

Spaces of Illiteracy · *Padma Perera*

an excerpt from *Sumi Spaces* #1

The Japanese school of Sumi painting says:
if you depict a bird in a scroll, you should
paint it with enough space around it so
that it can fly.

Tirunelveli

At age five, in this small town in the very far south of India, I refuse to be made literate. Learning to read and write means learning to read and write in English, that legacy left by the British; and now that the time has come for me to go to school, my great-aunt—peppery, fiercely nationalistic—says: “So? The British will leave shortly and we’ll be independent. But you? You will still be a slave. You’ll learn their language and have them on your tongue forever.” So the first day of school I mount my revolution and run away, and they have a rule thereafter that the gates should be kept shut.

That evening we are walking down the path from the house to the river, my mother and I, and I yell: I won’t go to school. I won’t be a slave. I won’t, I won’t.

First she says “Nonsense!” as we pause to examine the spinnerets of a cobweb on the jackfruit tree. “How can learning make you a slave? At most, it tells you how other people live with their language as we do with ours. Tools for the mind, like clothes for the body, you see?”

I won’t see and I won’t look at the cobweb and I won’t go to school, and I keep yelling it all out at the same time at the top of my voice until we come to a dead stop. She kneels down right there on the path, so our eyes can meet on a level. “Look,” she says. “Learning is not a bitter pill for you to swallow, making faces. It is an honour, a gift. The day you come to me with a paper and a pencil, and say ‘I want to learn how to read and write,’ you shall. Not until then. You don’t deserve it.” If you are stubborn with Amma, she is stubborn right back at you; but even when she isn’t on your side, somehow she is.

We keep our pact. I begin two years of glorious illiteracy, a period, I subsequently realize, of which I have almost total recall; for the world around me is my only book. I learn about herbs and herbal medicine; plant myths; river myths; stories of the guardian demiurges round about. Their life-size sculptures stand at the threshold to each village, all facing north, whence come all calamities.

Sudalaimadan is the most powerful. He has a high hat, like an archbishop, a fierce black moustache, bulging eyes; and he brandishes a sword with his right hand while his left rests on a murderous club, painted magenta. He can take any form he wishes . . . an elephant; a man on a white horse in coat and breeches; a bull trampling the crops; a pig; a bear. If you hear an unexplained scream in the middle of the night, it is Sudalaimadan calling his brother to come catapulting out of the underworld: *help! something has happened!* And if you hear equally unexplained weeping at midday, don't go anywhere near, don't. It is Isakki, disguised as a lovely sixteen-year-old. There is also the *pei*, the ghost, of an Englishman who died in battle, and needs to be given brandy, a cigar, Western bread, and a pair of leather boots hung from a branch. You have to accomodate their quirks. In the southwest corner of a nearby Hindu temple lives a Muslim *pei*. Why he chooses that habitat, nobody knows. What he wants, everybody knows. *Ganja*: pot. Leave him a bit every night, and he'll leave you alone.

"That's the trouble," I quaver to Ramu, the gardener. "There are so many. How am I to know what each one wants?"

"Simple," says Ramu. "Just as you'd be careful with snakes. You don't be too curious, or cross them; and they won't be curious or cross you."

"But suppose I walk over one and don't even know it's there?"

"Simple," he says again. "Keep a bunch of neem twigs with you. You can ward them all off with that."

Thereafter I carry neem twigs wherever I go, sleep with some under my pillow at night, and in situations that demand circumspection, secretly tuck a few leaves into the elastic of my knickers, until a red ant crawls out from among those leaves and bites my belly.

Ramu it is who also knows about herbs. He has planned a medicinal garden—"right there, beyond the neem tree." He points to the open space south of the house and makes a square shape with his hands.

"So close to the neem?"

"Not so close, just close enough. *She* lives there."

"Who?"

"Shitala. The cool one. Goddess of the pox. Seated on a swing."

From where we stand, the neem tree looks rather cloudy in the distance, but up close the leaves are fretted nervous and delicate above the chunky grain of the bark, and shapes move among them.

"Have you seen her?"

