

## Letter from Batticaloa

Making for the bridge chased by lazy drops of rain, I pass a solitary crane keeping evening vigil. Her grayness dissolves into the lagoon's silver reflections of dusk. Under her feet a slowly rusting post is twisting imperceptibly from the swirling generations of eddies. Shrouded in the shadows of the shoreline, fishermen brace themselves after an explosion of thunder. As darkness is created the crane exercises her wings and rises.

The day's last light rests on the bridge's barricades, gilding sand bagged bunkers and shining off wet gun-metal. I slow my pace and raise a broad smile from the three officers in dripping raincoats. Tomorrow, I'll hear that they died in the night. A grenade was thrown inside the darkness of their bunker's grills. The sky rumbles, rain splatters erratically in the heavy atmosphere of a threatening storm that doesn't break. Below, by landed boats partially lamp-lit shadows squat sheltering by their evenings catch. I make for a small temple's porch; there is no shelter on the exposed bridge.

Pitch blackness lives between the unattended square walls of the shrine. Stepping backward I lean forward as my eyes oscillate, orientating themselves on scattered devotional clutter. Beyond the central faded curtain, brooding inaccessibly, an austere carved head and a trunk roughly lined three times with chalk paste. The guttering light of a single ghee wick burns, absorbed and charged by the stone's dullness. There's deafening thunder overhead as a cool breeze of drizzle comes. I find myself moving further backwards towards the road. I reach it quieted by the places authenticity; the fine spray of rain soaks me slowly.

Earlier, in the white mid-morning sun I'd stood barefoot in hot sand by an old man as he was being shaved. Around him with razor and bowl his son-in-law and daughter. Their love for one another gently crosses the boundaries that many make cause for hate. A way off was their son was preparing coconut-water, his life defying the revenging cycles of death. The old man's neck strained defiantly upwards, its bones and sinews looking like mangrove roots. By the mangroves at dawn, a kayak rested filled with a weakly lit net folding round itself out of the darkness.

I watch a pelican's ungainly flapping as it sags close to the still lagoon. The muted grey waters glow as if the sun were rising from within them. Egrets perch on makeshift posts and balanced silent storks grow from the water like odd lotuses. The fishermen's progress causes gentle ripples, their shapes indistinguishable from the boat's shadow. As the light forms, the occasional rhythmic plunging paddle makes the only sound.