

Over Seas  
Christine Williams

*This trip reminds me of S.I. Ramanujan.  
Who?  
S.I. Do you know him?  
No. Who is he?  
A great mathematician.  
Oh. No, perhaps we don't know him so well in the West. Does he still live in India – or has he migrated?  
No, no, no. Fifty years ago, a hundred, maybe more ... he was a very dear friend of Mr Thomas Hardy. Do you know Thomas Hardy?  
Yes, I know **of** him. Of course. Tess is a rare ...  
Yes, he visited Thomas Hardy in England – and he wrote of this trip afterwards.*

Such is the tenor of the conversations I have from Sydney with Kriya,<sup>1</sup> a Bangalore student of 'The Beats', in the lead-up to his first overseas trip for poetry readings and a lecture tour in Australia. Kriya is going through a major transformation, from chrysalis to butterfly or bee. It's a delight to witness, or rather to hear, the changes floating down the phone line.

I'm left wondering what the great S.I. thought and wrote about England, what the friendship consisted of, and what Kriya himself thinks of the bewitched and tragic Tess, who sacrificed her all – security, domesticity, honour. All for love. For love alone, as the equally courageous Christina Stead would have said. And where did Tess end up? On the vast, cruel, windswept Salisbury Plain, where I'd wandered among the massive pillars of Stonehenge on my first trip to England twenty years ago, marvelling at their vast size and astronomical accuracy, with Hardy's magnificent fallen woman on my mind. A woman to be admired. But not emulated, surely? I don't have a chance to contribute these thoughts to the conversation as Kriya is off again on another creative whimsy.

*You know, I'd like to give a friend of mine who's writing an essay – not an essay, more like an extended letter or diary, or even memoir, it's fictional – I'd like to give her one delicate, Dravidian, ancient Sangam poem that I know from the hills of Karnataka, about an exquisite butterfly, injured, that lands on a young man's shoulders and, to assist her, he flies further than he's ever imagined, back to her water country ...*

But wait, I'm thinking .... If only I could get a grip on the first part of this conversation in the midst of the strident traffic noise accompanying Kriya as he explains that he's 'on the road'. I dare not cross-examine him about detail or I'll be

<sup>1</sup> Both a Tamil and Sanskrit name for a man meaning 'literary composition, energy, ability, knowledge or accomplishment'.

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distracted from the entrancing pleasure of following the natural flow of his thoughts. But I recall I have heard of a brilliant Indian mathematician from South India who had a friendship with a Trinity College, Cambridge, mathematician called G.H. Hardy, not the novelist, Thomas. Some story about G.H. Hardy visiting the Indian fellow in hospital in London and complaining about a taxicab registration plate number being boring and therefore a bad omen – whatever that might mean in the language of numbers and the minds of numbers men – and the Indian fellow putting him right, explaining that it wasn't a boring number at all, in fact it was the smallest number for ... something to do with two cubes. Who even knows now what the number was? These characters – the mathematicians – were around in the early 1900s, as was Thomas Hardy. So Thomas Hardy may even have got into the mathematical mix – there's no way I can refute it. Regardless, Kriya may be forgiven for confusing these two Hardys – novelist and mathematician – from such a distant past and exotic culture as pre-WWI Britain. Now, at least, I won't have to ponder Tess's fate any further, the back of my mind is advising my frontal lobes, as I tune in again to Kriya's buzzing mobile phone commentary.

For Kriya, who's about the same age now as I was when I wandered in the midst of Stonehenge, is just testing his wings in the wide world, after many years of hardship – that is, financial penury and emotional frustration on a scale still common in India and rare in Australia. These days he has purpose and, suddenly, too much to do. When I first met him he told me he was a poet. Good heavens, I thought, that's not a serious endeavour for a young man who wants to make something of himself! 'Take care, womankind,' was my second thought, as I was wary of the emotional mire into which a girlfriend of mine plunged when she fell in love with one of his ken. This fellow needs to be rescued from his own entangling romantic maze, this soft-focus view of himself – or he'll end up fat, forty and financially broke, I figured. Soon I discovered he was fixed on the idea of a literary life, and had received several awards in support of his fixation.

