



GREATER STILL

DAVID SWARBRICK

THE
CEYLON
PRESS

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1979-1993

DAVID SWARBRICK



Published By The Ceylon Press
2026

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THIS BOOK IS
PUBLISHED BY

The Ceylon Press
The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel
Mudunhena Walawwa,
Galagedera 20100,
Kandy,
Sri Lanka.

www.theceylonpress.com

FOR MY OLDEST FRIEND

MARK

WHO HAS HELPED KEPT ME SANISH SINCE
BOARDING SCHOOL

1

NOT HERE

It is still dark,
thin curtains shrouding
the taut March sky;

my room is uncompleted –
almost – unoccupied;

my possessions shrink beside
books, clothes, objects left here
by others –

and because you are not here –
not even near, not
in this village or the next –
not even in this county –
this thin flat pedestrian place
so far from the southern Weald –

because you are elsewhere –
my body moves
like a blind man's
trying to prove the place –

calculating distances
between bed and chair –
door and desk –

between you and me –
between here and there –

a bleak, discordant siren
enticing me to stay,
singing the old, old lie –

that there is no other way.

BEDFORDSHIRE, MARCH 1979

2

EDGE

Ploughed fields
force my walk
to the very edge –

a destitute land,
barren and friendless –

hedgerows of briar and blackthorn
stiff as razor palisades,

a slammer
of bare trees, flooded ruts
thick, greasy, drowning mud

and a thin, slashing horsewhip wind
to keep at bay my breakout.

BEDFORDSHIRE, MARCH 1979

3

CEEDED

i

Light haemorrhages,
bleeds through brooding trees, though copse.
We await the storm.

ii

Sound of the quiet moor -
small hours of dark certainties,
sleepless, terminal.

iii

This, the toughest place,
an anvil, nightlong, smashing
every dream that comes.

iv

He has let the room –
and now a watcher steals
everything he knows.

v

Come and commandeer
this world, that world, take them all
we have too many.

vi

Lift, scatter, dust, wind
down the ragged station cold,
strangers ever stirring.

vii

Blue electric crown –
by the sky, I bring you close:
it covers us both.

BEDFORDSHIRE, MARCH 1979

4

CEACELESS

Now, the cloudless blue
invites back the long-lost house
the honoured guest seated,

air still as whispers
friends dining in candlelight
a record playing,

photographs shuffled
as if a kindly cardsharp
dealt redeeming kings

LANGOLD HOUSE, SUMMER 1979

5

BOMB

Green fists of bud
lurch hurriedly to summer –

bring me
to Sussex Downs
laid on chalk,
cut with sheer tracks
to the sea.

I lie -
toes out,
following patterns
on the waves -
following people
spreading towels –

following families
sweating in the salty breeze –

sun pilgrims, returning
with plastic bags
and floppy hats.

The salty breeze has killed their talk;
there is only
the sexy grass
beneath bare feet –
vast smooth fields
below a prosperous sky –
the spreading ocean –
the smell of summer, spreading
like a bomb blast.

BEECHY HEAD, JUNE 1981

6

SCHOOL

Overnight, our schools
have become the strewn streets
of ruined cities -

lessons taken
in looted shops -
gutted cars -

classrooms reached
down roads bristling
with scorched, sharp debris
from the night before, and
the night before that -

the playground, a home
to petrol flames, rising behind
TV reports, the curriculum recast
by a ragged, weary mob
in cities north to south -

even unobtrusive towns
have traded in
their silence for slogans,
as if all this
could ever start
new term.

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

7

BUSTED

This room is busted –
this house is broken – empty -
bolted, a trail of
scattered bricks
and masonry.

Barbed wire,
red with rust,
defines the edges
of a disappearing drive

Birds call -
infinitely friendless.

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

8

PETITION

Forgive us –
say grace –
let's dine on blood -

give us this day –
our daily bread -

the man haemorrhaging his life
on bags of spilt basmati rice –

kingdom come –

unhallowed bodies
bobbing downriver; lepers
trespassing the garden gates
(dry to the right, wet to the left);

a corpse delivered from evil
on a jute bier of marigolds,
weaving through traffic;

scraps of horse and jockey
minced on earth by a Naxalite bomb,
bound for heaven,

Thy will be done.

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

9

TRIBUTE

i

This makeshift air, choked –
the dreams the old men once had –
mountains poised to rise.

ii

Tapers are unlit
the alter is empty now
its objects packed away.

iii

Summer twists the knife –
leaves a vexing wilderness,
a wreath, remembered.

iv

Still he assails,
as if love would ever be
an explanation.

