

know that I wasn't frightened and I didn't have a bad mind for her. I didn't want her to think I was like everybody else."

"You really aren't, you know," I said.

Encouraged, he carried on. "I felt as though she and I had things in common. She had secrets and I had secrets. Somehow I wanted to go there and take all my clothes off and say, 'Look! See? See all this? *I am different!* You can trust me, and I am showing you that you are the one person I will trust. And I am one person, for sure, for sure, that you can trust. I will be your friend.' "

"Otoh, that is exactly how I feel about her. I am certain—I can't express how certain I am—that she holds no grudge against you."

"I never cared what anybody else thought or said about me, but somehow I cared so much about what Mala Ramchandin thought. I needed her to know that it was my father, Ambrose Mohanty, who was sending food for her. And that I was his son, Otoh Mohanty. You know what I mean, Tyler?"

"I feel protective toward her too—"

"Deep in my heart, Tyler," he interrupted me, whispering as though he were saying something heretical, "is he, is Pappy, I hold responsible for all the rumours spread about her. I blame him for her barred-up house." I raised my eyebrows. "Yes, blame. I don't know why exactly but is he I blame."

I thought of Mr. Mohanty, dressed up especially to see Miss Ramchandin in his coattails and top hat, and of the gleam in his eyes when he sat next to her on the garden bench in the evening. I could not imagine him spreading rumours about her.

"Instead of sleeping he could have done something to prevent children from harassing her and tying from her fruit trees. I blame him for them pelting her and her house. For all the jokes and horror stories. I still didn't know what his real connection to her was, yet if anybody could have helped her it was he. That is why I wanted to come face to face with her. I wanted to go up there, to meet her and apologize for him and say that even though he was my father I wasn't a coward like him and that I would take care of her."

I thought of Otoh walking beside his father, lovingly clutching the old man's arm as they approached Miss Ramchandin. I was filled with a new admiration for Otoh. I thought him daring to want to search inside the cavernous areas of his soul and to speak out loud his feelings toward his father. I do not believe he feigned affection for his father: his love was deep and genuine, and perhaps that is why he was so tormented.

Then I thought of Asha.

"Do you know anything about her sister?" I asked.

"She had a sister? I never knew that." Otoh was oddly unmoved by the news.

"Asha. Her name was Asha. She left home in her teens. Your Pappy would know her. Do something for me, Otoh, please. Could you ask him about her. About Asha Ramchandin? Whatever happened to her, please?"

He squeezed my hand, nodded and then returned to his preoccupation.

"It's as if I wanted to redeem my father's name, to rescue her and be the Romeo he never was. It's a funny thing, yes, but I was never so protective to my own mammy."

It was the most he had ever spoken on the subject. The fear of discovering his anger toward his father made his body shake.

In spite of what Otoh thought of his father, I myself was partial to him. The old man was delightfully indiscreet.

"Mr. Tyler appears to be painting his face more diligently as time goes by," I heard him whisper—albeit loudly—to Otoh. "My boy, I think Mr. Tyler fancies you, wouldn't you agree?"

Then he whispered much more softly, "He is a Mr., isn't he?"

Mala Ramchandin, as usual, did not talk in public. She made gurgling sounds. It was unclear to the Mohanty gentlemen whether she really knew or cared that they visited. When I assured them that on days they did not visit Miss Mala was noticeably irritable, the lovely old gentleman winked slyly at his son. "I would wager

that it is not Mala who gets irritable when we don't visit!" he declared. I blushed even as I pretended not to hear. I could sense that Otoh was delighted, even though he feigned irritation and said, "Shhh, Pappy! Shhh!"

"Why should I shhh? I am an expert in the field of passivity," chuckled Mr. Mohanty.

Another time while sitting on the bench next to Miss Ramchandin, he squinted at Otoh and me and said amicably, as though talking about nothing more than fishing, "I know what I am saying: Don't let a good one get away, is what I say."

How can I possibly condemn him for the sluggishness of character that has so saddened his son?



MALA SAW SOMETHING crawling on her verandah. She had never seen such a thing before. She got down on her hands and knees and crawled alongside the iridescent, winged and multi-legged creature.

In the phase just before Mala stopped using words, lexically shaped thoughts would sprawl across her mind, fractured here and there. The cracks would be filled with images. Soon the inverse happened. A sentence would be constructed primarily of images punctuated by only one or two verbalizations: a noun tentatively uttered in recognition, a descriptive word confirming a feeling or observation. A flock of seagulls squawking overhead might elicit a single word, *pretty*. That verbalization, she came to understand, was not the feeling itself but a name given to the feeling: *pretty*, an unnecessary translation of the delight she experienced seeing the soaring birds. Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words. The wings of a gull flapping through the air titillated her soul and awakened her toes and knobby knees, the palms of her withered hands,

deep inside her womb, her vagina, lungs, stomach and heart. Every muscle of her body swelled, tingled, cringed or went numb in response to her surroundings—every fibre was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance. Mala responded to those receptors, flowing with them effortlessly, like water making its way along a path.

Many of her sounds were natural expansions and contractions of her body. She grunted when lifting something heavy. She dredged and expelled phlegm. She sighed melodiously. Cried and belched unabashedly. She coughed and sneezed and spat and wiped away mucus with no care for social graces. She laughed, sometimes as quietly as a battimamselle flapping its wing tips against water in an old drum, or as raucously as a parrot imitating her imitating it. She farted at will, for there was no one around to contradict her.

There was a time when Mala would hum two-note and three-note melodies. The number of notes soon decreased and she settled into a monotone whose pitch varied, harmonizing with whichever insects' shrills prevailed on a particular day. She started cooing, rasping, gargling—the sounds made by the pigeons on her roof.

She did not ascribe activities to specific times. When dozing pawed at her, she responded regardless of the time of day or night, curling up in the yard or on the verandah. If she awakened in the height of the night's darkness, she did not force herself back to sleep but arose as though it were daytime. She fed herself when she needed to, voided when and where the impulse knocked. She manoeuvred her half-acre world intuitively, withdrawing, smiling, laughing, fighting, crying, sulking.

Mala's companions were the garden's birds, insects, snails and reptiles. She and they and the abundant foliage gossiped among themselves. She listened intently. With an ear pressed to the ground she heard ant communities building, transporting food and breeding. She listened to worms coiling arduously from place to place. She knelt on the ground and whispered to the grass and other young

plants, encouraging them to grow, and then she listened as they stretched up to her. She did not intervene in nature's business. When it came time for one creature to succumb to another, she retreated. Flora and fauna left her to her own devices and in return she left them to theirs.

At first Aves, Hexapoda, Gastropoda and Reptilia burrowed instinctively into nooks and crevices. They realized eventually that they had no cause to hide. Mala permitted them to roam boldly and to multiply at leisure throughout her property. She provided them one service. Every season she rummaged through the yard for carcasses of those fallen prey to natural causes and, with ritual grace, she facilitated an honourable disposal.

She noted the position of the sun. When it reached a particular spot on the horizon she would finish her collecting for the season. Before that day, she routinely descended the back stairs with a bucket in one hand. One morning she came upon a shiny honey-brown beetle. Her heart soared and she reached into the pocket of her flower-print dress for the item she had once called *tweezers*. Before she made it to the foot of the stairs she had plucked carcasses of a bachac, a spinner ant, two red ants and a black-red cockroach as long as her thumb. She placed them gingerly in the bucket. By the time she had picked every visible corpse off her property, the heap included ants, beetles and cockroaches, different kinds of spiders, some bees, flies, a wasp, two fetid lizard skins and the brittle remains of their skeletons, six butterflies, a stick insect the length of her forearm, two dragonflies, a handful of crickets and other creatures that in the world of naming remain untitled. The collection measured a full hand deep. She paid no attention to the odour rising out of the bucket. The scent of decay was not offensive to her. It was the aroma of life refusing to end. It was the aroma of transformation. Such odour was proof that nothing truly ended, and she revelled in it as much as she did the fragrance of cereus blossoms along the back wall of the house.