A year later, as we chat on the phone, he has a lot on his mind that needs attending to. He's completing an MPhil on 'Beat' poetry, sitting exams for a teaching certificate, helping to organise an international literary conference, all while applying for a visa for the brief research and lecture visit to Australia. I thought a tourist visa would be easy and quick to obtain, and would suffice for his recreational and research purposes, but I should have realised nothing is quick and easy in India, and a tourist visa impossible to obtain without extensive financial records to prove you have the wherewithal to get yourself back to India for good. As Kriya explains ... and I find out when I am called on – along with his father, his academic supervisor and various other authority figures – to provide testimony of the authenticity of Kriya's intellectual intentions in Australia and his financial support in India. The paperwork is all very trying and long-winded, and Kriya is so stressed he ends up in bed with what he calls a 'compressed disc' – not the 'full slipped disc' he suffered a few years back, he reassures himself. But it's so debilitating that he has to call on his many sympathetic classmates and friends to type his thesis bibliography. Before he reaches that stage of deterioration (which I note lasts just a few days – long enough for the bibliography to be completed) he's quite surprised that he's become so competent, able to switch from adminstrivia required by the travel agent for submission of his visa application, to the demands of deep thinking in pulling the strands of his thesis on

Dravidian poetry together.

*It reminds me of Napoleon.*

*What does?*

*What is happening to my mind.*

*What is happening to it?*

*Napoleon was famous, you know, for being able to move instantly from one thinking task to another. Without a trouble. Smoothly.*

*Oh, yes, I'm sure he had a great mind.*

I'm wanting to talk about Napoleon's 'common man' approach to military generalship, how he would actually lead his troops into battle, on horseback admittedly, but prepared to face the enemy with full courage and thereby instill confidence in his men – in contrast to the weaselly politicians of today who send young men to their deaths in the far-flung reaches of Iraq or Afghanistan – even Pakistan – on some pretext of national security, with crocodile weeping for the boys' mothers during national media conferences where these spin doctors savour their own self-righteous cant. Yet, still on the question of Napoleon's greatness, I see clearly that despite his valour, he was an aggressive expansionist, put simply, a self-appointed monarch and autocrat, an egomaniac who rampaged and killed in the name of the splendour of the French nation, and finally failed to defeat the even more forceful English imperialists at Waterloo. Even so, he loved Josephine with a single passion and she was not a young woman when he met her. He was struck by her 'spirit, sweetness and beauty' as well as her older woman's 'mystique'.

*The bare root of the bean is pink  
like the leg of a jungle hen,  
and herds of deer attack its overripe pods.*

*For the harshness  
of this season of morning dew  
there is no cure  
but the breast of my man.<sup>2</sup>*

But I don't have a chance to offer Kriya any ideas of links between concepts of universal love, and legends about commoners and kings that cross cultural boundaries, for he's off and away on his own Napoleonic fancies.

*You see, I can perfectly leave the visa business and go into my writing without a trouble. Then I'm called back to the documents, and the phone calls, and the bother I'm causing my father who has to give up his financial details. Do you think it will be OK if the date on the bank statement is not able to be read – you see it is smudged – will it be acceptable, do you think, after all? As I am saying, I will leave all these matters, and perfectly return to my thoughts, to carry on till the end of the chapter. It's a surprise to me. I can create categories and move from one box to another.*

<sup>2</sup> 'Allur Nanmullai Kuruntokai 68', A.K. Ramanujan (tr) *Poems of Love and War* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985) 21.

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And I recall Kriya's last summer lounging about at his home in hill country in the south, once his Uni course had ended. His voice resonated, deep and heavy from sleeping in, the intense tropical heat taking over his body and mind, his soporific stupor punctuated by a fan's regular clicking through the heavy background soundscape of blaring traffic and crows cawing, the inevitable crows of India seeping into the texture of my life in Australia.

*What will I do, he would ask me? This is my last chance to get 'on the track'. I must take it – and help my father. I don't want to be a burden. But what must I do next?*

*The answer lies with God, I'd tell him over and over.*

Kriya's thoughts would veer between the frantic and the dulled. Any effort to haul himself out of his familial village life seemed overwhelming. Today he exhibits a completely different, invigorated mindset and I respond in kind.

