1979

Dear Primitive

A Subramani

Follow this and additional works at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Subramani, A, Dear Primitive, Kunapipi, 1(2), 1979.
Available at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol1/iss2/6

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Dear Primitive

Abstract
Elaine crossed the Arcade with a vague sense of unease. Suva looked stale and sickly-bright in the sun. How quickly the morning, which began so cheerfully for her, had exhausted itself; burnt itself out, she thought. She smiled weakly at a pupil in holiday clothes. At the crossing the shoppers merged and then broke into different directions.

This journal article is available in Kunapipi: http://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol1/iss2/6
Dear Primitive

Elaine crossed the Arcade with a vague sense of unease. Suva looked stale and sickly bright in the sun. How quickly the morning, which began so cheerfully for her, had exhausted itself; burnt itself out, she thought. She smiled weakly at a pupil in holiday clothes. At the crossing the shoppers merged and then broke into different directions.

She woke up rather early in the morning and sat on her bed, legs folded, and watched the light pour in through the diffused clouds. That old feeling of being bruised and imprisoned had disappeared. She told herself at last she was beginning to come to terms with herself. After a quick breakfast of eggs and cold milk, she took the bus to Suva, feeling a little guilty for this week-day freedom. But she managed to brush the feeling aside. Once in the city she did not know what to do. She sat through a movie with six other people in the entire cinema. Afterwards she wandered absent-mindedly from shop to shop and bought things she did not require at Woolworth’s. During the weekend there was a tourist ship at the wharf and the streets were full of foreigners. Now the city looked empty. She walked to a Chinese restaurant to eat after the lunch-hour customers had gone. She sat there for a long time smoking and listening to the soft rattle of the bead curtain – like pebbles under water.

To avoid returning to her apartment immediately, she decided to stroll along the sea-wall back to Nasese. She lived in the old section of Nasese, consisting mainly of wooden bungalows which were being gradually over-taken by new concrete houses on stilts. The bungalows had a permanently neglected and melancholy look: the paint had worn off from the wood, the galvanised iron
roofs were rusted by the action of sea water, and weeds flourished in the backyards. The front wooden fences, festooned with insects, needed repair. Once the residences of European civil servants, the bungalows were now owned by Indian merchants from Suva. Elaine rented a semi-detached house here. It was cheap and near the sea.

She threw the windows open. The sea appeared choppy and the tide lapped against the sea-wall, rocking the sea debris. She had planned to wash her hair but she soon lost interest. She hitched her dress over her thighs and dropped on the unmade bed. A bee buzzed against the screen door, found its way into the kitchen and continued to buzz in the dirty utensils. She heard the faint clank clank of a knife in the neighbour’s garden which added sadness to the still monotony of the hot afternoon. She picked up a hand mirror from the mantel-piece and studied the profile of her face and hair. Her face looked burnt and puffy and her hair, yellow like corn, was plaited as in an old photograph taken when she was nine.

She often asked herself why she had stayed when all her old acquaintances had either left the islands or were planning to leave. The shop-keeper at Nasese often asked her, ‘So, Miss, when you leaving?’ Why did she stay? What was she waiting for? There were no easy answers to these questions. Her immediate response was she stayed because this is where she was born. This was her country. There was nowhere else she wanted to go. But her relationship with the country was vague. After her parents had settled in New Zealand and Ronnie left her abruptly that night, there seemed fewer links with the place. She knew the world around her would never open up to her completely. Yet she waited for it to open up and claim her.

Her relationship with Ronnie was based on a chance encounter; it finished with the suddenness of such a contact. Ronnie had come to Fiji with the express purpose of making the best of the sun and sea. This brief romance with a good-looking island girl completed the pleasure of a package tour. Every weekend he drove her
to the holiday places and tried out the food and facilities at different resorts. She was of course grateful for his attention. She even tried to evoke within herself a sense of adventure for his sake. For a short period at least her past seemed like a dream that was over. However, all these activities in the sun left her feeling a little fraudulent, like pretending to be happy on a melancholy day. She realised that no amount of active life could thaw the cold spot that was her past. It was there she wanted him to reach her and understand what it was like.

