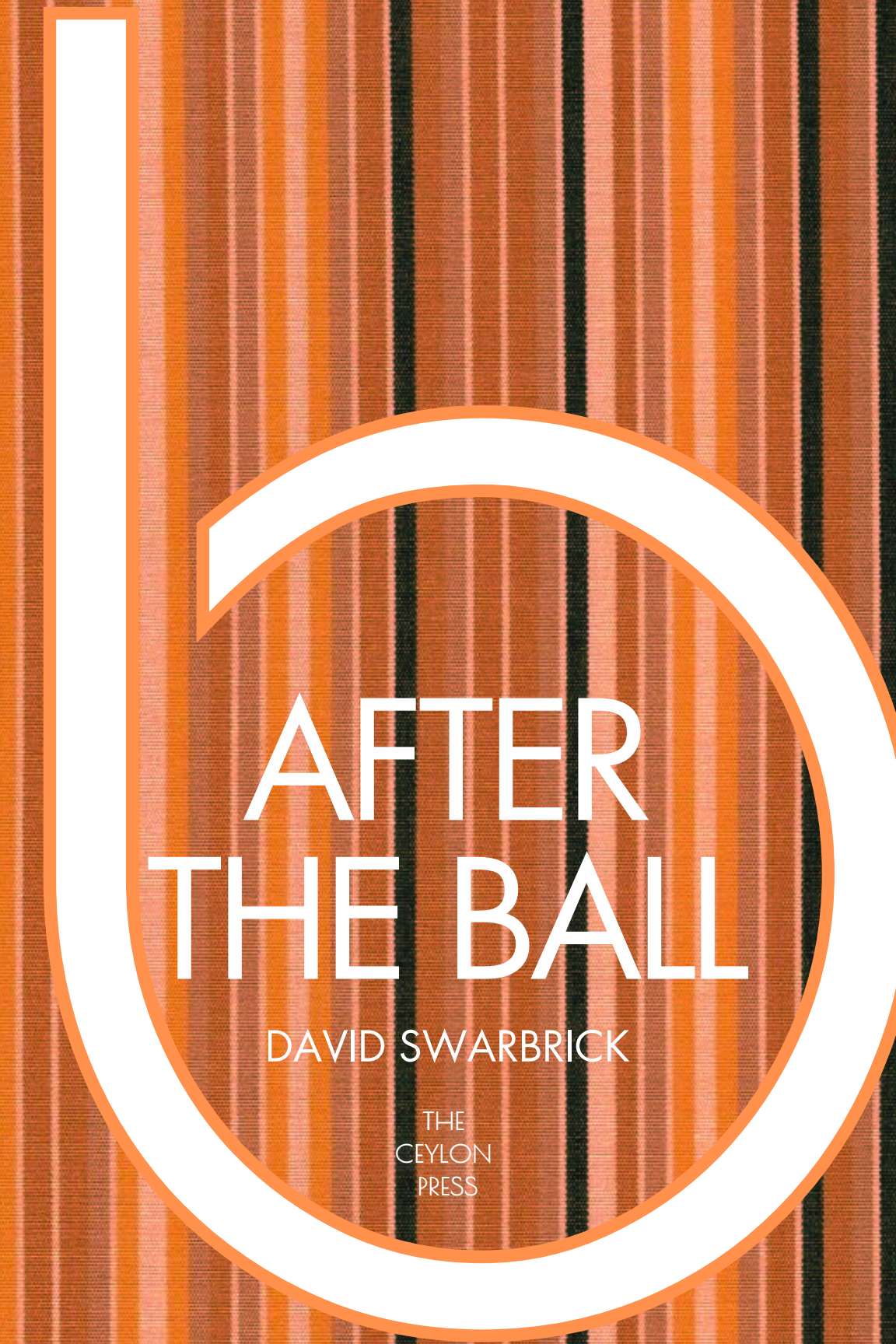




AFTER THE BALL

DAVID SWARBRICK

THE
CEYLON
PRESS

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LONDON

FOR

RD

I GIRLS, AND BOY

Early sun dissolves the mist;

bottles and chairs
disrupt paths,
paving,
lawns;

deer keep a cautious distance
in parkland trees.

On high-backed wicker chairs
five girls talk, smoke;

contractors dismantle
tents, lights;

fruit strung on green wire
along boughs.

At a table nearby
a boy sits alone,
playing cards.

II

GIRLS, AND BOYS

Her hair is blonde,
expensive,
cut no ordinary way.

Her feet rest on a footstool
on the grass.

The dress she wears
has small seed pearls
sewn on silk.

the arm that almost touches him -
does not move.

She watches,
looking above his eyes.

She watches.

He runs his fingers
through his hair,
plays with the knot
of his white bow tie;

notes the girls who talk,
notes the girl in silk;

notes the boy
playing cards nearby.

III BOYS

I watch you,

as I watch myself,
and know
the breech
that undercuts your poise;

the face, disfigured
by its rebounding image,

clouded by what standard parts
it can't extract.

The picture blurs,
but does not hide

the other guests departing
in their pairs.

IV

ME, YOU, HER

The band is striking jazz tunes;

last tunes;

light breaks
through the marquee,

draws to shape

gothic buildings,

trees beyond the park
lit by the lights
of early motorists.

The moon shrivels
in the opening sky,

the blind spot grows:

and sorrow, snared;

the heart, too,

a castle without walls

an accomplice,
in search of an assailant

You meet my glance,

and stretch your arm to her,

fall in behind the pair
that goes ahead
and the one that follows on.

V BOY, BOY

Behind the door
the recent world
is lost,
and left behind.

