

One

Every time it rains, hordes of moths and other winged termites swarm incessantly around the lantern. As I watch, enthralled, some of the termites, who have now lost their wings, crawl around, unable to fly. A cat walks up and licks the now limp insects up, one after another. Their short-lived lives seem to tell me a story – the story of many lives, our lives, all of us visiting for a short period, only to return again.

Whatever the cat has left, little ants scurry forward to claim. The termites' corpses and their wings are larger than even the ants, but nothing seems to stop them. I've always thought ants are fascinating creatures, their uniqueness springing from their special trait – they are a rare species that can carry more than their own weight, nothing limiting them. Just like my mother and sisters.

This rain, like every other rain, reminds me of all the rains I weathered as a child. I let the memories that each raindrop brings forth wash over me.

I remember waiting for the rain to stop and soon losing hope of that ever happening. The girls in my class who had their own umbrellas had left for home as soon as the attendant struck the school bell. The boys in my class usually never cared for umbrellas. The children who possessed umbrellas were happy to share with their friends. I was not invited to share anyone's umbrella, so I just waited.

Some parents came by with their umbrellas to collect some of

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the children who were waiting with me, leaving my closest friend and me. At last, even his mother came to take him home, and then, I was the only one left, all alone in the school.

The rain gods had no intention of stopping the downpour, it seemed. Soon, darkness surrounded me, frightening me like it always did. Worried, I wondered if my father would stop sending me to school on rainy days.

Finally, I decided to wait no longer, and brave the torrents. With my books secure inside my wet shirt, close to my racing heart, I ran home.

Our home was exposed to the unending, alternating tyranny of torrential rains and the scorching sun. It was a regular practice in our town to pray, hoping that the gods would listen, and stop these squalls.

More reminiscences rush forth. Memories of my childhood take me back to my village, where my sorrows were thundershowers, and my lonely days wept forever, but my school days shone through all the misery, like the brightest rainbow that ever gleamed across the sky.

My memories blossom, like a flower which smiles lustroously in the morning. Then each petal peels away one by one, falling softly to the ground, like snowflakes touching the earth gently. Loving memories of her.

I still pine for you, Nafsan. On that rainy day, I lingered for you at school, keeping my eyes open for one glimpse of you. I waited for you with wonderful flowers. But you never came.

As I walk down the corridor, only the echoes of my footsteps come forward to greet me, all the classrooms vacant and forlorn.

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It has been many years since, but I still yearn for my schooldays. I wonder where they are, all those boys and girls who went to school with me. Are they all still alive? Will anyone still remember me? Do they recall all those happy days, just like I do now?

The school now reminds me of an abandoned yard where stray cows graze around. I look at the playground where my sorrows lay buried, and my eyes haze with tears.

The only thing that doesn't seem to have changed is Kochappan's wheelbarrow. The four wheels on which his petty store ran still waited for the hustle and bustle of the lunch break to return. It was empty, not laden with little baubles for kids anymore. During the recess, Kochappan used to have a difficult time keeping the excited children under control. But he is no more.

Where did those days go? I know that many of my friends have gone away, looking for jobs and opportunities. I wonder what happened to our patient teachers. Would any of them be willing to spend this evening with me, reliving those days when we hero-worshipped them, did our utmost to be in their good books. But we were scared of them as well. In the company of our old teachers I want to relive those moments of fear and anguish. I'm sure they would be feeling equally nostalgic about the days when they ruled our lives, held sway over our imagination. Have they visited the school after so many years, like I am doing now?

As I walk through the corridors, a slight evening breeze caresses me, somehow deepening my longing for those days. It sets the mood for my nostalgia. The susurrus carries with it a prayer song from some faraway temple that envelops the

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entire school, just like the burdened clouds passing overhead.

As if on auto-pilot, I stop right outside my classroom. This was where I used to sit and listen to my teachers. Where, at times, I wept out of hunger. Where my math teacher caned me for not doing my sums right. I wish I could apologize now for all those wrong answers.

Right in front of the office room, hangs the old school bell, exactly where it used to be years ago. I laugh striking it mildly. The scene comes back in a flash: the strident gong ending one class, beginning another, raising a noise in between. It also heralded that moment of freedom, the noon interval, when everyone rushed out with their lunch packets. I used to carry my lunch wrapped in a plantain leaf, for my mother couldn't give me a lunch box. And then, there was the wonderful sound of the long bell, which marked the end of the day.

I tenderly touch the bench on which she used to sit. I can see the words carved in wood. They still haven't faded from the desk. Words of love... Songs of her love for me. I can't believe they're still here! I can hear her sing to me in her heavenly voice, and it still arouses the love and passion in me.

I remember how, though my mother never gave me an umbrella, I managed to keep my books dry. I always wrapped them in a plastic bag and held them close to my chest inside my shirt. I always wondered why my parents never worried that I might get wet in the rain, that I often starved on lunch break.