Ramu spits accurately into the jasmine bush. "What is there to see? If anyone is sick with the pox and you break off even a small branch and fan the invalid—*then* you'll see. When they get better, if you put neem leaves into the water for the first bath—*then* you'll see." He squats down and starts to weed the jasmine bush, slapping my hands away when I try to help. "You don't know anything. This is my work."

So I find a blade of grass to chew and squat by him. "Who told you all this?" I don't have to explain what.

"The priest in our village. Not like the others, mumbling mantras all the time. *He* grew his herbs right by the temple courtyard. He could heal. People came from everywhere."

"He had power?" I ask, awed.

"Nah," Ramu says scornfully. "Not power. Just plants." Reaching up, he strokes the jasmine leaves with his muddy fingers. He smells of that mud, and his sweat, and a kind of knowing, very sure of itself. "The priest told me you should always plant *tulasi* in the centre, to keep evil away: never pluck the leaves on a Thursday or a Saturday; never boil them, that will torment the soul of the plant. He said—" Ramu struggles, trying to twist his tongue around the Sanskrit words to get them

right. "He said: *tulasi-tulana-nasti, ataeva-tulasi*. . . . It means, nothing can equal the goodness of the *tulasi*." For a moment, the priest speaks solemnly from his mouth. Then Ramu returns to his daily voice, matter-of-fact. "That is what I will plant first in my garden." He makes the square shape with his hands once more, and jabs it in the middle.

"What else?"

"*Datura*."

"*Datura*!" Not those huge, trumpet-shaped, white flowers that hang face downward, as if ashamed of their own poison!

"Yes," Ramu says, surer than ever. "The thing with poison, if you can see it to tell it, you can sometimes use it. But I wouldn't use the blossom anyway, only the leaves. Spread them over a swelling of the joints, bind them down with a wet cloth. . . ." In the pause, a green damp seeps through. "And *nellikai*. You think it's just like a gooseberry? Nah. Purifies the blood. Oh, and senna for constipation." He pats his stomach; he weeds some more; I chew my grass-blade down to its end. The river spangles through the trees, the sun is hot.

"You look at some plants . . ." at first he seems to be talking to himself. ". . . and you think oh yes, very nice, very pretty, that's all. Oleanders. Do you know—" his turbaned head comes down close "—their roots, ground up, can cure skin diseases? You don't know. See? What did I tell you? You don't know anything."

Satisfied, he pulls out another weed, and I find another grass-blade to chew, and think about oleanders.

"Some," Ramu continues, "you don't even have to plant. They grow by themselves. Like *neglu-mulloo*."

Who would ever want to plant *neglu-mulloo*, I wonder to myself. They are all over the wild grounds behind the house. Round, spiked thorns, prickly whichever way you turn them, so they stick to your clothes and skin and have to be pried painfully loose, one by one. "Make a tea with them," Ramu advises me. "Just boil in hot water. Drink it if you have trouble peeing. . . . And those yellow flowers by the back gate—"

I remember the old book my father showed me from his library, with engraved illustrations and Latin names I can't read, though I love the sound of them. "Yes. Father calls it *cassia* . . . *cassia* . . ." my turn to struggle now. "*Cassia auriculata*."

"I don't know all that." Ramu waves a dismissing hand. "All I know is, keep those flowers in a bowl of water to bathe your eyes whenever they get sticky and scratchy with pus."

I blink. The house, the garden, the river, disappear. My eyes stick, and then un-stick, healed.

"And see over there?" You can easily miss the small round leaves he's pointing at, except for their stench. But this time I know better than to offer my father's name for it, which is *ruta graveolens*: syllable by syllable, I've learned it again for the love of its sound. "Wards off snakes. And the leaves are just the thing for certain kinds of snake-bites. Also certain kinds of fits." Suddenly he is shaking all over, and falls back on the grass, writhing and flailing about. Then he opens one eye. "That is, if the smell of those leaves in the first place isn't enough to cure you even before you start. But don't tell anybody."

I haven't. Not until now.