Separating the kitchen from the rest of the house was a partition

she had built of furniture piled several feet thick. The network of armchairs, rockers, side tables, dining table and high-back chairs was locked together by the ramming and jamming of protruding limbs into each other and age-old cobweb threads. The whole thing smelled of time and dirt. The individual shapes of the furniture were all but obliterated by the density of dust. The wall was so precariously balanced that no one but Mala could have detected the precisely obscured entrance.

She lifted away an old web and tugged at the legs of a straight-back chair. She slid that out first and then a hat rack. Next came a tall, ebony pedestal that she jiggled and pulled to unlink its long legs from the filigreed brass panel on a side table. Finally, she shoved a caned footstool forward, excavating a narrow passageway to the other side. She tucked her bucket against her body. Only one as nimble as Mala could have shimmied through such an opening without bringing the whole arrangement down.

On the other side of the furniture blockade was a spacious room that had once served as drawing room and dining room. The space was now empty. All that remained was a cut-glass chandelier. Disturbing not a speck of dust more than necessary, Mala stepped into old footprints that she had previously left in the carpet and headed to a bolted doorway.

Holding the bucket in one hand, she used the other to unpin an iron key from the hem of her petticoat. She struggled briefly with the old lock and then the lopsided door scraped open. Mala reached into the darkness behind the door for a hurricane lantern. With the unlit lantern she descended the darkened stairway.

At the foot of the stairs was another door. She hung the lantern on the doorknob, reached up and extracted a key from a dusty wooden ledge. She unlocked and opened the door. Mala greeted the stink of decomposition in the room with aristocratic grace, her head and the unlit lantern held high. She set the lantern down on a table.

She was delighted with her timing. Termites had gnawed at a board barring the window and sunlight beamed through, throwing a bril-

liant gash on the opposite wall and illuminating the insects that were pinned there. Mala walked along the wall, negotiating webs and nests, pinning her new cache to the remaining spaces. The insects that had fallen crunched beneath her bare feet. They were fodder for a vibrating carpet of moths, centipedes, millipedes, cockroaches and unnamed insects that found refuge in Mala's surroundings. Death feeding life.

The tenor of the vibration shifted as she passed. Those with wings fluttered. Those with legs crawled. Those on their bellies slithered a pace or two away. Mala finished her task just as the light was sucked back out through the chink in the board. She picked up the lantern and bucket and retraced her steps, taking special care to lock both doors behind her.

In the former drawing room she planted her feet carefully in the dusty footsteps and walked, backwards, to the hole in the furniture wall.

She enjoyed the smell of rotting, water-logged wood. It had been at least a decade since the eaves trough came away from the roof over the back stairs. Rain now cascaded onto the stairs and the top steps were coated in a dangerous green and black slime, especially thick in each depression at the centre. Holding the slippery banister with one hand, Mala pulled her skirt up and spread her feet to avoid the slimiest areas. At the bottom of the stairs, standing on a concrete slab that had risen out of the washed-away dirt, she scooped rainwater out of a barrel and splashed her feet clean. Before her was the wall of climbing cereus, foliage scaly with age and striped with the mucous trails of buff-periwinkles. The succulents, half a dozen plants in all, had ragged over the side of the house, further concealing the boarded-up window of the room downstairs. Scattered over the network of spiny, three-sided stems and fleshy leaves were countless buds, each larger than her fist. The sight of the buds made her giddy. She so looked forward to the night of their opening that she decided not to sit idly and wait but to enjoy every moment until then.

Upstairs on the back porch, sitting low on a peerah, she completed her preparation. On a slab of stone she ground a handful of peppers. The large, concave rock turned brilliant red. The lining of her nostrils became raw and singed and she squinted her eyes against tears. Mala scraped the slab clean with a flat stick and pushed the pepper sludge into a glass jar. She continued grinding handfuls of peppers, throwing her head back as the burning increased, her eyes mostly closed now. The jar was soon two-thirds full. Sweat ran down her face. She cleaned the stick on the banister, leaving a coating of seeds and red flesh behind for the pigeons.

On the stone slab she chopped limes into eighths. She topped the jar with the fruit and juice, and then held it up, tightly covered, to the blue light of the sky. Mala exulted in the medley of colours she had composed. She placed the jar at one end of the porch in a bleached area that received sun most of the day. There the jar would sit, for weeks, until it was well fermented.

It stopped raining long before the sun came up that morning. The dripping continued off the leaves, off the stairs, off the roof. Run-off in the back drain, frightening at times, sounded as though it would rise and spill into the yard. And rising from the soggy earth was a brown, ammoniac smell.

During the dry season, the hour of ten o'clock in the morning came and went without her taking notice. But in the rainy season that same hour was unbearable. The elements seemed to pull together in perfect imitation of another moment, long ago, just after a heavy rainfall.

It was the light. It was the blueness of the sky. It was the colour in the trees and shrubs in the yard. The dankness of the house. Everything so opaquely saturated with moisture that the sun couldn't shine strongly enough to soak it up. The time of day would come upon her and deafen her with the noise of insects screaming, *Pohpoh, Pohpoh, I want Pohpoh*. Insects spawning in pools of water, their drones shouting, *Sarah!* The suffocating pervasiveness of stagnant water.

At ten o'clock in the morning Mala knew the sun would catch on a jagged edge of the back porch roof where the iron was torn. The spot would dazzle white like a blinding star. A beam of silver light would pierce the hole in the roof, targeting the porch floor.

Time would collapse. Every inhaled breath was a panicked tremble sustained and each exhale a heavy sob. In anguish Mala would clutch her blouse, petticoat, handkerchief into a ball in front of her breast, her harried breathing punctuated with fits and spasms. Her skin and bones, especially her upper arms and the back of her neck, would become chilled, unable to dry out or warm up.

One such morning, a good hour before ten o'clock, she began strategizing against it. She armed herself with a bottle of bird-pepper sauce and a spoon, and lay down on the bare floor of the porch. The sun had begun its ascent to its highest point. All around her the quality of light signalled the approaching collision of sun and roof. Lying on the floor, looking up at the crack in the roof, she breathed slowly. For a while, staring up at the slit, all she saw was sky in various shades of hypnotic blue. Gradually the slit darkened. The edges turned harsh silver. Mala sat up. Her heart began to gallop, the beat crescendoing in her temples.

She opened the bottle. She raised it toward her nostrils and tentatively sniffed the flaming red sauce. The pungency, cultivated by the sunshine on the porch, startled her. She tried to stay calm but her pounding heart made her breathless. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply from the bottle, feeling the flames leap out at her upper lip and lap into her nose. She opened her eyes just in time to see the jagged piece of galvanized iron ignite like a brilliant sparkler. The cacophony in her head resounded. Insects shrieked. *Mammy. Asha. Pohpoh. Larinia.* The rumbling of a buggy.

A shaft of harsh light poured through the gash in the roof. Crickets began to screech, the running water grew torrentially loud. Mala shook her head. A wave of nausea washed over her. She raised the bottle to her face, shoved the open rim against her face, her nose deep inside, a wet, red ring imprinting across her nose,

cheeks and lips. Her tear-filled eyes fluttered but she fought the exhaustion. Her sinuses released a flood against the fire trying to break through.

The shaft of light had grown so strong it blinded her. Her body suddenly, fitfully fastened itself to the ground. Her arms and back became cold. With effort she lifted herself off the ground, pulled in her chest and thrust her shoulders forward. She cried out the only words she had spoken in ages. "Oh God. I beg you. Please. Doh leave me, I beg you, oh God, oh God, doh leave me, I beggin you. Take me with you." The pigeons on the roof hopped around frantically.

Mala looked down at the cerise blossoms of the pomerac tree and braced herself. She thrust her finger into the bottle, scooped out a heavy clump of raw pepper and shoved the finger into her mouth. She scooped up more and then more, wiping her finger on the sensitive tip of her tongue, and then again, scooping more, shovelling it into her mouth. The skin underneath her fingernail tingled. She didn't swallow, keeping the fire on her tongue, by then so blistered that parts of the top layer had already disintegrated and other areas had curled back like rose petals dipped in acid. She pressed her tongue against the roof of her mouth, dispersing the slush to the tender pink flesh on the sides and under her tongue. The roof of her mouth bubbled. Pepper mush oozed out past her clenched gums and spilled into the sides of her cheeks. She gasped for air. A torrent of sweat washed her continuously, her body trying desperately to cool itself.