*Yes, the mind is remarkable, isn't it? So versatile and powerful. The Buddhists picture a classification system in their minds as an aid to memory, imagining the mind as a great library, so they can mentally walk down aisle after aisle, turning into row after row, reaching into box after box for folder after folder to catalogue a piece of information or retrieve it.*

*Which Buddhists are they?*

*Tibetan Buddhists.*

*Oh, I see. I can do the same.*

To be able to swap ideas about the nature and capacity of one's mind with someone is a wondrous thing. To attempt to keep track of one's thinking. To watch its working. These are the conversations we share.

And then there are the reflections about Kriya's love of 'thinai' poetry, and his recitation:

*What She Said*

*Bigger than earth, certainly,  
higher than the sky,  
more unfathomable than the waters  
is this love for this man*

*of the mountain slopes  
where bees make rich honey  
from the flowers of the kurinci  
that has such black stalks.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> 'Tevakulattar Kuruntokai 3', Ramanujan 5.

Then Kriya's projections about what lies ahead in his life follow:

*I've been thinking about what Australia will be like. I'm a little bit frightened, you see. I won't know anyone else – except for you. Oh, yes, there is someone – he's the son of the First Minister of our state. What do you think, shall I meet him?*

*Of course, you must meet him. But where does he live? Is he in Sydney or another city?*

*I don't know. I'm not sure. I have not the details yet.*

*Well, I hope he's in Sydney because it would be costly to visit him in another city. Try to find out soon, eh?*

*I will. And another concern – there will be none of my friends. You will be working.*

*No, I'll organise the talks for you, and work with some of my coaching clients, but I'll still have a lot of time to be with you. And you'll meet new people. You can wander off to explore on your own, too. You're used to being on your own, you know. You live alone in the hostel ...*

*Not that way. It's another thing.*

*Is it the distance? It's not much further than Delhi, really, and you were fine there on your own.*

*It's leaving the land. Travelling over seas. I had a dream that all the passengers were preparing to crash into the sea... all was calm ... but then I think that it was just my imagination, thinking fearful thoughts before I went to sleep. Not a real dream.*

*(Whatever that is, a 'real' dream, I wonder.)*

*It will be great, Kriya, just great. You'll love it. And isn't it such a lucky thing that you've chosen Australia, that you're coming to a country where the people are so friendly? Besides, where's your sense of adventure? You know, a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains ...<sup>4</sup>*

No plantation or hill country. No field or coppice. I think of Tess, for some reason.

*As I walked over Salisbury Plain  
Oh, there I met this scamping young blade.  
He kissed me and enticed me so ...<sup>5</sup>*

Then, once the visa is lodged, a new phase. Not a word, not a comment about the journey now imminent. Kriya seems to be positively cosmopolitan. It's all the same to him: here, there, anywhere. He has his first ever job, you see, and it's consuming his full attention. Coming completely out of the wide blue yonder. Paid employment – to start immediately. He had explained that he first had to go to Australia, but he's been told he must begin work straight away, and then take leave, if permitted, for the ten-

<sup>4</sup> Dorothea Mackellar's poem 'Core of My Heart' (later 'A Sunburnt Country') was written while she was living as an expatriate in London in 1908.

<sup>5</sup> 'Salisbury Plain' collected in 1904 by Ralph Vaughan Williams for *The Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*.



day trip. He's been appointed a research assistant to a professor at the prestigious IIT – the Institute of Indian Technology – in Bangalore where all those greatly-admired engineers and IT specialists exported to multinational companies in London, New York and California hail from.

*So is the professor impressed that you're coming to Australia?*

*I suppose. But that's not why he chose me.*

*Why did he choose you?*

*He saw me at the hospital.*

*(Is this about his back, I wonder?)*

*Were you in hospital, Kriya?*

*Not I. My friend.*

*Which friend?*

*Dinesh. I went to visit him there. And I was talking to his professor.*

*So it was like a job interview in the hospital ward?*

*He was impressed by two things. One was that I was a good friend, that I had visited Dinesh when he needed me. The second thing was that I was doing my MPhil. I didn't say that I was a poet. I don't think that people are impressed by it.*

*(No kidding!)*

*Poets aren't usually too reliable, eh?*

*No. (He laughs.)*

I'm not the only one looking out for Kriya's material future, it seems. I've noticed that he attracts Good Samaritans wherever he goes. People feel they need to protect him from his gentle compassionate nature, I'm sure. Bolster him. Tend to his needs. Just like all those girls in Cochin who flutter about, offering to translate his poetry at the blink of an eye.

