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Abstract

By now, I should know how to do it. Begin. I look at the sheets of paper in front of me, blank except for: 'Bent over the lush grass', on one. 'Does she see the shadow pass?' on another. The sheet right on top is a pale, menacing yellow. It has blue lines running across it, straight and rigid.

GHITA HARIHARAN

Untitled Poem

By now, I should know how to do it. Begin.

I look at the sheets of paper in front of me, blank except for: 'Bent over the lush grass', on one. 'Does she see the shadow pass?' on another. The sheet right on top is a pale, menacing yellow. It has blue lines running across it, straight and rigid. I write in one long, narrow compartment,

If I could

and I falter. I look out of the window, waiting.

I am a retired salesman. They had better names for it; for once I did not have the last, or best, word.

I am a poet. You will notice that I do not say retired once again, in spite of the evidence.

When we moved to this house five years ago, the house which holds my life-savings in its solid heart of brick and stone, I had my desk placed right by the window.

The small garden, which was nothing but mud and weeds then, is my wife's territory. She has spent a lifetime growing minute, self-contained gardens in pots. When she saw the small stretch of land in front of the house, she didn't even want to go inside. 'I won't have a single pot here,' she said. 'No more pretend-gardens in the balcony on the seventh floor. Everything I grow now will dig its roots deep into the soil.'

I too made my promises and resolutions. Not to anyone but myself though; I have learnt, by necessity, to exercise my skill in private.

Five years later, Sarala's garden is no longer empty. The grass, the hedges, the green non-flowering plants she prefers, grow as if the earth pushed them upward. Even the twin trees she has planted, a neem and a peepal, are adolescent saplings. Already the patch below them is shady. They are ringed with clover and intricate little bursts of maidenhair fern.

Sarala's enemies are familiar, everyday creatures. The sparrows that pull apart the tendermost tips of plants; the occasional field rat that strays into the garden in the dead of night. My enemy is a chameleon. I have never seen him, but I know him well. He lurks behind my chair, only a word away. He is a dull, stupid animal given to platitudes.

Words still move me to tears. I am luckier than most people, I know. If I were to explain the last forty years, I could, if I wanted, blot out the long

meetings on how to sell more bulbs and tubelights. The two slim but hard cover books on my shelf will speak for me. So will the short biography I wrote of a little known poet from Kerala. He lived in a small village of fishermen all his life. He wrote of thatched huts that let in the rain and the sharp, pungent smell of fish drying in the sun. He wrote of boat after boat setting out on a moonlit sea. But his sea was a choppy, awesome stranger, a hard taskmaster. His fishermen never sang of happy times.

I wrote about this simple, earthy poet the year I retired. That was, I think, the happiest year of my life.

That was also when Sarala and I began all over again, in a new house, in a new town. We began our second lives; she at her muddy patch, spade in hand; and I at my desk, cleared at last of everything but pure, unadulterated poetry.

By midmorning, I can no longer put off the blank sheets of paper that Sarala has laid out on the table. For a few moments before I begin my day's work, several decades roll one into the other and I look at my life as if I were someone else. I see myself as I used to be. I see the years when I would pick up the pen every night, trying to make a beginning. The middle is more friendly.

I went home from the stale, smoky, tubelights office and struggled, like a fish thrown ashore, till a single word sucked me in like a gentle, blessed wave. I wrote page after page, and it lay before me as if its pattern was predestined, a complete, whole poem.

There is something else that grows inside now. The ulcer in my stomach blocks the way of all nourishment. My own words no longer move me. I stumble on to something I wrote ten, fifteen years ago and surprise myself. (I ration these deliberate forays into the past.)

The lyrical image gets stuck somewhere in the throat. By the time I have it on my lips, guide it down the pen to paper, it is cold. Brittle, insubstantial. An old man's nonsense rhyme.

Sarala does not understand poetry. But she likes to hear me read it out – or used to, in the days when we still thought marriage meant doing things together. Now, in the evenings, we eat early – boiled vegetables, rice, a glass of cold milk each. She does not have an ulcer but she shares my diet. Our dinners are austere, serious affairs. If we had children, perhaps the small talk of other households, grandchildren, other people's private sorrows, would have filled our spare, half empty plates.

After dinner Sarala sits on one of the two big armchairs in the living-room and puts on her thin, gold-rimmed glasses.

Her face is round, and so is her body. She wears dull quiet colours, muddy browns and dusty greys. She peers into her book like a wise old owl. Her book – she looks at the same one most nights – lists seeds and seasons for planting and pruning.

I have my reading to get on with too. I try not to read during the day – you learn that if you have walked a tightrope for a lifetime – and you

make choices. You can do this or that. Too many drugs clog the intestines. The ulcer has only reached the tip of my oesophagus. It waits at the door to my stomach, cunning and patient.

The other night I dreamt I was in a windowless, bare hall lit by harsh, merciless floodlights. The walls were lined with shiny mirrors that made the hall even brighter. I felt the cold sweat pouring out of my armpits and down the sides of my body. I ran around, looking for a small window or at least a crack, but I found nothing. Then I took a deep breath and felt my feet lift off the ground, inch by inch, till my head brushed against the ceiling. I could see nothing now; everything was one big burst of white, dowdy light. The ceiling felt like melting wax. I pushed my head through it, then my shoulders. I flew into the cool night sky, floating aimlessly.

I don't like this dreaming of the past though. I woke up in a sweat, and found myself in the familiar, reassuring darkness, Sarala snoring by my side. I willed myself to sleep again.

What I would like to dream is this: I stand on the shore of a vast, choppy sea, and the sight fills me with a strange longing. Before I know what I am doing, I bend over, pick up the sea and shake out the folds and wrinkles. When I lay it back it is a clean, thick sheet of smooth, glowing water.