An eruption of pain spread into her ears. A thousand bells clanged. Then all sound stopped. She squeezed her eyes tight and stomped her feet. She couldn't feel her legs or the ground beneath her feet yet she pounded the floor and beat the wall. She heaved, trying to find cooling air but the air entering her mouth sent her lacerated flesh into further agony. A tide of peppery saliva cascaded over her lips. She ran to the balcony and spat, salivating and expelling sauce and pepper flesh and seeds. She waved her

grotesquely enlarged tongue in the air but this brought little relief. Exhausted and dizzy from breathing so rapidly she collapsed on the balcony floor. Glancing up, she noticed the light had changed. There was no trace of the silver beam.

The cerise blossoms of pomerac swayed in the breeze. She shut her eyes and listened. The pigeons had calmed down, their feet scratching faintly against the galvanized iron. Mala's mouth remained open, her lower jaw dropped partly in exhaustion, partly to release heat and let air in. Her flesh had come undone. But every tingling blister and eruption in her mouth and lips was a welcome sign that she had survived.

She was alive.



IT WAS ONE of the brightest moonlit nights Mala had ever witnessed. Every evening for the past week she had descended to the cereus patch and checked the state of the buds. Their time had arrived, and the long-awaited event coincided, as she interpreted it, with another blooming, that of the moon. As night fell she dragged her rocking chair down the back stairs and into the yard under the fringes of the giant mudra tree. She sat upright like a concert director in front of the wall. As the night unwound she witnessed the slow dance of huge, white cereus buds—she counted sixty-two—trembling as they unfolded against the wall, a choreography of petal and sepal opening together, sending dizzying scent high and wide into the air. The moonlight reflected off the blossoms' pure whiteness and cast a glow over the yard. Mala basked.

In Lantanacamara when the moon blossoms, so, traditionally, does love. The monthly occasion is anticipated and prepared for even

now, and no one, including the older people who tend to stay indoors, wants to be caught without a companion for the evening.

In the week prior to this event Otoh had been visited in his downstairs room in Government Alley by at least one young woman a day inviting him to the moonlight stroll in the lovers' garden. He turned all offers down because he had a mission of his own. As the days passed, however, he worried his suitors would see him outside that evening and take offence that they were not good enough. After tortuous deliberations he decided to accept the first suitor's invitation.

He was so preoccupied by Mala that he had forgotten his suitor's name and had to check his diary. It had always been this way for Otoh. Unlike the other men in the village, and much to their envy, he had long been the object of desire of almost every Lantanacamara woman, regardless of her age. (It is also noteworthy that a number of men were shocked and annoyed by their own naggingly lascivious thoughts of him.)

Mala heard the footsteps of people ambling down the road. She knew that when the footsteps slowed it was because someone was sniffing the heady perfume. It was a change from the odour of age, filth and rot that normally permeated her yard.

On this cool bright night Otoh strolled arm in arm with the elegant Mavis. At the front of Mala's house, mesmerized by the smell, his companion, thankfully, was curious. The pair stopped to see what it was that so perfumed the entire neighbourhood. The air was full of bats swooping and swishing, diving and darting. Otoh and Mavis ducked to avoid the ugly creatures. He was still shaken from the scare on the night when he tried to enter Mala's yard but in the company of another he found the courage to approach the fence.

He tiptoed close to the wire, bent down and looked for a crack in the foliage. Peering intently into the bushes he momentarily forgot his companion. He was convinced that Mala would show

herself to him again. Mavis disturbed his concentration with a polite tug on his arm.

"Come, Otoh, boy. Look how many people going up to the park. If we don't hurry we won't find a nice place to sit and enjoy the evening, you know. Come, na?"

"Right," said Otoh limply.

A scented breeze came gushing through the bushes and whipped itself around Otoh, nabbing him like a lasso. Taken aback, he closed his eyes and breathed in slowly and deeply. He took Mavis' arm and pulled her to a stop.

"Mavis, the park will be full by now. Look, I know another place, a better place. Come with me."

"What you mean another place? Is moonlight night. El Dorado Park is the place to go."

"Smell the air, Mavis. That park never smells so good. You don't want to see what flower could make such a scent? This could be our moonlight adventure . . ."

"But Germaine and Pauline and Radha and everybody else going to the love garden in El Dorado Park . . ."

"If we go to the back of this yard we would get a good view of the blossoms and be able to smell them better. Come tomorrow, you could tell them about our unusual adventure. I know how to get up into the yard. Come with me, na."

"Otoh Mohanty, you are adventure enough, yes boy!" said Mavis, shoving her arm under his. "It smelling good, is true, but I don't too much consider *that* yard to be romantic. Is moonlight night, boy! You really adventurous, yes, but come let me teach you about romantic."

She whispered the word, drawing it out reverently. She gripped him close to her and ushered him onward. Mavis, given to babbling and convinced that Otoh knew Mala's yard through involvements similar to her own, began to babble.

"Otoh boy, you know what we used to do when we was children? You remember Jason and Jacob? They married now, you

know. Well, the three of we and some other children used to climb this fence and go and tie whatever was in season and come back out, suck the meat of the seed dry-dry and then the fellas them used to pelt the house with the seed to try to get the old lady—"

"Mala. You mean Mala."

"Yes, she self, to try and get she to show she self. I remember them even using stone to pelt at the house, yes. Ey. But when I think about it now, them boys was bad, yes. But they grow up good and the two of them married as I say just now. Mammy hoping I would marry soon too, you know."

Otoh did not respond. "You know, now I remember," she continued. "Sometimes when the fellas and Jason and Jacob used stones, windows did break, yes."

Noticing his unresponsiveness, Mavis became pensive. She hadn't thought of these childhood escapades in years, and hardly anyone in the neighbourhood, she realized, made mention of Mala any more.

Otoh was amazed at how stealthily, like an insidious, long drizzle, his sadness had turned to drenching anger. Forever a gentleman, he checked his reaction and managed, with only a margin of hesitation, to pull her closer, a gesture intended to comfort him more than her. Why had he never engaged in such callousness when he was a child? he wondered. Out loud he assured her that such actions were the natural stuff of childhood. Assuming that his voice had deepened in anticipation of their arrival at the lovers' garden, Mavis pressed her cheek against his chest and smelled his gentle body odour, highly unusual and so very welcoming from a man. Otoh released her and leaned toward the misshapen fence. He wanted so dearly to see Mala that he believed that any second now he would catch a glimpse.

His companion, now impatient, tried again to coax him up the hill with a little teasing. Otoh reluctantly followed. On the way to the garden he was untalkative. And Mavis, sensing the evening might come to an abrupt end, held her tongue. Otoh let go of her hand and clasped his behind his back.

Behind them pairs of lovers strolled by on their way to the garden. Inspired by the dizzying scent of cereus they were compelled to stop in front of Mala's house to caress and steal probing kisses.



Close to midnight the buds had opened fully. They intensified their scent, steadily pumping it into the air, an urgent call to insects and bats to find and pollinate the flowers. One by one the moths came. They slid from cracks in the walls of Mala's house. They bored through and wriggled out from every moth-ridden enclave in the neighbourhood. They unbound themselves from sticky webs nestled in dents of rocks and from cocoons that dangled from leaves. They migrated in swarms from the lime tree in her yard to the wall of expectant cereus. The arrival of thousands of moths, already drunk from the smell alone, held Mala spellbound. The sound of a thousand pairs of flapping wings drowned out the screaming crickets and created a draft. Mala rubbed her arms for warmth. Crazed bats swooped by, crisscrossing each other's flight en route to suckle the blossoms. They disturbed the swarms of frantic moths. They brushed their hairy bodies against the blossoms to sample the syrupy, perfumed juices. Then, thirst and curiosity satisfied, they darted off. By two o'clock in the morning, every moth was thirstily lapping sweet nectar, bruising and yellowing its body against the large stamens that waved from the flowers.

The smell in Mala's yard drenched the air and flowed across town. Neighbours in deep sleep stirred, suddenly restless. Some were pried wide awake but were soon pleasantly besotted by the perfume and swept back into deep sleep.