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

10

FICTION

Why let him dream
when really –
he cannot; why

let him think
that he will live
without end, that

he will draw
the flame from fire, that

he can take it
to the shadow –

to the silver
in the dim –

to burn
forever more?

LANGOLD HOUSE, JULY 1981

11

KID

Oh, little boy -
Oh, little boy -
what do you think
of me?

I've not time
to hold the world up -
I'm too busy -
don't you see?

SUSSEX, AUGUST 1981

12

HIM, HE, US

This is the best view!

He walked into the room -
and it was his.

He walked
into the air and trees –

into the walls of an old barn
and they were his.

You are me
said the View.

The blades of grass,

the ancient sea
agreed -

viewing the View
that was he.

We are one and indivisible
cried the priest,
smiling
into outstretched hands.

The bricks of the house -
that knew no other form
but that of clay -
were glad,

and called to the rocks below –

mother and father, sister and brother
we are sky.

Praise be!
Praise be!

13

LATER

i

All this love, this child –
undaunted by any debt,
or speculation

ii

The tree is lost now.
Thickets and webs of bramble
hide its tough witness.

iii

No one will find you.
Lounge and laugh in the long grass –
till the day is dark.

iv

Later, he put aside
All the things that made him yours –
and the day goes on.

v

A fascination;
never by windows can I
just watch your walking.

LANGOLD HOUSE. APRIL 1982

14

PULL

We have been divided
where – precisely –
you once bred
another life, another death
inside of you.

Year by year
I shut it all away –
placed it carefully.
in undisturbed and undisturbing rooms;

I have shut it up
in a big old house; in a big
old hidden house encircled
by a huge dark forest; in a big
old secret house surrounded
by an infinite ocean
teaming with sharks.

And the days pull on -
addictive, gripping –
shifting everything away.

LANGOLD HOUSE. APRIL 1982

15

GAME

I play the game
of guessing motives –

as do they –

the carriage, crowded;
our train is bumping up to London.

Outside things are blue. Suburbia
is a dusky red lady
not without her charms.

I am feeding off them.,
they off me, all of us
upon each other -

we cannibals, we cannibals
together.

WOLVERHAMPTON, MAY 1982

16

THERE HE IS

There he is –
the boy in the sheepskin coat –
the one from the party,

the one my sometimes-girlfriend
is cross with me about -
for not being cross with her
for sleeping with him.

What do I care?
His hair is the colour of cut wheat.

ABERYSTWYTH, JUNE 1982

17

FINALE

You have not asked me this, Fiona
but my answer –
for now at least –
(and now is surely quite enough) -

that had I just minutes – just minutes - left

just minutes before the world ends,
before the big bang and kingdom come,

if I had just minutes,
then, yes, I would spend them here
as I spend them now –
dwarfed by huge trees –
lit by the silver clouds
of a warm Sussex night,
alone.

BALCOMBE, JULY 1982

18

PROPHET

Yet, by his face,
the peacock, flying
wraps the corners
of the world,

where the sea rounds green in greatness
sun and sand and cliff laud on,

and in his eyes, the shrinking mirror
never now sees all.

EASTBOURNE, JULY 1982

19

SOUND

Against the sky
a bat -

inside the forest
a noise -

beside the lake
a splash -

a cry upon closed eyes.

BALCOMBE PLACE, JULY 1982

20

GIST

i

You live at night now -
have learnt to cover your tracks –
bury black on black.

ii

Telling lines remain -
within a puzzling space.
Winds blow every way.

iii

In the old forest
fallen seeds no longer grow
where no sunlight strikes.

iv

On the high chalk cliffs
a wavering cry of gulls.
The friendless sea sighs.

v

Secret, summer calm,
The wide green sea moves and runs
as the land cannot;

vi

an old secret told,
the sky breaks in strident flames,
its every secret shared.

vi

Finally – nothing.
The storms have ended, the land
breathes predictably.

BALCOMBE PLACE, JULY 1982

21

HEARSAY

The track is rough,
the road uncertain:
fields burn in a harvest moon –
and all around
the fragments of stories,
no more than fables now –
told to others by those
who heard earlier
when the tales were true,
chronicles in fact,
written in huge illuminated books
the later kings had burnt.

ABERYSTWYTH, SEPTEMBER 1982

22

TOTAL WORSHIP, YOU

Total worship, you
are the demon, gone, and grace
gliding chariots through the clouds.

Emperors will thrust;
you are the sun,
the moon,
the catalogue of universes,
rolled up unto your
one
small
important
peak.

