

Letter from Mutur

Slowing wearily the bus comes to a cautious halt some way from the next checkpoint. Those who must, get off, they queue silently, between makeshift barriers. The contents of each one's bag painfully neatly folded for the ease of police fingers. Identity cards are scrutinised, presented without being requested, avoiding using a second language unnecessarily. Then in the dusty shade of an oleander tree we wait for the final search of the bus to end.

The evening sky's indigo glow sets the first star's brightness beautifully. I walk back through the jasmine scented dusk. On my way are European designed 'tsunami housing', older homes with war reconstruction 'U.N. roofs', finally the still empty shells of buildings standing in memorial to human darkness. An old man passes me in a white lace skullcap, his broken backed shoes seem not to quite fit. My gaze follows him past the noisy night food stalls. Unsurely displaced from itself the road seems busy and empty all at once.

At the Buddhist vihara the monk in orange robes beckons from its Hindu shrines' bright yellow walls. A smothering cloud of incense engulfs burning oil lamps and camphor. Unattended ceremonial sweet rice boils over, burning slightly. Wearing chalk-paste on their brows and bemused smiles, incongruously barefooted policemen hold half-coconuts filled with flowers for the brightly painted Gods. Towering above, inside the shadow of the stupa's dome, a rainbow coloured Buddha gazes inward and beyond.

After midnight I watch the surreal serenity of phosphorous red tracer bullets in the sky. They silhouette the dome of the gently crumbling Kali temple. Distant explosions echo, booming over the bay. Then the air vibrates with impotent rapid rifle fire, a search light sweeps the clouds. Soon only a sporadic handgun breaks the silence. My neighbours wearied by memory usher me inside. The next morning as I cycle past unyielding dry paddies, children laugh grabbing at a fish trapped in a muddy pool deep in the irrigation canal.

Some weeks later, hours of standing are lightened by the transformation of the monsoon rains. At every turn fluorescent green shoots rush up to the window, as the bus lurches from rut to wheel-deep rut. Wedged in the cramped aisle, blue sky is only visible on the unbroken waters held by the paddies' earth embankments. Reflecting the sun, once dry dust is now dazzling. Along these thick mud walls a great shimmering peacock dances.