Sarala has an old gardener to help her three times a week. Bent over my sheet of paper, my pen hesitating between the words magical and enchanted, I hear their low voices, exchanging professional secrets. They make a good team. She is the navigator, he the oarsman. Or I could say, she is the poet, he the word. Their alliance is blessed by hardy offspring, mostly commonplace foliage that thrives despite changes in weather.

Sarala does not believe in newfangled insecticides and hormonal growth helpers. But her ferns are a luminous green. Little black dots line their undersides at regular intervals. Her pale pink anthurium has a corn-like centre-point, framed by skin that looks delicate, but is thick and enduring.

In the Introduction to my first volume of poetry – the result of ten years' work – the critic who agreed to write a short note on my work described me as an organic poet. 'The fragile lyrical image is firmly bound to earth in these poems,' he wrote.

What he did not write in the Introduction he said to me: 'Look, there is some congenital weakness in your poetry. Your poems remind me of a beautiful clockwork doll that drones the same mild, soft-spoken complaint day after day.'

We have no children, but Sarala does not seem to miss them. She has covered one corner of the garden with spider plants. 'I know they are common,' she says. 'But they fill up all the empty spaces so quickly!' Her other favourite is the portulaca. As it creeps along, the vine grows and spreads, flowering along the way.

I look at the nearly empty sheet before me.

*Tell me, koel, when you heard him last,
My little boy in the wooded past—*

I see the fruit of tired loins. The images I have hoarded over the years, like ripening embryos, are soft and rotten.

Sarala's wards are also in danger. For the past week, I hear cries of alarm from the garden every morning. She sounds like a small animal in pain.

'It's been here again,' she calls to me. 'See what that rat has done to my rubber plant.' Even before I go out to her, I can see her plump face screwed up, like a child about to cry.

This rodent is no ordinary enemy. He picks on the most lush, the most fecund of her plants. He digs deep into the soil and pulls wildly at the roots. He leaves no tracks but Sarala and the gardener find the uprooted, torn shreds of stalks and leaves every day. He does not eat any of it. It is a song of pure destruction.

A week later, the suspense freezes my already vacillating pen. I can no longer pretend to write. I know that if I look up, I will see Sarala's red, swollen eyes, her thick, chapped fingers slowly conducting a burial of the night's casualties.

I put away my sheets of paper and buy a wooden trap. The first night I fill it with cheap sweets from the market. The rodent ignores it completely.

'Let's give him what he wants,' I tell Sarala, and I fill up the trap with roots and leaves, organic offerings.

One more night. Neither of us needs the alarm clock to wake up. I rush out into the garden before Sarala. I see the trap, the drying leaves and roots clumped together like a nest, but no rodent. He has not been fooled by the ageing poet.

'What do we do?' wails Sarala. I make another trip to the market. I buy poison this time, six packets of it, ten grams in each.

I line the floor of the trap with cardboard and empty the packets, enough to kill five rats, on to the board.

The next day, I remove the untouched poison and summon Sarala.

'We can't be so obvious,' I tell her.

We pack the poison into crisp, freshly fried vadas. The three big, doughy blobs shine in the dark and stain the wooden trap with oil.

That night I don't get into bed at all. I sit by the window, listening carefully for sounds other than Sarala's gentle snoring. Even my imagination fails me: I don't hear a thing.

Some days later, I realize I have a mission at last. I will see him, confront him and conquer him. He is no elusive, disappearing image. He is a hairy, solid beast, a creature of blood and slime.

I spend the night outside, waiting. The whispery rustling of the leaves fills me with a childish fear. I can't remember when I was out in a garden

at night before. Before the ulcer perhaps? Or the years of racing between bright, glaring tubelights and pages of melancholy poetry?

I feel the goose-pimples on my bare arms. I could go inside the house and get myself a sweater, but I am afraid of being cheated again.

I lie instead near the thick bush of creeping jasmine and invoke my familiar, wordy saviours.

*The heaving roses of the hedge are stirred
By the sweet breath of summer.*

I remember this. I also remember:

*I have loved flowers that fade
Within whose magic tents
Rich hues have marriage made
With sweet unmemorised scents.*

A thin filmy cloud passes slowly across my eyes, now myopic with age. It's too late to disentangle vanity and vocation, desire and depth. All the images the jasmine evokes in me – a reluctant salesman, an almost-poet, a sterile householder – are borrowed. I have written for a lifetime about petals kissed by dewdrops and the shy, unseen blossom in the heart of leafy bushes. I have never heard a koel sing. Sarala is no lotus but a thick-skinned yam that grows coarse and pungent under the moist soil.

Towards morning, a faint but persistent rustling and scurrying wakes me up. My arms and legs are stiff and cold on the wet grass. My head feels as if it is tightly wrapped in a thick fog.

I lie here, my body frozen and immobile. But I can hear everything. I can hear her enemy, now mine, at work with his long, sharp teeth. Chopping, cutting, laying waste our hard earned patch of green.

As he bites and spits, I can hear him mocking an old man's dreams. Fame, wisdom, love, the nectar-laden words of a patriarch.

I see nothing, but I sense him moving near my head. He pauses, as if to take measure of his opponent. Then I hear him again, but he is no longer in a hurry. He takes his time, careful to pull apart every root and leaf in the long row of verdant, fecund spider plants.

He is so absorbed, so inspired, that he is still at it when Sarala finds the two of us. She has a large stick in her hand which she brings down on his bristly back. She gets him the first time.

I have always thought rats squeal, but this one grunts, a deep, angry growl that grows and grows out of his stomach.

I can feel the thick, sticky slime of his blood, his last poem, spurting on to my numb, outstretched hands. He has left nothing for me to do but write an epitaph.