And there is the river. All the dry season long, it is just a thread of silver, winding through the vast white sand-bed where washermen spread out clothes to dry in the sun. But during the monsoons it swirls full and tempestuous, drowning trickle and sand-bed alike as it swells and tosses from bank to bank, the exact colour of very milky tea. . . . At the marriage of Shiva and Parvathi on holy Kailas (Mount Everest) the presence of all the gods who gathered at the wedding tilted the earth so perilously that the great sage Agastya had to be sent south to balance it again with the weight of his learning and goodness. When he left, he took with him a handful of pink lotuses from the wedding garland; and when he saw how parched the south had become, he flung down the petals, and they turned into the river, and gave it both its colour and its name. Tambaraparni: which can mean either Copper Water, or River of Red Leaves.

And there are the ancient burial urns north of the town. Scholars keep coming down from the universities, and the townspeople try to tell them: "Listen, these ancient people, the older they grew the more mischievous they became; and the more mischievous they became, the more they shrank; until at last they grew so small and everyone else was in such a fury, they *stuffed* the little creatures into the urns." But the scholars won't listen. They don't know that if you don't watch out you can shrink.

And there is the house. Our house only for as long as we live in it. Most visitors round their eyes in astonishment at its sheer size, slewing their heads from side to side to take in the whole long sweep of its pillared verandahs—up and down which I bicycle on rainy days—or supporting their necks with their hands as they crane back to take in its height, gasping: "O-oh, like a palace."

But of course it isn't a palace. It is, my aunt Rekha says, "just a dumbfoundingly huge and decrepit old house built in the early days of the East India Company." She is studying to be an architect, and has come to spend her holidays with us. Instead of rounding her eyes, she narrows them—"to measure the perspectives, you ignorant child—" and walks all over, every inch, aligning corners, tapping walls, and inspecting the great old half-shuttered doors, not one of whose latches works.

"Aren't you afraid to live in a house where you can't lock a single door?" others ask.

Such questions never enter her head. "Look at the height of the ceiling," is what *she* says. "Each floor, two storeys high at least. They must have used the downstairs as godowns—to store grain in times of famine, perhaps, or as warehouses in which to cram the evidence of their nefarious trade." Her words are long (even as I translate them now) whenever she talks about the house: it is big enough to hold them.

Together we decide we must invent a special festival to honour it, unlike all the other festivals that measure out the year, festivals handed down by everybody else to honour everything else. "Because *this* is worth its own celebration," my aunt says. "*Sturdy*. They had terrible floods here during the last century. I looked it up in the District Gazetteer of that

time. The bridge across the river was safe; the British finally built it in 1833, and an elephant was the first to walk across. So it was strong enough . . . and high enough, that's the main thing. But here the whole ground floor was under water. Everyone fled upstairs and stayed there, marooned but safe, until they were rescued. And the house withstood it all—floods; ravages; repairs."

The water must have been muddy during the floods, but I see it clear and sunlit, rippling between the white pillars, and the old house standing strong and still.

"And don't forget," my aunt Rekha reminds me. "If you don't celebrate it, someone else will, in their own different way. One of these days, this place will be protected under the Ancient Monuments Act, and then nobody else will ever live in it again."

It is as if we are all slipping away with the water as it recedes; you have to hurry and catch hold.

"Why?"

"Because it is historical, that's why. There's supposed to be a secret passage somewhere. I haven't found it, though God knows I've tapped the walls loud and long enough. Some say the English General hid here while escaping the Nawab's men. Or maybe *they* were escaping from him, who knows? It was all so long ago." She yawns and looks sleepy. "Anyway, when you leave and go to school and start learning about the causes and effects of the Carnatic Wars, remember you played with history in this house."

She knows well enough I won't go to school, but we ignore that for the moment. "What about the festival? How should we celebrate it?"

"Choose a day," my aunt says. "Choose a way. Think about it." She rumples my head and walks off, humming a film song.

But the house is never the same again. Now the stairs thunder with invisible footsteps; ranks of sweating soldiers crowd the verandahs; and outside, the garden loses its green and grows ragged beneath the trampling of horses' hooves.