*But surely he snapped you up once he heard that you would be coming on a lecture tour to Australia?*

*No, it is as I say.*

*What hours do you work?*

*Oh, the professor decides my hours. I come when he says, and I leave when he says.*

*Oh, that sounds perfect. Are you a slave then?*

*Yes, that is right. But at the end of the month will come the pay.*

*Yes, there's a name for that. Do you know what it is?*

*No.*

*You're a wage slave.*

*Yes, a wage slave. But every job has the same, isn't it? The same conditions, or similar. You must do what the boss says.*

*But what about your trip? Are you thinking about it? Are you happy, excited, about coming?*

*Cherie, you must know that these days we have a very good idea about other countries, from internet and television, and so forth.*

He hasn't got a clue, but how can I tell him so without seeming to belittle him. To live the experience of a foreign culture is on another scale completely from watching a documentary.

*OK. But are you happy about it still?*

*(He's snickering.)*

*Why do you laugh? What is it?*

*I'm wondering how many times you will ask me that question. Do Australians really care so much about whether I am happy to see their country?*

Sharp-witted and usually gentle is Kriya. He's very adept in the realm of the emotions, mostly projecting sensitivity, careful not to cause offence. A mother's boy, he's admiring of a senior feminist lecturer in Cochin, is always keen to improve his English through constructive criticism, and to learn about other cultures. Suddenly there seems to be a strengthening of his volition and his backbone. Maybe it's the professor's influence and the research subject Kriya has been given: Masculine Studies. A coming of age.

*What She Said*

*to her girl friend*

*On the tall hill*

*where the short-stemmed nightshade quivers,*

*a squatting cripple*

*sights a honey hive*

*above,*

*points to the honey,*

*cups his hands,*

*and licks his fingers;*

*so too,*

*even if one's lover*

*doesn't love or care,*

*it still feels good*

*inside*

*just to see him*

*now and then.<sup>6</sup>*

So I'm held in suspense – waiting, wondering. Will Kriya's deceptively delicate butterfly wings provide enough resilience to negotiate the fierce southerlies of the Indian Ocean, allowing him to show off so many glittering hues in Sydney? Is his bee sting potent enough to close the watery gap between a 'sub' continent and the 'great south land'?

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<sup>6</sup> 'Paranar Kurutokai 60', Ramanujan 15.

I'll find out soon enough – once he dons the woolly 'sweaters' needed for wintry August in Australia. No perspiration required. At least he won't have to face snow, as did S.I. Ramanujan, who at first resisted the idea of voyaging from his home in South India to England for further study, due to religious restrictions on travelling abroad. Yet once transported, S.I. remained a deeply religious mathematician, praising the hillside goddess Namagiri, for his talent, and declaring to the world beyond his cloistered culture that, 'an equation for me has no meaning unless it expresses a thought of God.' S.I.'s theorems are now used extensively in computer science, a basis for the information explosion overtaking the entire globe.

'Her arms across her breast she laid; She was more fair than words can say,' Kriya recites to me along a fibre optic phone line before he packs his mobile away. At last, a beggar girl makes good as a king lifts her up out of poverty. 'This beggar maid shall be my queen!' Tennyson declared in a universal aesthetic of hope for the salvation of the pure and beautiful ones through love alone.<sup>7</sup>

Recognition of the poem across ages and cultures, space and time, hints that in sharing a common language, we commonly share a colonial literary mind, the product of English culture predating even the Hardys' day, snippets of which we've archived in our respective thought-vaults. All filed in separate catalogues and dispersed among disparate societies as part of the one mind that is God, some forms labelled 'exotic', some called 'home page'.

Now fully prepped, carrying a head full of poetry and a backpack slung over his shoulder, Kriya reinforces his protective sting for travelling as his hard sheath of chrysalis falls away, thrusting him forward to take flight.

The saga climaxes beside Sydney's great well of a gleaming harbour, as Kriya uses his natural tongue to speak a universal language, gifting me a divine offering, pure poetry flowing directly from his ancestors.

*What She Said*

*Like moss on water  
in the town's water tank,*

*this body's pallor  
clears*

*as my lover touches  
and touches*

*and spreads again,  
as he lets go,*

*as he lets go.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Beggar Maid' by Alfred Lord Tennyson published in 1842, shortly after the Napoleonic era.

<sup>8</sup> 'Paranar Kuruntokai 399', Ramanujan 30.