The moon lifted higher. Mala herself felt intoxicated and finally, deliriously tired. She must have dozed off because suddenly there was only a handful of moths tilting heavily and precariously in flight. She hadn't noticed the swarm leaving. She slumped in her chair. The scent was indeed more pleasant than the stink that usually rose from behind the wall.

FROM THE MOMENT his companion admitted she had tormented Mala, Otoh found himself awkwardly distanced from her. Not wanting to upset her, he allowed her to return to his bedroom in Government Alley. Mavis immediately lay on the bed. She might as well have been alone, though, because he seemed oblivious to her. Throughout the night she cooed at him. She tried tossing and turning with much drama, hoping he would hold her to calm her. It was futile. When he did not respond she became more direct. Mavis reached for him, caressing his belly, chest and shoulders, and, through his shirt, his nipples. They hardened and she coaxed off his shirt. When she began to work on the belt of his trousers, he became aware of her in his bed again, and he rolled over and feigned deathly exhaustion. She sulked long and loud and then, resigned, dozed off. When he heard her steady breathing, Otoh turned over and lay on his back wide awake.

He was still full of the night's perfume. What was it about Mala, he wanted to know, that his father so utterly adored? Had she rejected his father and if so, why? He suddenly wondered if Mala would reject him if they were to meet. Perhaps he might be able to hold her attention in a way his father had been unable to. It was still dark. Above him in the kitchen his mother, fully awake, paced with a studied shuffle that by now had become an integral sound in his family's house. Cocks in the distance were just beginning their hesitant pre-dawn crowing. Otoh drifted in and out of sleep.

Mala faced her wall of faded cereus blossoms. She was content. Oblivious to the dew that drizzled from the mudra, she rocked and dozed lightly. Scent, as though too shy for light, no longer trickled from the blossoms but Mala was not yet ready to leave the yard.

Her eyes would flicker open and catch a glimpse of the day that was beginning to split the black sky apart. In that first orange light the flowers hung limp, battered and bruised, each one worn out from the frenzied carnival of moths.

Mala refused to sleep.

Otoh awakened to a stillness in his sun-heated room. His companion was no longer with him. In the unanchored moments between sleeping and awakening, ideas came with unshakable conviction. One such idea was an image of how his father might have appeared as a dapper, young man on his way to court his lady.

Several years earlier Otoh's mother had packed up two boxes of clothing and other miscellany, including a damaged gramophone and some recording disks—things that a man who was awake for only one day a month would hardly require. She was reluctant to do away with the boxes. This would have been akin to giving up hope that her husband would resume a day-to-day existence, so she stored them for safe-keeping in Otoh's room.

Otoh had the gramophone repaired and for a while he played the recordings constantly. Since then he had paid only scant attention to the dust-covered boxes, the tops of which were resting places for his shoes.

He got up now and opened the boxes, pulling out a few items of clothing, the gramophone and records.

Otoh A. Mohanty dressed himself in front of the mirror on the door of his armoire. There was no question in his mind this morning that he would not be wearing one of his mother's dresses to make the monthly delivery. He dressed instead in the heavy, black, pleated dress pants of his father. They fit him as though they had been custom tailored. He angled himself in front of the mirror and, with both hands in the pockets of the slacks, widened his stance, rhythmically rocking back and forth. He looked at his slender three-quarter profile, tilted his head downward, squinted and thrust his jaw forward to give a sculpted line to his soft face. He

puffed his chest and lowered his shoulders to turn his torso into plates of muscle. He ran his palms across his two tight, little nipples. He held the nipples between his fingers, squeezed and rubbed them until they puckered into little squares, trying to imagine what Mavis might have felt when she lay next to him and touched his shirtless body. He was grateful for such small breasts. As long as his tightly belted trousers were never removed he had nothing to worry about.

He pulled on a dress shirt made of fine Irish linen. From years of storage the shirt was no longer white but unevenly cream-coloured. Fastening the long row of pearly buttons he wondered on what occasion his father might have worn such a shirt. Buttoned all the way up to his neck it hugged his body and showed off his leanness. He took a red, white and black-striped silk tie and knotted it loosely around his neck. Next, a black jacket and fedora. He posed. In all this black he might have passed for a pallbearer if it weren't for his colourful necktie and elegant posture. In his father's get-up, Otoh looked more like a dancer.

Closing his eyes and tucking in his lips Otoh shook a few drops of sweet-lime 3333 after-shave cologne from its bottle. Having nothing on his face to shave, he used the cologne entirely for its smell. The toiletry reminded him of the compelling perfume of blossoms that had filled the air around Mala's yard the previous night. This morning he would find out what flower turned the air so sweet and take a clipping of that plant, even if it meant entering her yard.

Anxious to meet the woman who controlled the lives of both his parents, he forgot to match his footwear to his clothing. Otoh still wore his red rubber thongs, which exposed the pink edges of his soles.





LONG INTO THE morning Mala remained in the yard. The sun had warmed her arms and legs, chilled through the night. Every so often a breeze nudged her rocking chair. She kept her eyes closed. Fortified by the night's display she wove memories. She remembered a little and imagined a great deal . . .

Pohpoh's shivering was not a response to the cool night air. No blanket of any thickness could have warmed or calmed her. Any weight, even that of a thin sheet on her body, would have stifled her. She stared wide eyed in the direction of the pomerac branches swaying in the night wind outside the window at the foot of her bed. She had to fight the temptation to indulge in yearning—yearning to have her mother back next to her, to feel her mother hugging her against her breasts with one hand resting on wet cheeks, absorbing Pohpoh's tears. But if she did not stay strong, if she succumbed to her longings, she would not be able to look after Asha. It had become Pohpoh's mission from the first day her father put his mouth on her little body to prevent Asha from experiencing the pain of his touch. For the most part she had succeeded. Her stone-blank eyes concentrated on the blackness of the night outside her window.

Mala wished that she could go back in time and be a friend to this Pohpoh. She would storm into the house and, with one flick of her wrist, banish the father into a pit of pain and suffering from which there would be no escape. With piercing eyes she would pull the walls of that house down, down, down, and she would gather the two children to her breast and hug them tightly, rock and quiet them, and kiss their faces until they giggled wildly.

Except for a silver-edged harshness there was not the slightest suggestion of emotion on Pohpoh's face. In the corners of her eyes, however, a saline spring slowly welled up and bubbled out. The tears fell in spite of her stoniness.

She lay still, waiting for anything that might be a cue. It arrived after some moments of prickly silence. The pomerac tree swayed and rocked in the wind, washing like the ocean across her body, a roar so encompassing it seemed to absorb every other sound. Commanded by the tree's creaking in the wind she mechanically rose from her bed. Her body had so stiffened she had to make a conscious effort to loosen it with long, slow breaths.

On relaxing she was overcome by the rage that seeped into her veins. At times like these she felt inflamed to the point of wanting to tear and scream into her father's room, of screeching so piercingly that she disabled him, of punching him in his stomach over and over until he cried like a baby, admitted how loathesome he had been and begged hers and Asha's forgiveness. But at such times her rage was usually muffled by a sudden injection of good sense. The success of an adventure like the one she was embarking upon depended on the control of all her faculties. Anger, hatred and even fear could very easily trip her up. Pohpoh worked on finding that perfect balance between being rigidly alert and dangerously relaxed.

She covered herself with her darkest clothing, olive-green trousers and a dark brown vest. She glanced over at Asha, who slept on her back with her arms stiffly at her sides. She looked like a corpse. Mala listened and heard her father's snoring. Asha was safe. She pocketed her silver stopwatch and after a farewell glance back at Asha, exited barefoot through the window as effortlessly as a moth.





"WHAT IS IT about you today that seems so familiar, my son?"

"What exactly you mean, Pappy? As far as Mammy is concerned, I am your son. And unless your memory is on its way out, you are right, we have seen each other before."

Ambrose E. Mohanty chuckled. "No, no, no! One might call you impertinent but charming is more apt a description I am sure. I mean that you seem to be a reincarnation of a past familiarity."