It wasn't long before she discovered that one world was shattering into another. It happened first at the golf course. Ronnie was crouched on the green, leaning forward, his left elbow on his knee, putter in his right hand. The greenskeeper was burning mounds of grass on the edge of the fairway. Suddenly the green started to smoulder and crackle. She felt a wave of heat against her face. The sky turned orange, saffron-splashed. A heat mirage danced in front of her and pursued her across the green. She hurried back to the safety of the club house. From there she saw the grass was all consumed; there were two dark smoking patches where the mounds had been. Ronnie and the greenskeeper were transfixed where she had left them.

She asked Ronnie that night if he believed there were things about the islands which no outsider could ever understand. Her father used to say that about the sea and the hills at Vandrakula.

‘But you aren’t a foreigner, my dear primitive’, Ronnie replied in a jocular manner.

‘I know’, she answered quickly without looking at him.

Ronnie stared at her face for a moment; then started to tell her about the tourist couple he met at the yacht club. She didn’t want to pursue the subject any further.

Elaine worked with the children all day, and learnt many ways to occupy herself in the evening. She read her favourite books, or took a walk along the sea-wall. Sometimes she painted or tended to the potted plants. Late in the night when it was very still, as
only islands can be, she heard the surf breaking on the reef, bringing back memories of her childhood. She selected those states or feelings which gave her special pleasure and, unencumbered, she turned them in her mind as she pleased. She knew in some strange way her life at the cottage by the sea held the key to her present unease.

The cottage was a mile east of Vandrakula. On one side of it were the stately coconut groves spreading out to the hills – a series of volcanic mounds cloaked in green foliage. On the other side was the enigmatic sea. The hills entered into the sea just beyond the village. From the cottage the dark boulders looked like a herd of animals struggling out of the sea.

The cottage was built from native wood and reeds. Charles had fashioned some European-type furniture from local timber. It was always sunny in the cottage. The floor was covered with sand. She remembered Amy complaining, ‘There is too much sand here and too much sun’. And she pulled the blinds down. Charles sat at the breakfast table, bare-chested, wearing a topee. He smiled at Elaine across the table. Charles had very brown teeth and a ginger beard. After breakfast, he disappeared in the bush with his Fijian friends.

Amy rarely went out. Everything outside the cottage seemed to clash with her feelings. Above all she avoided the beach because of sand fleas. All day she shuffled about in the cottage moaning about the heat and the smell from the village. Once every week she walked to the Chinese shop for green vegetables. She wore her hair neatly in a small bunch at the back. The rest of her person had taken on a permanently bedraggled appearance.

Charles started a small medical centre at Vandrakula. Elaine knew Charles wasn’t a real doctor. He had learned something about medicine in the army. She couldn’t figure out why her parents had come to the islands. Once she heard her father say that every white person on the islands was either a criminal or a fugitive. She didn’t believe her parents were these things.

Every Sunday Charles read from an old Bible to the villagers in
a large open bure. She remembered watching the lizards slide down the massive pole in the middle of the bure and snap at the moths. After church she played with Akanisi and Mere on the beach. Amy said her hair was full of lice acquired from the two native girls.

When it rained the sea took on a mournful expression. The beach was drab and slushy. Elaine would shut herself in her bedroom and read *The Count of Monte Cristo* or *Jane Eyre*. One afternoon her parents had gone to call on the Thaggards who were trying some Angus Brahmin cows on their farm. It was raining in the sea. Elaine was reading *Jane Eyre* in her bedroom. She was so completely absorbed she could hear the ridiculing laughter of the crazy woman in the attic and the grating of a key in the door below. Just then she heard a knocking on the front door: it was like knocking in a dream. She peeped out the bedroom window. There was no one at the door. She saw Akanisi chasing after a hermit crab in the rain. Farther on some villagers were riding horses on the beach.

When she heard the knocking again, she opened the front door. That was the first time she saw Senibulu. She was standing shyly behind old Radini. It was hard to say how old Seni was; later she discovered it was the most difficult thing to tell about her. She was taller than Elaine but much darker. And she wore a soiled white frock. They sat in the lounge for some time; then suddenly Radini asked if they could leave. She invited Elaine to the village. Elaine went back to her book but her mind kept wandering to Seni and Radini. She couldn’t work out why they had come to see her.