And there are other nights when it all fades, and the moonlight washes through where once the water must have, and the old house stands strong and still, waiting for a festival I cannot name.

There is so much to hold, how can you pick a single way?

And then there are the Maravas. A tribe of thieves belonging to the district. Very proud of their profession, and respected for their skill, until years ago the English passed the Criminal Tribes Act and called them (I am to discover more years later) “K.D.’s,” short for Known Depredators. After this, earning their livelihood has become harder and harder for the Maravas. But they move with the times. Instead of having the police go around to check on them in their houses, they offer courteously to come and sleep in front of the district jail during the dry season—nice and fresh and open, there, right under the eye of authority. Besides, with so many of them, who can notice on a moonless night if one or two are missing? After all, by morning they are back with the rest, sleeping there as good as gold.

Their instruction comes into my life after the festival for Saraswathi, the goddess of learning and skill and the arts. She is titular deity to us Saraswath Brahmins, though everybody participates in her worship. Early morning the household shrine is cleaned and washed and decorated with flowers, and a bare place made beneath Saraswathi’s silk portrait for all the instruments and implements to be especially blessed by her. My mother’s violin and *vina* are brought there; my sister’s school books; Ramu’s gardening tools; pots and ladles from the cook; and I am dutifully laying out the ankle bells I wear while dancing, when we discover—in the middle of the array of offerings—a jimmy and a pick-lock.

It turns out then that a Marava is in the compound . . . not *doing* anything, just resting, while he brings a message for a cousin’s friend who lives in the buildings by the south gate. There is a small rise, scarcely a hillock, here, from where you can see the house, the wild thorn-ridden grounds behind it, the garden before it, and the river beyond. Here the Marava sits endlessly cleaning his teeth with a neem twig. My sister who, when she was three, had thought a thief was a perfectly round house with two windows and a door, is too busy now with older preoccupations; so I go alone to have a chat with him.

He is dressed like anyone else in a dhoti and a shirt, but his head is shaven bare, except for a topknot of long straight black hair. Every now and then he unties it, shakes it out, slapping it into the air, once—twice—thrice—then takes a wooden comb from his pocket and streamlines it carefully through before retying the knot again. “Nothing much happening now,” he complains, low and gloomy. “But in the old days, in my grandfather’s, in my father’s, even . . . what thievery!”

It is a long story, the way it used to happen, the way he tells it now, with many pauses to shift his neem twig from one cheek to the other, and stare off into the distance.

Every expedition really begins on the previous night, with the raiding party praying to Sudalaimadan and laying a crowbar at his feet, to promise that any further offerings will be strictly in proportion to the haul. Always there are omens before, during, and after the ceremony. Chirp of a lizard to the left, hoot of an owl, cat running across from left to right, all mean disaster: postpone the raid. When they do set out, each one takes a particular name . . . *hatchet, knife, club* . . . Some carry stones at their waist. Once a hole has been bored in the house under attack, or a window forced open, a stone is dropped in to see if the clatter will waken anybody. If all is still, the thinnest—*knife*—struggles in, and the others await his signal to enter.

“Not so now,” the Marava repeats. “Not so easy . . .” and goes off into another of his long silences, from which he emerges, more cheerful. “Except sometimes. Of course nobody can carry stones and hatchets now, with them watching us all the time. But sometimes you don’t need any of that. Sometimes . . .” his voice drops “. . . all you need is a single strand from a broom.”

“A single—?” I am agog.

“Yes.” For the first time he looks at me, weighing me. Perhaps I am too young and riveted an audience to be dangerous, so he tells me that too. “You know how a traveller will always put whatever is most valuable to him under his pillow at night, stupid fellow, and then put his stupid head directly on top of it? Well—just wait until he is asleep, then take your strand of broomstick and tickle his ear. *Very* lightly, like a mosquito. He’ll brush it off . . . or slap it away . . . or mumble . . .

Maybe even show signs of waking up. Then you stay quiet until he is back to sleep and start again. Brush—slap—scratch—mumble . . . and he'll turn over. So you slip your hand exactly under where he's just removed his head, and remove what *you* want. That's all there is to it." He sounds every bit as sure as Ramu.