Elsie Mohanty shook her head and snapped, "For the love of Jesus Christ in heaven, speak plain words, na, man!" She too was taken aback by her son's choice of attire on this once-a-month morning but she sensed that, as usual, she should probably not ask too many questions in case she received answers she didn't want. "Look here! Even with red 'kerchief tie up round his neck he look like he going to funeral," she muttered.

Ototh rested a sack of rice, a bottle of coconut oil and two bottles of sweet drink by the door. Wheeling his father out to the porch he had a sensation of being both mother and father to his own pappy. He patted Ambrose's head affectionately, rubbed his cheek and ran a hand under his chin. He almost wanted to say out loud the thought that played in his head like a mantra: "I'll win her back for you, Pappy. You just have to know how to do it." But he stopped himself because deeper than this thought was one less benevolent that said, "How could you not have looked after her?"

Before Ototh turned to go his father whispered, "I remember now, son. You are indeed a reincarnation but not of a person per se, merely of a forgotten memory. You are a perfect replica of me in my prime. I have never seen you look so stunningly like myself before." Then he pulled Ototh close and lowered his voice further. "If I am not mistaken, you are wearing my clothing."

Ototh began to apologize.

"Shhh. I am only too pleased," Ambrose interrupted, "for by appearing in front of me like this you have given me the gift of remembering. I am sure I cannot thank you enough. You are wearing the very same clothing I wore whenever I visited my dearest Mala. We used to dance together. She and I. Did I ever tell you? I used to be a very good dancer, you know. Are you a dancer, son? My clothing looks very good on you, but I must say you are so much younger looking and rather more tender than I was in those days."

Ototh blushed.

"If fortune sees fit to grant you the pleasure of an audience with her," Ambrose continued, "may I impose upon you, my treasured son, the honour of conveying to her wishes for an incomparably good day from one Mr. Ambrose Mohanty, also known to her as Boyie?"

Ototh smiled. His father said the same thing every month.

"Mr. Ambrose Mohanty, also known to her as Boyie."

Ototh nodded and smiled again. His father reached up and touched his face, rubbing it more intently than his usual perfunctory father-to-son pat. "Son, perhaps if you were to use a razor on your face, you might encourage the growth of some hair. It is unusual, and not very nice I might add, for a grown man to have such soft and smooth skin." After a heavy pause, he whispered, "Have you a Mala of your own?" Without waiting for an answer he continued. "She was quite a dancer too, you know, and she dressed so beautifully, always in the same simple dress, but, oh, so beautifully. We used to dance together." His voice trailed off.

Ototh squeezed his shoulders, remaining quietly with him for a while longer and then left. On his way out his mother shoved a biscuit tin full of coconut drops against his stomach. She had baked them yesterday along with other savory and sweet dishes in preparation for her husband's awakening.

"Your father think I don't know. I hear how he used to dress up and go and visit she when he was young. And that he and she used to be dancing up, dancing wild-wild in the house up there. I even hear he and she used to go to a dance club in town. He ever take

me anywhere? How many years now we married and I ent leave the house? That woman loose too bad, yes! I should be so wild and loose! If I had wild blood in me and I was loose, he wouldn't now be sleeping-sleeping so.

"And you self! Listen to me, Otoh, it is morning. It don't have no dance happening this morning. What you dress up so for? You go and make death restless dress like that today, and it will be on your head for you to deal with, you hear!"

Otoh made his way down the stairs quickly. Before heading out he stopped in his room to pick up the portable gramophone and one of the recording disks.



HER ROUTE HAD been calculated long before Pohpoh jumped out the window, an effortless leap to the moist grass below. She had never yet hurt herself, perhaps because on such nights she tended not to feel much of anything.

With catlike sure-footedness she made her way to the edge of the garden. A small wind rustled the neighbourhood's shrubs and trees, masking her sounds. She parted a break in the hibiscus and the wire fence and crawled out to the grassy sidewalk. Dew from the shrub hedge drizzled over her clothing and hair but she was so tense she was unaware of the wetness or the cold night air that crept under her vest and clung to her skin.

Pohpoh paused. The ditch running down the side of the fence provided enough of a gurgling to cover the sound of her steps. Up above, dark clouds raced each other and were soon blown far away, leaving the sky crisply cold and clean. There was no moon, making for a perfectly pitch-black night, the kind that permitted Pohpoh to roam without concealing herself in shadows. On the outermost

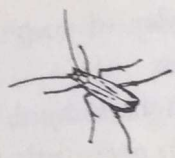
edges of the sky was a display of suspended stars that made the heavens twinkle and shimmer.

Like a crane pondering flight Pohpoh stooped low on one leg, the other bent at the knee. In gracefully flowing motion she lifted her arms, ready to shield her chest should it need protecting. She spun around, her eyes searchlights surveying the quiet street and the neighbours' yards. She did not look back at her own. Only a sharp breeze here and there stirred. Occasionally a dog's whimper sliced through the background pulsing of crickets and hiccuping of frogs. Pohpoh thrust her jaw forward and, like a cautious night animal, bounded across the road.

A lantern always glowed in the front hall of the house opposite her father's. She knew the yard well. The guard dog, a plump boxer named Tail, knew her too. Tail heard Pohpoh scuffling in the ditch and, curious, sniffed his way over to the fence. He began jumping against the wire, growling, scratching up the garden soil and barking, igniting the other dogs in the neighbourhood. Every dog for miles around seemed to have been awakened and Pohpoh's disappointment changed to fear. She knew better than to try to calm Tail. She leapt up the ditch, slipped on the mossy side and landed face down in a tall grass bush. This would be a good place for her to burrow for safekeeping. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed that if she were perfectly still Tail would lose interest. She tightened the muscles between her thighs against an urge to pee. She heard people swearing at their dogs to be quiet, and then front doors slamming shut. The pulse in her temples thumped with an exhilaration she loved, and she grinned in triumph. Pohpoh waited another few minutes until she was confident the neighbours had gone back to bed.

Her eyes had learned to see so well in this outdoor darkness that she picked out a dead and perfectly intact harlequin bug lying in the grass. She lifted, sniffed and pocketed it.

When she was again able to hear the crickets and frogs, she pulled her trousers down, avoiding crushing her little find, and relieved herself in the cold air.



*TLIP-TLAP TLIP-TLAP TLIP-TLAP.* With every step Otoh's rubber thongs slapped the road. Cars went by, each driver slowing to look at him, curious as to why in a town the size of theirs they had not heard about the event that would warrant the wearing of a suit. One car pulled over, keeping pace with him. The driver, an out-of-towner who regularly visited for some unknown reason, leaned out of the window and chatted him up. He had admired Otoh from afar. Seeing him today dressed so beautifully, sauntering up the road with unsurpassed grace in spite of the hot sun, an untidy load in his arms, the stranger had a reason to accost him.

"Psssst! Young man, where you going? You want a ride?"

"Not far," said Otoh, "but thank you all the same."

But his voice, unusually silky for a man's, intrigued the out-of-towner more. Shaded by the brim of his fedora, Otoh's black eyes and long, full eyelashes made the man even more desirous. Flattered by the attention, Otoh was both amused and bewildered at how much the man assumed.

"Don't be so shy, na. I might be going your way. As a matter of fact, I will even go out of my way—for you—and take you right where you going. But, look at that load you carrying in the hot sun, na. It must be heavy for so. What you say?"

Otoh grinned. "No. Really. Thank you. I going to see a friend and is better I take my time and walk there."

"Who is this lucky friend you dress up nice-nice so, goin' to see? Tell me, na? Why she—is a she you going to see or is a he? Don't mind me asking, you know. Why she so lucky and not me? A nice fella like you need a friend to show you the ropes. Let me give you a ride, na? Is a gramophone you have there? You like to dance?"

"But you does ask a lot of questions," laughed Otoh. "Really, I

don't need a ride, thank you kindly. I don't have far to go. And is a lady friend I going to visit."

"Oh. Well, let me take you by she. You could make your visit and I go wait for you. Then you could come back with me. You didn't answer. You like dancing? Because I—"

"No, thank you again. I spending the morning with she."

"Okay, spend the morning and I'll come and meet you back by noon. Then we could set up the gramophone. What you say?"