Seni guided Elaine near the dark boulders from where the two volcanic shields on the side of the hills looked like giant turtles. They watched the boulders gamboling in the waves. The sun beat down most severely on the boulders: the specks of foam were soaked up as soon as they were tossed on the rocks. Seni initiated Elaine into the mysteries of the sea. Together they collected cowrie shells or followed the progress of a mollusk that had left its shell. Seni showed her sea snakes bobbing in the waves and she
tried to imagine Medusa’s head: Elaine learnt from Seni the art of changing every situation into a legend. Sometimes Seni transformed herself into a sea goddess and raced away from her side, squealing with laughter, because she was nudged by a local demon. Elaine observed her outrageous behaviour with great amazement. Charles laughed when she told him about her friend and said Seni was an elf.

She wondered why Charles said that. And why Radini asked her to regard Seni as her sister. Alone in her bedroom at night, she tried to link Seni with Marnie, her still-born sister, who was buried at sea. She had heard Amy accuse Charles of liaisons with native women. Perhaps Seni really was her sister.

Suddenly she stopped visiting the village. Charles had seen a Japanese disguised as a coolie in the hills. Amy slept with her bedpan in her room. ‘Time has become historic again’, Charles remarked one morning at breakfast. Earlier the Thaggards had decided to sell their farm to an Indian family. Charles and Amy spent a good deal of their time with the Thaggards before they left for England. Her friendship with Seni was short-lived, but she realised that in some profound sense, which she was unable to assess even now, it had altered her whole existence.

One afternoon Elaine was alone in her room. Her parents had gone to Thaggard’s farm. Elaine heard knocking on the front door. Her heart pounding, she opened the door. Radini was standing outside, alone, her head bowed. Her eyes were red with crying. Between sobs she told her about the accident at the rocks and Seni’s disappearance. The villagers searched for weeks but failed to recover her body.

Elaine locked herself in her room and cried until she dozed off. When she opened her eyes it was almost dark. She heard Amy’s voice in the kitchen, ‘You should have seen them. Near-naked in their dhoties. Sitting on the empty crates as if they were already the owners of the property. Poor Jane she had such difficulty shooing the impertinent beggers away. . .’

She remembered the gleam in Amy’s eyes as soon as the
steamer touched the pier at Suva. Amy was in a beige suit, leaning on Charles' arm, observing good-humouredly the changes she already saw in streets and shops. Charles looked bored and exhausted in his clean shirt and pants. Amy kept wiping away the sweat on his red and creased neck. Elaine was sick with influenza for weeks after their arrival. She rested in bed reading and thinking about Seni and the cottage by the sea.

Amy immediately set about establishing herself in the white community, among people who she believed might be useful to them. One of her friends, Beryl, the minister's wife, found a position for Charles in the Civil Service. Amy's social life was somewhat spoilt by a boorish husband and a daughter who was attractive enough but lacked poise, and who spoke English with a bad accent. Soon she started complaining about the smell and heat again. Charles spent most of his time drinking at clubs.

Elaine's thoughts returned to Ronnie and their last happy evening together. She seldom spoke to him about her Fijian friends. Ronnie seemed unenthusiastic when she mentioned them. That evening he suggested they drive to the government compound - to her 'native friends'. 'And don't apologise for everything, remember', he remarked cheerfully. His comments often left her feeling inadequate and maimed; that particular night she ignored his words.

The barracks were less than ten minutes drive from her apartment. The women were sitting in the yard in their florid garments when they arrived. The men had gone to fish on the reef. Their lights were visible in the sea.

Elaine was at once thrilled and surprised to see Radini there. She first saw Radini in Suva in a throng of people at the government buildings. The sky above the buildings was metallic grey. On the lawn scattered groups of people were watching, with considerable amusement, two ancient-looking Fijian women executing a tribal rite. The back of one of the women was hunched like a turtle shell. The other woman was equally short and thick. Their chanting grew more intense as Elaine drew closer. She recognised
the chant dimly: it was a call to the ancestral spirits to cleanse the land. In the crowd she caught a glimpse of Radini's face, but before Elaine could call her name she disappeared behind a wall of people.