After his departure—and nobody has missed so much as a handful of grain—my worldly education comes to an abrupt and deadly dull stop. The rains set in earlier than usual, falling in dreary ropes straight down from the sky, holding you in like a net. Dampness, stickiness, nothing to do. My sister is in school, my father away most of the time in the low-lying districts where, if you don't work hard enough soon enough, checking on irrigation canals and strengthening lake boundaries with sandbags, there is always a danger of floods. When he is home, he is hardly to be seen. People keep coming around to the southern, 'official' end of the house. Men with file-folders and briefcases mount the shallow steps to the octagonal Meeting Room.

Once I sneak past Nabbi, the red-uniformed attendant outside, and get down on my stomach to peer beneath the swinging half-doors, and count twenty pairs of feet around the conference table. Of them all, my father's are the most recognizable by their impatient tapping if the speeches drone on too long. I tap my fingers in time, in sympathy.

"That's his way." A whisper sounds above, guessing what I'm doing.

Nabbi is not only undisturbed at finding me flat on the floor there, he is even in the mood for a chat. We go to the far end of the verandah where you are out of earshot if you speak softly. "Other people talk much and do little, he talks little and does much. Look what happened with the man-eating tiger."

The moment Nabbi names a wild animal, it comes alive in front of you. Maybe because he looks rather like a lion himself, with his burly shoulders and tawny eyes and beard dyed red after his pilgrimage to Mecca. This has made him a Haji and gives him authority when he speaks. "I've worked here for many years, seen many sahibs come and go. None like him."

"What happened about the man-eater?"

"It was marauding an area about thirty miles from here. Near a village trapped between the river and the jungle, so the people had no place to run. First their livestock was carried off, then their children. Nobody was safe. So they complained to the government. Anyone else might have sat down and written a hundred and one reports. Not he. He just went out and got a gun and shot it. Didn't want to do it, but it had to be done, so he did it. That's all." And Nabbi pads off.

That's all, he says. *That's all there is to it*, says the Marava. *Simple*, says Ramu. Except once: *Think about it*, says my aunt Rekha. And the rain goes on and on, and your footsteps echo before and behind as you walk against that endless drumming. Lamps have to be lit all day; the greyness turns them yellow and too dim to cast their usual shimmer on the floors. Outside, though the bamboo screens have been lowered between the pillars, gusts of spattering raindrops keep the verandahs skidding wet. This gives my great-aunt a pain in her joints and she takes either to bed or to quarrelling, refusing to speak to anyone for days on end. Only Amma remains the same, moving quick and light through the old rooms, with the household keys jingling at her waist; or sitting down in the evenings to play her vina or to read.

Leaning over her shoulder, I see the book open on her lap. It has an illustration drawn in swift, flying black lines: people in a room, with rain outside the window. The women have foreign clothes, short hair, and bare legs. But reading cannot be so different after all, if it rains inside books as well as out. There might even be floods in them then, and broomsticks, and villages, and fear of man-eaters, and pilgrims like Nabbi with beards dyed red.

"What are those people doing? What does it say?"

Amma looks up and smiles. "Are you asking me, or do you want to know for yourself?" Her question goes on and on into the dripping dusk.

There's a table wedged against the wall. Its square top, inlaid with patterned bone and ebony, opens on hinges like a lid; and you look inside for strings and pins and clips and pencils and erasers and pads of paper. I tear off a sheet, find the stub of a red pencil, and return to her. "For myself. I want to read and write."

After this it is magic. Also, in other ways it is no different. Perhaps I haven't become a slave yet. Small "I"'s are simple and straight as legs. Capital "P" is Ramu with his hand to his turban, thinking about herbs. "Y" is Nabbi facing Mecca, with both arms raised in prayer. And when these and the other letters are pulled together into words, those words can be shifted and shaped like clay into their exact place next to each other, until at last you can say what you see: just so.

