodded and declared fit for work. The gold nose stud of a woman wearing a red sari who was near the end of the line glinted in the early morning sun. Ram nudged Hari, but after a brief glance his friend continued to blab on about flour, milk, sugar and the humidity ruining his galub jamuns.

That afternoon, when Ram stood up to stretch his aching back, he saw a flash of red cloth disappearing into one of the adjacent plots. Something made him follow. He stopped when he saw a woman, her back to him, weeding a lane of cane with a hoe. A red cotton sari was wrapped tightly around her thin body and one end was tucked efficiently into the side of her waist. Her hair was tied in a simple knot, which rested on the nape of her neck. She hoed the cane with the strength of a man but in tune to the song, which she was sweetly singing.

‘Lekha!’ The sirdar yelled her name like an expletive.

Ram wondered if he knew the names of all the new arrivals. He turned and slipped away. He didn’t want to be caught spying by the sirdar, but even less so by the woman. But he found himself slipping away from his gang on a daily basis to observe Lekha. At the end of the work day she would wipe away perspiration with the edge of her red sari, and then balance on her haunches and take hungry, almost desperate, gulps of water from the brass lota. He enjoyed watching her unknot and comb her hair and twirl into a circle with her thumb and forefinger any loose strands.

One evening, after the work was done for the day and he had prepared and eaten his meal, Ram went to Hari’s quarters. They drank tea and afterwards smoked tobacco together as they sat on the mud floor, chatting. Hari, still obsessed with making sweets said, 'we could start by giving the sweetmeats out for free to see if there is a market for them. I think this could work, Ram. Satisfying people’s sweet tooth is a calling, yaar.'

It amazed Ram that Hari talked endlessly about mithai and very little about his wife. Ram, in turn, talked only of the woman in the red sari. He told Hari about Lekha's soulful voice, her dark skin, which was so different to what he normally liked, and yet somehow enticing.

Suddenly they heard a scream. It was high-pitched and echoed across the cane fields.

'Lekha! She's in trouble, Hari!' Ram raced outside the barrack and towards the nearest cane plantation. He didn’t hear Hari calling to him to stop; he heard only the voice of his beloved, the woman with whom he had never exchanged a single word, calling for help.

Hari tried to follow him but Ram was too fast and he soon lost him. After a while he stopped running. Ram was behaving like a crazy man. How could he be sure the scream had come from Lekha? He listened but could hear nothing: no screaming, no Ram. The sudden loud clanging of the sugar cane train, the last of the day, as it passed the field made his heart pound furiously.

A figure emerged from the uncut cane. It was the sirdar, with his stick, and he was striding in his direction. Terrified, Hari turned and ran back to his hut.
It was four am, a week later. Hari stood in front of his barracks, waiting for customers. On a makeshift table made from coconut fronds he had placed a tray of *gulab jamuns*. Appetite was hard to come by at this time of the day but he still had hope. He was thinking about his mother. Was she still alive? He was too afraid to think about his wife. The disappointment she must have felt when he never came home. And Ram … Ram was dead. His body had been found lying in a cane field, the cause of death a single violent blow to the head. And Lekha … Hari had never seen her again. He heard she had been shifted to another plantation.

'Three *gulab jamuns*. Give me the plump ones, idiot.'

The first customer of the day. Hari, his hands trembling, placed the three sweets on a palm leaf. He kept his eyes down to avoid looking at the sirdar.

The man sucked and slurped greedily. Then he pulled a cloth from his pocket to wipe his lips and strode off. But not before Hari had seen it: a strip of cloth from the edge of a red sari.

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The bars had closed and Neville and I were standing on Hooker Hill in Itaewon, the Seoul neighbourhood that serves as the playground for GIs on leave in Seoul. Holding enormous bottles of OB beer to our chests, we laughed over the efforts of the newly arrived service men to negotiate with the few remaining working girls. Neville pulled me aside and put an arm around my shoulder. ‘I like you Kyle. I really like you.’