She waited for Radini to show some recognition of their past friendship. But Radini seemed cold and surly, and she deliberately ignored Ronnie. She served him a bowl of kava and immediately turned to the others and whispered something in Fijian. They tittered together, completely disregarding the visitors. Soon they started singing. Elaine clapped her hands softly as the music came back to her.

'It was like picture-postcard', Ronnie remarked as they drove back. 'The yellow moon, the soft singing, and the hush...' 'And friendly natives', she added looking into his eyes.

'And friendly natives', he smiled good-naturedly, and slipped his arm around her.

The village appeared again in her dream that night. She was being dragged into the sea between the dark boulders. She woke up in fright when the flower pot fell and cracked in the bedroom, spreading the red earth on the floor. Ronnie said it was the acoustics which caused the accident.

Her troubles with Ronnie started soon afterwards. She was edgy the moment they arrived at the Playhouse one Saturday night. After the play Ronnie decided they ought to stay back and talk to the players. Elaine moved in the gathering, aware only of the subdued voices over the tea-cups that crashed against the saucers, and the clicking of heels on the polished floor. She didn't care for Ronnie's observations to the players. Nor was she interested in striving assiduously to say the right things for him. She slipped her handbag into the crook of her arm and stepped outside.

The air was clear and restful. There wasn't a sound of traffic. She stood in the garden letting the cool night penetrate her body. She remained there for a long time, totally oblivious of who she was and why she was there.
Then it happened again. The leaves of the crotons began to move. A soft rustle at first, the next instant the wind leapt from the hedge to the ground in front of her, kicking and sucking and pulling at the hem of her dress. She thought she would never be able to move. Fighting against the weariness that was over-taking her, she pulled herself together and retraced her steps back to the Playhouse.

She didn’t speak to Ronnie in the car. She decided that moment he must leave her. She wanted to be free again. He had moved in with her on his own accord and now he had taken control over her whole existence. She wasn’t going to be crushed and humiliated by him any more. Once in the house, her distraught mind poured out all the dumb resentment it had stored up. Shocked by the violence of her reaction, he tried to calm her, holding her shoulder, ‘You’re hyper-sensitive. Overwrought. Let’s talk when you’re calmer’. She forced him away from her, without once looking at him. He sat on the edge of the bed for a long time, waiting for her to take control of herself. Suddenly he dived into the bathroom, grabbing his shirt from a chair. She heard the car pull out of the yard; the next moment it sped away towards Suva. She fell on the bed and wept with humiliation and rage.

Elaine was shaken from her thoughts by a soft scurrying movement in the corridor. Someone was walking towards the kitchen, stopped when the floorboard creaked. The muscles in her stomach knotted as she held her breath and waited. The feet started to move with anxious haste towards the back door. Before the figure disappeared, she caught a glimpse of the grinning profile, the long muslin dress and the diamonds on the fingers.

She jumped off the bed and rushed to the back door crying, ‘Seni... Senibulu!’ She looked out into the yard. There was no one about except a dog, which dozed peacefully on the lawn. The only thing unusual was that there was too much light all around. As she turned inside the leaves of the mango tree stirred frantically for a second and then everything was still. Next door, an Indian
girl stood erect in her garden, knife in hand.

She returned to her bedroom feeling surprisingly calm. She heard a dog bark in the neighbourhood. Then another and another, until the noise was like a wailing, skirmishing crowd.

The clock in the kitchen indicated 5:30 p.m. when she woke up. It was chilly and dark inside the house. She poured herself a glass of cold milk from the fridge and looked out the window. The clouds had turned charcoal black as night crept over the sea.

She went back to bed again. In the middle of the night she heard the waves pounding against the reef. She saw the foam splash on the dark boulders and a white line of waves receded into the cold primeval sea. Soon the pounding started again until it grew into a deafening boom. The reef cracked and the dark waters flowed into her head. She knew she was drowned.