

THIS AFTERNOON I WALKED TO MEET A FRIEND FOR A CUP OF TEA IN HIGH STREET

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For now my garden is a narrow rectangle of balcony. So narrow that I water and pluck the leaf-tips of potted herbs and grasses from the doorway. I inhale. There are various mints, including lemon balm; Australian native lemongrass, and the sharp-edged ‘culinary’ lemongrass for curries. All can be used to make tea.

Only this morning I noticed: over the years I’ve moved closer to the water, closer to the veins of inner Melbourne. When I first left the family home I moved north-west – north of the area marked Fairfield on a map of Melbourne suburbs, where the course of the Yarra River traces the shape of a lobed leaf. Later my parents, too, moved north-west, and our songlines could more easily converge. For special occasions we’d plan that they converge at a local restaurant.

Many a father bestows on his children a silence about his childhood. Many a child comes to believe that the silence is weighted with suffering – stories are slighted by a wish to forget. Perhaps for this reason I know just a single tale my father told from his earliest memories. It’s an image of contentment, set in the highlands of Sri Lanka, which was known as Ceylon when my father was born. His father, from Aberdeenshire in Scotland, managed a tea plantation in forested hills above the Kandy plateau.

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I can tell you this story because of a moment of alertness amid the ordinary flow of family talk. Suddenly I became the small furred animal that lowers itself into the dimness of the ground so as to listen and know. My father was remembering being a child in a large homestead kitchen... how he liked roaming through the lush rows of the vegetable garden.

Near the gate he had just seen a rat snake, *sara paambu*. Heard it hissing. The cook spoke to the boy in Tamil. Imagination hoists the warm, stocky body of my father at four years old onto a wooden work table. Knees stark, legs swinging, he sits facing the stove, being calmed. He inhales kind words that end in *kal*, *ga*, and *van* – they rise with scented steam as it mingles with the day’s thickening air. Soon, quite possibly, he feels more at ease than he will feel ever after.

The image is so distant. Suffused with sepia, like the waters of the Yarra River from the clay soils it has carried since European settlement. My father and his two older brothers arrived in Melbourne in September 1939. They made the journey straight after Britain and France declared war on Germany. Within a week they were enrolled at boarding school. The boarders’ dining room always smelled faintly sulfurous, from overcooked cabbage and brussels sprouts.

To mark my father’s eighty-first birthday I booked a table at Sigiri Sri Lankan Restaurant and Takeaway in High Street Northcote. Lalith and Rupathala were so welcoming. My father said little. He ate well. Then, still holding the paper napkin, he leant back from the table, and praised the hoppers, *appam* – the curved

rice-flour pancakes we’d been served warm from Rupathala’s kitchen. The edge of a hopper should be very thin and crisp, like a wafer, Dad declared; the middle, spongy, like a crumpet. The batter should pour... like single cream.

Despite the din and brightness of the restaurant, the small furred animal was roused. The image of my father by the fragrant homestead stove pulsed in vivid colour through my throat, in and out of my lungs. Of course he knew hoppers as a breakfast staple – how many times had he watched the batter being swirled in its oiled pan? As we left the restaurant, Lalith urged us, please, come for the Saturday night banquet, fresh hoppers with all you can eat!

During the last months of his life, my father became inexplicably thin, and ate more and more simply. Yet his taste for onions, pickle, and coriander persisted, as well as any acid, spicy, salty condiments featuring red chilli, *milagai*. Even supermarket products labelled ‘Hot Sauce’ seemed to evoke the pleasures of sambals that he knew from childhood.

Only since his death did I think of trying to discover the hills that cradled the plantation homestead. And wonder about the river closest to my father’s birthplace. Traced on a road map, Kandy has the outline of an upside-down heart. It’s contoured by the eastern turn of the Mahaweli Ganga, the ‘Great Sandy River’. Most highland streams flow into the Mahaweli.

This afternoon I walked to meet a friend for a cup of tea in High Street. There are hundreds of ways to let the dead follow you home.