Neville and I had both started working at the same language school in Seoul within a week of each other. The close timing of our arrival and our similar ignorance of the host culture and language led to a couple of fellow-strangers-in-a-strange-land episodes, but we still did not know each other well.

‘You're a great guy. Kyle, I'm going to tell you something, but you have to promise to never mention it to anyone.’

I expected the usual beery confessions of attraction, the standard coming-out-of-the-closet speech. I hadn’t sensed that Neville was gay, but I prepared a speech I had used before about being flattered but sorry that I was not attracted to him in that way. I never got to use the speech. Neville’s secret was much more curious.

He reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. He shuffled through the ID and credit cards before finally pulling one out.

‘Before I show you this card, Kyle, you have to promise that you will never tell anyone about this.’

I was curious, but feigned indifference. ‘If you don’t think you should show me, don’t.’

‘No, I want you to know this about me. But you can’t tell anyone.’

‘OK. I won’t tell anyone.’

‘Swear it, Kyle. Look me in the eyes and swear that you will never reveal what you learn tonight. Swear it!’

Neville’s eyes were bloodshot from the alcohol and his voice had taken on a hard edge. I did not want any trouble. The easiest way out of this ridiculous situation seemed to be to play along. I looked into his red-rimmed eyes and swore that I would never tell anyone what I had learned tonight.

Neville handed the card over. It was a simple piece of heavy bond paper, worn and wrinkled from too much handling. It looked as though the card had been produced with a pair of scissors and a typewriter. I looked more closely and read [the typed letters]: 'This is to certify that Neville Thomson has been accepted into the Eternal Order of the Ninja.' His name was signed with a ballpoint pen.

I looked up and Neville leaned in close. ‘I am a ninja, Kyle. I am a fucking ninja. These hands can kill.’

At first, I thought he was taking the piss. Neville’s sense of humour could be pretty dry, but I decided to play it straight.

‘Neville, that is so cool. I won’t tell anyone.’ I looked reverently into his eyes and handed the card back to him. There was not much said after that. The beer was warm and sour in my mouth. It was time to head home.

‘Wake Up Call.’ Kelly Quinn.
Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, November 2016.
At the school in Chongno, we all worked nights. Classes finished at 10 pm, and then with the requisite beers after work, we usually did not get home until the early hours. For teachers on the night shift, classes usually began mid-afternoon, which was plenty of time to recover from the previous evening’s revels, but Neville started showing up looking a little rough, bags under his eyes, hair dishevelled. When questioned, all he would say was, ‘That fucking chicken.’

It turned out that the elderly father of Neville's landlord had moved from his farm to live with his son and brought with him a pet rooster as a reminder of his previous life. The rooster lived on the balcony, two stories above Neville’s apartment. The rooster crowed, just as roosters are supposed to. He started crowing at dawn and crowed pretty much all day. For someone who worked nights, and especially someone of Neville’s nocturnal habits, a rooster crowing would be more than a small distraction. I visited him one Saturday and the rooster crowed the whole time – loudly. We’d had chickens on our farm when I was growing up, but a rooster crowing on a farm and a rooster crowing on the balcony of an apartment two stories above your head sound very different.

When the rooster started crowing, Neville rushed outside and shouted, ‘Shut that bloody bird up!’

I followed and saw the rooster walking along the railing of the balcony two stories up. It was a handsome bird, a dark Rhode Island Red, I guessed, with striking colouring.

The rooster paused and crowed again. Neville’s face was red. ‘Shut the bloody fuck up!’

Suddenly, the face of an elderly man popped up over the balcony’s railing. It must have been the landlord’s father. He was laughing, and we stared straight into his toothless mouth. The old man smiled and petted the rooster, saying, *Gwiyeobda, gwiyeobda* (‘Pretty, pretty’). Then both man and bird disappeared from sight.