The proposition amused Otoh. He enjoyed the flirtation and was reluctant to end it. But since there was no point in carrying on in this vein, he dribbled water on the desires of the amorous out-of-towner.

"You are very kind, but I am not sure how long this will take. You see, you could say that I am courting her."

"Oh, you courting her. You? You courting a woman! I see. Is a lady you courting, eh. Uhuh. Well, I better not keep you back, because I have to go and meet my wife to take she to matinee. And my children coming with us too. What I was asking you was to come to the pictures with my family. You understand, na."

The man drove off, his brick-red face sweaty. Otoh smiled and picked up his pace.

He had decided that his delivery that day would be made at the front gate. On arrival he used the top of the biscuit tin to check his hair and scarf. He pushed the gate, expecting it to open. Instead the entire fence made one long creak, like the sound of a misplayed violin, and lethargically tilted backward. Otoh almost lost his balance and the goods. He looked around. He felt foolish to have damaged the fence when his intention had been to project the epitome of debonair. He would return later or first thing tomorrow and repair it, he promised himself. The only way to enter the front yard now was to hop over the fence.

The yard did not seem cared for. He studied the terrain searching for an easy route to the front door. He spotted a clearing among the brambles and carefully bent over the fence depositing

his goods and the gramophone on the other side. Holding the record album, whose sleeve was damp from sweat, he retreated several paces. Sizing up the fence, he took wide strides toward it and leapt over. He landed in the midst of row upon row of shells, some whole but mostly all shattered and partially buried in the hard-packed earth. He tiptoed around the brittle pieces.

On this side of the fence, the world seemed quieter, as though time had slowed down. The soil smelled damp and rich with earthworms. He gathered up his armful of offerings and headed through the break in the brambles. As Otoh went further into the yard, sounds that he took for granted—the pounding of hammers, the swish of cars and barking of dogs—receded. Rather there was the buzzing of insects, the flutter of wings and the sounds of a breeze circulating earthy odours.

Otoh arrived at what were once the front steps. Before him, obscured by overgrowth, were the remnants of an old-fashioned gentility that was unapparent from the roadway. Leading up to the verandah was a wide, flagstone stairway, from whose many cracks pepper and orange trees protruded. The verandah's banister was of simple wooden posts, many missing or about to fall. Looking up, he saw stranglers growing out of the roof, their thick roots clutching the sides of the house.

Otoh wanted to be polite and present himself by knocking at the front door but after negotiating the first, treacherous steps he realized the stairway stood precariously alone, separated several feet from the house. He stepped down and stood awkwardly in the centre of the walkway, wondering whether to advance or retreat. Disappointed but undeterred, Otoh resigned himself to a more pedestrian entrance around the back of the house.

Mala had not had a human visitor in at least a decade. The last ones to enter her yard were not even visitors but vandalizing youngsters who tormented her and her plants so callously she was obliged to chase them out. One time she saw blood spurt from a boy's head

when she angrily threw back at him the leather-bound cricket ball that had missed the mango tree he was pelting and had broken her window instead. The last of that kind of problem took place a very long time ago and it no longer occurred to her to watch for trespassers or visitors. It was difficult to remember who her last visitor had been, probably Ambrose, just after he returned from the Shivering Northern Wetlands.

With Otoh so close but unknown to her, Mala returned to her memory . . .

Finally feeling in control of the night's possibilities, and having relieved herself, Pohpoh relaxed. Even though her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, they were of little use. To negotiate her way Pohpoh had to experience her surroundings, become one with the trees, shrubs, weeds, fences, thorns, water and mossy ground. She stood in the ditch and lifted her hands into the blackness before her, meditatively feeling the shape of the moist air, inspecting and greeting the space. Her heart drummed with excitement.

She was ready for the sprint up the ditch. Her legs spread apart, Pohpoh took a long, slow breath and then, like a soldier running for dear life, bolted up the slope. On either side of the ditch, overhanging foliage and slimy fronds slapped against her body, sending ripples of fear and excitement through her limbs. In seconds she had reached the top and stood among several houses. Her clothes were dew-damp and her teeth shivered, but her mission was of such importance that she could not allow it to be thwarted by mere physical discomfort.

The yard on the left had neither fence nor hedge, just a few unmanageable clumps of razor grass. This yard, she decided, was no challenge for her. All through the bushes a discordant chorus of bullfrogs belted territorial warnings. At such a late hour she was surprised to see a light in a bedroom window of the house. A man passed in front of the window and then back again. She crouched lower, just in case. On the other side of the ditch was a

hedge of boundary shrubs, easy to get through but too close to the insomniac.

At the top of the incline lay another backyard as familiar to her as though she had planted it herself and watched it unfold leaf by leaf, insect by insect. Pohpoh felt an uncanny communion with the fruit trees that had sprung up from thoughtlessly spat-out seeds: lime, pomerac, cherry, dongs, orange, two common prickly-mango trees and a fat nutmeg, all conspiring to make the night even darker than it already was. In the pomerac tree slept several fowl. Pohpoh was aware of them yet their snores and ruffles sounded to her as though someone else was also in the yard. She became even more alert. The acidic smell of bird droppings contrasted with a stronger, very sweet odour. Among the bushes was a single cereus plant. Pohpoh saw its large white and crimson flowers, gleaming like stars. With the force that comes from a broken fire hydrant, the cereus blossoms spewed heavy perfume in the air, luring the thousands of moths and flies whizzing by, colliding and humming so loudly that an ominous drone hovered in the air around Pohpoh's face. The air was full of floating moth powder. The scent of the cereus with its two edges—one a vanilla-like sweetness, the other a curdling—so permeated the air that she could taste it on her tongue as though she were lapping it from a bowl.



OTOH AVOIDED BEING clawed by the patch of stinging nettles. He walked toward the back and through the thick grey-blue mudra stilts that propped up the front of the house, and then around a room, positioned like his bedroom, underneath the house. He noticed that, unlike his room in Government Alley, this one had no doorway and would only have been accessible from the top floor of

the house. What was once a window was now completely boarded up and covered by a thick plant.

He sniffed, trying to ferret out the scent that had captivated him last night. The sun never shone under here. He came upon dank pools, thick layers of rotten water that had seeped into crevices and settled under thin slabs of broken concrete. A pungent stagnancy rose up in bursts. Otoh held his goods close to his chest and tip-toed, afraid to disturb whatever thrived there.

A handful of steps farther and another perplexing odour washed over Otoh. He gasped on the crest of each wave delivered by the innocent morning breezes wending amid the mudra posts. It appeared to be the full-bodied foulness of an overflowed latrine. From the back fence, far away from the house itself, where he had made deliveries on mornings past, nothing prepared him for such sensory assaults. Certainly his dreams of meeting Mala had been filled with the scent of frilly herbs and potions, potpourri and balms, and nothing so oppressive as what choked him now.

Otoh forgot for a moment his reasons for entering the yard. So appalling was the odour—and thick, like a miasma he had to wade through—he expected to see some kind of spillage. Yet as much as he was repulsed he was again overcome by curiosity. He was also prompted by memories of a similar smell—the memory of an outdoor latrine far behind his grandmother's house, down by the edge of the cane field. He used to think of it as a hut, a hut big enough for only one person at a time.

The putridity under Mala's house, Otoh noticed, was strongest close to the downstairs sewing room. He walked with a measured pace, absorbing every detail of the outer wall of the room before him: decades of dust; clumps of matted cobwebs; old cavities eaten away by wood lice; lazy, unperturbed daddy-longlegs clinging to the siding, motionless; stout cloud-white moths polkadotting the wood; remains of snake eggs, lizard eggs, hatchlings lurking, squirming squishily as they sought the warm sunlight. An old glass aquarium lay on its side.

He made his way from underneath the house. His eyes felt fragile in the sudden brilliance. Warming shivers rippled up and down his arms, and he started to perspire. He lifted an arm and wiped his damp brow and upper lip on his shoulder. Nothing in the yard stirred in the claustrophobic morning heat. There was still no sign of Mala.