As I was in the fifth grade, I was no longer entitled to the free noon meal that was given only to the little ones. Unerringly

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hungry at noon, I would scan the primary class area, looking for some leftover. I was joined by some of the other unruly boys who failed the exams now and again. A fear lurked around – fear of being caught by the forbidding Headmaster.

I remember how my mother admonished me if she found out. “Eat and drink only what God has given you,” she always said.

I remember hurrying home in the rain. Mother used to pound paddy in the mortar with a wooden pestle. Then she patiently winnowed the rice from the chaff. The kitchen slowly warmed up, and soon it was time for the evening's hot gruel as plates queued up for their share.

As a judge I need to personally verify the items in the storeroom once a year. This is where the records for the trials of the criminal cases are kept.

All I find in the store are the charred remains of the huts that were hit by the two riots. I'm familiar with the slum where the first riot killed three people, and the second, thirteen.

Eighteen swords, fifteen knives, eight hatchets, a heap of blood-stained clothes, shirts, undergarments, broken wooden fragments from the huts, bits of earthenware, glasses, lanterns, torches, wooden logs... Among the terrifying and sad reminders of the riots, a lonely gramophone catches my attention, kindling happy moments from the past.

Each article from the riot scenes is a throwback to some events in my childhood days in the old slum. Events which have a special meaning for me. Before that, we had lived in a village. I can still hear the music played on the bamboo flute,

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as the children ran down the street, playing, laughing... The gramophone rests there, a silent reminder of the music of the slums. Even when it is still, it recalls all the miseries the slum-dwellers went through because of the riots. It sobs, weeps, sighs.

As I glance at each item in the room, I hear, in my mind, the piercing cries and long wails of women and children, their fervent pleas to the murderous mob to spare them. The blood-stained sword still glistens with sharpness, even though it is covered in rust now.

The main reason for the riots is said to be caste rivalry, which is basically hereditary enmity – something akin to the longstanding antagonism between the snake and the mongoose.

I go through the records in the hope of finding the real motive behind the violence. *Res ipsa loquitur* (the thing speaks for itself). Poverty. Couldn't everything always be tracked down to poverty?

When I went to the slum blighted by the riots, for fact-finding, the first thing I did was take a handful of earth from my footprints on the ground. I held it in my hand, knowing that hundreds of people had walked there before me.

Who were behind these incidents? Why did these things happen? When I was young, I found it immensely difficult to comprehend the causes or effects of such happenings. I had heard people say that 'unscrupulous elements' had infiltrated the slum to exploit the poorness and despondency of the people. Their deep sense of dejection. There were also some religious leaders who had secretly incited violence to stir a wave of panic in society. The record room is now chock-

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full of artifacts that confirm all that I had learned as a child.

I remain in the storeroom even after my work hours. For some reason, I'm reluctant to leave the room even though I know very well that I'm not supposed to be here, especially now that the other members of the staff have left the *thondy* room long ago. Here I am alone – facing the evidence of a bloodbath.

Finally, I decide to bolt the room and come outside, leaving the reasons and evidences of the riots behind me, in the closed room. No one else seems to be around. The court's premises look desolate.

Is there any wound at all that is not healed by the passage of time? Everything will soon be erased from our minds. Posterity brings forth new things, and the story goes on.

It is still raining without a break. I scoop my hands and collect enough raindrops. I want to splash them all over my face.

I now have the protection of an umbrella.

Nafsan used to cover her face with a scarf. When she held the beautiful blue umbrella to ward off the heat of the sun, her face glowed, as luminous and enchanting as a rainbow among gray clouds.

I knew that she never longed to see me. Still, I went to school with a deep desire of catching a glimpse of my love, her delicate features that were imprinted on my mind. She was always special to me, and I resented my friends' casual comments about her, their silly jokes. Fifth standard has never been an accepted time for a youngster to fall in love. But still, I was so fascinated by her that I had to see her at least

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once a day.

I used to wait at the bus stop, eager to catch a glimpse of her. But she always looked straight ahead, and never at me. Had she ever noticed that I was there for her, waiting, hoping? One day, when she had left earlier than usual, I had rushed to a friend's hut near her house just to see her one last time for the day. But she didn't come out of the house that evening. Did she know, perhaps, that I was somewhere close by?

A delicious tenderness fills my heart at the very thought of you. My mind overflows with thoughts of you, my heart with love for you. Your frame, built like a lovely sculpture, your eyes as bright as the moon reflected in a glassy river. Let me melt in your heart, like a dewdrop, and drink the honey from your heart's slowly unfolding petals. The sweet evening breeze carries not only the scent of the rain, but also traces of your perfume, the gentle sound of your footsteps, the faint murmur of a poem from your lips, the flowers that blossom in your honest eyes.