Soon there are numbers. 1 is so skinny because he hates to eat. His parents keep urging him: eat, eat; but no, he won't. 2 is so curly and graceful because she is a dancer. 3, 6 and 9 are friends; but 5 and 7 can't stand one another, because they're so angular that their bones bump if you put them together. If I get a sum whose answer is 57, very quickly I rub it out and write 56 instead.

"Why do you *do* that?" Amma asks, exasperated but willing as usual to listen.

"They'll fight. Their elbows will get in the way and they'll fight. What else can I do?"

Delhi

"Nothing, clearly." My mother answers that question of more than twenty-five years ago. "I'm not surprised that the spaces of your learning have been so crammed ever since." We are talking together, she and I, in the sunlight of a northern winter, about the interplay of imagination and intelligence—in living; in certain kinds of learning, whether you are literate or not.

"Like Phulo," she reminds me.

Phulo is the sister-in-law of the farmer who sells water-buffalo-milk to our neighbourhood. She is a widow; crippled, illiterate; has inherited some land and livestock; and the men of her in-laws' family are planning to sell her—sell her—to a scoundrel of a neighbouring landlord, so that they can weasel some joint property out of the transaction.

Phulo, that living property, comes desperately to my mother for help

as those in trouble do. "I have to get out of there before they take me away . . . but I have to think about my son also—What am I to do? Where can I go? Where can I get a job that will give me an excuse to leave the farm?"

For over a year, my great-aunt's asthma has been getting worse. A matter of time, they say. A matter of slowly watching her die. We take turns nursing, but Amma does most of it; and the nights assert their cost, since the days don't lessen their full measure of demands and duties. Phulo arrives then, to keep the night-watch. And stays on with the family thereafter, in one capacity or another. When Americans reach the moon, and my aunt asks: "How would you feel about going there?" Phulo says, indefatigable, "If you go, I go. Just get me the bus ticket."

But on that first night of her arrival, Amma and I go into the sickroom around midnight, to see how she is managing. Only one small night-light burns. The row of medicine bottles casts monstrous shadows on the wall. As we enter, we see her gently moving my great-aunt's arm, and then her leg.

I whisper: "What are you doing?"

She whispers back: "When people have been ill so long that they haven't strength to move a limb, we must move it for them. Or else they get sores where they lie. This is how we look after our cattle."

We stand, half-smiling at that, despite our anxiety and our book-learning, while it is Phulo, again, who notices what the invalid can't ask for. "See? Her lips are dry now, she needs water . . ." And holds a spoonful against my great-aunt's mouth. Some dribbles, some she drinks.

Now, in the winter sunlight, Amma and I remember that. Not to discount literacy or sentimentalize its lack, but honouring Phulo's ability to anticipate the wordless—that applying of observation to life.

"Maybe that's why I took a chance on letting you go illiterate." Amma smiles at me, with me. "Hoping some of that might rub off on you."

"Actually in Tirunelveli literacy made no difference. Wonderful of you not to make me go to school until we moved to Madras. But there I realized it was the Thin End Of The Wedge."

Which, said suddenly in English, makes us both laugh. But later, at Delhi University, as earlier in the middle schools of Madras, literacy—in the way it is disseminated—often *is* a slavery, though perhaps not quite as my great-aunt envisioned it.

Still, for me as for others, it also provides a peculiar and only freedom, the freedom, at least, to make my own stubborn world, writing, writing; knowing full well that what I'm doing isn't good enough, merely an apprenticeship, which may never stop being an apprenticeship; so that in Madras I feed the finished pages to a hot-water boiler we call Ophelia because "it's quite mad." It stands on three legs in the backyard, smokes foully, and has a door at the bottom which you open to shove in the fuel—wood, coal, paper. Pages. My burnt offerings.

Ophelia is tangible, but there are other intangibilities that will not be confined to the disciplines within, which inevitably have to reckon, as we all do, with the world outside.

Referring to this, Amma says: "From the very beginning you've imposed so many inner restrictions upon yourself that the external restrictions, especially when they are senseless, are not to be borne."

My mother. My mother. As someone said: just let them try to cut this umbilical cord. Just let them try.