This is your territory, I know:

these trees,
this house,

this lane,
cleared by the departing taxi;

but you have not arrived here
like this before;

you have watched me,
but my voice is alien –

you have not seen eyes like mine;
not fingers, jaw, nape.

I am not an old friend,

I am the visitor

you have always known;

the stranger within,
betraying with a kiss,
the kiss that waits

the stranger within,

betraying with a kiss,
the kiss that waits.

VI

MOONWALKER

There is water on the moon;
and though I know

sitting, almost close,

watching the sun slide
between solider trees –

though I know

- almost touching;

the cigarette's blue smoke
rising untasted –

though I know
what we are here for
by all we do not say;

though I know
there is water on the moon;

though I know
the names of Roman senators,

the parts of trees,

the rules of games,

I do not know
what we make room for
here and now
beneath the tall trees
of the wood.

VII

CHILD

These gestures know the force
behind lost words;

articulate what has closed
with a homing cry,

as if the way my fingers
hold your head
alone could touch
the anguish and the joy,

the child behind
the adult's face
whose eyes close in relief.

You sleep beside me
nervous to each move.

Does the arm that holds me
knows who it holds?

Am I your mother,
brother, lover?

Who holds you
when you sleep alone,
who holds you?

VIII

SOLOIST

If I were not so tired
I would spend the night
watching you sleep;

watching your fingers
tighten and relax;

your eyelids tremble;

open,
to what the morning will eclipse.

If I could trust myself
to care a little less,
I would wake you,
play this aching game
by patient rules;

the night
is pitched so quiet
and you sing
and sing in me.

IX

MIGRANT

Because I have waited;

because I have waited so long;

because I have waited
beside old friends

and even strangers,

and those grown tired of waiting;

because of all of this,

all this and more;

because I have waited,
keeping you for a long journey,

I have not learnt
how to read the stars

I have not learnt
the migrant paths

I have not learnt
which tracks
lead across the frontier.

X SPEAKER

The tangled night
is thick with echoes.

Is the language you hear
the one you have waited to speak?

How often
have you heard
its tones
ring through these trees,

muted,

an echo simply waiting
to be recalled?

Truth comes at breaking point,

Account. Is it settled?
Are you free?

XI

GHOSTS

An adder slides over moss;

a flowering tree's deadly blaze
smothers the light –

the oldest paths shift
and shift;
and shift again
on each tread.

The forest's cool sequestered calm
vanished before you came.

The land does not know you
when you walk this way.

What you see
is not
what you think
you saw before.

The forest stirs
with an uneasy sigh;

light breaks behind curtains;

fills the room with a golden shadow;

and though you wake,
can you recall to what exhausted ends
your passion broke;

the ghosts drawn back
in sorrow and relief,
to repatriate the soul?

XII

BODY, BODY

Flesh talks to flesh
in quiet rooms,

in secret rooms
the city through.

But now,

between the meeting and the kiss,
between that first touch and this last;
between one look and another;
between the taxi and the house

the full stretch of all that time
is cauterised;
is sterilized;
is sanitized
is consumed in the merchant smile
of a separate life.

What is the currency
you hold in check?

XIII

SMUGGLER

However close your face
it will not read -

your eyes
take to an edge
a smuggler's tide

you pass you pain on
with a kiss;

forget the reason
why you came;

confuse your entrance
with your exit.

You do not speak.
Can you speak?
Speak.

I remember your fingers
through my hair,

your fingers on a pen
spelling out both names
like an insignia.

The first thing you ever did was cry.

Cry now.

It is a noise.

It is a start.

XIV

BEACH BOY

If I tell you there is no gain,
would you still trust to touch
a native base
so far from home?

Each moving on is moving back
some other way;

the heart opens to phantoms;

the land's unbending bleakness,
shifts like inscriptions of the sea.

We have arranged to meet
and now you wait above the harbour,
a spyglass trained on the mainland's
pleasure ferries.

On the beach a local boy
slides his toes through sand.

He does not need to get away.

Like Carter, he has seen candles
light on ancient gold;

he has worn blue earrings in Troy;
drunk at the alter where Priam was stabbed.

He has kissed a frightened soldier
at Ypres;
rounded the Horn like Magellan,
past the yardarms of Tierra del Fuego
where the mutineers were hung.

The street is warm and calls him down;
the cunning waves slide across the beech.

They bury his reflection
in their subtle tide.

They sing to him,
and sing to him alone.

XV

GRAVES

Buildings crumble. Below the sun
fields contract, scorched, silent,
yellow with overuse:

in stagnant courtyard wells, mosquitoes breed.

You sit, feet over the parapet,
alone.

The sky is white and dry.
Monkeys gibber quietly in trees
and under domes of the old palace;

beside the graves of Mogul courtiers
water buffaloes lie.

There is no movement;
just a reckoning
waking
further
and further away.

The blue sea darkens.
The last ferry closes against tyres
strung from the harbour walls
with a soft thud.

XVI

I, YOU

You do not know me
as I am
but all I do
returns to you.

The open door is open still;
I pass it every day.

XVII

PEOPLE

The twilight city
struggles to a close.

Offices empty.

The scuppered asphalt
rings with people,
darkest cargo
of the night.

And which of these
do you now see;

which faces hawk the imprint
you have lost?

Which places
quieten
a private cry

that makes no noise
that has no face?

XVIII

GUESTS

Legends bleed;

new collaborators turn
old worlds
with fresh, unproven loyalties.

Shadows shorten,

lift,

apportioning
sand and stone.

Guests come.

Guests go.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, art and marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

DISCOVER MORE



A small island surrounded by large oceans, Sri Lanka is a mystery to many: remote, hard to place; a well-kept secret.

The Ceylon Press seeks to make its complicated story more accessible.

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