ABERYSTWYTH, OCTOBER 1982

23

WALES

i

See how now he hunts
in a dark and teeming wood,
goaded, as usual

ii

Philosophers row.
We place our conflicting gains
beneath fresh alters

iii

The next tenants lodge
in rooms of new beginnings;
ever gone, the last.

iv

A quiet house, this –
outside the day's arrangements
a cool Welsh rain falls.

v

The new moon rises
over the mountains of Cors Caron,
a private world in view.

SWYDDFFYNNON, NOVEMBER 1983

24

KILLED

We are leaning near,
towards such separate fractions
of a whole –

caught in the shallows
of quiet days,
between land and sea –

between silences
that start unnoticed,

withdraw,
unsaid –

for in every room –
we have been killed -
down every passageway
within the lobby, attic, spare room,
in your room, in mine, a fatherland
mothering its divisions
into one.

DHAHRAN, DECEMBER 1983

25

HIGH WEALD

My memory hordes
the last escarpment -

fields inferring,
with each twist of hedgerow,
smudge of copse,
parish steeple,
sail of oast

a world reclaimed.

DHAHRAN, DECEMBER 1983

26

REDEEM

i

separate space all lost –
in sleep, I admit my limbs,
touch and hold to yours.

ii

I would chuck away
the praise you want, even the songs –
discard a lofty house.

iii

His eyes reveal nothing –
a void, suggesting answers
all secret, bleak, unshared.

iv

a bare day-to-day -
the great blaze of light hidden –
a spy behind trees.

v

Oh, but one of us
is destined for servitude.
like Samson's wheel.

v

It's the sum that counts -
after all's been done, forgotten -
the sum calculates.

vi

Down darkening streets
the easy light is trafficked,
leaving silhouettes.

vii

When the gain is gold -
into view, the watcher's face –
never really gone.

viii

Each takes, takes and takes
I, you, they, the world all had,
kidnapped with kindness.

ix

But for that far line
I would not know this place again –
wide fields, unbound.

HAMPSTEAD, FEBRUARY 1984

27

IN SEARCH OF

Little boy leaning
off a great green tree –

falling, like leaves -
not to soil, to old gods,
but to all that cannot finish
or would rest. You

turn beside me
heavy, asleep -
you slice into me
warm, asleep -
you rouse against me
trusting, asleep -

and yet
you are not my kind.

HAMPSTEAD, JULY 1984

28

PASSER BY

In any way but this
I had expected you –
practised what would be said
when we remeet;

noted once more
the gait, the habits -
heard again, the phrases
unheeded for seven years.

City summers have no summer.

When we've remeet
it has always been
back in the country
looking across white fields –

the weald
dwindling in a green haze,
dog days, blanching in the sun.

The offices are closed
the evening restaurants
open to people passing time till Monday.

We are not due to meet
we are not due.

Your faces startles like someone's recognised -
but it is not the same.

I pass you by, alert, relieved.

I pass you by.

SOHO, OCTOBER 1986

29

A DELICATE THING

i

You live inside me –
don't I direct your freedom -
daily, close the gap?

ii

Almost forgotten -
what's gone claims the greater part,
roars and roars in me

iii

Nothing hurts much now
but a useless bastard love –
loud as wild hymns.

iv

I see again your face –
and from people I don't know,
your voice, suggested.

v

Ever to others
A ghosting smuggles you in –
the strangers, slight, alike.

vi

Wide as the swift sky:
sun, sail, sea, beating like drums
beginning what's gone.

SOHO, OCTOBER 1986

30

A DELICATE THING

See how it comes,
finally, late, effusive –
a Golden Age –
divulging, with a kiss,
a succession of desire,
the kiss of Jacob –
Samuel, Judas, Ruth -
the given kiss that waits -
and all of life
paused, a battle-ready army,
well-equipped, armour polished,
boots strapped on, stranded –
the real rival – master of a thousand
guerrilla skirmishes, hidden
in the insidious tucks and creases
of a landscape that is commonplace.

PRUSSIA COVE, OCTOBER 1986

31

TO J.B.

Did you find peace –
die in peace –
all life fixed to a final point -
I wonder. I read
of everyone in the Old Boy's Journal:
the dinner at Boodles, the marriages,
births; the old boys who returned,
strangers each one -
until this page, until your name,
a steel knife, pinned me to the top
of a small, neat paragraph
set in ten-point Times Roman
below a thin black line.

And all it said
was that you had died
after a long illness
(and that you walked your dog
across the school rugby pitches
at the end).

I wonder what it left unsaid
- how, why, and most especially –
the boundaries breached
the thoughts that woke you nightly
hunted you daily, dressed, primed
and lauded you.

But tonight
it is simply your beauty I recall,
your clipped, dark face,
your way of playing a piano,
startled, secret,
your slim, young body:
tonight, it is you I acclaim.

MAYFAIR, 1993

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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