Neville was livid, spitting mad. ‘Fucking bird! I’m going to kill the damn thing!’

‘The old guy is senile. The bird is his pet,’ I said.

‘I don’t give a good goddamn if it is his pet! It's illegal to keep livestock in a domestic situation.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘You can’t keep farm animals in an apartment building. It's a health hazard and a public nuisance.’

‘Ah. Maybe it's illegal in Australia, but this is Korea. Regulations are much looser here. There's a motorcycle repair shop by my house. I see the guy pouring oil down the storm sewer everyday. There ought to be a regulation about that, but I don’t see the cops doing anything about it.’

‘Kyle, I don’t give a damn about your motorcycle repair guy. I’m talking to the police. The rooster has to go.’

‘Well, good luck with that.’

I don’t know if Neville ever called the police, but a couple of days later police came to the school looking for Neville. I learned later that the rooster had turned up dead. The old man had found it the previous morning, lying on the floor of the balcony with its neck broken. The landlord suspected Neville, and the police had come to ask him some questions. Neville denied everything. The whole thing might have blown over, but the old man was upset and screamed whenever he saw Neville, and in the end it was decided that it would be in everyone’s interest if Neville moved to another apartment.

I went over to help him move. While bringing in some stuff from the balcony, I looked at the wall of the building. It was brick and, as part of an ornamental pattern, some of the bricks were
recessed into the wall while others stuck out. They could be used as handholds to climb to the third floor. It would not be easy, but it could be done.

I went into the apartment. Neville was packing. ‘Neville,’ I asked, ‘did you kill that guy’s rooster?’

Neville paused. He stood up and gave me a serious look. ‘Kyle, I like you, but a ninja can never discuss his work. It’s part of the code, Kyle.’

Six weeks later, Neville broke his contract and disappeared without a word to anyone. Most of the staff assumed he had received a better job offer, but I suspected that, with his mission completed, it was time for the ninja to move on.

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Are hills like white elephants?

Sunil Sharma

‘Can hills be like white elephants?’
The teaser fails to disengage Sandip from his iPhone.
‘Can hills be like white elephants?’ Priya insists, fingering her curly mane, lower lip pouting, eyes wandering across the room and outside.
He is orbiting in another space, detached from the lunch-hour din in the Mcdonald’s in Colaba, Mumbai.
‘Why don’t you pay attention?’ she asks irritated. Sitting near the exit, Priya watches the Friday rush hour traffic with the bored expression of a regular.
‘OK.’
‘Can hills be like white elephants?’
‘What kind of nonsense is this?’ Sandip’s eyes are unfocussed. ‘How can they ever be?’
‘That’s my question, too. I asked my professor. He said they can be.’
‘But how?’
‘The professor says it’s a short fiction by a famous American.’
‘Do they write fiction?’
‘Who?’
‘The Yanks. Thought they just made dollars.’
‘You’re a nerd, Sandip!’
‘In love with a doll!’
Priya smiles. ‘Nada!’
‘What the hell!’
‘What?’
‘This nada stuff.’
‘Oh.’
Sandip is not yet disengaged. ‘Why do you drive me crazy with this stuff?’
‘Which stuff?’ asks Priya, rolling her eyes.
‘This literary stuff! Heavy-duty!’
‘Because I’m doing an MA in English Lit, that’s why.’
‘But I’m not into this.’
‘So what?! Ain’t you my BF?’
‘That doesn’t give you any right to ply me with this boring stuff!’
Priya flutters her long eyelashes. ‘Don’t be a mean nerd.’
‘I’m not a nerd. Do you know about programming, Java?’
‘Nada.’
‘My gawd!’ Sandip sips his Coke, fiddling with his iPhone again. The doors swing open, letting in traffic sounds. The outlet is fast filling up with a teen crowd: torn jeans and tees, and mohawks and undercut styles. American accents prevail.
Priya says, ‘Why are you being so nasty?’
‘I’m not. But don’t hand me your nada-nada thing.’
‘Nada.’
Sandip shrugs, lost in another realm.