Probing farther around the back of the house he gasped when he came upon the wall of cereus blossoms, every one of them completely wilted. He had forgotten about the flowers. Their blooms, brown-splotched by the stinging sun, hung limp. Even so Otoh was amazed at their size. The heads were larger than any flower he had ever seen before, much too heavy for the small, stunted stems from which they dangled. A ghost of scent hovered close to the blossoms, remnants of last night's fullness now souring in the heat. Replacing the perfume was an even more startling one that seemed to emanate from the wall behind the blossoms. The smell, like those under the house, quickly grew nauseating. Within seconds the contents of his stomach rebelled, rising, twisting and turning. The combination of odours and the heat made him dizzy. The stench made him want to drop his package, gramophone and all, clasp his stomach, hold his breath and run as fast as he could back out of the yard. But he was determined not to give up. Otoh scurried like a distressed mouse noisily past the wall. In his haste he raced past Mala, who was sitting under the mudra tree.

And she, totally entranced by her day-dreaming escapade, didn't hear the bees buzzing around her ears or feel them slurping the salty sweat trickling down her neck. Neither did she hear the peekoplats in the mudra tree when they suddenly stopped trying to out-whistle each other and joined forces to warn of Otoh's approach.

He turned to look for the birds. They fluttered and squawked in the uppermost branches of the old mudra tree. Otoh marvelled at the sight of the magnificent mudra, knowing that such a specimen might be seen only in the heart of an old-growth forest on the other side of the island. With its yard-long, bean-like purple pods,

the mudra had taken over the side of the yard, completely blocking out the road beyond and glimpses of the town. It took generations for a mudra tree to grow so large. The peekoplats hopped to the edges of the branches and their whistling subsided as though in curious and worried anticipation. Otoh noticed the quiet and looked up to see the tree covered in sleek, brown-grey birds. Never before had he seen this kind of bird in the open. They were usually associated with money, with gambling and singing competitions. Men from Paradise often went into the deep forest and returned with cages crammed with rare peekoplats. A single bird of that species would fetch a large sum of money, an investment paid out willingly in the hopes of higher earnings and prestige in singing competitions. Otoh was astonished that in his own neighbourhood, unknown to catchers and gamblers, there existed a tree laden with hundreds of peekoplats. He suddenly felt himself a trespasser, an awkward voyeur. Surprised that in all his deliveries he had never seen the huge tree, he looked around, trying to locate the back fence.

He came to an abrupt halt. Right there, directly in front of him, was the reason he had come. Mala Ramchandin. She sat in a rocking chair beside the tree, her eyes closed. Her figure was all but lost in the blueness of the mudra's trunk. She wore a petticoat, greens and browns and light blues, that blended into the background of leaves and gnarled, twisted limbs. Otoh's face burned. He stood and stared. He was seeing the woman for whom his father awakened. She was no bird, he thought. She was thin, indeed, but her height, dwarfing the rocker, surprised him.

Without taking his eyes off her Otoh squatted and deposited his load on the dusty clay ground. He moved slowly. He could so easily have missed her, mistaken her for a shrub. He was again aware that he was trespassing on this woman's land.

She was unlike any woman he had ever seen. It was as though he had stumbled unexpectedly on a lost jungle, and except for the odours he would have sworn he was in a paradise. Making sure the

gramophone was safely settled on the ground, he untied his bandanna and wiped his face and neck.



Dankness hung heavily. The air close to the ground bristled with the natural fragrance released in the blackest period of night. The aroma of grapefruit, lime and orange trees lay like a fringe on the edge of the darkness. Pohpoh began to tingle with a sensation of delirious omnipotence—she was able to find her way, to survive in the dark, to name plants and insects with only their scent or a brush against them as her clues. She sprang out of the ditch, landing elegantly in a crouch. Inching her way along the narrow bank of overgrown razor grass, she gravitated toward a ragged opening in the wire. Like a moth, she breezed through the hole and out the other side without a scratch.

Crickets and tree frogs sang out among the trees. She listened for dogs. Hearing nothing, she decided that if there were any in the yard she would have by now smelled the evidence of their presence.

Darting across the lawn Pohpoh arrived under the skirt of a citrus tree. With fewer bushes to conceal her, she exercised care, peering out at the large two-storey house in the centre of the grounds. The ground floor of the house was washed in dull yellow light from garden lanterns planted in a bed of thick, low shrubbery and flowering plants.

This would be her target tonight. Pohpoh cupped her ears and aimed them at the house. She heard nothing. She imagined bedrooms with a happy family, a fairy-tale family in which the father was a benevolent king. There would be a fairy queen for a mother, and enough little cherub siblings to fill a very large shoe or pumpkin carriage, their fat, pink faces smiling even as they slept. In the

wash of garden lanterns she could see curtains on the ground floor drawn behind ornately wrought-iron bars. High up on the second floor she saw curtains pulled back, windows open and no bars.

The old samaan tree around the back wasn't hard to climb. Near the tree's top, a branch extended like the palm of a hand to an open window. Pohpoh had seen four-foot-long iguanas crawling along the branches of other samaan trees, and she decided to descend to the window slithering on her belly. Midway down the branch she stopped. Pohpoh swung her head from side to side looking down at the yard and up into the branches that crisscrossed the star-laden sky. Closer to the window she waited for the wind swishing through the branches to cover the sliding sound of her body.

There was a light on in the hallway just outside the room she entered. She perched like a gargoyle on the window sill, her eyes still unused to the light. Pohpoh imagined herself invisible, sitting there and thwarting monsters and demons who tried to lay a finger on the little baby in whose room she found herself.

A baby's room is a good clue to how near the parents are, Pohpoh thought. Imagination could cost too much. She put herself back on track, shaking her finger sternly at herself. She pinched her eyes tightly shut, squeezing out the friendly gargoyle, iguana, monkey and fairy, and returning to the concentration of a night prowler at work.

"Two minutes. I *can* do this—I *will*—in two minutes, not a second more." She activated her stopwatch, then slipped off the sill.

Pohpoh glided gracefully across the smooth teak floor. The door of the parents' room was wide open. Her eyes followed the shaft of light to see a large bed, too large for the two adults asleep in it, facing apart and joined in deep sleep at their backs. She passed another bedroom. Her eyes now accustomed to the reddish light, she made out the figures of two children asleep in a large bed high off the ground. On a wide window sill sat stuffed toys and rag dolls.

The hallway led to a landing at the top of a wide, winding stairway. The banister was inviting, its wood warm red. She would

have loved to mount it like a horse rider and slide down backward. She held fast to her determination to touch nothing. Pohpoh moved toward the panelled wall, pressing her back against it as she descended. At the bottom of the stairs she wiped fine sweat off her upper lip and forehead.

The downstairs room was lit only by the feeble, blue light of the night sky entering a pair of windows on the far wall. Another wall was lined with bookshelves. On another were framed pictures. One in particular caught her attention. It was larger by far than any of the others and sat in the centre of the wall. She could make out a full-length portrait of two adults and two girls. The mother had one hand on a girl's shoulder and the father had one hand on the shorter child. Pohpoh had never been in the house before but she had seen the family passing on the road in front of her home.

She passed into a corridor. Pages of children's drawings were tacked to both walls. The pages rustled as she passed. At the end of the passage was an archway. She knew the route that she had to take lay there. During these night-time adventures she had learned that the layouts of houses were predictable, depending on the social status of the dwellers. It thrilled her to have guessed correctly which room followed which.

Her eyes brightened with triumph as she stood at the entrance to the living room. Across it was her destination—the front entrance. She headed straight for the door. There was a long mirror, the largest she had ever seen, in a carved gold frame on the wall, and as she hurried by she saw a tiny, ragged girl.

Pohpoh stopped. She had never really thought of herself as tiny or mangy before. Her confidence slackened. She looked closely at sunken eyes. She had never noticed that they were so large and set so far back in her skull, shadowed in comparison to the rest of her features. Pohpoh wondered which was her true self—the timid, gaunt, unremarkable girl staring at her, or the one who dared to spend nights doing what no one else ever dared to do. The image of her father about to lower himself on her body charged at her sud-

denly, complete with smells and nauseating tastes. She gasped loud enough to startle herself and pinched her arm hard, an admonishment that she dare not lose her concentration. Pohpoh swiftly navigated around the ornate furniture to the entrance hall. She opened the door and faced the familiar darkness. Success so far was giddy-ing but she knew the adventure was not over until she was once more back in her own bedroom. The air outside was comfortingly warm compared to the cool dampness of the house. She pulled the door softly behind her. There would be no hint of a stranger's presence, no trace of entry.