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‘Listen, lar. I love literature. What’s wrong with that?’
‘It’s for morons.’
‘Nada!’
‘Seems you’re not interested in me.’
‘Why?’
‘Because you don’t show any interest in my interests.’
‘Do you in mine?’
Priya ignores the sullen accusation. Then she stands up. ‘I’m leaving.’
Sandip is startled. ‘Why?’
‘Because you are…’
‘A nerd. OK. I am. Tell me. I am serious now. Ask me. I am focused, real-time.’
Undecided, Priya lingers.
‘Please! Honey!’
‘OK.’
She sits. They sip Coke and crunch chips.
‘Go ahead. Ask.’ Sandip sounds eager. ‘That thing about hills.’
‘I asked if hills can look like white elephants.’
Sandip scratches his thick top knot. ‘No idea.’
‘Well, this is a home assignment: write a piece on the story “Hills like white elephants”.’
‘Go ahead and write.’
‘But I can’t figure it out. I need your help.’
‘Show me.’
‘Look at the circled dialogue on the tab. Or better, I’ll read it out. It goes:

‘All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn’t that bright?’
‘That was bright.’
‘I wanted to try this new drink. That’s all we do, isn’t it – look at things and try new drinks?’
‘I guess so.’ The girl looked across at the hills.
‘They’re lovely hills,’ she said.
‘They don’t really look like white elephants. I just meant the colouring of their skin through the trees.’
‘Should we have another drink?’
‘All right.’

Tell me now.’
Sandip scratches his hair, a habit that annoys her, he knows, and grins. ‘What the hell!’
‘Is that all?’
‘Does it matter?’
‘Yeah, it does,’ Priya says bitterly. ‘You’re like her American companion in the story.’
Sandip grins. ‘If the hills look like elephants or not, what does it matter? It’s fiction.’
She stands up. ‘It doesn’t matter. To you or to her companion. I’m leaving, walking out on you, in fact.’ She takes her bag and leaves.
Sandip, hurt, looks around. Nobody is paying attention to this little drama. After a quick
bite, he too leaves. He mutters under his breath, ‘What the fuck! Just for a fictional character and an atrocious plot!’

Sunil Sharma is a senior academic based in Mumbai who has published three collections of poetry, a collection of short fiction and one novel, and has co-edited five books of poetry, short fiction and literary criticism. In 2012 he was the winner of the UK-based Destiny Poets’ inaugural Poet of the Year award, while in 2015 his poetry was published in the prestigious UN anthology Happiness: The Delight-Tree. He edits the English section of the monthly Setu, a bilingual journal from Pittsburgh.
Horizon

Vicky Tsaconas

We always left our things in the same place, opposite the grey house on the corner of Ormond Road, a street back from the kiosk that sold Four’n’Twenty pies in paper bags and sweaty Glad-wrapped sandwiches. Once I asked Dad why he always chose this spot. He said that it was the best place to swim because there was a clear path from shore to waist-deep. No rocks like there were further back.

He could work out whether the sea would be calm or choppy fifteen minutes before we reached it. It could be seen as soon as the bus reached the Alma Road hill. After he told me his secret, I put it into practice whenever we went to Elwood beach. A choppy sea was not something we looked forward to. I hate fighting the sea. We never turned around to go back. Just left earlier.

We always travelled by bus; we did not have a car until I was twenty. Our fellow passengers were my surrogate extended family. I felt sad when we all went our separate ways once we had arrived.

After our swim, Dad and I would climb onto the low rock wall protecting the foreshore. We did not lie on the sand until I was about fifteen and considered the wall daggy. I sunbaked on the wall. Dad just sat and watched. People, children, women probably. The sea. The horizon.

When the government started its campaign to educate people about the dangers of exposure to the sun, Dad did not go the beach as often as before. Not because of the campaign, but because his heart condition was worsening. He would sit bare-chested in our backyard. I would chastise him, tell him he would get skin cancer. He would laugh. Say the sun’s good for you.

Angela and Peter, my cousins, sometimes came with us. Their mother worked on weekends and their father did not like the beach. I admired Angela because she was older than me, slim and olive-skinned; she tanned easily and could dive between our legs. She stopped coming to the beach when she got a job at the Coles Variety Store in Bridge Road, Richmond. Peter stopped when he turned sixteen.

Dad, Angela, Peter and Dimitri, an older cousin who had just arrived from Greece and boarded with us, taught me to swim. I still went to swimming lessons at school, proud that I could float, do breast-stroke, free-style and back-stroke. I went to fewer classes in high school because I could not bear to be seen in my bathers. Sinus problems were my excuse. I watched the others from the stand at the Richmond pool – the same stand from which I watched the swimming carnivals I never entered. The stand I now look up at while I do laps.

On our way home from the beach, Dad would buy me an ice cream, usually an Eskimo Pie, but sometimes a Choc Wedge, from the huge old milk bar on the corner of Barkly Street and Glenhuntly Road. I had to eat it immediately, before we reached the bus stop, otherwise it would melt all over the clean dress I had changed into.

At home, I would pretend I was swimming in our concrete backyard and then in the bath tub. I would have a shower immediately, to wash off the suntan lotion and sand. Dad liked to have a shower later because he believed salt water was therapeutic and should be left on one’s skin for as long as possible. He never used suntan lotion. He tanned; I burned. Often.

On weekends we had dinner soon after we returned home. Mum would have made it while Dad and I were at the beach. She never came with us – she couldn't swim. We always seemed to

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have chicken and potato stew. Afterwards, Mum and Dad had coffee and talked about the day.

Dad told me about the salt sea baths in Σελιανιτικα, Selianitika, his village. People from all over Greece came to it. Σελιανιτικα is an intimate, pebble beach shaded by pine trees. Five-six steps and you are neck-deep. I often stumble on the rocks as I walk in. I have been warned about stepping on sea urchins. Hotels, apartments, tavernas and outdoor cinemas are so close you can walk barefoot between them and the beach. Σελιανιτικα is in the Bay of Korinth; in a couple of hours you can reach Ρουμελη, on the other side by fishing boat. Dimitri, my cousin who returned to Greece after ten years in Melbourne, did this often during his holidays. His mother was from Ρουμελη; sometimes he stayed there overnight, at his cousin's.

Elwood Beach was a bare sand beach with an old-fashioned kiosk at one end and a public toilet block at the other. The foreshore and houses were divided by a large area of vegetation and a busy four-lane road. You need to walk metres before the water reaches your waist. The sea-bed is sandy. Sometimes I fantasised about walking forever.

The first time I had an ice cream, seated, was in Σελιανιτικα. I had eaten gelati when I was at uni, usually with my friend Chrysoula, at the end of our last class, but always standing. The first afternoon my parents and I were in Σελιανιτικα, I had the ‘Afrikan’ (layers of pistachio, vanilla and chocolate ice cream covered with chopped nuts, and sour cherry sauce in a sundae glass) at the restaurant of the Hotel Αιγλη, two steps away from the water. It was the first time we had gone to a cafe together. I was twenty-two.

A year after Dad died, I went back to Σελιανιτικα. As I sat on a bench overlooking the sea, in September, when most tourists had gone, I remembered Elwood Beach.

Vicky Tsaconas is based in Melbourne and writes poetry, essays and critical reviews. Her poetry and prose have been published in the anthologies Southern Sun, Aegean Light and Mothers from the Edge, in Transnational Literature, Australian Poetry Journal, Azuria, Hobo Poetry Magazine, and Unusual Work. Her essays and reviews have been published in Australia and Greece and appear online.