She gave the yard a perfunctory survey before bolting across the lawn and into the background of a fat grapefruit tree. She felt triumphant. Avenged. The image of her face in the mirror was forgotten.

A smile of triumph lit up Mala's face. She had relived this scenario so often that even she did not remember how much of it actually took place—whether it took place in the day or night, whether she was accompanied by Asha, whether she actually entered a house, whether she was ever caught. Her eyes stayed closed. She was not yet ready to enter the day with its cutting brightness.

Otoh had managed to get the gramophone out of its box, inserted a disk and wound it up without disturbing her. When he lifted the needle's arm the turntable began to spin with a fine whirr. Mala opened her eyes. When she saw the young man in front of her she gasped.

A Dixieland quartet began to scratch along. Otoh and Mala locked onto each other's gaze. Otoh rose up from fiddling with the device. The music was too loud but he could not bring himself to stoop again to turn it down. He retreated a couple of paces.

Mala's lips moved but the din of jazz drowned out her words. Holding the arms of her rocking chair she pushed herself up, then reached a hand out to the young man before her. As the music came to an end she breathed, "Ambrose."

Otoh was awed that she recognized the resemblance to his father. The needle arm retreated with protesting squeaks to its rest position. In the stillness Mala mumbled his father's name several times. It was then that Otoh realized she had mistaken him for his father. He was about to say, "I am Otoh. Ambrose is my father," but stopped. She might not know that Ambrose had a child or even that he had married. Right then, he did not want to bear such news.

The arm of the needle automatically lifted up and moved once more into position and lowered itself on the record. Mala shuffled toward Otoh in time to the music. She laughed like a giddy child yet all at once her face contorted. Her gaunt eyes were large and glassy with expectation. Otoh's first instinct was to flee but he was wary of making abrupt movements or of turning his back on this woman whose wiliness he had witnessed in the past. Besides, he wondered in which direction he would run to escape the yard. He was completely disoriented.

Mala approached, humming and dipping and sliding to the fast-paced melody. In a strong clear voice she sang not only the main tune but the buoyant *wa-wa wa-wa* of the clarinet. She closed her eyes, gave an exaggerated tremble of her head and mouthed two soulful *wa-wa's*. Nearing him she became feverish with excitement, cast her arms rhythmically sideways and executed fast-paced dance steps in perfect time to the drum beat and banjos.

She reached a hand out to him again. He took it, an angular parcel of flesh and bones. The pale skin of her face and hands was finely wrinkled, as textured and colourless as a young albino lizard. He was mesmerized by her green-brown eyes and complied. She suddenly pulled him toward her grinning face and just as swiftly pushed him away at arm's length. She spun them both around and around her yard to the accompaniment of her imitation clarinet solos. The music stopped again yet she continued to hum and sing out *wa-wa* and twirl him around. All the while she peered intently into his eyes.

Otoh stepped outside of himself and imagined he was watching

the scene from the roadway. In light of what the townspeople had assumed about this woman over the decades, and of what he had known of her through his deliveries and his father's yearnings, he was amazed. He was actually in her yard, holding her hand. They were whirling about. Unaware that her own voice had long been a stranger even to her, he was still awed that he should be privy to its sound, and a witness to her past.

They moved to the foot of the back stairs. Mala slowed and pulled Otoh close to her chest and whispered, this time pleadingly, "Ambrose?"

Otoh brought them both to an abrupt halt.

"It's all right, Ambrose. It's all right. He won't hurt you," Mala whispered in his ear.

"Who won't hurt me?"

"He can't hurt you now, Ambrose. Come, come." And she took his hand and led him up the stairs. Mounting the weathered boards he imagined himself retracing his father's footsteps from decades back. He reminded himself to observe every particularity so that on his return to Government Alley he could recount the minutest details as proof that he had indeed been a visitor in Mala's house.

At the top of the stairs Otoh was startled by the sound of pigeons scurrying on the roof. Mala giggled at his timidity. She stood on the verandah, pleased to have him in her house again. One edge of the porch, he noticed, was lined with rows of small jars of what looked like pepper sauce. He recognized the jars. He had delivered them to her full of condiments and spices.

On the verandah the redolence of the yard had diminished and was replaced by another: the sea-like freshness of dark dirt, earthworms and, oddly, garden snails. The smell, this high up, baffled him. Mala stood next to him and clasped her hands behind her back, not wanting to disturb what she thought were his reveries. Humbled with appreciation for his return, she once again longed for him to be the king of her garden. Seeing him looking in the direction of a spider web she became very excited.

"Spiders. There are enough spiders nowadays, Ambrose," she whispered. Getting no response, she looked up at him hopefully.

"More than enough spiders now, Ambrose."

"Oh, that's good. That's good. Spiders. That's good."

His words encouraged her. She held his arm and led him into the kitchen. He opened his eyes wide trying to see in the dark interior. He realized that the kitchen window had been boarded up with scraps of wood, cardboard and galvanized iron. On the other side of the room was a mound of furniture piled into the shape of a dust-and-cobweb-packed wall. A mustiness tickled his throat. He coughed and his eyes filled up with tears. Mala began to disassemble the wall. Worried it would come crashing down but unsure what to do, he watched in resigned awe as she pulled items from the bottom. The structure didn't cave in. She stopped only when an opening, large enough for them to both creep through, appeared. She tugged him through and they emerged into a vacant space. Otoh thought might once have been a drawing room. There were three closed doors leading from the room. Two, judging from the thick layers of dust on the floor, had not been opened in years. Reaching the third, Mala took a key from the pocket of her dress. Before inserting it in the keyhole, she looked up at Otoh, placed a thin finger to her lip and said, "Shhhh." She turned the key and opened the door.

An odour far more intense than that under the house burst out like a gaseous belch, knocking him back onto the carpet of dust. Mala helped him up. She was far stronger than she looked, Otoh realized. The foulness was suddenly recognizable. It was a combination of organic rot that has reached maturity and stale adult urine. He gasped, unable to breathe. His stomach felt as though it were working its way up to a somersault. He sputtered and coughed.

She ushered him into the darkness at the top of some stairs. When his body resisted she slipped behind him and pushed him forward. With one hand on his back for assurance, Mala held up a bundle of weeds.

"Jenghie, shandolay," she explained, waving the weeds under Otoh's nose, "baby bonnet and shado-beni. Keep it by yuh nose. It will help with the bad-feeling. I accustomed to it long time now." The bouquet had lost its aroma. He gave it a harsh rub, hoping that some sliver of scent might have remained trapped in it but he only broke the brittle twigs. The leaves crumbled into dust. She locked the door behind them.

"Is better not to take chances, you know. We'll keep it locked so he can't come out."

She took his hand and pulled him down the flight of stairs. His legs wobbled. The smell intensified as they descended. Halfway down the stairs Mala stopped, let go of his hand and lit a lamp. The glow revealed moths as large as a hand, fluttering about disoriented as though too abruptly awakened from a stupor. At the foot of the stairs was another door. Mala retrieved a skeleton key from a ledge above the doorway and opened the door only wide enough for them to slip in. She moved about the room swiftly, confidently. Otoh stayed close behind her, afraid to be left alone.

Farther into the room, through the haze of dust, Otoh made out a high platform the size of a single bed. A long, uneven bundle of clothes lay upon it. Something black protruded here and there. Mala walked right up to the bed frame and stared at the indecipherable mass. Otoh looked at her.

"He can't hurt us now, Ambrose," she smiled and whispered. "Look, come and see." Otoh walked closer, sick to his stomach from the smell and terrified at what he was about to see. She held the light high above the bed frame so he could get a good look.

Opening his eyes Otoh realized he was collapsed over Mala's shoulder, watching the back of her legs as she mounted the steps to the drawing room. He was too weak to demand to be put down. She pulled the door shut behind them and locked it again. She then carried him, still on her shoulder, through the space in the wall of furniture, out through the kitchen, and set him down to rest on the